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SOCIAL ANALYSIS: THROUGH SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

> *I cannot give you anything more on credit. I also have financial difficulties*

Monsoon. People hardly get any work here. I was studying in ninth standard at that time. I went to the shop with my father to buy groceries. On seeing my father, the shop keeper reminded him that he had to pay him a significant amount for the things he had purchased earlier. My father gave him whatever money he had in his hand. On that day he agonised over it. I realised the value of money even if it was one rupee. The cause of our problems was that we did not have money. I am confident that everything will soon become right.

Given here is a portion of note prepared by Anu as per the instructions of her teacher to share her experiences about a rainy season. What are the problems mentioned here that Anu and her family face?

- Limited opportunities of employment during rainy season
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Anu is thinking what could be the reasons for her problems. Anu concludes lack of availability of money as the cause of her and her family's problems. Anu believes the problems she is experiencing is due to personal reasons. Why would Anu think like this?

To understand personal problems many people rely on superficial reasons. Individuals also try to understand the reasons for their problems basing it on their previous experiences. Others understand the causes for their personal problems through the information that they gather from the interaction with others and their experiences. Individual problems are generally analysed using the knowledge and practices acquired through the process of socialisation by some people. It is on the basis of such commonsense knowledge that individuals often find the causes of their problems.

Commonsense Knowledge

Commonsense Knowledge is the direct understanding individuals acquire about the world through personal experiences, social interactions and cultural knowledge.

This is not formal knowledge. Rather they are assumption or even everyday practical knowledge. The notion that "The Sun rises in the East and sets in the West" is an individual's perception of a natural phenomenon. Similarly, the knowledge that 'fire will burn' is a basic understanding of the nature of fire. This knowledge is acquired through observation, experience and socialisation.

Commonsense Knowledge and Social Analysis

We have now seen that individuals acquire commonsense knowledge through their everyday perceptions, practices and the knowledge of the world around them. It is formed based on norms, practices, beliefs and personal experiences which are not often examined. Anu and her family face the social problem of indebtedness. Will it be possible to find the actual reasons for this if this social problem is analysed through just the lens of commonsense knowledge?

Now think about the reasons why a person experiences poverty. People may also think that poverty is due to a person's laziness or disinterest in work. Many people think that personal failure is the only reason for poverty. Such perceptions are formed through commonsense knowledge.

Social Problem

A social problem is a problem or condition that affects a large number of people in society. Problems that affect only a single or a few individuals are not considered as social problems. A social problem is considered as undesirable or detrimental to the society. Poverty, inequality, discrimination, environmental pollution are some examples.

What are the ways in which commonsense knowledge develop?

- Through personal experiences
- Through general observations
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Can we always rely on commonsense knowledge for solving our problems? Give reasons.

Given below are some of the statements based on commonsense knowledge that exist at least in some part of the society.

> **1** *Climate change is natural: Human actions have no role in it.*

> **2** *A high score can be achieved only if you study for longer hours.*

> **3** *Teenagers are always rebellious and irresponsible.*

> **4** *Eating till you are full is good for health*

> **5** *Providing temporary shelters can solve housing problems*

Let us analyse and see if these statements are completely true.

1 Note the statement that humans are not responsible for climate change. What are the problems caused on earth due to climate change?

- Global warming •
- • •

List human actions that cause global warming

- Burning of plastic •
- • •

While observing these things, it can be seen that human actions are also responsible for climate change and global warming. It can thus be seen that this is a statement based on commonsense knowledge. **Such commonsense knowledge is often partial.**

2　Note the statement that a high score can only be achieved by studying for a longer time. Is it the same for everyone? Do individual learning methods and styles affect learning? Spending more time in learning alone does not make it effective. What can be done along with this to achieve academic excellence?

- Group learning

- Taking regular intervals and proper rest while studying

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Therefore, the statement that a high score can only be achieved by studying for a long time, is merely commonsense knowledge derived from speculations or practices. **Commonsense knowledge thus relies on speculations and practices**.
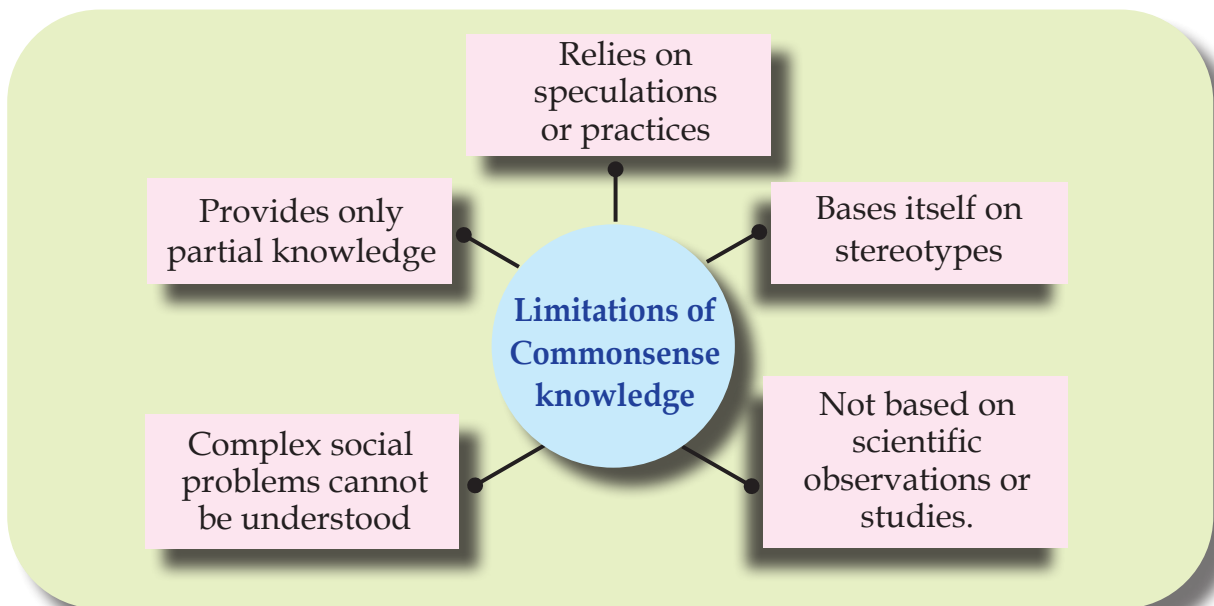
3　It is a general statement to make that teenagers are always rebellious and irresponsible. Such general statements, beliefs or ideas are referred to stereotype. When observed in this way, it can be seen that the statement about teenagers is a stereotype. Such stereotype creates misconception about teenagers. Teenagers are indeed a heterogeneous group, usually showing responsibility and mutual respect. But such stereotypical statements lead to a lack of trust in teenagers. Moreover it results in misplaced assumptions about their behaviour. **Now, you can see how commonsense knowledge is often based upon stereotypes**.

4　The statement that eating till you are full is good for health is a part of commonsense knowledge. Such statements are based only on day to day observations without a detailed understanding of nutrition and health. Commonsense knowledge usually provides only partial understanding of such a concept. **Commonsense knowledge is often not based on scientific observation or studies**.

⑤ Now approach the problem of housing through commonsense knowledge. Some may think that it is just a personal choice or a problem of not trying to secure permanent housing. Those who think so, may imagine that temporary safety, and housing, or vocational training can solve the problem permanently. But are there other reasons behind housing problems? What are they?

- Financial instability
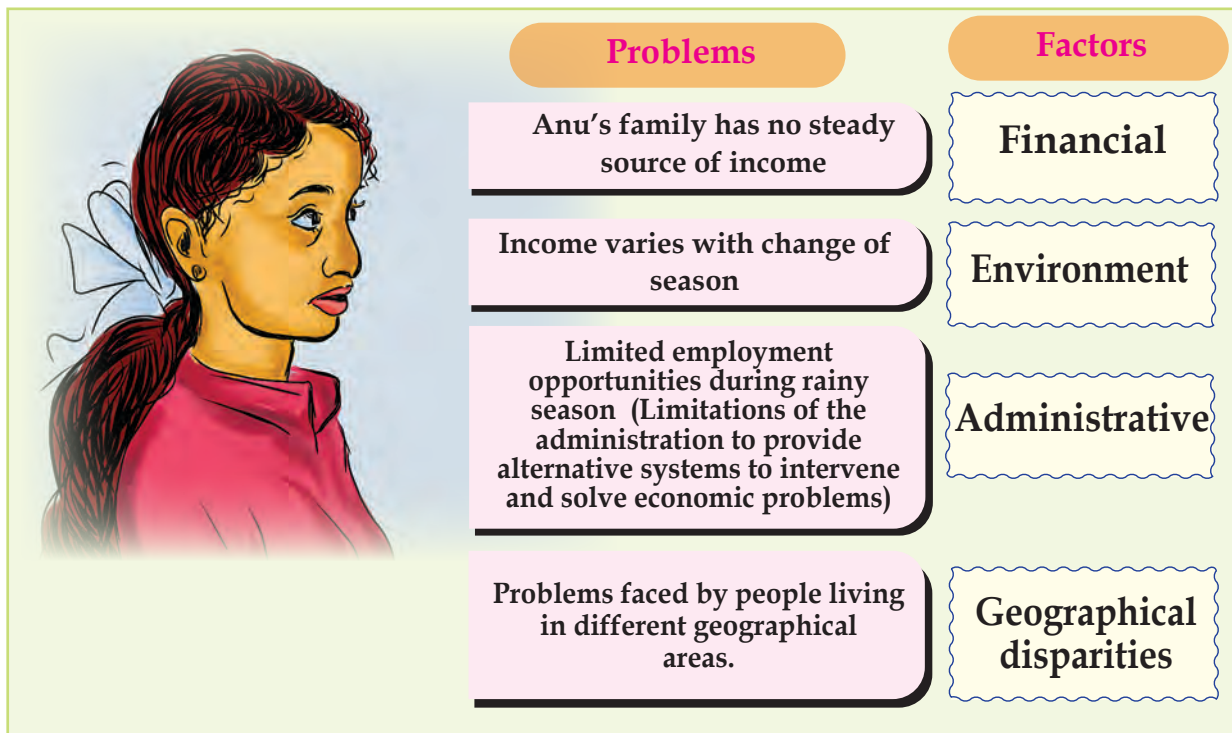- Unemployment
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Commonsense knowledge often fails to discover the real causes behind the problems. It can be seen that all the topics covered in the above mentioned five statements are related to complex social problems. **Individual problems or complex social problems cannot be understood properly using commonsense knowledge**.

Relies on speculations or practices

Provides only partial knowledge

Bases itself on stereotypes

Limitations of Commonsense knowledge

Complex social problems cannot be understood

Not based on scientific observations or studies.

Find more examples of commonsense knowledge and make notes discussing the limitations of the knowledge gained through it.

Approaching personal and social problems only through commonsense knowledge will not provide enough knowledge for proper solutions. It can be seen that Anu thought about the cause of her problems only based on commonsense knowledge.

Anu thought that the reasons for the problems they are facing is only because they do not have enough money. But aren't there many other factors that can contribute to Anu's problems? What are they?

Problems	Factors
Anu's family has no steady source of income	Financial
Income varies with change of season	Environment
Limited employment opportunities during rainy season (Limitations of the administration to provide alternative systems to intervene and solve economic problems)	Administrative
Problems faced by people living in different geographical areas.	Geographical disparities

Here, we can see that factors such as environment, geography, administration and finance all contribute to the problems in Anu's family. Now, do you notice that financial insecurity is not the only reason behind Anu's problem but many other social factors?
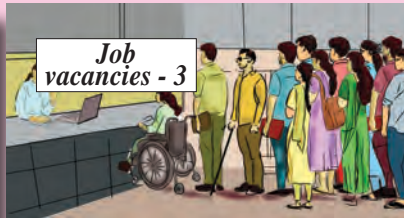
Social Factors

Social factors include various elements of society that influence the behaviour, attitude, opportunities and choices of individuals. These include family, education, peer groups, religion, caste system, economic status, environment, cultural norms, values, governance system, politics, technology, media and many more.

We can see that Anu's personal problem is also a social problem. Social factors influence each and every personal problem. We can understand individual problems and their causes in greater depth and breadth only when we identify the influence of social factors behind them. Mention a recent personal problem you have had. List the social factors that influenced it.

Observe the pictures

Based on the pictures, list the individual problems and identify the social factors behind them.

Serial No.	Individual Problems	Social Factors
1		
2		
3		

You would have identified now that there are many social factors behind individual problems. By analysing these factors, we can identify the cause-effect relationship and consequences of the social problems. Observed thus, it can be seen that individual problems are related to wider social structures.

Social analysis is the process of examining how social relationships, social institutions, social structures and social problems affect individuals and society. Social analysis, helps us to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that influence various social situations and provide suggestions for their improvement.

Sociology

Sociology is the scientific study of society. Sociology can observe, analyse and interpret relationships, social institutions and structures in society. Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber were prominent among its early thinkers. Some important concepts used in sociology for social analysis are **social relationships, social institutions, social structures**, etc.

Social relationships are the relations and interactions that individuals develop from within the society. The basis of social relations is social structures and social institutions. The cooperation, care and affection of the members of the family as a social institution and the deep bonds, contacts and togetherness formed through friendships are examples of social relations.

Social institutions are the framework of rules established by society to stabilise and regulate social relations. They define and shape our actions and behaviour while explaining society's perspectives. Along with that, it assimilates generally accepted values and reflects them in the actions of individuals, leading society towards progress. Examples include family, marriage, religion, political institutions, economic institutions, educational institutions, judicial institutions and so on.

The **social structure** explains and implements the status, roles, existence and responsibility of individuals in the society. Norms and rules of society are the examples of social structure. These provide order and stability to the society.

Have you noticed the various factors of the problem that Anu is experiencing are related to wider social structures? **Sociological imagination** is the skill to identify and analyse how individual problems are related to broader social structures. The concept of sociological imagination was introduced in the book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) by American Sociologist Charles Wright Mills. He proposed this concept as a skill that helps to see individual problems as part of the wider social structure. The sociological imagination envisages a way of identifying individual problems and their causes and explaining them by subjecting them to wider observation and analysis.

Charles Wright Mills

Sociological Imagination and Social Analysis

The social causes behind all personal problems can be identified through sociological imagination. Sociological imagination helps us to understand how social structures influence our lives and that of others. Sociological imagination enables individuals to move beyond their life situations and view their experiences and personal problems in the context of broader social structure. Now, let us examine the characteristics of sociological imagination.

1. Broadens individual perspective

Observe the picture

Does an individual meet with an accident only because of carelessness. There could be other reasons behind it. What are they?
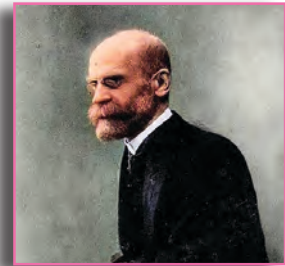
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Sociological imagination reveals that there are many other factors resulting in road accidents. For instance, violation of traffic rules, over crowding of vehicles, limited transportation facilities, failure of legal system, unscientific way of construction of roads and so on.

Sociological imagination helps to identify how other social factors influence individual problems and thus broaden the individual's perspective.

Suicide Rate and Society

Emile Durkheim, one among the founders of Sociology, studied the social causes behind suicide at a time when suicide was only seen as a personal matter. He found that people commit suicide for social reasons more than personal ones. He presented his findings in the book *Suicide* (1897).

Emile Durkheim
(1858-1917)

2. Understanding social issues in depth

Look at the table

Labour force participation rate in India by gender status 2017-2023

Year	Labour Participation rate	
	Male	Female
2017-2018	75.1	21.1
2018-2019	74.9	21.6
2019-2020	75.8	26.3
2020-2021	75.8	27.5
2021-2022	75.9	27.2
2022-2023	77.4	31.6

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey Report, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

The table shows the labour force participation rate in India by gender for the period of 2017 to 2023. Labour force participation is a major factor influencing the economic development of a region. Notice the gap between the labour force participation rate of men and women in different years.

The commonsense knowledge is that women are not coming forward as workforce. Sociological imagination helps us to think that there are other factors behind the decline in the number of women in the work force. When we examine the reasons behind the decrease in the number of women in the workforce, we can find that there are many social factors related to gender status.

Some societies expect 'men' to be responsible for providing for the entire family, while 'women' are to remain at home as the caretaker of the family. This is a gender norm that limits employment opportunities for women. Due to this, women are not able to engage in income generating jobs. This contributes to the economic backwardness of women. In some societies, boys have more opportunities for education than girls. This results in the educational backwardness of women and lower labour force participation. We can trace various cultural, economic, and educational factors behind the gender status gap in labour force participation among women, using the concept of sociological imagination.

Sociological imagination helps to identify the relationship between individual problems and social issues. It also helps in gaining deeper understanding of the social issues.

3. Enables self - reflection

Read the extracts from Ishan's speech at his school reunion.

“ I was an Engineer. When I was young, I wanted to be a painter. But neither my teachers nor my parents were interested in me taking up painting as a career. Eventually, I also thought the same and decided to become an Engineer. I was under the impression that I became an engineer by my choice. But I was not satisfied with it. When I pondered over it, I realised that I became an engineer not because of my decision, but rather by the opinion of parents, teachers and friends. Thus, I was influenced by many. I have retired from engineering as a profession and moved into painting, and I am happy now. ”

Whose influence does Ishan find behind his choice to become an engineer?

- Parents

Ishan realised this when he critically evaluated his decision. Self-reflexivity is the skill to critically evaluate one's own thoughts and actions. Ishan realised this upon self-reflection.

Apart from understanding the social factors behind individual problems, sociological imagination helps to realise more about oneself and exercise self-reflection.

Self-reflection enables us to identify the social causes behind individual problems. This allows for broader understanding by moving away from the confines of commonsense knowledge. In this way, sociological imagination is beneficial at both individual and societal levels.

4. Develops empathy and tolerance

Imagine that a child in your class consistently gets low scores and is not active in studies. What are the possible conclusions you would reach when you think about the reasons for this based on commonsense knowledge .

- Laziness

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But when you approach the problem through the lens of sociological imagination, you can see the influence of wider social factors on the child's learning and behaviour. What are they?

- Family background   • Limited access to resources

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When you approach the problem in this manner, you will develop empathy towards the child and will be able to provide support and encouragement. By understanding the social context behind the experiences of others, individuals can approach them from diverse perspectives. Empathy and tolerance can be developed through this.
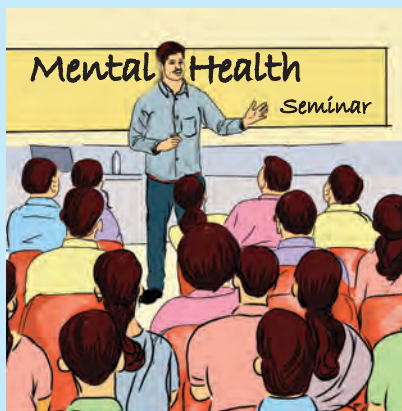
5. Develops critical thinking

Priya was born and brought up in a village. After completing her education, she migrated to the city in search of better employment and living conditions. But she found it difficult to find work and secure accommodation there. Though she got a job after sometime she soon lost it. Priya then approached the labour office. She thought that losing her job was a problem that happened only to her. But at the labour office, she realised that there were many migrants in the city who had lost their jobs like her. By interacting with them and the labour office, Priya got some knowledge about the problems faced by migrants and their rights. Based on that, Priya tried to think critically about the issues and started actively engaging in activities to improve the conditions of the migrants. Gradually she was able to improve the conditions of others as well as herself.

This was the experience of Priya who migrated from village to the city for work. What were the personal problems that Priya and other migrants experienced in common?

Critical thinking enabled Priya to recognise that most migrants faced similar problems like hers. She was also able to find that other social factors also influence individual problems. Hence Priya was able to improve her circumstances and support others. In this way critical thinking based on sociological imagination helps individuals to understand how various social factors influence their lives.

6. Questioning negative social norms.

Rinu lives in a small town. With a satisfying job and family, he believed that there were no flaws in his life. But he often felt anxiety and depression. He was afraid that if he shared this with anyone, they would think he was mentally unstable and would be isolated. So he did not disclose it to anyone. Once he attended a seminar on mental health. From the lectures and discussions held there by the mental health experts, he understood that mental health is as important as physical health. He realised that it was difficult for him to share his condition with others because there existed some negative social norms and stereotyping about mental health in society. He shared his mental issues with his friends. Together they started working to create social awareness about the importance of mental health.
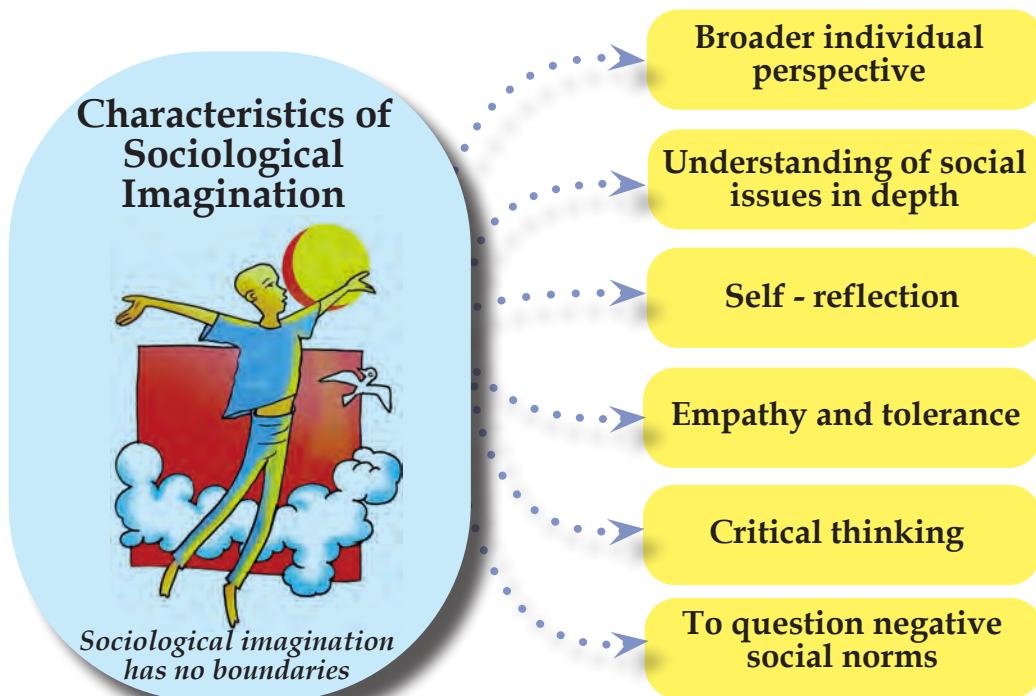
Have you read Rinu's experience? Do you realise that mental health is just as important as physical health? This awareness will inspire us to question the negative social norms that exist in society about mental health.

Sociological imagination also helps to understand the influence of social institutions like family, educational institutions and financial institutions on individual choices and their consequences.

Social factors can be seen behind every individual problem. Approaching only through commonsense knowledge will not help developing a social perspective. Social factors behind individual problems need to be identified. We should be able to analyse individual and social problems by looking beyond commonsense knowledge.

The sociological imagination enables to see individual problems as social problems rather than mere personal failures.

The reasons behind various social problems can be grasped through sociological imagination. This increases the possibility of intervention in problem solving and will help in formulating more effective social policies. Thus, sociological imagination helps to formulate social policies and strive for social change.

Characteristics of Sociological Imagination

Sociological imagination has no boundaries

- **Broader individual perspective**
- **Understanding of social issues in depth**
- **Self - reflection**
- **Empathy and tolerance**
- **Critical thinking**
- **To question negative social norms**

Observe your personal experiences and social problems in everyday life and record them in a journal. Find out how such social issues and individual experiences relate to broader social contexts using sociological imagination. Analyse the findings and write them down in the journal. Make a digital presentation of your analytical note and discuss it in the Social Science club.

Commonsense Knowledge and Sociological Imagination

Sociology seeks its knowlege beyond commonsense knowledge. Sociological enquiry helps in understanding and explaining commonsense knowledge. Commonsense knowledge and sociological imagination are different ways of understanding the society around us. These are interrelated but distinct ideas of sociology. By integrating these two ideas, individuals can engage critically with society and avoid viewpoints based only on commonsense. Consequently, individuals develop the ability to differentiate the complexities of social realities, social behaviour and social problems. Let us see how commonsense knowledge and sociological imagination differ in analysing social problems.

Commonsense Knowledge Approach	Sociological Imagination Approach
Limited to personal views and experiences	Its scope is broad as it connects individual experiences to larger social structures
Often provides only a superficial explanation based on stereotypes	Analyses deeply the impact of social factors on individuals
Social realities and problems are not approached through critical thinking	Encourages critical thinking about interrelationships between personal experiences and social structures

Sociological imagination helps to find the micro-macro relationship between individual and society. It equips us to engage in social activities and enables us to understand and address the complex interrelationships between individual lives and social structures. Sociological imagination thus becomes a powerful tool, skill and approach that enriches social life.

Try to find out the causes of social problems given in the table through the approaches of commonsense knowledge and sociological imagination.

Social Problems	Commonsense Knowledge Approach	Sociological Imagination Approach
1. Poverty	• Lack of interest in hard work •	• Uneven distribution of resources •
2. Unemployment	• Laziness •	• Population growth •
3. Academic Pressure	• Fear of failure •	• Pressure from school to get high score •

What are the differences found when approaching the same problem through commonsense knowledge and through sociological imagination? Form different groups and discuss the differences between the two approaches and present them in the class.

Extended Activities

1. Prepare a short speech to present in school assembly on 'The need of Sociological Imagination for healthy social life.'

2. Collect news of contemporary social issues that appeared in different media. Compare how they have presented the same social issue. Find out how different media have presented them using sociological imagination.

3. Prepare a presentation in the social science club which reflects the interventions that you have made using your sociological imagination skills.