

## **Bridging Theory and Method: Conceptualizing Poverty at both ends of Sociological Inquiry**

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C. Wright Mills charged that the sociological enterprise is limited by abstract empiricists and grand theorists who pare down our understanding of the social world to a set of variable relations and pompous theories. While quantitative research and macro theories hold an important place in sociology, they limit the ability to move to different levels of understanding. Mills (1959) critiques that our theoretical understandings are empty without data, but our data are blind without theory – neither is or has an absolute orientation. Over-attachment to a theory or a method systematically reducing one's ability to consider the varied aspects of the social world, however, the reflexivity of the sociological imagination, now taken for granted, often gets minimized in operationalization. Mills' ideas are reconsidered for a *conceptual imagination*, bridging theory and method at different levels of inquiry. A brief application of this reorientation of Mills' work considers varied understandings of poverty within a dynamic social world. A conceptual link is offered between this *imagination* and broader ideas of reflexivity, levels of abstraction, and the interplay between theory and method.

## INTRODUCTION

Concepts in sociology provide terminology through which social phenomena can be analyzed, classifying the objects of the observable world, imparting meaning to such phenomena, and providing higher-level schemes on the basis of these observations (Marshall 1998).

Concepts can be used by practitioners in minute, detailed work with small groups and individuals or in the detached, theoretical work of philosophers to observe and speculate on the social world(s). While there may be some agreement on the utility of concepts in the social sciences, they have traveled a tenuous path, arguably, between two broad but important orientating extremes: deductive and inductive inquiry. The tension, as will be explored, is the acceptance or rejection of *the* scientific method; that is, is there a means to get at an *absolute truth*, or is reality *relative*, is “truth” dependent on the approach? This paper attempts to discuss these questions in terms of the link between methodology and theory as the process of conceptualization.

Contrasting Mannheim, Mills and Merton, Phillips, in 1974, argued this issue as a matter of epistemology in sociology; the argument is based in authority and legitimacy of sociological knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, and therefore how knowledge is legitimated. Based on this tension, Phillips presents the following as an orienting question, which I adopt:

On the one hand, by accepting that each separate culture or group should decide by its own standards what properly counts as ‘scientific knowledge’...we opt for relativism. On the other hand, by accepting the existence of universal, abstract definitions of ‘scientific understanding’, ‘equality’ and the like from outside, we land ourselves in absolutism. The question is whether we must choose between these, or whether there exists a middle way which allows us to steer a course between the relativist and absolutist extremes (pp. 61-2).

While Phillips pursues the *sociology of knowledge* specifically, the exploration of this tension below is not for the purpose of examining our knowledge abstractly, but how our knowledge is used in outlining *what* one is researching and *how* the research is progressing empirically, that is, on conceptualization.

C. Wright Mills (1959) contends this divide should not be the basis for one's mode of investigating the social world. Rather, the approach through which one collects, analyzes, and explicates the meaning of concepts, *methods*, "does always require a developed carefulness and attention to detail, a habit of being clear, a skeptical perusal of alleged facts, and a tireless curiosity about their possible meanings, their bearings on other facts and notions" (pp. 126-7). This orderly and systemic scheme utilizes not one means of *knowing*, but through a collection of relevant empirical materials – including statistics, ethnography, case studies, or which method offers the most intelligible contribution. While originally written for the entire enterprise of *doing sociology*, the intellectual craft and imagination of the sociologist can be applied to the process of conceptualization – *the procedure through which concepts are stated, defined and operationalized in a sociological project* as the relations of sociology's ideological and empirical content. A reconsideration of Mills' framework will guide an intellectual and reflexive understanding of, and exploration in, sociological concepts.

Research in the social world depends on, to a great extent, the researcher's orientation and how she sees the social world. Orientations toward objectivity and truth – in the positivist sense – have traditionally co-opted methods that quantify social experience; that is, counts and measurements as observations of phenomena lead to an absolute, quantifiable understanding of the social world. Alternatively, the social world may be considered as unstructured and complex, where the experience of humans cannot be captured on a form or measure, but rather can only be understood through human perception and self-definition (Cargan 2007). The divide is emblematic of what the sociologist knows and how they discern and legitimate knowledge. Mills writes, "Serious difference between social scientists occur not between those who would observe without thinking and those who would think without observing; the differences have

rather to do with what kinds of thinking, what kinds of observing, and what kinds of links, if any, there are between the two” (1959:33). These two broad paradigms show an example of such differences in the research practice between thinking and observing, and the paucity of relations between the two. Concept formation and utilization remain important mechanisms in bridging both theory and methodology in the social sciences. By building a conceptual imagination, however, reality will be argued as multidimensional; an exploration with theory and methods highlights this multidimensionality and the essential acknowledgement that *reality is relational* (Biersack 1989) both in the abstract and specifics.

This paper explores two main ideas: first, in an attempt to outline parameters for this tension in social scientific *knowledge*, a framework for conceptualization using the approach of C. Wright Mills will provide a basis on which a bridge can be built between explicit attempts at method and theory. Second, a brief example of this Millsian approach will be offered by considering a sociological approach to poverty. What will be offered is a justification for Mills’ *intellectual craftsman* in defining the conception of poverty and the exploration of such phenomena conceptually utilizing the wealth of existing research. Moreover, it will consider creativity and imagination in defining and operationalizing sociology’s key concepts.

#### TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL IMAGINATION

Conceptualization formalizes the realm(s) in which relationships are deemed to be meaningful. For paradigms where concepts are tested through variables and hypotheses, observed relationships argue for patterns that follow a tendency toward universal certainty. Other modes, however, consider concepts and their patterns in context, acknowledging relative relationships in the place of universal explanations. Taken together, concepts are both born out of and informative for the research process. The focus should move beyond an either/or

approach to research and connect theory to method in all its manifestations, shedding light on concepts of phenomena, how these phenomena are conceived, and how they are tested. In essence, it reclaims the balanced relationship between deductive and inductive processes.

Mills (1959) defines the *sociological imagination* as:

...[T]he capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most *impersonal* and *remote* transformations to the most *intimate* features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two. (p. 7; emphasis added).

As stated, the sociologist should have the ability to consider the personal and private lives of individuals as well as the impersonal and public dimensions of the social world – it connotes both micro-level and macro-level analyses. The intellectual craftsman, Mills argues, recognizes the need for both theory and method, at multiple levels, in one's work; "To have mastered 'method' and 'theory' is to have become a self-conscious thinker, a [person] at work and aware of the assumptions and implications of whatever [they are] about...every working social scientist must be [their] own methodologist and [their] own theorist..." (1959:121).

Mills is therefore arguing for two major channels of understanding: the *capacity* to move from the personal to the public, from the individual to the social structure, and the *competence* to work in both theory and method. Capacity and competence is the foundation for a *conceptual imagination*. Mills' orientation toward sociology is summarized by Bernard Phillips (2001) in five major components: first, sociology should address the fundamental problems within society; second, it should utilize broad and abstract concepts to, third, examine concrete evidence of social phenomena; fourth, sociological knowledge should be integrative, using diverse and relevant perspectives; and fifth, individuals should develop the capacity to think both abstractly and imaginatively (p. 4). By building a scheme toward conceptualization using Mills' approach, the orientation toward the problems of sociology must include both abstract and concrete

evidence, incorporate different perspectives, and work in a reflexive manner (Gouldner 1970; Phillips 2001). Arguably, it is an approach that can consider conceptualization as a process through which one's theoretical and methodological approaches are presented and negotiated toward a well-rounded orientation to social problems. Theories should lend toward an analysis of concrete phenomena, but concrete phenomena should lead toward better understanding of theories and, likewise, methods explore phenomena, inform theory and should function to elucidate and inform concepts. Mills writes:

‘Method’ has to do, first of all, with how to ask and answer questions with some assurance that the answers are more or less durable. ‘Theory’ has to do, above all, with paying close attention to the words one is using, especially their degree of generality and their logical relations. The primary purpose of both is clarity of conception and economy of procedure, and most importantly just now, the release rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination. (1959:120)

Mills outlines three tendencies of sociology that limits the accumulated understanding of the discipline: a theory of history distorted by prophetic views for the future, a systemic theory of the nature of people and society too abstract and static to allow for nuanced processes, and fragmented empirical studies of contemporary society arranged in a series of unrelated and insignificant facts (1959:22-3). This *Abstracted Fragmentation* argument, considering the extremes, maintains the practice of sociology should work within them to incorporate the historical, the theoretically abstract, and the methodologically specific – and so should its conceptions. The definition and utility of conceptions should be able to ‘shuttle’ between theory and method – to have empirical as well and abstract gravity. Mills argues: “The problem of empirical verification is ‘how to get down to facts’ yet not get overwhelmed by them; how to anchor ideas to facts but not to sink the ideas. The problem is first *what* to verify and second *how to* verify it” (1959:125). The task of conceptualization is both a process in *how* and *what* – or in inductive and deductive approaches.

*Abstract Concepts*

At one extreme, Mills warns against the tendency toward ‘grand theory’ – a level of abstraction so high that theoretically it does not allow for a consideration of the heterogeneous nature of the social world. “Claiming to set forth a ‘general sociological theory,’ the grand theorist in fact sets forth a realm of concepts from which are excluded many structural features of human society, features long and accurately recognized as fundamental to its understanding” (1959:35). Ignorant of contextual, cultural, historical, and social processes, working at too high of a level of abstraction fetishizes grand concepts, disjoins theory from specific empirical problems, and leads to nothing more than withdrawal from reality. Highly abstract concepts generate one key defect of sociological understanding: the lack of coherent knowledge of their concepts in relation to individuals, *their mind*, and other social factors (Mills 1967b). Rather, moving toward a lower abstract consideration of concepts, one should start with history and recognize variation between societies and their social structures; Mills maintains “...there is no ‘grand theory,’ no one universal scheme in terms of which we can understand the unity of social structure, no one answer to the tired old problem of social order...Useful work on such problems...will be used in close empirical connection with a range of historical as well as contemporary social structures” (1959:46-7).

In considering conceptions, one must recognize that they are related abstractly to other conceptions at the theoretical level – that is, concepts are in part broad and overlapping umbrellas containing a magnitude of historical, social, and personal experience (Phillips 2001). These intersections can be used in various ways for a variety of studies where reflection may begin from numerous angles in the range of understanding society and culture (Mills 1967b:459). Balancing the necessary overlap with the danger of too high a level of abstraction, the social

construction of language should be paid close attention: language reflects knowledge which connects the broader discipline and the individual understanding of the discipline thus expanding and contracting one's sociological imagination (Mills 1967a).

Conceptions have three distinct requirements at the theoretical level: first, one must ensure that the theoretical definition allows one to logically move toward observation; second, recognition that one such movement *is not the only* movement for observation; and third, one must appreciate the boundaries of language. This orientation rejects a full absolutist view of reality and grand theory as unrealistic. Rather, abstract theories, do exist, overlap, and mutually influence each other. The social world, at the theoretical level, is multifaceted by definition. The absolutist problem, however, comes in when one is unjustifiably devout to one abstraction, neglecting the influence and interconnectedness of multiple theories.

### *Methodological Dependence*

Mills also warned, at the other extreme, against working at too low a level of abstraction. Using the term 'abstracted empiricism,' Mills points out that this is the opposite of grand theory, not characterized by any substantive propositions or theories, but is rather preoccupied and obsessed even with a particular philosophy of science rooted in the natural sciences and *the* scientific method. "In their arguments about various philosophical issues of social science, one of their invariable points is that they *are* 'natural scientists,' or at least they 'represent the viewpoint of natural science'" (1959:56). Further, "the kinds of problems that will be taken up and the way in which they are formulated are quite severely limited by The Scientific Method" (1959:57). That is, methods determine the problems to be studied in a fashion that reorients them to the minute and mediocre (Mills 1960). The scientific method, here the over-dependence on statistical procedures and the lack of an ability to move beyond the immediate context in

which data are derived, is the focus of Mills' critique. Concrete behaviors of people, statistical relationships, quantifiable agency, and the over emphasis of contemporary life are celebrated at the expense of the history of institutions, affective relationships, the structure of interaction, and personal biographies. Moreover, it inhibits sociological understanding at higher levels of abstraction; "'Theory' becomes the variables useful in interpreting statistical findings; 'empirical data,' it is strongly suggested and made evident in practice, are restricted to such statistically determined facts and relations as are numerous, repeatable, measurable" (1959:66).

Most important to the utility of Mills' ideas, and the conceptual procedure, is the unwavering devotion to method as a fundamental quality of a technician; specialists in method are specialists in one or another sociological 'discipline'. "The important point about them, in sociology today, is not that they are specialists, but that one of the results of their specialty is to further the process of specialization within the social sciences as a whole" (1959:59). It is not solely statistically driven empiricists, but those who have an overwhelming devotion to any method, Mills (1943) argues, abidance to method is a function of professional ideology. "Within such a generally homogeneous group there tend to be fewer divergent points of view which would clash over the meaning of facts and thus give rise to interpretations on a more theoretical level" (p. 166). The common condition of one's work with others becomes the focal point of inquiry, not the benefits of abstraction. This point is not specific to one approach: positivists and post-positivists, grounded theorists, ethnographers, and feminist standpoint researchers demonstrate over-dependence on *their* method, whether multivariate regression analysis or hierarchical modeling in mathematical sociology, theoretical sampling, open coding or participant observations in qualitative quarters, even structural discourse analysis. Concepts are not merely variables in an analysis; they are the ideas that catalyze the use of *method*.

When formulating concepts one cannot aim to address phenomena through a singular mode of inquiry. This point may be emphasized through the arguments of Feyerabend (1988) in that, “not every discovery can be accounted for in the same manner, and procedures that paid off in the past may create havoc when imposed on the future” (p. 1). More fundamental to the formation of conceptions, however, the sociologist should suppose a range of techniques as the inquiry into concepts should not be limited by the devotion to one method. Gouldner (1970) argues this as a point of the need for reflexivity, “A Reflexive Sociology embodies a critique of the conventional conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist’s relation to [their] work” (p. 495). Observations, and the methods of data collection, “cannot be a simple and positivistic mirror-like operation...the observational dimensions of any verificatory model are influenced by the selective language of its users” (Mills 1967b:460). Moreover, the language of the sociologist has social and historical importance; “There is in our time no common form of validation to which all will submit their assertions. This epistemological condition presents an opportunity to study comparatively the diverse norms themselves, their function, and genesis” (1967b:463). **Method relative to a theory is limiting; the only absolute, arguably, is the sociological method, encompassing the diversity of methods as the conceptual standard for sociology.**

### *Theory and Method*

By critiquing both the reliance on highly abstracted theory or positivist empirical methods, Mills (1959) re-emphasizes that the sociological enterprise is distracted by the ‘Concept’ and the ‘Method;’ both are parallel burdens against sociological progress (p. 50). While Mills uses the extreme of positivism as the example against which sociological understanding is critiqued, the primary task of sociology, and the larger body of social sciences,

should be to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding humans, society, and their interrelationships. Where abstract empiricists and grand theorists limit this overlapping framework, so to do those intellectuals who are devoted to any one approach. Mills continually invokes classical social science and its focus on understanding social order, social change, and social problems to state that it, “neither builds up from empirical observation nor does it begin with a grand theory of sociocultural systems and deduce down to human behavior...[it] places *empirical research and theory building in a continuous interaction*” (Elwell 2006:24).

Comprehensive frameworks are, with this continuous interaction, continually tested and reformulated through empirical observations.

Conceptualization in sociology must then bridge the gap between theory and method through a continuous and reflexive process. Method, how to ask and answer questions in a durable manner, is both an input and output of theory. The history of social inquiry, according to Mills’ orientation to classical social science, is the process through which social ‘facts’ are collected, generalizations are made from these ‘facts,’ and as new ‘facts’ are found, and as old ideas may be proven wrong, generalizations are improved (Mills 1960:9). Conceptions, therefore, cannot be considered the concrete definition of an idea nor the stable method through which the ideas are explored. Mills writes, “neither method nor theory is an autonomous domain; methods are methods for some range of problems; theories are theories of some range of phenomena” (1959:121). And, I submit, they are anchored in the dimensions of space and time. To gain a full, or a more comprehensive conception, the sociologist must consider multiple ranges of both theory and method; “This obviously means that [s]he must be very well acquainted in a substantive way with the state of knowledge in the area with which the studies being examined are concerned...that such work is best done when the several studies examined

are concerned with a similar area of study” (1959:121). In essence, the sociologist should work against the fragmentation and isolation of problems to lower levels of abstraction, but moving toward connecting them to larger levels of understanding (Mills 1943).

Following classical social science, Mills provides an idiom of the *macroscopic*, the movement of concepts between highly abstracted theories and methodological inhibition, that involves “an abstraction from what may be observed in everyday milieu, but the direction of its abstraction is toward social and historical structures...it is in terms of specific social and historical structures that the classic problems of social science have been formulated, and in such terms solutions offered” (1959:124). The conceptualization of a social problem or processes is constituent of multiple level of abstraction, multiple methods of investigation, and verified by the strength of socio-historical considerations. To understand the actions and motivations of individuals and groups, one’s character, a general view of institutions and social structures have to be introduced into the conception. Moreover, one must also include important ideas that consider differences between people that shape their biographies, how they are stratified, and the dimensions through which humans are considered in various social structural institutions as a present day determinant built on historical processes. Broad conceptualizations of character and social structure aim “to display, analyze, and understand types of persons in terms of their roles within institutions in given orders and social structures within various historical eras; and...do this for each institutional order” (Gerth and Mills 1964:34).

### *Summarizing a Framework for Conceptualization*

To move beyond the absolute/relativist divide in sociological inquiry, and building on Mills, I offer a framework for conceptualization as an ongoing expanding and contracting process that channels the intellectual craftsperson:

“The classical crafts[person] does not usually make up one big design for on big empirical study. [One’s] policy is to allow and to invite a continual shuttle between macroscopic conceptions and detailed expositions. [One] does this by designing [their] work as a series of smaller-scale empirical studies (which may of course include microscopic and statistical work), each of which seems to be pivotal to some part or another of the solution [s]he is elaborating. That solution is confirmed modified, or refuted, according to the results of these empirical studies (1959:126).

What is more, classic social science neither begins with micro-sociological foundations or abstract elaborations attempts to “build and deduce at the same time, in the same process of study, and to do so by means of adequate formulation and reformulation of problems and their adequate solutions” (1959:128).

*Theory.* Conceptions have three requirements at the theoretical level: to ensure that the theoretical definition allows one to logically move toward observation, the recognition that one movement toward observation *is not the only possible* movement and one must realize the boundaries of language. This orientation necessarily rejects a full absolutist view of reality but provides theories as dynamic and overlapping, and mutually influential.

*Method.* The language of the sociologist has social and historical importance; there is no longer a common form of method or validation of knowledge. This presents the opportunity to study comparatively the diverse norms themselves, their function, and their genesis through diverse methods – both quantitative and qualitative. Co-opting a metaphor, typically used in qualitative work, but universally applicable, the sociologist must be a bricoleur – one who generates a substantive set of practices that provides solutions to problems in a variety of situations and is built through varied methods and techniques to consider the quantity and quality of social worlds (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

*Conceptual form.* In formulating a conception – it is not through the process of one study that the sociologist should be focused, but the larger, historical, and social implications of, and grounding in, public issues and implications for understanding private experiences. Imbedded in

substantive problems, one's conceptual form should, above all, avoid the problem of demarcation between theory and method; that is, "the blindness of empirical data without theory and the emptiness of theory without data" (1959:66). When concepts are derived at a higher level of abstraction, the relationship between the pragmatism of sociology combined with other disciplines shows that knowledge is relative in the exploration of the dimensions of concepts. Working against a fragmented social science, utilizing varied orientations and empirical methods enable the sociologist to confront the practical problems of everyday life (Phillips 2001:9).

#### APPLICATION: MOVING BEYOND AN ABSOLUTE POVERTY

The popular conceptualization of *poverty* mirrors Mills' sociological problematic of an absolute, singular and limiting theoretical and methodological orientation for exploring some phenomenon. Marshall (1998), in a *Dictionary of Sociology*, provides this definition: "Poverty defined in absolute terms refers to a state in which the individual lacks the resources necessary for subsistence. Relative definitions...refer to the individual's or group's lack of resources when compared with that of other members of the society [as] their relative standard of living" (p. 516). From here, the need to move up to higher levels of abstraction becomes evident as the definition is explicitly based in the distribution of material resources, and limited by a conspicuous absence of theoretical and methodological considerations. As provided in a discipline specific lexicon, this conceptualization provides evidence of an absolute position on poverty. Similarly, Iceland (2006), a prominent poverty scholar, defines poverty as economic deprivation, building on the two common measures of poverty: absolute and relative. These measures, commonly used in policy circles, have evolved in to a combined *quasi-relative* measure of poverty that is focused not just on economic fluctuations, but consumption patterns and social spending (Iceland 2006; Saunders, Bradshaw, and Hirst 2002). Both Marshall and

Iceland give mention to *subjective* measures of poverty, but it given little gravity. Subjective poverty, according to Njeru (2004), is more common in areas not accustomed to higher income levels or economic development; it is a measurement whether individuals and groups actually feel poor. Typically, however, even subjective poverty is placed in the material/economic framework focusing on those absolutely or relatively measured as *poor*. Each of the three measures drives the understanding of poverty as economic, fracturing how one comes to understand such phenomena from abstract theories and other methodological interests.

Considering the conceptualization framework above, a theory of poverty as based in solely economic terms provides a narrow empirical understanding of the measure of poverty – economic assets – and hence purports a single means to measure deprivation through absolute, relative, or subjective income. The remainder of this section expands on this single conception of poverty to build a broader treatment of its various dimensions based in theory, method, and the reflexive exchange between them.

#### *Theory – Moving through Abstractions*

Primarily, it is important to situate poverty in possible abstractions – that is, poverty must be extracted from common, concrete observations to theoretical generalizations. One such generalization considers sociological theories based in *social stratification* where one considers how people are ranked within a social system, and the differences between these ranks (Gerth and Mills 1964). Difference between ranks could be abstracted to include varied social structures and institutions, for example, or between dominant and alternate norms and values, in efforts to understand such their existence and persistence (Collins 1994; Turner, Beeghley, and Powers 2007). Stratification has also been argued to correspond with structured and systematic inequalities, not solely difference between ranks. Inequalities could manifest themselves in a

series of stratified relationships such as social class, social status, and social power associations (Bendix and Lipset 1966).

Moving to a lower level of abstraction, class, status and power can be considered through a series of socially constructed categories of people, such as race/ethnicity and sex/gender, as well as traditional orientations such as family, religion, political party and/or political involvement, education, occupation, and even economically determined social class. While the original definition of economically-based poverty focused on a methodological definition, shuttling up toward broader understandings of social structure and back down through a system of inequalities, poverty can supplement a constructed economic standard to incorporate standards of the family, religion, or occupational prestige, for example. Race, and its dynamics contributing to poverty has been considered as an outcome of racial disparities in public policies and cultural norms (Jencks 1993; Wilson 1987); likewise, the role of sex and gender has also been considered as a system of inequity in the production of poverty (Edin and Lein 1997; Pearce 1978; Sidel 1998). Some have combined class, gender, and race on occupational and economical factors in defining poverty (Neubeck 2006; Wilson 1996). History, of course, can provide a necessary mode of analysis, both as the historical contingency of poverty and through continual systems of inequality (Goldberg and Collins 2001; Mink and Solinger 2003; Noble 1997).

Moving up once again to broader abstractions of social stratification and inequality, one could move in a comparative direction toward evaluating poverty between nations and states. Poverty could be theorized based on comparing the level of development of the countries (Njeru 2004; Portes 2006) or the political structure of the state (Esping-Anderson 1998; Palme 2006; Smeeding 2005). Historically comparative political, social, and economic development of the

structure of the state as it intersects with poverty can be another abstract orientation, especially through a system of inequality and power (Piven and Cloward 1993). What is more, this progression can focus on the social categorizations of people as they intersect with both poverty and the state (Kilkey and Bradshaw 1999; O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999; Orloff 1993).

While this movement through other theoretical abstractions is brief, it offers an example of how poverty can be limited by an absolute; it is important to move above and beyond a single poverty line (absolute poverty), a relational poverty line (relative poverty), or how one feels about being above or below either of the former measures (subjective poverty) and incorporate the wealth of theories available. Poverty is intertwined within a system of abstractions broadly considered in social stratification, but also in systems of inequality; through comparative space and time, poverty is observed in and through varied contexts. In essence, a conceptualization is offered that opens up different, and equally important, movements for observation – of which economic determinism is not separate for other institutions of inequality and social processes. Additionally, it offers a consideration of language in that it accepts varied definitions of stratification and inequality, social structural location, and comparative perspectives, strengthening the dialectic of poverty.

*Methods – Measuring (Absolutely and Relatively) Poverty*

Mencher (1967:2) comments that the problem of measuring poverty is two-fold: the establishment of a sound theory and the development and employment of valid and reliable techniques for the collection and analysis of data on incomes. In terms of an imaginative conception of poverty, this problematic is three-fold: the need for a multitude of theoretical orientations (previously discussed), the limiting absolutist need of validity and reliability in measuring income, and the limiting reliance on income as the sole conception of poverty. As

argued from the beginning of this example, *one* measure of poverty, or one methodological anchor – income – is *the problematic*. Measurement, it is argued, must decentralize itself, de-economize itself, to consider and inform a range of *what* poverty means. By working against methodological dependence, the methods through which poverty is explored should exhaust quantitative and qualitative approaches.

At one end, indicators of poverty can be reconsidered. Indicators are long-term measures of phenomena used in planning and analysis of public policies and as interventions for social research. Fronès (2007) defines an indicator as an empirical variable assumed to point to constructed, but not necessarily observable, variables to measure “a wider range of phenomena, from vague indices, signs, and symptoms to calculated probabilities and systematic measures” (p. 8). While indicators, commonly viewed, are scientifically quantifiable and empirical, they do offer the ability to observe trends. Further, as Fronès maintains, indicators can be cultural, measuring trends in myths and styles, or media messages, to gain an understanding of the complexity of humans. For poverty, this means that indicators do not have to focus solely on income, consumption, or other economically determined thresholds (which characterize common poverty indicators), but can use trends in family health, educational attainment, or cultural markers, for example (Roosa, Deng, Nair, and Burrell 2005). Additionally, Pressman and Scott (2009) argue that the measurement of poverty is inadequate without considering the level of debt encumbered by poor individuals and families, especially in a necessarily consumer society. Other positivist methodological conceptions have attempted, for example, to quantify and compare the three ‘measures’ of poverty (Kingdon and Knight 2006), or consider trends in multi-level models of income and non-income based indicators (Dewilde 2004). Moreover, social indicators can be useful in generating cross-national comparisons of poverty by using related

indices of some measure, or indicators can be constructed in a time-series to allow historical comparisons to be made over a given span of time (Hicks and Esping-Anderson 2005).

However, it is important to remember that statistical indicators are only one point of measurement; with a range of abstractions of poverty, there must be a range of methods to avoid the methodological reduction of theory to a simple set of variables.

On the other end of the methodological spectrum, strictly relative methods can provide a completely different portrait of poverty. Studies in the experiences of poverty have focused, rightly, on qualitative methods in order to build an understanding of poverty through individuals' social life and their interaction with others. Family studies of poverty, for example, move beyond measuring some indicator of poverty to argue poverty as a totalizing human experience (Zucchini 1997). Contextual and relative studies have been argued to provide circumstance to statistical relationships (Rank 2005), and to expand the capacity to live in and about poverty. When quantified measures give way to new and expanding relational means (Goode and Maskovsky 2001), contextual ethnographic, observational, and historical methods offer diverse examples of the experience of poverty including cultural distortions of poor lone mother families (Hays 2003), survival techniques of families in low-wage employment (Edin and Lein 1997), the intersection of racial and class experiences (Hartigan Jr. 1999), and the political involvement of impoverished persons (Piven and Cloward 1979).

The measurement of poverty, coincidentally, may be more elementary to reconfigure than the movement through abstractions since each measure can follow different paths toward such conceptions. To the point, however, there is no single, common method or mode of validation for knowledge – especially when considering the complexity of poverty. Expanding the inquiry of poverty beyond quantifiable economics, while accepting its importance as a outcome of some

form of inequality, the opportunity to study poverty through comparatively diverse norms, complicated functions, and relative origins is hallmarked by utilization of multiple and diverse methods. One method relative to one theory is limiting; the strength of the sociological method in analyzing poverty is that it takes in diverse methods as its conceptual standard. Gathering empirical data through different methods and interpreting them with different theories, ranging from abstract indicators to personal ethnographies, the conceptualization of poverty is richer than the strongest, single correlation of income to a constructed poverty threshold or remote observation.

*Theory and Method Revisited*

In formulating a conception of poverty – as a series of bridges between theories and methods – it is not through the process of one study that the sociologist should be focused, but the larger, historical, and social implications of, and grounding in, the public issues of inequality and stratification and explorations through understandings of private experiences. Concepts derived at higher levels of abstraction liberate the common definition of poverty from its economical roots; moving down the ladder of abstraction to practical observations allows poverty to be considered both through space and time as multifaceted, personal accounts and individual experiences. Poverty is not a single issue manifested in a single form– it is a broad set of experiences through a broad set of perceptions and theories. No one method best *measures* poverty; no one theory best *explains* or *explores* poverty; it is the continued combination and reconfiguration of these methods and theories that reflexively forms a comprehensive understanding of both the public and private dimensions of this social problem.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

In closing, grounded in substantive problems, one's conceptual form should, above all, avoid the problem of demarcation between theory and method. To repeat Mills, this demarcation is, "the blindness of empirical data without theory and the emptiness of theory without data" (1959:66). When concepts are derived at a higher level of abstraction, the relationship between social science disciplines can explore the dimensions of concepts. Working against the fractured understanding of concepts, sociologists should use its varied orientations and empirical methods to confront the practical problems of everyday life.

Gouldner (1970) offers a salient consideration of the use of sociology, *all of sociology*, as a work ethic. Here, it is argued, that we should work against routine in sociological roles through both theoretical and methodological domains; rather, as has been developed above through the work of C. Wright Mills, we should be creative and imaginative, and be reflexively expansive in our use of both theory and method – *to be refreshing and serious, demanding challenges and respect*. Gouldner argues,

As a *work ethic*, a Reflexive Sociology affirms the creative potential of the individual scholar, which it opposes to the conformity demanded by established institutions...It opposes the inherent tendency of any professional role to become standardized and to be ridden with the smugly self-satisfied...It prefers [people] with a capacity for intellectual risk-taking...In truth, a Reflexive Sociology is concerned more with the creativity than the reliability of an intellectual performance: it shuns the domestication of the intellectual life. (p. 504)

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