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Deploying the sociological imagination as a research method in the neoliberal university

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Introduction

Empiricism often limits what does and does not constitute valid research based upon methods alone. This form of gatekeeping forces scholars to push past these methodological limitations by widening and exploring new realms in critical theoretical research precisely because as described in this book, empiricists strictly adopt traditional, classical approaches to methods that expect educational researchers to rely squarely on positivist, postpositivist, or naturalistic paradigms (Dennis, 2017; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Rist, 1977). Such an approach presumes that formalized mechanics and structure in methods by way of processes, rigor, and application are necessary to organize an unapologetically messy world (Lincoln et al., 2011; Strunk & Locke, 2019). In this sense, empiricist work – not to be equated with empirical work – focuses its attention on the intricacies of process-based applications that do not allow for much interrogation of the researcher themself. And, by deflecting the research’s attention away from the researcher and onto the mere methods, they inadvertently defend the actions of the researcher’s objective or subjective logic in efforts to establish what Lincoln and colleagues refer to as “intellectual legitimacy” (p. 97). This emphasis, however, steers the conversation of research methods toward the processes of these methods rather than the impetus for the research.

In order to critically (re)frame how we approach educational research, researchers must reflect on the societal context in which education occurs, not just fine tuning the empirical methods they apply. This context includes racism, sexism, classism, ableism, patriarchy, and heteronormative sexuality that is replicated and reinforced. As such, strictly narrowing in on methods diverts attention from the context of how replication of these -isms inculcate in the educational system (Giroux, 2001, 2015; Grosland & Roberts, 2021). This critical (re)framing of the educational context, however, is not without resistance from those who fight to maintain a status quo characterized by a narrow conception of educational research (Ball, 1995; Morse, 2015). This reified view of conducting research holds strong consequences in terms of the value and need to conduct research in an evermore complex world (Stevick & Levinson, 2007). Not uncommonly, student-researchers adopt ideas of research methods...
as static or frigid, often considering them “set, natural, and unquestionable,” mirroring a possible adoption of the reality in which they also conduct research (Anderson, 2010; Strunk & Locke, 2019, p. xix).

This strict delineation of what constitutes educational research via methods smothers the realization that theory indeed offers transformative applications for inquiry. Denzin (2009) points out that “governments are attempting to regulate scientific inquiry by defining what good science is. . . . These regulatory activities raise fundamental philosophical, epistemological, political, and pedagogical issues for scholarship and freedom of speech in the academy” (p. 13). While Denzin is referring more broadly to qualitative research, we argue that theory as method falls under this assertion. One such theory as a method under assault is C. Wright Mills’s (1959) sociological imagination. The purpose of this chapter is to join the voices of scholars, both past and present, who argue for the advancement of theory as method by offering an explanation and application of the sociological imagination as a method, particularly to develop student-researchers for socially just projects. Per Freire’s (1972) assertion that critical pedagogy is both theory and praxis, we too argue that the sociological imagination is also an act of praxis that blurs the lines between knowing and doing in research.

The sociological imagination as theory

C. Wright Mills (1959), a contemporary sociologist from the United States, conceptualized the sociological imagination as “the vivid awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society” (p. 6). The sociological imagination is a theory that problematizes individual realities by forcing researchers to also consider the social realities that shape daily life. That is, beyond individual realities, there is something more to understanding those realities when acknowledging how society socializes people into their experienced realities. For example, a Black man may have an individual reality of his lived experience, yet the social reality of racism, white supremacy, and anti-Black violence also contributes to how he experiences his individual reality. Further, Mills (1959) argued that our personal troubles only have meaning when considered within proximity to public issues. He noted,

The first fruit of this imagination – and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it – is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances.

(Mills, 1959, p. 5)

The sociological imagination, as such, places the individual in the context of their society and the public issues within that society. To illustrate, Myles Horton’s conceptualization of the Highlander Research and Education
Center leveraged education to interrogate and alleviate the struggles inherent in people’s lives within rural Appalachia (Brian & Elbert, 2005). This community-based institute was founded in 1932 and empowered activists, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, to fight structural inequalities. In doing so, this critical consciousness helped to advance initiatives (including social class and land, literacy, environmental activism, and food insecurity, *inter alia*) within the Civil Rights Movement and the Appalachian Social Justice Movement (Brian & Elbert, 2005). Clearly, the research and activism become one because the individual injustices are married to larger public injustices. They cannot be divorced. And, in their forever entanglement, research methods become more robust and meaningful to both the individual and the public.

The sociological imagination, then, serves as a theory and, haphazardly, also a method for situating the daily lives of individuals in a larger social context. Aligning with Mills (1959), individual reality is not in and of itself informed by just that one individual, especially when the period of time and other individuals within the circumstance influence the ways one person views reality. Needless to say, reality is co-constructed between the individual and those around them and cannot be detached from other lived experiences (Crowley, 2019). As such, the sociological imagination is a theory that expands our understanding of an individual as part and parcel of a larger collective. When applied as a method, the sociological imagination realizes the story captured by one participant in empirical research may not be adequate enough to best capture the reality of a more holistic lived experience.

Playing a fundamental role in sociology, the sociological imagination is often-times one of the first ideas discussed alongside social theory (Garoutte, 2018). For sociologists, social theory centers on understanding four major components: socio-cultural contexts within which institutions/human behavior exists; the connection between those contexts and institutions/human behavior; the social worlds created by these contexts; and the experiences of individuals or groups within these contexts (Anderson, 2010). However, the sociological imagination takes these objectives one step further by acknowledging the role of the individual in these investigations and necessitates a critical examination of the roles individuals played within the socio-cultural contexts that then affect the researcher (Garoutte, 2018). Through this, the sociological imagination equips researchers to reveal and critique structures in society that may help to reproduce and maintain inequities (Doob, 2019; Hurst, Fitz Gibbon, & Nurse, 2020; Kozol, 1991). Going back to the Highlander example, this is illustrated through the philosophy that was adopted as part of the training for collective action:

To empower people, Horton had to begin where they were; help them develop the ability to define their own problems and find solutions for themselves. As Horton and Highlander focused on assisting the poor and oppressed, it became apparent that a first step in empowerment and
facilitating change would be to honor people for what and who they are: unique individuals possessing a wealth of knowledge.

(Brian & Elbert, 2005, pp. 2–3)

By starting with community leaders’ experiences, this training taught individuals to critique inequalities in society and become aware of structural inequalities (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, etc.).

Though used widely in sociology the sociological imagination has not been fully integrated into the field of critical theoretical research in education. The sociological imagination impacts a researcher in that applying the sociological imagination as method not only investigates the role of the individual researcher but also their role within a larger context of race, gender, class, etc. Meaning, the sociological imagination as method accounts for the role of researchers and the social identities of that researcher. If the researcher is white, for example, and does studies in Black communities, how then do larger social contexts of race influence their role? Or, more precisely, shall the identities of the researcher as white, cisgender, male, monolingual, and non-disabled within a social context of white supremacy, gender binaries, patriarchy, hegemony of English, and ability privilege also be considered? In this manner, researchers can no longer waltz into communities of study without acknowledging how their social identities might be extensions of larger social systems of power and privilege.

**Why the sociological imagination?**

The significance of this chapter derives from the argument that critical theory is inherently a form of research. Thus, we examine the contending arguments in educational research to better understand why and how the sociological imagination fits into the ever-expanding definition of what constitutes research methods. Within these paradigmatic wars, theory has typically been placed as an add-on to these “more rigorous” methods – an assistance to help explain or add action to discoveries made within these paradigms but rarely a stand-alone process by which to evaluate the same, messy world. However, on its own, theoretical work offers what more traditional methods do not. Theory offers a way to unpack the existing and explore a multiplicity of perspectives, lenses, or possibilities for change; a look into the ideal or the unknown based on flexible parameters and intertwined realities (Anderson, 2010; Strunk & Locke, 2019). As Lather (1986) would note, leveraging theory, particularly frameworks aligned with critical theory, offers an opportunity of negotiation, reciprocity, and empowerment that elevates it to research as praxis.

The question is how. How do we prepare researchers to do as Lather suggests, elevate their research to praxis? For us, the sociological imagination, long used in sociology courses as a foundational theory which undergirds other sociological theories, is that bridging theory. For example, sociology courses at universities are oftentimes populated with sociology majors and non-sociology majors.
This brings various perspectives to issues of social problems. However, it was not until student-researchers were exposed to the theory of the sociological imagination that they begin to rethink social problems in new ways. Instead of thinking of a social problem as one they experience in isolation, upon learning the sociological imagination, they begin to realize that social problems are but mere results of larger social contexts. Needless to say, learning the sociological imagination helps student-researchers, both sociology majors and nonmajors, expand their understanding of social problems and contexts. As such, curricula in sociology courses that begin with foundational understanding of the sociological imagination is vital to begin the preparation of student-researchers.

In this chapter, we offer an example of how the sociological imagination, though initially conceptualized as theory, was implemented as a research method within an undergraduate sociology course in a neoliberal university. This context is defined by the encroaching reliance on empiricism to guide teaching and learning; in accordance, the use of this theory as a research method guided students’ culminating projects within this course to intentionally integrate their experiences with their learning and socio-cultural contexts (Giroux, 2015). Suffice it to say that though we are researchers ourselves, the focus of this chapter is not about our research. Instead, this chapter focuses on how to better prepare student-researchers with both theory and method of the sociological imagination. As their professors, we speak pedagogically. But for the purposes of this chapter, we focus in on the revelations and actions of our student-researchers.

Implications of sociological imagination in education

Although derived from sociology, the sociological imagination as a theory has relevance for research in education. By leveraging this framework, through which “the awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society” comes to the forefront, researchers recognize education as a social institution in which members of a society are taught skills and values that are seen as important for the survival of the society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Mills, 1959). Fine (2017) uses the sociological imagination as a formidable theory for education and a way to promote social justice in the classroom. She expands on creating solidarity among marginalized groups, democratizing the knowledge production process, and critiquing structures to promote social change. While her book focuses on the method of critical participatory action, our approach builds on this perspective and helps students engage in the sociological imagination as a method through establishing agency needed to foster social change. This theory as method approach is particularly important because, as educational institutions replicate unjust power structures found in society, there must be alternate ways in education that create agency within student-researchers who then feel empowered to create social change.

Before agency, however, a thorough understanding of how education is an institution with inherent power dynamics that are historically oppressive must
be had. Bowles and Gintis (1976), for instance, explain how the primary function of education in the United States is to reproduce social class. Educational institutions use a dominant socio-cultural structure that privileges the norms of one social group and silences the norms considered “other.” We see the reproduction of injustices from the larger society, including racism, sexism, and classism (Giroux, 2015). Within the United States, for example, this type of privilege has favored white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male, heterosexual, non-disabled norms and systemically silenced, policed, and oppressed those that do not fit into this mold (Weber, 1930).

By using the sociological imagination, students can better examine how issues of white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism, heteronormativity, and Christian-centricity are all embedded in educational institutions. To this point, that type of activism can be described as follows in terms of the reproduction of systemic oppression in educational institutions:

On this point, a politico-pedagogical problem, for Giroux, is not whether students, or academics, are right or left, but whether they are responsible or unreflective and acritical – about themselves, the conditions in which they learn and work, and the broader world – and, thus, whether or not they make it difficult to extend the conversation and perturb the basic conditions of arrogance and myopia that underpin dead-end polemics and a politics of annihilation.

(Giroux & Robbins, 2015, p. xv)

This type of politics of annihilation is reflective of the work of other scholars who have highlighted how education in the United States is permeated with multiple forms of racism, sexism, and classism (to name a few) through learned oppression and policing practices (Giroux & Robbins, 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2005).

The sociological imagination as method, in turn, demands that researchers reimagine education as a just and joyful context and investigate, through a critical lens, how education acts as a reproducer of socio-cultural injustices (Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1994). hook (1994) indicates that this type of (re)framing becomes a challenge to those that may benefit from the actual structure that is being reproduced through education. In (re)framing and shaping the way that education is understood, from institutionalized oppression to liberation, she expounds on the fact that such freedom challenges the inherent socio-cultural authority established in schooling (hook, 1994). Thus, in many ways, the sociological imagination serves as a call to action to challenge the status quo by deploying a method that connects biography and history for a better society.

Understanding sociological imagination as method

As a research method in education, the sociological imagination is comparable to other frameworks within the critical lens tradition in that it leverages
research to enact change in the social world in which we live (Lincoln et al., 2011). Intertwined with the notions of empowerment and praxis, the sociological imagination is not meant to be a static mechanism by which to explore the social world, but rather a fluid dynamic that meshes the micro and macro lenses to dismantle and understand what is there and what can be envisioned. In forming critical sociological thinkers, researchers become catalysts of change through an intentional understanding of data via the sociological imagination and the lenses selected for the analysis (Mills, 1959). To this degree, understanding other critical analyses offers a mechanism by which to make the case and better consider the mechanics of the sociological imagination as a research method.

One particular parallelism that can be used is Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) as offered by Souto-Manning (2007) in her defense of the method as a valid research process. As a new research method, Souto-Manning (2007) argues that CNA marries the lenses of the micro and macro analysts through intentional discourse analysis (micro) and institutional analysis (macro) to help understand and uncover the dynamics that affect both. In her words, CNA

transcends the artificial dichotomies of micro-macro in discourse analysis and of personal and institutional discourses. It uses a mostly microanalytic perspective (Critical discourse analysis or CDA) to inform a predominantly microanalytic perspective (analysis of personal/conversational narratives), and vice versa.

In doing so, using a method like CNA allows for researchers to explore the “link between macro-level power inequities and micro-level interactional positioning” which positions people in the entanglement of both (Rymes, 2003, p. 122 as cited in Souto-Manning, 2007, p. 131).

Using CNA as a template, similar arguments can be made for the sociological imagination as a valid research method. Similar to CNA, the sociological imagination requires scholars to transcend the bounds between the micro and macro levels that influence larger social patterns and establishments (Mills, 1959). However, instead of focusing on just discourse, the sociological imagination requires a more holistic use of social theory (via meta-analysis of structures) to investigate social patterns/trends from different perspectives including historical, economic, and political (Anderson, 2010; Jones, 2011). In a CNA study, for example, the focus would be on dismantling the conversational narratives that result from contextual markers that underscore what was said, the language used, and the social elements that give that language power and meaning (Souto-Manning, 2007).

Souto-Manning (2007) illustrates this through a study conducted in Brazil wherein the conversational habits of low socio-economic status residents revealed larger political themes of governmental oppression and gender-based
discrimination. In contrast, the sociological imagination is more observational than discourse-based, holistic methods, and attempts to transcend power inequities stemming from both macro- and micro-level positioning. Taking the same context as the CNA study, the sociological imagination would task researchers to evaluate their position within the Brazilian neighborhood being studied, interrogate the frameworks being presented in terms of socio-economic status and gender of the participants, and charge researchers with evaluating the historical and social elements that not only influence these narratives and behavioral patterns, but also search for possible solutions to address these challenges (Anderson, 2010).

Effectively, the sociological imagination leverages three main elements – (1) reflection and reflexivity, (2) a critical framework, and (3) critical meta-awareness – to contend with the structuralist traditions that initially gave way to social theory as analysis. Specifically, the sociological imagination asks people to remove themselves from their individual vantage points (reflection and reflexivity) in order to reveal and challenge a social panorama (critical framework) where institutions and structures can be understood, challenged, dismantled, and transformed (critical meta-awareness). We discuss them next.

**Reflection and reflexivity**

Beginning with reflection and reflexivity, the sociological imagination adopts a form of introspection that requires the researcher to understand their place in inquiry. According to Akenson (2018), while distinctively different – reflexivity necessitates the development of full awareness of positionality wherein reflection allows for this awareness to remain at a distance – both shape the processes inherent for critical reflexivity. In this sense, the Freirean (1972) understanding can be adopted, wherein it is understood that no social experience takes place in a vacuum; all experiences including historical, economic, and political are influenced by the very lens that the sociological imagination requires be flexed as part of the process (Souto-Manning, 2007).

As a method, the sociological imagination requires the integration of reflection and reflexivity as part of the analytic structure. In the example provided in this chapter, reflection and reflexivity represents a better understanding of our unique position within various socio-cultural contexts and how this perspective influences the way the world is analyzed. From the student–researchers’ perspective in the said course, they were tasked with engaging in both reflection and reflexivity as a means to understand their own positionality within the social patterns and issues they were investigating. Reflection and reflexivity are thus necessary in terms of understanding researcher and social agent positionality requiring a deep comprehension of the social elements that influence identity development, social actions, and subsequent consequences of those actions (Strunk & Locke, 2019).
Critical framework

The second element centers on the notion of a critical framework, which necessitates action. Of scholars working within this framework, Anderson (2010) describes the following:

We are more rebellious in desiring rapid social change. Theorists from this position examine institutions for their faults, often with the political intent of changing institutions. We reject the notion that it is dangerous to alter social beliefs. We do so because we view the current system as being designed to promote the power and wealth of a few, at the expenses of the many.

(p. 11)

The sociological imagination is innately a critical framework demanding that researchers engage in reflection and reflexivity for societal transformation. In other words, the sociological imagination equips researchers with a lens that enables them to reveal and critique structures that marginalize those in our society with the least power. This is parallel to how Giroux and Robbins (2015) understood activism in challenging the oppressive structures of educational institutions. The researcher, then, is called to action when they deploy their sociological imagination to critique racism, sexism, classism, etc. in the larger society and to work toward a more just society.

The culminating projects created by the student-researchers in the example of this chapter illustrate the very notion of a critical framework. Whether alleviating poverty, eliminating human trafficking, or improving accessibility on college campuses, the student-researchers of this course leveraged the sociological imagination to challenge common social woes and, through this process, challenge themselves to imagine a different world. From the professors’ perspective, the critical framework helped us to dismantle the common structure of an undergraduate sociology course and help redesign the course with a purpose geared more toward student development as scholar-activists. The purpose of the sociological imagination as a method tasks the researcher with deconstructing social structures, patterns, and processes through the critical analysis and integration of other perspectives, notions, and understanding (Souto-Manning, 2007; Strunk & Locke, 2019). Thus, the purpose of the sociological imagination is to challenge the status quo, regardless of the positionality of the researcher, to affect change in society.

Critical meta-awareness

The third element refers to the development of critical meta-awareness as part of the research method. The pairing of the micro to macro lenses that the sociological imagination uses to examine social structures provides a holistic lens by which to investigate ingrained social patterns and practices. This type of holistic lens, the intertwining of the personal with the institutional or structural, builds on what
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Souto-Manning (2007) refers to as the development of critical meta-awareness (or conscientization) – a step that goes further than reflection or reflexivity. For Souto-Manning (2007), the development of this critical meta-awareness allows “common people to engage in social action to solve problems and address issues they identify in their own narratives” (p. 134). The student-researchers, then, did just that throughout the course and within their culminating projects.

For the student-researchers in the example of this chapter, this critical meta-awareness was reflected in the steps they needed to take to evaluate the social problems, investigate factors associated with their positionality, and then propose solutions to the problem. The student-researchers followed guidelines by which to engage with the critical meta-awareness processes using the sociological imagination to develop solutions cognizant of different perspectives, understandings, and realities. Thus, critical meta-awareness was developed not only in the process of designing the culminating project, but also in the process of understanding their place in what worked and what did not work in order to enact positive change to better the solutions posed in the final project. Together, these three theoretically derived elements play a role in facilitating the use of the sociological imagination as a research method that is not empirically derived but rather sociologically driven and individually centered.

Situating the sociological imagination as method:
an application

Deep learning of the sociological imagination applied to novel situations outside of the classroom is needed if student-researchers are to apply this method to their lives beyond the classrooms (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2004). Thus, in this context, the sociological imagination was used as a research method for student-researchers’ culminating projects as well as to help co-design their experiences in the course. Learning the theory of the sociological imagination empowered student-researchers to develop and deploy their own sociological imagination to recognize social problems and advocate for social change, both within and outside of class. For example, after completing the course (and developing a research project around food insecurity) one student-researcher group used their sociological imaginations to create a Food Swipe Program on campus where students would be able to donate their unused meals in their meal plan to other students who are food insecure. Student-researchers were, thus, required to use the sociological imagination as a research method, including the notion that a sociological imagination comes with social responsibility to work toward social change (Haddad & Lieberman, 2002; Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009).

C. Wright Mills (1959) offers a set of tips for developing a sociological imagination that can guide researchers and student-researchers through this process. He suggested the following tips:

1. Avoid existing sets of procedures,
2. Be clear and concise,
Observe the macro and micro,
Observe social structure as well as milieu,
Avoid arbitrary specialization,
Always consider humanity and history,
Understand humanity as historical and social actors,
Consider individuals in connection with social issues – public is personal, personal is public.

(Brink, 2019, para. 21)

To help develop the sociological imagination as a research method, we center on student-researchers’ culminating projects as evidence of this process. These projects integrated a student-centered pedagogy that placed each student’s sociological imagination (i.e., reflection and reflexivity, critical framework, and critical meta-analysis) at the forefront. The learning outcomes, instructional activities, and assessments linked to this culminating project all played a crucial role in empowering student-researchers to step out of their individual realities in order to see the social realities. In many ways, the sociological imagination functioned as a theoretical perspective, a research method, and a desired sociological outcome for the course.

The sociological imagination was implemented in this undergraduate sociology course as part of student-researchers’ iterative experiences with their culminating projects. For this project, student-researchers used the sociological imagination to publicly engage in sociology by creating a media project that either educated people about a social problem or offered a solution to a social problem. Regardless, the culminating project included the elements of reflection and reflexivity, critical framework, and critical meta-analysis. This process encompassed various activities throughout the semester that were further integrated as a multi-layer research process for student-researchers to investigate a social inquiry of their interest. How this process was implemented by student-researchers in terms of reflection and reflexivity, critical reflexivity, and critical meta-analysis in this course is detailed in the following sections.

Reflection and reflexivity

The culminating project began with student-researchers selecting a real-world social problem that was of interest to them. One challenge related to reflection and reflexivity is how to engage student-researchers in the sociological imagination while not promoting a post-modern response from student-researchers that “it is all just opinion” (Haddad & Lieberman, 2002). Teaching student-researchers to use the sociological imagination as a research method can often lead to resistance, especially when student-researchers are confronted with their own privilege as part of the reflection and reflexivity process (Eckstein, Schoenike, & Delaney, 1995; Haddad & Lieberman, 2002). For example, when student-researchers do not use their sociological imaginations, they tend to “blame the victim” of social problems for the social problems they experience...
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(Ryan, 1976). This means that an individual is seen as contributing to their own oppression instead of living in a society that is built on oppressive structures like hegemony, patriarchy, and neoliberalism.

This is particularly true when discussing social inequality (Goldsmith, 2006; Haddad & Lieberman, 2002). Student-researchers tend to do this often for multiple reasons: (1) they have not been exposed to the sociological perspective, (2) to reduce criticism of society and/or inequality, and (3) to avoid responsibility for the social problem (Goldsmith, 2006). Another obstacle is when student-researchers explain social problems as a form of “naturalization” where they view the status quo as the natural way for things to occur and therefore it cannot or should not be challenged or changed (Goldsmith, 2006). However, the sociological imagination asks people to remove themselves from their individual vantage points in order to reveal a social panorama where institutions and structures can be critiqued.

The sociological imagination is an act of praxis through which reflection and reflexivity can emerge (Freire, 1972), blurring the lines between knowing and doing in research. Evidence of this type of reflection and reflexivity include that as the course progressed, student-researchers increasingly were able to shift from an individualist approach rooted in blaming the victim to examining the social structures and institutions behind social problems in their culminating project. Student-researchers also commented in class discussions about how they had shifted from blaming individuals for the problems they faced to seeing these as part of broader social problems. This reflection and reflexivity process helped student-researchers narrow down topics that would become the focus of their culminating projects.

The sociology classroom as an “arena of activism” is the public venue of choice where personal experience can be afforded critical sociological depth. Here, personal “troubles” can be linked to “issues of public matter”: “matters that transcend . . . local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life” (Mills, 1959, p. 8). The cognitive and affective recognition of the fundamental connectedness exists and persists beyond the immediacy of our private orbits. This ability to see our lives as part of something much larger, this quality of mind (and heart) that prepares the way away from apathy and “privatized notions of citizenship” (Giroux, 2001, p. 4), ultimately empowers student-researchers to understand these issues as related to matters of social justice (Muller, 2012). As the semester progressed, the papers and discussions related to the culminating projects increasingly shifted toward how to work for social change through civic engagement, linking this process to the second element of theory as research, the critical framework. For example, in exploring the problem of food insecurity, the student-researchers discovered that this larger social issue was closer to home than anticipated; some students were going hungry while other students had meal plans that were going unused. In response, the student-researchers designed a Food Swipe Program on campus that offered a potential solution to this social problem. This shift is illustrative of how student-researchers’ reflection and reflexivity grew through a deeper
understanding of their topics via the sociological imagination, consistent with how Giroux (2015) describes activism in education.

**Critical framework**

Building on the reflection and reflexivity aspects of their research, student-researchers continued examining their own positions with respect to their social inquiry and exploring possible strategies towards solving this problem. Taking the food insecurity example again, student-researchers examined their own positions as college students along with the intersectionality of their class, gender, and race and their respective access to food, researching different approaches to food insecurity that had been implemented on other campuses with respect to their own experiences with food accessibility. Although hard to disentangle the reflection and reflexivity phase from student-researchers’ engagement with critical frameworks, asking them to better define their identified goals via possible solutions also required them to look externally and integrate multiple perspectives in this phase. In the food insecurity example, initially student-researchers wanted to be able to donate all of their unused meals. After realizing the social constraint of corporate and neoliberal control over food distribution on college campuses, they learned that this was not a realistic goal. In order to achieve any realistic chance at success, they had to modify their goals and compromise their strategy to integrate elements of national success stories. This new goal was to maximize the number of meals that they could donate each semester. This led to in-depth discussions about capitalist structures of food distribution on college campuses as well as discussions about the contradictions of neoliberal conceptualization of property and how that did not apply to the meals that they had purchased when in opposition to a major corporation.

After brainstorming and revising topic selection throughout the early part of the course based upon using their sociological imaginations, student-researchers developed a written component based on peer-reviewed sources to serve as the basis for this part of their culminating project. Having peer-reviewed sources involved viewing social problems from more than one perspective, working through solutions by anticipating outcomes, and supporting why one strategy would be more effective. This type of peer-reviewed source integration allowed student-researchers to better define power dynamics in terms of capitalism and neoliberalism as they are studied within the field of sociology. In doing so, the student-researchers adopted the sociological imagination as method by incorporating a critique of capitalism and neoliberal market distributions that many student-researchers may have resisted without this type of approach.

This critical examination differed from typical literature review assignments as using their sociological imaginations further allowed student-researchers to evaluate and understand why certain strategies would benefit parts of the student population on campus, while still not making an impact on others. Through this process, student-researchers realized that there were vested
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powers in the operation of the university that went beyond the goals of education and the needs of students. Although this realization set parameters to their initial strategy in response to food insecurity on campus, they also realized that through their activism they could engage as a counter to these entities to create social change and to provide a more equitable learning environment. Student-researchers who do not deploy their sociological imaginations might assume that students experiencing food insecurity poorly managed their food and money.

Critical meta-analysis

In the final phases of the culminating project, student-researchers were asked to engage in critical meta-analysis as part of anticipating the outcome of the proposed strategies and recommending a strategy. Although initially linked to the critical framework, asking student-researchers to determine the quality or value of a proposed strategy also requires a component of understanding one’s role in the effectiveness of this strategy (i.e., critical meta-analysis). To address this phase, the course was designed to provide student-researchers multiple opportunities to practice and receive feedback on skills related to developing critical meta-analysis (Bidwell, 1995; Bransford et al., 2004; Malcolm, 2006). For example, on the final project student-researchers were given feedback from other student-researchers, the teaching assistant, and the professor. For the food insecurity topic, this type of feedback cycle was intended to be an iterative approach that offered student-researchers the possibility of moving through the logic and frameworks of their project development, while at the same time learning about the parameters of the project both socially and logistically on campus.

In the last step of their culminating project, student-researchers were charged with integrating critical thinking skills as part of the sociological imagination into their recommended solution to the social inquiry initially identified. As part of this step, student-researchers engaged in critical meta-analysis by creating a novel solution to a social problem or by using their creativity to promote other people’s solutions to a social problem. This required a deep understanding of the social inquiry initially identified (reflection), their position within the socio-cultural context of that inquiry (reflexivity), their understanding of the power dynamics within that inquiry (critical framework), and their individual abilities to engage civically in changing the outcome (critical meta-analysis). In engaging with these research elements, student-researchers needed to leverage critical thinking skills to better understand the appropriateness of their selected solutions with respect to the socio-cultural context in which the social inquiry manifested. In relation to the food insecurity on college campuses, the critical meta-analysis aspect culminated in student-researchers’ different approach to activism on campus. While awareness of the issue on campus was a popular strategy to engage the student population directly with the issue, student-researchers also worked with a student government representative who
agreed to write a bill to implement a Food Swipe Program on our campus. This tactic of engaging the student body government representation was based upon examining the power dynamics inherent on campus and leveraging the most effective strategy in line with other campuses’ success stories and campus resources.

Reflective of this step, student-researchers’ culminating projects needed to be as equally engaging to their audience. In accordance, student-researchers used Adobe Spark to create a 3- to 5-minute video reflective of the sociological imagination as method to develop either a solution to or an awareness campaign about their identified social problem. Student-researchers received feedback to make sure they were using the sociological imagination as method and incorporating a social justice framework on their culminating projects from their peers, addressed revisions, and presented them to the Office of Research. The representative of the Office of Research selected three of the student projects (i.e., domestic violence, food insecurity, and mental health issues) to highlight in the campus wide Research and Creative Inquiry Day. Not only did the Office of Research create a special category and presentation format for the culminating project, they featured the project in a campus-wide email and a campus-wide newsletter.

In effect, when using the sociological imagination as a method, researchers account beyond themselves and connect to socio-cultural elements that may be overlooked in more traditional empirical methods. This leads to the creation of research questions that interrogate socio-cultural norms and the behavior of those that are negatively impacted by these institutional structures, differing from traditional research questions that may stop at determining an effect. Through this method, student-researchers realized that as they completed their culminating projects that additional theoretical perspectives were needed, including those related to critical theory and feminist theory. This was evident, for example, in the food insecurity project where student-researchers centered on socio-economic status as a backdrop to investigating the power dynamics of hunger on campus which led to further examinations of how to address this issue navigating and challenging these institutional structures.

Focusing on socio-economic status, student-researchers explored how the varying positions of privilege related to social class influenced access to food, educational opportunities, support structures, power, and comfort. As described, throughout the semester, and through extensive reflection, reflexivity, and critical framework development, student-researchers could scrutinize the social and economic factors that impacted college students’ success in terms of food security and general stability. In accordance, after completing this investigation of food insecurity on campus and seeking to develop a Food Swipe Program to donate their unused meal plans to those who are food insecure, student-researchers developed theories to explain the institutional roadblocks to being able to donate meals that they had already purchased. In using their sociological imaginations to develop their culminating projects, the student-researchers began to critique the social institutions that contextualized
their projects, ultimately critiquing social institutions that represented a reproduction of oppressive systems.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to present the sociological imagination as a method for which to conduct critical theoretical research in education. Effectively, the contents of this chapter propose the sociological imagination not only as a theory that helps to better understand the social structures that govern the actions and patterns of everyday life, but also as a method that can be applied to better provide a critical lens to dismantle the hegemonic nature of social structures and decolonize what is considered common knowledge. Introducing the sociological imagination as a critical theoretical method for educational research stems from a long history of critical scholars who have argued that the function of levering theory to perform critical work is, in itself, a rigorous method by which to conduct research (Rist, 1977; Stevick & Levinson, 2007; Strunk & Locke, 2019).

As a method, the sociological imagination holds its own weight as a contender within the paradigmatic contests in educational research. Originally, the sociological imagination was intended by its creator C. Wright Mills (1959) to provide scholars with the ability to analyze larger social structures in which they were situated as a way to offer critique. Perhaps more eloquently stated, Jones (2011) suggests that methodologically applying the sociological imagination offers the following:

the capacity of individuals to recognize the influence of larger structural forces on their everyday lives and concerns; understanding that their personal troubles were often public issues. This ability to link the micro-level minutiae of behavior to broad macro-structural factors such as gender and ethnicity is one of the principal attractions of sociology to such leading theorists as Loic Wacquant (2005).

(p. 6)

Rooted in sociology, then, the purposes of the sociological imagination as a mechanism to analyze reality is aligned with the larger notions of uncovering social patterns, realities, and structural factors that govern the actions of people (Jones, 2011).

However, the sociological imagination goes one step further in offering ways in which to question, and therefore disentangle the structure, to empower those individuals who are often entangled within these very realities. In contrast with the objective and subjective logic that guides traditional notions of educational research, the sociological imagination joins the critical frameworks in asking researchers to examine all social patterns with a critical eye. This entails “questioning metanarratives, myths, stereotypes, and hegemonic processes of social matters” against what may be thought of as dominant or hegemonic beliefs,
as well as those ideologies that are deeply embedded within the researchers’ own social construct, as demonstrated in the food insecurity project (Anderson, 2010, p. 10). In this way, the sociological imagination is meant to build researchers’ skills in critical sociological thinking (Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003), encouraging the problematization of the world in which they exist (Souto-Manning, 2007). The sociological imagination as method, thus, provides a way of knowing and being to help researchers critically view their social world and move toward a more just society.

References


