

Understanding Local and Global Contexts: The Importance of the Sociological Imagination for Adult Education

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Abstract: *The concept of the sociological imagination is explored as a practical theoretical concept to provide insight into local and global contexts in adult education.*

In a world increasingly influenced by globalization, it is frequently challenging to comprehend the impact of world affairs upon our localized contexts. Yet the ability to make connections between global and local issues is key to understanding and addressing what is happening in our environment, economy, communities, and educational institutions. This paper takes up the concept of the sociological imagination, first introduced by C. Wright Mills (2000; 1959), as a means towards better understanding both the world at large and the particular situations and circumstances in which people are located. I outline the central premises of the sociological imagination, explore the ways that Mills' work can inform current adult educational practices, and provide some examples from my own work. I address some criticisms of this concept, but conclude that the sociological imagination provides a practical theoretical framework for understanding connections between local and global contexts in adult education.

The Sociological Imagination

The concept of the sociological imagination was first introduced by C. Wright Mills in 1959. Revisiting Mills' concept of the sociological imagination raises a number of important issues around the tasks of research for social scientists, the assessment of what constitutes valuable scholarship, and the need for academics to critically reflect upon the types of contributions they wish to make in their work. It is a useful approach to encourage educators to think more deeply about the world around them and their place in it, and it evokes the need for learners to develop the capacity to move between abstract ideas and concrete experience. Although some of the examples Mills uses to support his work are dated, it is surprising how much of what he has to say resonates today in a world increasingly characterized by an influx of information, the expanding influence of the marketplace, and the corporatization of the academy.

In assessing the need to develop the sociological imagination, Mills writes that in the ordinary population, people often feel trapped in their particular circumstances. "They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct" (Mills, 2000, p. 3). Individual problems cannot be understood in isolation from global contexts. These struggles with comprehension arise because "they do not possess the quality of mind to grasp the interplay of man *sic* and society, of biography and history, of self and world" (Mills, 2000, p. 4).

This sensation is familiar to any of us who watch the evening news and feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world; suicide bombs, spiraling unemployment, or environmental disasters. At a more personal level we grapple with individual troubles; a marital breakdown, a family member with cancer, or a loss of employment. As educators we also struggle to negotiate

meaning with our students and with others in the academic and larger community on challenges in our work; the increasing impact of the marketplace on higher education, changing learning and work contexts resulting from globalization, and concerns over equity and justice issues.

Mills argues that “the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise” (2000, p. 4). The difficulty for most individuals is to be able to move beyond personal knowledge and experiences, to broader, more abstract concerns, and then to make the connections between the two. It is this interplay of concrete experience and abstracted rationalism, personal emotive understanding and insights from historical occurrences, that is most helpful for providing insight into problems at the local and global level. This level of understanding is also quite elusive, because it requires the individual to move between different levels of thought, experience and reason, in a way that does not seem to come easily to most people.

I used to do a writing exercise in introductory sociology classes where I distributed an article by a reporter who met an elderly woman at an airport. She was flying to San Francisco to bury her son who had died of AIDS. The reporter then connected this personal tragedy to the lack of willingness of government and society to address the burgeoning AIDS crisis.

In his book, *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (2000, c. 1959) outlines three types of questions that need to be taken up in any serious social analysis; an assessment of the structure of the society being studied, an understanding of how this society is situated in human history, and finally, the characteristics of the men and women in this particular society at this time. By using these three general questions as a framework for analysis, individuals can develop a more reflective form of self-consciousness. This may lead to insights into both the “troubles of the individual” and the “public issues of social structures”, and the interrelationship between the two (Mills, 2000, p. 8)

After explaining the concept of the sociological imagination, I had students work through a series of questions that fit into the categories that Mills described. The purpose was to help learners to make sense of this story moving from the woman’s personal troubles (which they all understood), to how this connected to larger social issues. This kind of thinking requires the ability to move from abstract thoughts to concrete experiences, and back again. Usually, only about ten to twenty percent of my first year students were able to write a response that clearly indicated they had developed this “quality of mind” that Mills talks about. No doubt as they continued their education students would develop this capacity, but it revealed to me the challenges of trying to get people to broaden the scope of their thinking.

Students are not the only ones who struggle with the concept of the sociological imagination. Mills argues many academics experience difficulties because they are either comfortable with grand theory and its complex language, or they work on the other end of the spectrum, as technicians in large research projects driven more by methodology than a coherent grasp of the social issues at stake. Mills argues that “the basic cause of grand theory is the initial choice of a level of thinking so general that its practitioners cannot logically get down to observation” (2000, p. 33). Those who are caught up in what Mills perceived as a bureaucratic approach towards academic work, involving large scale studies that require funding and staffing, are focused on what he termed “abstracted empiricism” that “is not characterized by any substantive propositions or theories. It is not based upon any new conception of the nature of

society or of man *sic*” (2000, p. 55). Mills dismisses both of these approaches towards academic work, arguing instead for intellectual craftsmanship, where theory and methods simultaneously emerge out of the questions being investigated.

Implications for Adult Education

Brookfield argues that the sociological imagination “stands as one of the most potent (though largely ignored) manifestos for American graduate education” (1993, p. 64). A few adult educators have drawn upon this concept to inform their work. For instance, Castle (1996) uses the concept of the sociological imagination in a study on black managers in affirmative action programs to explore how their lives were shaped by apartheid, racism and poverty. Recently, Fenwick (2003) refers to the sociological imagination as a means to emphasize the importance of carefully listening to understand the experiences of others, but at the same time making connections between how individuals make sense of their experience and larger social, political, and economic structures. For instance, to understand the experiences of a refugee, you would gain insights by listening to her personal story (or troubles), but to have a better understanding of the issues raised, you would need to connect her situation to the larger social and political circumstances that have impacted upon her life.

Therefore, to develop an analysis of an individual problem within local and global contexts, one must also take into account broader historical and social concerns. For instance, as a part of my work as a university professor, I teach in a Graduate Adult Education program in Jamaica. One of the challenges I have found in working in this program is thinking through the complicated local and global circumstances of engaging in a teaching practice that is compatible with my beliefs around justice and equity in lifelong learning, while realizing that my own work as an educator is enmeshed in a complicated web of historical and international relationships.

This realization came to me during my first visit to Jamaica when a couple of my students took me on a tour around Kingston. While walking the beautiful grounds of Mona, the University of West Indies campus, one of the students pointed out the old stone aqueducts that were constructed on sugar plantations in earlier centuries.

“Can you imagine,” she said to me, “standing here in the fields while an overseer on a horse looks down on you and tells you to work harder.”

In that sweep of imagination I could not only see the image she depicted, but also how I would have been located differently, simply because I am a woman and white. I might have been a working class woman in town, or a wife back on the plantation, but my skin tone and gender would have defined my location in that time and space so that I would not have been a slave or an overseer. And I also realized that the same privileges my skin tone would have given me at that time were impacting on the present, as was the history of British colonialism - there I was as the professor and she was the student. My program was being offered in Jamaica from Canada, not the other way around. To better understand my role as a critical feminist educator, I had to think through not only my beliefs in creating a particular kind of classroom environment, but also work to understand better the historical circumstances of slavery and colonialism, current global relationships that are shaping the flow of information and knowledge, tensions between the North and the South, the influence of the marketplace which lends support to these kinds of “off-shore” educational programs, as well as race, gender, class, and other diversity and social

inclusion issues.

Using Mills' three questions, I had to first assess the society being studied. In this instance, it was not just an individual society, but both Canada and Jamaica, and an understanding of the relationships between these countries in the broader global context of North and South. Plumb (2003) details how these global interconnections played out in the development of this program, which began as a discussion between academics in Canada and Jamaica, who met in Germany, and eventually led to an agreement to deliver the program in Jamaica. Advances in technology, the ability to move people (ie. have faculty fly in for the weekend), and financial incentives for our Canadian university (with diminishing government support international programs are perceived as a source of both increased status and revenue) all led to the decision to move ahead with the program in Jamaica. Demand created by the global marketplace for better educated employees, as well as domestic and childcare responsibilities that limit the geographic mobility of our mostly female student population, all contribute to interest in having our program delivered locally in Jamaica.

Secondly, I needed to think about the historical framework that has shaped both nations as British colonies and the detrimental consequences of the African diaspora. As Mills notes, we can not understand the circumstances of any society "by flat, timeless comparisons" (2000, p. 151). From my Jamaican students I have learned that the legacy of colonialism and imperialism has served to enhance an authoritarian and didactic approach towards education in their country, and tried to work with them in respectful ways to encourage them to think through alternative approaches. I have had to consider my personal history as being of British descent while my Jamaican students have a mixed racial and cultural heritage, realizing that the color of my skin continues to provide me with an unspoken advantage in a broader society that gives preference to lighter skin tones (McIntosh, 1992). I have also been forced to reflect critically upon my own beliefs around religion and spirituality in the classroom, as the Christian churches have extremely strong historical roots in Jamaica, that continue to be played out today. In contrast to the more secular environment in Canada, most Jamaican classes begin with devotions (a prayer and frequently a religious song), and students will quote scripture to support their arguments. There is no doubt the historical circumstances of our countries and our personal experiences continue to shape the teaching/learning interactions that my students and I engage in.

Finally, I had to consider the characteristics of men and women in this particular society at this time. For instance, I have had to think carefully about how I address my own beliefs as a feminist and someone who supports Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transexual (GLBT) rights. Both of these equity issues are dealt with in different ways in Jamaica, and there are still significant human rights concerns around GLBT issues. Yet it is when I think about the kind of people my students are that it is easiest to bridge cultural differences. Most of my students are caring, dedicated educators. They are motivated to do well professionally, but also display a genuine commitment to improving their society and working to make their country a better place.

A Critical Feminist Perspective

As a critical feminist educator, I find that the interconnection of moving between abstract theoretical ideas to everyday tasks informs my understanding of the intersections between local and global contexts, and connects to my interest in learning and the homeplace. I recall talking

on the telephone one evening to a Jamaican student who had requested some assistance with a paper. We had both just put our children into bed. She apologized for the clatter of plates on the other end, as she was doing her dishes. I replied that as we spoke I was folding my laundry. We were two women separated by distance, race, and nationality, talking about theory and our work as educators as we each tended to the familiar pattern of domestic chores that women across the world engage in on a daily basis. From these commonalities, we can strive to gain better understanding and connections to create a more supportive learning environment.

For critical educators, adult education has an important role to play in supporting citizenship learning and civil society. Ian Martin utilizes the sociological imagination to argue that when C. Wright Mills discusses how to make sense of how ‘the “personal troubles of milieux” meet and mix with the “public issues of structure” - or, in Habermasian terms, the “lifeworld” confronts the “systems world”, educators can develop:

a retheorisation of radical adult education in terms of learning that takes place in the intermediate space between the private lives of individuals and their public lives as citizens. This is where people must learn, once again, to meet to argue through and argue out what it means to be active citizens in a democratic society (2000, p. 257).

In making connections between personal experience with broader social structures, we can understand better how the system is encroaching on lifeworld preserves (Habermas, 1989). By utilizing the concept of the sociological imagination, critical educators can explore challenges to the lifeworld - the personal realms of people’s lives, and work towards developing resistance through civil society movements. In this way, educators can make connections between local and global contexts.

Assessing Criticisms and Benefits of the Sociological Imagination

In rereading the sociological imagination, one becomes aware the significance of gender inclusive language. At the time Mills was writing, the use of the masculine pronoun was supposed to signify the inclusion of all people. The infrequent notation of “men and women” when talking about the general population and occasional mention of developing nations, while not explicitly derogatory, signify their marginalized existence in the world that Mills is describing. As a critical feminist, while I believe it is important to render these points visible, it does not mean I must dismiss Mills’ contributions. Like many feminist philosophers, I look “for a proper balance between an individual’s thoughts and the social and political context within which and about which he she thinks, between thinkers’ consciously intended positions and their unconscious assumptions and motives” (Nye, 2004, p. 10).

Some scholars critique the sociological imagination because it entails moving beyond more localized, concrete experiences into an abstract realm. Edwards & Clarke argue that, “rather than following in the footsteps of the those who suggest the need for a sociological imagination, we would call for more and more explicit cartographical imaginings, through which to explore not only the spatial-temporal practices of flexible learning specifically but, more generally, all forms of continuing education” (2002, p. 164). MacLean argues that “a renovated sociological imagination of globalization must steer clear of grand theorizing...without simultaneously lapsing into the abstract empiricism that infects most of the technical work on

globalization” (MacLean, 2000, p. 345). These researchers seem to think that the sociological imagination lacks practical application for providing insights into existing problems.

Mills’ work has had ‘staying power’, however, precisely because the idea of the sociological imagination is a practical theoretical approach towards developing contextual analyses of social changes. To understand local situations, whether it be displaced fishers struggling to learn a new trade or professors finding a course on critical theory canceled for more market-friendly offerings, one has to address global as well as local concerns. The sociological imagination provides a framework for making this leap between past and present, personal troubles and structural issues, visible and not readily visible factors that impact on the situation.

C. Wright Mills claims that “it is the political task of the social scientist - as of any liberal educators - continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals” (2000, p. 187). Supporting this view, Barr (2002) argues that “the idea of a kind of imagination which is based on understanding the forces which influence people’s ordinary lives, still strikes me as a compassionate and much needed counter to the abstractions and individualizing impulses that are so powerfully present today” (2002, p. 326). For educators concerned with social justice issues and the impact of the globalized marketplace upon local educational contexts, developing the sociological imagination as a framework for analysis can help facilitate learning towards social change.

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