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The Sociological Imagination in Challenging Times

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Abstract: This critical essay argues the events of the last few years have made sociology more relevant to students' lives and increased their need for and the utility of a well-developed sociological imagination. To meet the opportunities created by this moment, sociology educators need well-designed and highly effective pedagogical interventions that develop their students' sociological imaginations. Unfortunately, much of the available scholarship on developing students' sociological imaginations lacks the conceptual clarity and empirical rigor needed to discern which pedagogical interventions are most effective. After a detailed review of the scholarly problems surrounding the sociological imagination, recommendations for expanding the field are provided.

Keywords: Sociological Imagination, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

"Some feel that we as a society are sitting in a burning room, calmly drinking a cup of coffee, telling ourselves, 'This is fine,'" Sen. Richard Burr said in 2018 during a hearing on Russian interference in the 2016 elections (Burr 2018). Sen. Burr referenced the ubiquitous internet meme depicting a serene cartoon dog sitting alone in a room engulfed in flames below the caption, "This is fine." The meme cartoonist K.C. Green created in 2013 originally went viral online as a way for people to lampoon their own avoidance and irrational complacency in the face of encroaching danger. The meme that initially spoke to individual apathy and self-delusion was transformed by the loss and social upheaval caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, economic turmoil, frequent mass

shootings/violence, and many other social phenomena that have recently become a regular feature of daily life. Initially, "the house burning may have just been your final exams," Green told *The Washington Post* recently (Ables 2023). "Now, it's feeling like it's the world. It's your country."

The last few years have provided our students with ample reasons to feel like the world around them is on fire. The situation for each of our students varies, but none are strangers to the consequences of social phenomena. Today's students have first-hand knowledge of living through a global pandemic; many grieve for a loved one taken by COVID-19. Social issues like food insecurity (Nazmi et al. 2019; Willis 2021),

housing shortages (Olfert et al. 2021), and sexual violence (Brubaker, Keegan, Guadalupe-Diaz, and Beasley 2017) are all-too-common experiences for many college students.

Historians would rightly balk at the idea that the events of the last few years were substantially different or significantly worse than any previous period. For instance, the pain and suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as excruciating as it was living through it, pales in comparison to illness and death wrought by the pandemics humanity faced before the advent of modern medicine (e.g., Christakis 2020). However, college students are not alone in misperceiving the size and severity of social phenomena; evidence suggests people often incorrectly estimate rates of crime (Brenan 2022; Hipp 2010) and the level of economic inequality in their society (Flanagan and Kornblugh 2019), to name a few of many examples. Whether accurate or not, the subjective sense that we are living through a troubling time of upheaval pervades, and if left unaddressed, this sense can impede student learning (Davis 1992).

Students could be forgiven for feeling like their lives are a series of traps. That was the turn of phrase Mills (1959: 3) used in his foundational book, *The Sociological Imagination*, to describe what it feels like when you are forced to endure the consequences of social phenomena that are hard to perceive, difficult to understand, and beyond your

control. Mills believed that the promise of sociology was to provide individuals with a critical understanding of society, helping them to recognize and analyze the broader social forces and structures that shape their lives. By cultivating this sociological imagination, individuals are empowered to transcend the narrow confines of individual experiences and, instead, recognize the intricate interplay between personal troubles and broader social issues. Mills posited that the sociological imagination could serve as a gateway to engendering societal awareness and fostering transformative social change by empowering individuals to grapple with social problems holistically.

In this critical essay, I argue that students' subjective sense that they are living through extraordinary times increases the relevance and utility of sociology, which deft educators can use to enhance their students' sociological imaginations. However, for educators to effectively strengthen their students' sociological imaginations, additional scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research with enhanced operationalizations of the sociological imagination is required. To be clear, developing students' sociological imaginations is not the only way to assess learning or effectively teach sociology, but the concept warrants attention because it is one of the most used conceptualizations of learning and teaching sociology by SoTL scholars,

especially in the United States (Author 2022).

The Relevance and Utility of the Sociological Imagination Today

Sociology has long been criticized for being too abstract and detached from the real world (e.g., Best 2003), but today, our discipline and curriculum have never been more relevant to our students. After surviving a global pandemic, enduring economic downturns, and living with existential threats like climate change and nuclear annihilation, our students have ample first-hand experience with social phenomena. Furthermore, college students and young Americans generally report relatively high awareness and concern on multiple social issues. On climate change, for instance, Americans born after 1996 reported the highest level of concern and were the most likely to report that they personally had taken some action to address climate change (Tyson, Kennedy, and Funk 2021).

Students today have also witnessed the extraordinary potential of collective action. They have seen how an individual's life can be forever changed by "going viral" online. In part, many of our students aspire to be social media influencers precisely because they have seen how the structure of social media and the modern internet make it possible for almost anyone to find an audience online and for a select few to command massive audiences. Recent events have shown students that modern digital

communications technology can be leveraged to disseminate information and coordinate social action, illustrated by both the summer of protests in 2020 after the police killing of George Floyd and the Q-anon conspiracy theory fueled insurrection of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Just because our students have lived through social crises and been immersed in social phenomena, that does not necessarily mean they recognized them as social phenomena or could understand them scientifically. Mills (1959: 3-4) believed that developing a sociological imagination required sustained and deliberate practice because most people are "seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history," and as a result, they, "do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction." Mills (1959: 170) lamented that without a sociological imagination, people may become "cheerful robots" who mindlessly acquiesce to the status quo and common sense understandings of daily life even as the consequences of "the public issues of social structure" inch ever closer to their doorsteps. Recast in this light, telling yourself, "This is fine," as the world around you burns, is only irrational if you can perceive the flames and understand how the fire functions. To fully understand the world around them, our students need to develop their ability to simultaneously analyze the individual,

societal, and historical factors behind the social phenomena affecting their lives. "The sociological imagination today is essentially the same as it has always been, but our society and culture are more resistant to elucidation with the would be possessor of the sociological imagination more in need of the powers of imagination" (Dandaneau 2001: 70). As sociology becomes more relevant to the lives of our students, the need for a well-honed sociological imagination grows in proportion as does the need for sociology curricula that effectively develops it.

Fortunately, over the last sixty years, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) movement within sociology has advanced our understanding of pedagogy and generated a wealth of empirically validated pedagogical interventions for teaching a wide variety of sociological topics. Multiple analyses of the articles published in *Teaching Sociology*, the American Sociological Association's flagship SoTL journal, have documented increased scientific rigor over the journal's life (Chin 2002; Paino, Blankenship, Grauerholz, and Chin 2012). However, a recent analysis of *Teaching Sociology* covering published work through 2020 suggests the sociological imagination is the exception to this larger trend.

About a fourth (25.9%) of studies published in *Teaching Sociology* claiming to develop students' sociological

imaginings provide no evidence or empirical assessment to support their claims of effectiveness, and this issue persists (from 2010 to 2020, 15.6% of claims-making studies provided no evidence in support) (Author 2022). Among the studies that provided evidence, the majority (56.7%) based their claims on a single measure of learning, and most (58.3%) used indirect measures of student learning (e.g., self-assessments of learning or student ratings of the course), which are relatively weak measures of learning (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker, and Grøgaard 2002). A larger majority (71.6%) of these studies were unable to evaluate the reliability of their pedagogical intervention because their data was collected from a single setting (i.e., from one class, taught by a single instructor— typically the article's author— at one university, during one semester). At the same time, this systematic analysis also found 14.8% of all studies that claimed to develop students' sociological imaginings, and 28.1% of the studies published in the final decade of observation based their conclusions on systemic comparisons of data from methodologically robust research designs (Author 2022). Similar to every other topic of inquiry published in *Teaching Sociology*, investigations into the sociological imagination based on systematic comparisons have been increasing over time. For sociology educators to meet our students' need for a sociological imagination, we must continue this trend toward

methodological sophistication and further enhance our scholarly understanding of the sociological imagination.

One possible reason SoTL scholars have struggled with the sociological imagination is that Mills' definition of the concept was not originally written with pedagogical concerns in mind. Mills wrote *The Sociological Imagination* to critique the predominant schools of thought within the social sciences at the time of its publication and to advise future professional sociologists on how to pursue the field. "It is clear from his correspondence and other materials that Mills did not envision that *The Sociological Imagination* would be taught to many thousands of beginning sociology students and that the sociological imagination would become the catch-phrase of the discipline (see Horowitz 1983, chapter 5; Geary 2009, pp. 168–78)," Manza (2023: 18.7). Thus, when sociological SoTL scholars make "claims about teaching to the sociological imagination or fostering our students' sociological imaginations, [they] do so from a subtext in Mill's argument..." (Hoop 2009: 48). While Mills refers to the sociological imagination as a "quality of mind," and he enumerates many of the components of what he believes it means to think like a sociologist, "turning this into coursework and pedagogical strategies has been left to us," (Hoop 2009: 48).

Without a clear and pedagogically oriented definition of the sociological

imagination, sociological SoTL scholars have struggled to establish boundaries around the concept's meaning. While nearly all scholars who invoke the concept make mention of the ability to connect personal troubles to public issues, some contend that a wide variety of skills are components of the sociological imagination. Put another way, the sociological imagination within sociological SoTL has suffered from concept creep.

Concept creep occurs in discursive communities, which sociological scholars represent, when what a concept is thought to encompass expands over time (Furedi 2016; Hallam et al. 2020). This process, which has no natural end (Best 2021), results in a concept's meaning becoming less precise and more elastic. Abstractions like the sociological imagination that are commonly used within a discursive community as a "catch-phrase" for the discipline (Manza 2023) or as a catch-all term to describe any learning in sociology courses (Eckstein et al. 1995) but are rarely defined or unpacked are prone to concept creep. Given that *The Sociological Imagination* was written as a critique of grand theory and unbounded abstractions, it is remarkable that the book has come to be used by some SoTL scholars as an unbounded grand theory of sociological learning. Finally, the widespread popularity of the sociological imagination and its treatment as "a universal statement of the distinctiveness of sociology" (Brewer 2004:319) may be

signs of its susceptibility to concept creep. As Best (2021: 9) points out, "We can suspect that when virtually everyone agrees that something is good, they probably define it in different ways."

Concept creep generates multiple problems for scholars. First and foremost, ambiguous concepts are difficult to operationalize and measure. For instance, scholars have claimed that the sociological imagination can be developed by improving students' ability to use the campus library (Abowitz 1994), visiting a commune (Gondolf 1985), and learning about academic integrity (Trautner and Borland 2013). Abstractions like the sociological imagination that are poorly defined but commonly used within a specific discursive community could lead members of that community to feel like they comprehend one another or have reached a consensus when, in fact, a great deal of variation and disagreement would be manifest if clear, precise language had been used instead. Concepts with fuzzy definitions are also difficult for scholars in other disciplines to use. This is particularly unfortunate for the discipline of sociology because, even amid the ambiguity, the sociological imagination has received praise and been incorporated into fields like health and medicine (Kendall et al. 2018; Kitto 2004), human resource management (Bratton and Gold 2015), marketing (Hewer 2022), and the law (Rosen 2016).

Struggling to define the sociological imagination, some scholars

have opted to take a wider view and conceptualize what it means to think sociologically (e.g., Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003). For those specifically concerned with the teaching and development of the sociological imagination, such a move does little to address the concept's ambiguity problems. Furthermore, as regular readers of *Teaching Sociology* already know, what it means to think sociologically is as unresolved as the debate about what, if anything, is core to sociology. For more than a hundred years (Howard 2010), sociologists have struggled over *what* sociologists think (i.e., whether there is a common core of ideas between sociologists) (Ballantine et al. 2016; D'Antonio 1983; Ferguson 2016; Keith and Ender 2004, 2005; Schweingruber 2005), therefore reaching a consensus on an all-encompassing definition of *how* sociologists think seems improbable. Additionally, attempts by sociologists to establish what it means to think sociologically are prone to tautological reasoning (i.e., "I am a sociologist, and I think X; therefore, X must be a part of sociological thinking.").

Research into the development of the sociological imagination needs to be more adequately supported by theory (Dandaneau 2009; Eckstein et al. 1995; Hoop 2009). This is partly because authors frequently use the sociological imagination and claim to have developed it in articles never intended to directly investigate the "quality of mind" Mills articulated. However, even in studies

focused on the development of the sociological imagination, authors rarely theorize or even discuss the process students go through as they develop their sociological imagination (Author 2022).

The Sociological Imagination was primarily focused on advising future professional sociologists on how to pursue the field; therefore, the fact that scholars frequently use the concept to describe learning in introductory courses is peculiar or, at the very least, it suggests that scholars need to provide additional theorizing to establish its applicability. Future investigations into the sociological imagination could benefit from incorporating theories of learning and skill acquisition created by education and educational psychology scholars. For instance, studies informed by previous research into skill acquisition would suggest the sociological imagination be conceptualized not as an end state (i.e., conceptualized as a skill one either has or does not) but as a non-linear developmental process that novices go through on their way to becoming experts (Schoonenboom et al. 2008; Sprague and Stuart 2000). A fruitful vein of research along these lines could investigate how sociology experts (i.e., those with sociology doctorates and other professional sociologists) use their sociological imaginations. Nearly all the scholarship on the sociological imagination published since the turn of the century has focused on novices, either students in introductory sociology

courses or undergraduate majors. By documenting what a sociological imagination looks like in the minds of sociology experts, scholars would be given a point of comparison that needs to be added to the extant literature. Such a developmental model would facilitate longitudinal research on the sociological imagination, a gap in the available SoTL literature that scholars have long been calling for scholars to address (McKinney 2005).

Mills wrote *The Sociological Imagination* to encourage readers to take a holistic view of society and the individual. Future sociological imagination operationalizations would benefit from a similarly holistic approach. Instead of measuring the sociological imagination as a unidimensional skill, future scholars could expand the field by conceptualizing it as a complex skill comprised of component skills, each of which must be developed independently and then integrated (Ambrose et al. 2010). Component skills of the sociological imagination could include the ability to recognize societal or supra-individual factors, being proficient at contextualizing any phenomenon within its historical moment and the larger society surrounding it, comparative reasoning, perspective-taking, and critical thinking. By taking the sociological imagination apart, scholars will likely reduce measurement errors and increase the validity and reliability of their instruments.

Furthermore, the subcomponents of any complex skill are rarely developed uniformly, but unidimensional measures conceal these learning dynamics. By incorporating a more robust conceptualization of learning into investigations of the sociological imagination, scholars would be better able to identify which component skills their students struggle with most and design pedagogical interventions to address students' specific needs. Over time, repeated investigations like these may reveal that there are one or two component skills of the sociological imagination that novice learners struggle with more than the rest. If this were the case, the challenge of developing students' sociological imaginations would be narrowed.

Building competency with the subcomponents of a complex skill alone is insufficient for developing mastery. "Mastering complex tasks requires not only the temporary decomposition of subskills and the opportunity to practice them separately, but also their eventual recomposition and the opportunity to practice them in combination" (Ambrose et al. 2010: 103). Skill integration presents a distinct challenge to novice learners that is connected to but separate from mastering each component skill of the sociological imagination. Prior psychological research has shown that people's performance degrades when asked to do more than one intellectual task at a time (Kahnemann 1973; Navon and Gopher 1979; Damos 1991). This is

especially true for novices because experts, after extensive practice, have developed a high level of fluency with the component skills or an "unconscious competency," as Schoonenboom et al. (2008) refer to it. It remains an open question within the available literature whether students struggle to develop their sociological imaginations is primarily located in their ability to master the component skills, integrate them, or both in equal measure. Uncovering these dynamics matters because the pedagogical solutions for addressing integration issues (e.g., scaffolding, simple-to-complex sequencing of learning tasks, and providing "worked examples") are dissimilar from the strategies for developing mastery of component skills (Clarke, Ayres and Sweller 2005).

Conclusion

Critically analyzing prior definitions, conceptualizations, and operationalizations of the sociological imagination, as this essay has done, invites readers to wonder, what then is the optimal way to measure the sociological imagination? While this essay has suggested ways scholars could enhance future investigations into the sociological imagination, this should not be misread as advocating for standardizing the concept. As a discipline, sociology encompasses a wide variety of sub-disciplines and scholars using a similarly vast array of methodologies. Therefore, it seems borderline absurd to

expect to find a standardized way of perceiving the world and analyzing social phenomena.

If the sociological imagination can be defined as the ability to recognize and connect macro-level social phenomena with micro-level individual phenomena, then standardization would be predicated on there being a uniform way sociologists perceive and reflexively understand the individual and society. Such a notion would fly in the face of even a rudimentary understanding of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hill Collins 2009; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Like all humans, scientists develop a perspective of the world that is informed by their lived experiences, which are influenced by their social location.

A close reading of Mills' work suggests he would oppose any attempt at standardizing the sociological imagination—standardization rings of positivism, which Mills spends a substantial portion of multiple chapters criticizing. Furthermore, standardization implies that scientists can be neutral observers of phenomena, but Mills dedicated a chapter to disabusing scholars of this notion. Finally, Mills (1959: 7) said the sociological imagination resides at the intersection of biography and history. Each individual has a unique biography; therefore, multiple sociological imaginations must exist.

The only "right" way of scientifically measuring the sociological imagination is to do so systematically, adhering to the central tenets of the scientific method. This critical essay is not a call for standardizing the sociological imagination but for standardizing scholarly investigations of the sociological imagination around the same scientific principles professional sociologists apply to every other topic of sociological inquiry. Additional SoTL scholarship into the sociological imagination is needed that adheres to the basics of science: specificity of language, unpacking or clearly stating what is meant by otherwise vague abstractions, interrogating measurement validity, collecting data systematically, using research designs that afford assessments of reliability, articulating the methods used thoroughly enough to allow for tests of reproducibility. Even if this essay is wrong and there is a way to standardize the sociological imagination, scholars will only locate it if they investigate the concept systematically. Examples of investigations featuring the level of rigor this essay has called for can already be found within the available sociological SoTL research, and some evidence suggests such studies are becoming increasingly common. For sociologists to meet their students' need for a sociological imagination, this trend must continue, and the rigor of these studies needs to be the rule instead of the exception.

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