

## **Christopher Wright Mills Sociological Imagination: A Relevant Tool for Holistic Approach to Contemporary Social Problems**

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### **Abstract**

The world has been plagued by a myriad of problems that seem to swing like a pendulum from one end to the other. The recent experience of the coronavirus – COVID-19, has shown us that there are no problems that can be studied or resolved in isolation. Medical problems could have social effects as well as social problems could end up having medical problems. Religious concerns can create economic/political tensions and problems as well. Christopher Wright Mills an American sociologist observed that for social sciences to be able to handle social problems properly and in a humane manner, social problems must be approached in a holistic manner using Sociological Imagination as a tool. This qualitative research by way of discursive analysis seeks to demonstrate that social workers and social scientists that struggle every day in the society to solve social problems that are often multidimensional must apply the basic questions or principles of Mills' Sociological Imaginations which can become a holistic tool to social research for problem solving. The study recommends that multidisciplinary cooperation is key towards problem solving.

**Keywords:** Sociology, Sociological Imaginations, Social Science, Holistic Research Approach, Social Problems.

### **Introduction:**

A preacher once retorted that anyone living in this world and who discovers that he or she has no problem whatsoever, should be prepared to die because problems, difficulties and challenges of life are the inevitable end we must continue to confront either as a community or as individuals living within the society. As much as this inherent aspect of human existence is unavoidable, it does not mean we leave ourselves to fate and watch them ravage our lives and society (Plummer, 2019). Human history is a history of human struggle to overcome various challenges and problems that have accompanied humanity throughout her journey of life and experience. These problems and challenges range from the search of the divine, to the search of self, identity, society, health, entertainment, development and security. This search can be described as the social evolution process (Hallpike, 1996)

which has always carried in its path a consistent struggle for growth of social interrelationship (Burton, 2016).

As the human society experienced an unprecedented advancement through the enlightenment era, there was a presumption that she was going to become more humane creating an atmosphere of tolerance, cohabitation, integration, social and economic stability with little or no problems (Giddens, 2013). The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 was considered an epoch-making event of this time giving humanity and Europe in particular, a turnover in relative peace and diplomatic interaction that most communities in Europe had not experienced (Croxtton, 1999). These events led to the birth of modern society and sociology eventually (Dillon, 2010). Giddens and Griffiths (2006) defined sociology as a social discipline that scientifically investigated the various interrelationships of the society using scientific methodology. This understanding is because the dawn of sociology in Europe coincided with the Westphalian treaty (Beck, 2011). This means that there cannot be a sociological discipline without a formally established society (Touraine, 2003).

Some of the leading figures in sociology like Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons (Morrison, 2006), might have not envisaged sociology to be confronted someday with the task of investigating some issues and problems she faces in a complex and multifaceted society of today (Cohen & Kennedy, 2007). The modern society seems to be a bit different from the one in which sociology was born. This is greatly influenced by the growing tides and effect of globalization and the contemporary forces of mechanised warfare, global insecurity, institutionalized terrorism, global migration, commercialized sports, climate change, disease, academic institutionalization, and departmentalization of research with little or no serious connectedness to the whole body of knowledge. Giddens (2013) described such a scenario and time as the unanticipated world. The dawn of the era of enlightenment made us believe that the more we get to know about the world and all the forces in it the more we will be able to control it; science and technology were supposed to help in this knowledge and control (Giddens, 2013). This seems not to be the case we today live in a world that seems to be spinning out of our hands, making the future we were supposed to master and control an unravelled mystery (Giddens, 2013). Mills (2001) on the other hand thinks that 'Ours is a time of uneasiness and indifference and it is not yet formulated in such a way as to permit the work of reason and the play of sensibility. Mills (2001) believed that what people want to know is their social and historical reality and how it is written in their contemporary world, history and literature. They yearn for facts, they search for their meanings, they want 'a big picture' in which they can believe and within which they can come to understand themselves (Mills,

2001). Mills (2001) believes that people are more incline to seek for the values that orient them to suitable ways of feeling, of emotions, of problems and motives. Most often according to Mills (2001) these are not found in today's literature and approaches. What then is the missing link?

Caught up in the web of such a crisis sociology seems to be losing its relevance not only as a discipline of societal studies but much more as a discipline of science. A library is a collection of books of different fields into one single unit aimed at enlightening the mind towards problem solving. The more these units are looked at independently of each other, they might create an academic conflict and crisis of solving one problem and giving birth to another. This concern resonates with the words of the famous Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who opined that we should be careful about the danger of a single story (TEDGlobal, 2009). A danger in which we reduce reality to one storyline or experience or field of discipline. This was the early approach to the global pandemic when the noble coronavirus known as COVID-19 hit the world. Most nations assumed lockdown as the best measure of containing the reality with little considerations of other social, religious, and domestic concern (WHO, 2020). This one-way approach to the pandemic, have led to an increase in suicide cases, domestic violence, sexual abuses, and incest (McCann, & Matenga, 2020; Mangen, & Veale, 2020). This is because every human phenomenon is a jigsaw of linked events (Dahms, 2007). And no one reality or problem should be treated in isolation.

As the world becomes more expert and professional base (Brint, 1994), it becomes obviously clear that there is a missing link to contemporary approaches to problems. This is because medical problems are approached medically, social problems are approached socially, and spiritual problems are approached religiously with little or no recourse to other dynamics of the problem. It is at such crossroads that the work of Wright Mill 'The Promise' becomes very relevant because of its sociological imagination approach to social reality and problems (Denzin, 1989). The work presents the examiner or researcher very relevant and thought-provoking questions that can lead to a more realistic and near to perfect solution to human needs and problems.

How can this work become the missing link that can provide a holistic theoretical approach to social problems of our time and to restore sociological research to problem solving research and not just talk shops with little or no solution to prevailing social problems? This work therefore is an analytical presentation of the works of Wright Mills 'The Promise' as the missing link to most contemporary research that seem not to address the

social problems properly within their context and needs. The work offers some basic questions that could serve as a guiding compass for a comprehensive and holistic approach to research.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **Conceptualizing Sociological Imagination:**

Sociological imagination has been defined by Solis-Gadea (2006) as an analytical tool used to lay bare the intricacies of complex societies, while also offering a heuristic and normative infrastructure to the practitioners of social science. This means that it is a tool through which social scientist x-ray social concerns of the society in an objective manner. According to Mills (2001), sociological imagination is the mental ability to establish intelligible relations between history, social structure, and personal biography. Mills (2001) strongly believe that sociological imagination is that mental power that enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of different individuals' daily experience of their social positions. The concept, therefore, entails a mental and intellectual matrix or mould through which the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated (Mills, 2001). Sociological imagination is the first step to any academic research because it is within this backdrop that the individual can understand his own experience and measure out his own fate there by locating himself within his own time and history (Mills, 2001). Sociological imagination is the altruistic power that enables one to know her own chances in life and, it is only so can one become aware of those of all individuals in her circumstances (Mills, 2001). Sociological imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry (Mills, 2001). It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human endeavour (Noy, 2014) or the capacity to identify the self in the society and the society in the self (Leon-Guerrero, 2018).

### **Basic Principles of Sociological Imaginations**

Mills (2001) in his work the “The Promise” stated that Sociological Imaginations have certain methodological principles and basic research questions which are summarily presented thus.

- The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scenes.
- Sociological imagination seeks to create a categorization of individuals in the society within their social and psychological frames of mind.
- Through sociological imagination personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of the public is transformed into involvement with public issues.
- Sociological imaginations help individuals understand their own experience in relation to other individuals within the society.
- 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. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classical social analyst.
- Sociological imagination seeks a redress of three basic questions namely, what is the structure of this particular society as a whole, its essential components, and how do those components relate to one another?
- Sociological imagination addresses the question of Where does the society stand in human history and what are the mechanics by which it is changing and evolving? What is the place and meaning of this society for the development of humanity as a whole? What is this particular feature we are examining today and what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are the varieties of men and women who are living in this society and in this period? (Mills, 2001).

The big question will therefore be, do the social workers and social scientists that make frantic effort every day to solve the social problems of our contemporary society like poverty, unemployment, homelessness, domestic violence, migration, climate change, disease, crime, insecurity and many others; ask these basic questions or concerns expressed by Wright Mills sociological imagination?

**Conceptualizing Social Problem:** Life generally is like a pendulum that swings from one end to another and very often these two ends are characterised by either good experiences or bad ones. While the good experiences are celebrated and cherished the bad ones are frowned at and avoided at all cost. These unpleasant experiences and problems cannot all be categorised as social problems. According to Horsfall, (2018), there are six basic ingredients that best describe a social problem; a social problem must be a situation that threatens the physical or social well-being of a group or a category of persons, it must be

communally identified as a problem, the adverse social situation can be changed by human efforts, all preventable disasters affecting a large number of the community are always and almost social problems, there must be a group of people who identify the problem who are often known as advocate group, social workers. These people or group often propose change through an ameliorating action and finally a social worker must have the will to act to solve the problem (Horsfall, 2018). Best (2016) talking about social problem observed that social problems are undesirable situations that are caused by actions or inactions of people or society which often affect a large number of the population. From the foregoing, social problem tends to have certain objective characteristics that help sociologists and social workers to identify problems that qualify for that status. Best (2017) commenting on this stated that this objectivist's approach sometimes reduces the subjective dimension of social problem which could be the real scenario that helps to identify the social problem. Other scholars are of the view that social problems are social constructions of the society and every social condition can be constructed into a social problem (Best, 2017). This work, however, identifies social problem as any social condition that affects the well-being of members of a community and have been widely identified as a problem that can be solve through human intervention (Leon-Guerrero, 2018).

### **Sociological Imagination a Holistic Approach to Social Problems:**

Jenkins, (2002) in his book *'Towards a Better Understanding of the Human World'* observed that there is the need for a re-thinking of sociology as a discipline this is because; general sociological theories and empirical research have become too weakly connected to each other. Secondly, that sociological writings routinely fail in large part because of the way they often fail to address the concerns of large audience that the discipline's subject matter demand, and lastly that sociological aspirations to objectivity which is central to the relevance of sociology has been threatened in recent past (Bhambra, 2009; Jenkins, 2002). A social problem can be described as a dislocation or dysfunction in the social system which is regarded by the society as requiring intervention by its designated agents (Best, 2017). There are certain requirements for a given social condition to be regarded as a social problem: It must be social in origin, it must be regarded by the society as a problem, it must require some form of social intervention and it must be a problem that has a human solution (Leon-Guerrero, 2018). Most social problems are often approached using mainly one or few perspectives often the objectivist's or constructionist approach to the detriment of the subjectivist reality and experience (Best, 2017). These approaches deprived of a holistic face and all-round approach end up not being effective in producing the expected result (Isaksen, Dorval & Treffinger, 2011). Various sociologists and social scientists have

continued to work out ways and modalities towards solving these social problems from various perspectives. These approaches often lack an all-round strength and proper questioning of the problem. This is often because certain aspects or approaches that might have been noticed or deliberately ignored because the right questions have not been asked. This in a way, gives room for an in exhaustive investigation into the problem (Best, 2017). Some sociologists, on the other hand, seem not to grasp and explain complexities and various intricacies of the modern society well. (Cuff, Dennis, Francis & Sharrock, 1998). With all these changes and conflict of being and the constant shift in individual status and lifestyle. Sociologists and other social scientists must undergo a rethinking and conceptualization of its study in such a way that its theoretical framework and pedagogical orientation is aimed at establishing a ground for sociological relevance in the present changing world (Connell, 2018). This could best be attended through sociological imaginations of Wright Mills which creates a dynamic and contextual application of sociological skill (Connell, 2018). Sociological imagination is very much relevant despite the time frame. Though so many theorists seem to believe this work has outlived its relevance and cannot even offer any relevant solution to the prevailing social and economic problems of the world (Dinerstein, 2014). Sylvia (2009) opined that, modern scientific research requires a re-thinking of the concept of society, its boundlessness and processes of formation, and the relationships between social systems in the world. This is the same recommendation made by Mills (2001) in his work 'the Promise and task' It is essentially correct to say that the shift in theoretical thinking in sociology over the past thirty or so years have followed a definite albeit loose, pattern (Cuff *et al*, 1998). The question therefore sociology must seek to answer this time around is how sociology can still be relevant amidst the changing tide of contemporary society. This is a concern Connell (2018) observed and recommended a decolonization of sociology as the way forward. This demands a rethinking of sociology within the new social experience and an establishment of a new understanding and perspectives of theorizing through sociological imagination. Sociologists and social scientists must, therefore, seek a quality of mind that will help them use information to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and what can be done to arrive at a socially humane and stable society.

Sociological imagination can be described as a holistic methodological approach to solving social problems. Many scholars recognising the relevance and importance of this reality rebranded it in modern times as the New Sociological Imaginations (D"Urso, 2013; Fuller, 2006; Simon, 1995). The new sociological imagination uses theory, history, empirical facts, logical formalization, systematic analysis, creativity, local knowledge, moral

judgment, and inspiration (Solis-Gadea, 2005). What distinctively constitutes its elements is not just the search for correlations between abstract variables, but the search for pertinent relationships among facts, moral problems, structural conditions, historical concerns, personal worries and ethical values of contemporary societies (Solis-Gadea, 2005). The new sociological imagination is a search for satisfactory ways of understanding the contemporary world in a rational, communicable, truth telling and coherent way, while also contributing to the development of the public sphere and a collective understanding of social issues (Solis-Gadea, 2005).

This height is possible because sociological imagination helps us differentiate between the nature of the society and the various uniqueness peculiar to that society (Mills, 2001). What are the various institutionalized principles of social inequalities operational in this society? By understanding the nature, dynamics of the society, the human and material makeup of the community it becomes quite easy to know what is her need and problems and what is the best approach that could help solve her problems.

Sociological imaginations enable us to understand problems within their context. Are these problems individual problems or are they social problems? To this numerical context the researcher is enabled to contextualize his or her research within the milieu of its needs. As stated by Mills (2001) 'consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000 people and only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed from the public scene' (Mills, 2001). By following this theoretical approach, the researcher can confront the problem in its holistic nature thereby finding lasting and effective solutions for both individuals as well as society.

Sociological imagination is a theoretical call towards understanding the historical and anthropological background of a community and the role this background has played to its present circumstances and situations. Mills (2001) nicely expressed this idea when he said that sociological imagination is both historical and systematic; historical, because it deals with and uses the materials of the past; systematic, because it does so in order to discern 'the stages' of the course of history and the regularities of social life. It is generally said that those who forget history live to repeat her mistakes. Most problems facing our society today are issues that our forebears might have articulated upon but very often in a world of



today a lot of social problems are confronted with little or no recourse to history and its evolutive development, thereby lacking a holistic face in its investigation.

By recommending ethics, value and norm (Mills, 2001) to both social and scientific research, Mills is of the opinion that knowledge is not a mere intellectual academic activity that has no respect for human life, dignity, religion and nature. The same idea is further observed by Keohane (2018) that theorizing can thus be conceived of as a methodical reaching out for impossible ideals by which we can take the measure of our civilization. Through sociological imagination Mills raises up some fundamental theorizing questions that often seem ignored. Questions like, what is fiction, what is journalism, what artistic endeavour can compete with the historical reality and political facts of our time? What dramatic vision of hell can compete with the events of twentieth-century war? What moral denunciations can measure up to the moral insensibility of men [sic] in the agonies of primary accumulation? (Mills, 2001) These questions serve as guidelines and statements of the problem to all researchers aimed at solving social problems. Academic research that gathers facts and data and does not interpret how those facts improve the quality of life and of our common home (earth) must be deficient in its social and intellectual relevance. It is principles as these that challenges some international and national interest in nuclear weaponry and war. The huge sum of the world's resources has been used heavily in nuclear armament, space force, and mass production of weapons of mass destruction in a world that is still languishing in abject poverty, homelessness, unemployment, hunger and starvation in almost every continent.

Mills (2001) thinks that the primary concern of humanity lies in the unruly forces of contemporary society, with its alienating methods of production, its enveloping techniques of political domination, its international anarchy and more seriously, its pervasive transformations of the very 'nature' of the human being and the conditions and aims of human life. This lays before the social scientist's the foremost political and intellectual task to make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference (Mills, 2001). Sociological imagination therefore lays upon the social scientist, the central demand made upon him or her by other cultural workmen, physical scientists, artists, and the intellectual community in general to recognise the promise and task within the ambience of sociological imaginations and approaches problems in a holistic manner through the laid-out principles of sociological imagination. This is the only way our society can free from the social, economic, political, religious, and anthropological instability. Truth is one, eternal, immutable, and indivisible with a singular mission to enlighten and bring meaning to human existence. Until we realise this in our search for knowledge in various fields and

discipline, the world shall continue to experience increase in knowledge with little wisdom to make our society more humane.

## **Conclusion**

Science and technology together with social sciences have become monumental achievers whose accolades are littered all over the world. We have been able to place man on the moon, build a house in space, establish the United Nation, establish various social, scientific, art and literary theories, cross the ocean at sound speed, transplant human organs and even clone a sheep. Amidst these great achievements, human society is still bedevilled by all sorts of problems that seems to take meaning out of human existence. The big question would certainly be what is the missing link in these contemporary approaches that seem not effective enough to solve most contemporary problems? To theorize we must note that it is not a superficial game for the moment activity. It is rather a holistic interpretive reflective set of methods which constitute the normative heartbeat of the social and body politics, the method by which we reach out towards grasping and representing the sublime and the beautiful as unified moments of immanent transcendence.... This creates a fusion seeking the union of human and divine powers creating radiant ideals against which we may estimate prevailing values.

## **Recommendations**

- i. There should be an increase in interdisciplinary cooperation in which researchers from different disciplinary background builds up a collective union towards academic research this will enhance holistic approach to social problem thereby creating effective solutions.
- ii. There should be an increase in the decolonization of the social sciences in such a way that social problems are not always approached from the Western perspective, but holistic considerations are made to the historical and anthropological background of every community and society thereby de-emphasizing a social science that is built and practiced around a Western paradigm only.
- iii. Research and knowledge should be oriented towards problem solving and not for its esthetical value. This will create an opening to value and respect traditional dynamic approaches of knowledge that is unique to a place or a people.
- iv. Every academic discipline be accorded equal value and recognition in every society and academic setting thereby creating a conducive academic scene

devoid of intellectual or professional stratification. This will help all disciplines to see themselves as part of a jigsaw build towards a holistic solution to human needs and concerns.

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