SR 968-22: Sociological Methodology: Interpreting Changing Cultures

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**Introduction**

The issue of income inequality is deeply entrenched in society and reflects racial, economic, and gender disparities. In order to understand these phenomena, sociological theories such as structural-functional theory and conflict theory are critical lenses. A key component of Conflict Theory, in particular, is the role played by power dynamics in perpetuating inequality. As competing interests compete for fair distribution of resources, Lierse, Lascombes, and Becker (2022) claim wealth inequality frequently leads to political and social conflict.

**Part 1: Explanation of Conflict/Critical Theory**

  Based on Conflict Theory, we can analyze power imbalances and class struggles that sustain inequality (Lierse et al., 2022). Modern analyses show how the ruling class maintains control by deepening socioeconomic divides through policies and practices based on Marx's foundational ideas. Lindh and Andersson (2024) emphasize that social networks further exacerbate class divides by shaping attitudes toward inequality, which reinforces class divisions.

Part 2: Analysis of Income Inequality

Framing the Problem

### There is more to income inequality than just a personal struggle. It is a product of systemic exploitation. In Qureshi's essay, he argues that rising income inequality is a result of structural inefficiencies in policy design, which disproportionately benefits the wealthy and limits upward mobility for the working class.

### 1. Capitalist Structures

### As a result of capitalism, wealth distribution is often neglected in order to maximize profit. Low-income workers are experiencing wage stagnation as a result of this dynamic. Although the economy is growing, wages for lower-income workers are failing to keep up with inflation, decreasing their purchasing power (Qureshi, 2022). In research, it has been shown that labor conflicts persist as a result of capital accumulation, state policies, and global economic shifts. The conflict inherent within capitalism is also overlooked by Keynesian economic theories, according to some scholars, which contributes to stagnation.

### 2. Policy and Privilege

### A disproportionate number of tax policies favor the wealthy, contributing to economic inequality. Although inequality is rising in many advanced democracies, the tax rate on the rich has been reduced (Lierse et al., 2022). It is often argued that lower taxes for the wealthy stimulate economic growth, a theory known as trickle-down economics. Critics, however, argue that these policies exacerbate wealth concentration and limit redistribution. While higher taxes on the rich have gained public support, wealth inequality persists due to political and institutional obstacles.

### 3. Intersectionality

### The concept of intersectionality examines how socioeconomic disparities are compounded by overlapping identities such as race, class, and gender. Race and gender intersect in a variety of ways to create varying levels of privilege and penalty, particularly in education and employment, according to Lindh and Andersson (2024). In addition, scholars emphasize that intersectional frameworks can be applied to labor markets, policy-making, and social justice movements. Because marginalized communities experience structural disadvantages, they often earn lower wages, have fewer career advancement opportunities, and have fewer opportunities to accumulate wealth.

### ****Part 3: Insights and Solutions****

As well as criticizing existing structures, Conflict Theory informs reform strategies. According to Qureshi (2023), progressive taxation and increased access to education can help mitigate the wealth gap. Collective action is also demonstrated in grassroots movements that challenge systemic exploitation, as Lindh and Andersson (2024) describe.

**Part Two:** The Sociological Imagination

As a result of Mills' concept of The Sociological Imagination, individuals are invited to see societal patterns in the context of their personal experiences. A few examples are:

* In 1959, Mills argued that personal struggles like unemployment are often the result of broader economic and social forces, such as shifts in labor markets.
* Throughout his argument, he emphasized the importance of assisting individuals to understand their experiences within a larger context by emphasizing the interaction between biography (individual lives) and history (societal structures and trends).

From a Christian perspective:

* As biblical prophets, sociologists can expose injustices, critique corrupt systems, and advocate for social reform. According to Heddendorf (2010), moral or religious values underlie societal structures, shaping people's interactions and lives. It is possible to perpetuate inequality or promote redemption and renewal based on these values.

Individuals can apply this concept by encouraging them to view life through the lens of

It is imperative to foster a commitment to justice and accountability, and to understand the systemic forces at play.

Part Three: Application of Sociological Method

Application of Sociological Method: Addressing Mental Health Stigma through Symbolic Interactionism

Step 1: Select a Sociological Theory

By analyzing social interactions through symbolic interactionism, mental health stigma can be analyzed (Blumer, 1969). In this theory, labels, language, and societal expectations influence perceptions of mental health, which often lead to discrimination and exclusion.

Step 2: Identify a Real-World Problem

The stigma associated with mental health remains a significant obstacle to treatment and social acceptance. The perception of mental illness by society contributes to social exclusion and discourages individuals from seeking treatment (Corrigan &amp; Nieweglowski, 2019).

Step 3: Uncover Societal Patterns Using Sociological Imagination

It is important to analyze personal struggles in the context of larger social structures, according to C. Wright Mills (1959). Cultural norms and systemic barriers to care play a deep role in stigmatizing mental health (Heddendorf, 2010). The societal attitude toward mental illness may reinforce unconscious biases, leading to discrimination against individuals with depression in the workforce.

Step 4: Draw on Heddendorf’s Hidden Threads

The author of Heddendorf (2010) examines the influence of moral and religious values on social attitudes. In religions emphasizing resilience and self-reliance, stigma may be perpetuated by discouraging open discussion of mental health struggles. The historical misconception that mental illness is an indicator of moral or spiritual failure further reinforces negative perceptions (Smith et al., 2022).

Step 5: Advocate for Change

A Christian perspective on social issues allows sociologists to challenge systemic injustices and advocate for reform. The mission of sociologists is similar to that of biblical prophets, who called for social accountability and social change (Heddendorf, 2010). Faith-based initiatives, policy reforms, and educational campaigns canincrease acceptance and support of mental health care (Corrigan &amp; Nieweglowski, 2019).

Conclusion

Conflict Theory has been used to examine income inequality in this essay, emphasizing its systemic genesis and the need for structural reforms. In order to foster equity and empower marginalized communities, it is imperative to address the deep-rooted causes of inequality -- such as capitalist structures, policy biases, and intersectional disparities.

By integrating C. W. Mills' sociological imagination, individuals are able to connect their personal struggles with broader societal problems. According to Mills (1959), individual hardships, such as unemployment or wage stagnation, are often caused by larger economic and political forces rather than personal failures. Through recognition of these connections, individuals can engage in collective action and advocate for systemic change.

According to Christian sociology, this approach aligns with sociologists' prophetic roles, who, like biblical prophets, expose injustices and criticize corrupt systems. Using examples from wealth distribution, labor rights, and social justice, Heddendorf (2010) shows how moral values influence society's structures. Using Christian sociological theory, scholars and activists can challenge oppressive systems and promote compassion, justice, and ethical behavior.

In addition to critiquing injustice and inspiring meaningful change, sociologists play a transformative role in society. They mobilize communities, reshape narratives, and push for institutional reform through critical pedagogy, policy advocacy, and grassroots activism. Sociologists contribute to the creation of a more equitable society by fostering awareness and accountability, ensuring that economic and social structures serve the common good rather than perpetuating disparities.

An approach that combines sociological imagination, conflict theory, and ethical responsibility is most effective for addressing income inequality. People and institutions can work toward a more just and inclusive society by recognizing systemic injustices, advocating for policy changes, and engaging in collective action.

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