**Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative**

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**Introduction**

I am the co-editor of a relatively successful introductory textbook, *Being Sociological* (Matthewman, West-Newman and Curtis, 2006). Reprinted twice, the second edition should be out later this year. I am the co-author of a ‘mixed methods’ textbook, *Social Research: A Practical Introduction* (Curtis and Curtis, 2012). I have taught research methods in various guises since 1996. I am currently writing a proposal for a textbook, *Researching Organisations*, which is intended for management and sociology students. In late 2011, I received assistance for this and a broader project through the University of Auckland Summer Scholarships programme.

I was fortunate to be allocated two summer scholars, Anna Ma and Charlotte Moore, to conduct an online study into how methodology is taught across sociology and management, and more specific business-oriented programmes in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA. The main focus of the study was the identification and analysis of required and recommended textbooks from the websites associated with likely programmes and courses. The researchers then developed an outline for each of the courses and the textbooks used in terms of the methods or approaches cited.

This paper is an extrapolation of both the recent online study (constituted as an availability sample) and my experiences as a teacher, writer and researcher in the area of methodology.

**THESIS**

My thesis is that sociology is riven today by the split between abstracted empiricism and grand theory which C. Wright Mills (1959) lamented more than 50 years ago in his monograph *The Sociological Imagination*.

This split is most obvious in the teaching of research and methodology. Here the binary of quantitative research and qualitative research map directly on to the Millsian concerns of abstracted empiricism and grand theory.

More concerning are the flow on affects this binary opposition has on the research and publications of sociologists. I concur with Savage and Burrows (2007) that empirical sociology -sociology in general- is facing a crisis of credibility (although not precisely for the reasons they put forward).

In the current conjuncture, which may indeed be the terminal moment of Late Capitalism, the response of sociology is unedifying and depressing.

On the one hand, are abstracted empiricist accounts (squarely located in quantitative research) that (as is seemingly inevitable with this sort of research) treat power, meaning and injustice as a series of socio-technical problems of rationing and compliance. If anything, this sort of evidence without theory acts to extend the neoliberal / Thatcherite myth that ‘there is no such thing as society only individuals and their families.’

On the other hand, the top of the sociological hierarchy remains dominated by grand theorists. They may no longer be the champions of postmodernism – which Matthewman and Hoey (2006) argue never made it out of the Twentieth Century. But they have embraced a purportedly Marxist / materialist analysis of the ‘financial crisis’ in a decidedly philosophical manner. Think Bauman and Zizek. Their modus operandi is precisely the syncretism formerly practiced by structural functionalists, and eviscerated by Mills in 1959. What they produce is theory without evidence. Inexact philosophy in other words.

The balance of my paper deals mainly with how sociology got from the binary opposition of 1959 to the binary opposition of 2012. I pay particular attention to the Science Wars of the 1970s and the Science Wars Redux of the 1990s (which undid most of the previous good work).

I conclude with a list of things to be done: starting with the concrete suggestions to improve teaching; culminating in a call for a Science Wars 3, the aim of which must be the development of a ‘reflexive positivism’.

**C. Wright Mills and The Sociological Imagination**

“The *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, 1959: 6-7).

For C. Wright Mills the sociological imagination constituted a way forward in the form critical of grand theory and abstracted empiricism.

Abstracted empiricism refers to sociological inquiry that fetishsizes the collection of data, of social facts, at the expense of an analysis of social and historical contexts.

Abstracted empiricism tends to be blind to social structure and the realist verities of power and meaning. Typically abstracted empiricism is associated with ‘quantitative’ research. Mills’ main target was Paul Lazerfeld.

Survey research was and remains the epitome of abstracted empiricism. However the capacity of software packages like NVivo and NUD\*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing) to quantify the qualitative has given fresh legs to abstracted empiricism which Mills never envisioned.

Grand theory refers to sociological inquiry that privileges abstraction and, in so doing *also* ignores social and historical contexts. Typically grand theory is associated with abstraction and syncretism. Mills’ main target here was Talcott Parsons.

Abstracted empiricism and grand theory are both aspects of positivism. Positivists have the greatest confidence in the capacity of science and scientists to ascertain social reality from social facts.

Mills (1959: 8-9) argued that one of the most important distinctions sociologists can make is between “personal troubles and public issues”. Personal troubles are the realm of individual values and character. They are played out primarily within circles of intimate social relations or *milieu*. Public issues transcend *milieu.* Issues are a public matter that typically involve the crisis of some institution or norm. The sociological imagination is then about finding the limits to social action. For example, unemployment is one such issue (Mills 1959: 9).

The key aim of Millsian sociology, the deployment of a sociological imagination, is to highlight where personal troubles end and public issues begin, and to offer solutions. Millsian sociology was therefore as much about politics and problem-solving as it was about research.

**SCIENCE wars**

Mills’ call to arms was a critique of positivism in the form of structural functionalism. Whether Mills was an optimist or pessimist was a question that bounced around for a decade or so following his death and decline into relative obscurity. I think he was the former insofar as he saw no real obstacles to researchers / lay people adopting the sociological imagination. In retrospect his pragmatism looks naive. Certainly he was not particularly reflexive and it is interesting to speculate on how he would have reacted to Gouldner’s (1970) *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*.

However for Alvin Gouldner the crisis of sociology was a lack of reflexivity, not just on the part of the adherents of structural functionalism but for Marxists as well. Sociology risked obscurity by its practitioners becoming unreflexive functionaries of the welfare state (yes, those were the days) (Crompton, 2008; Hollands and Stanley, 2009).

Mills and Gouldner book-ended the 1960s. They provided much of the foundations for the ‘Science Wars’ of the late 1960s and 1970s. They inspired radicals of all persuasions, most significantly feminists to challenge the positivist hegemony (in terms of epistemology and methodology) and kill off structural functionalism as a meta-theory and ideology.

**The three P’s:**

Anne Oakley (1998) gives a nice overview of this ‘paradigm debate’ and ‘the three P’s that formed the realist critique of positivism: the case against *positivism*, the case against *power*, the case against *p values.*

1. **The case against *positivism*:** Oakley (1998: 710) argues that positivist claims to objectivity, lack of bias, and rules of inference are all considered problematic by non-positivists.
2. **The case against *power*:** Similarly (ibid: 710-711) positivist claims to objectivity and science assume a hierarchy of knowledge in which the knowledge of the researcher is privileged over the researched. Respondents, participants, samples and populations are reduced to objects of study.
3. **The case against *p* values:** This refers to the both the reduction of issues of reliability and validity to statistical measures of probability, significance, null hypotheses, etc (see above for our passing discussion of statistical analysis). At the same time, it is a rejection that people and social relations can be properly represented by numbers. For example, “Feminist qualitative researchers argue that the *p*s they are interested in do not concern the probabilistic logic of statistical *p*  values, but the value of *people*, and this can only be deduced by construction a qualitative knowledge about them” (ibid: 711).

**Epistemology not methodology; not methods**

On the face of it the realist radicals won the sciences wars. At precisely the time that sociology flourished as a discipline it diversified its practice, including new avenues for non-positivist publication. Hooray! Unfortunately, no one seems to have told the positivists who, like Japanese soldiers on Pacific atolls long after the surrender continue to fight on.

Worse still, as the 1970s progressed the realist focus shifted from driving a methodological stake through the positivist heart and became increasingly concerned with developing a ‘reflexive realism’. This epistemological effort was both premature and missed the mark. Its origins are also found in Mills and Gouldner.

For Mills the crisis of sociology was of positivism, rather than of methodology *per se.* Indeed Mills displayed famously little regard for methodology and methods (among other things he refused to teach graduate students). While the life history approach flourished within the rubric of a sociological imagination and of charting the limits to social action – that is, as an exemplar of Millsian sociology- the methodological connections are not obvious.

That Mills said next to nothing about the mechanics of research, about methods or methodology, was a major deficit. I believe that when coupled with Gouldner’s emphasis on reflexive sociology this deficit undermined the concrete advances secured by realists in the 1970s.

Among other things the realist shift to issues of epistemology aided the postmodern moment.

**Science Wars Redux**

The paradigm debates of the 1960s and 1970s gave the illusion of resolving the binary / dualism identified by Mills. It is truly unfortunate -for empirical sociology- that this useful debate was superseded by the Science Wars Redux.

The paradigm debates that Oakley overviews involved positivists and realists in heated discussion, resulting in controversy over truth claims. Initially at least this ‘debate’ encompassed method, methodology and epistemology.

However the Science Wars Redux were contested between realists and ‘constructivists’. They were conducted at the level of epistemology and as such seemed largely methods and evidence free. Even the famous Sokal Hoax (Sokal, 1996) played on *Social Text* was perpetrated and made its point using false evidence.

In terms of teaching research and methodology the debate between realists and constructivists -about what constituted a totalising discourse or not- had little in the way of helpful results. I concur with my colleagues Steve Matthewman and Doug Hoey (2006) that postmodernism never made it out of the Twentieth Century *and* that it was largely the combined efforts of its critics that made it look like a coherent project. But it is unfortunate that the anti-realism, anti-humanism and anti science of whatever postmodernism was, was allowed to slip away. One quote from the Derrida, the omni-philosopher of his day should suffice:

“Every discourse, even a poetic or oracular sentence, carries with it a system of rules for producing analogous things and thus an outline of methodology. That said, at the same time I have tried to mark the ways in which, for example, deconstructive questions cannot give rise to methods, that is to technical procedures that can be transposed by analogy – this is what is called a teaching, a knowledge, applications- but these rules are taken up in a text which is in each time a unique element and which does not let itself be turned totally into a method”(Derrida, 1995, p. 200).

Remember here that *everything* can be subjected to endless, iterative discourse analysis. At best Derrida suggests a methodology (a logic of the processes shaping research) but cannot sustain a method (a repeatable set of procedures).

Derrida is highlighting an issue of epistemology. As a constructivist he does so by denying method. Everything is unique: nomothetic endeavour is ruled out.

At the level of research as a process that in some way / anyway provides rigour to truth claims, all that is left is the syncretism Mills associated with grand theory.

In this sense the postmodernists took on the tradition of structural functionalism.

This begs the questions whether postmodernists and structural functionalist share some variant of positivism. Positivists have the greatest confidence in the capacity of science and scientists to ascertain social reality from social facts. Certainly grand theory based on syncretic readings is a decidedly anti-realist stance. In this regard, I agree with Barry Hindess (1973) that at some point a hyper-relativist position (e.g., constructivism) becomes indistinguishable from positivism in that it prioritizes the ability of certain researchers to distinguish fact from fiction without the encumbrances of realism or method. The Derrida quote is intended to demonstrate this. (Of course Hindess was criticizing ethnomethodology rather than postmodernism.)

**The crisis of empirical sociology?**

Savage and Burrows (2007) have a gloomy prognosis for empirical sociology and sociology in general. On the one hand, they argue that sociology is dominated by syncretic approaches (grand theory). On the other they argue that the crisis of empirical (I would say empiricist) sociology is the result of a crisis in the survey method:

“However, the sample survey is not a tool that stands ‘outside history’. Its glory years, we contend, are in the past. One difficulty is that in an intensely researched environment, response rates have been steadily falling, and it is proving more difficult to obtain response rates of 80 per cent or more, which were once thought normal. People no longer treat it as an honour to be asked their opinion, but instead see it as a nuisance, or even an intrusion. These problems are, however, not overwhelming because survey statisticians have developed methods for estimating the attributes of ‘the missing’, and it still remains possible to generalize on the basis of biased samples. A second problem concerns the way that surveys rely for their sampling frame on the empty homogeneous space defined by national boundaries. The survey emerged as a key device for imagining the nation, and in a global era of mass migration, this also marks a serious limit...A third telling issue is the proliferation of survey research in private companies, especially in areas of market research. Such survey research now has very limited reference to academic expertise”( Savage and Burrows, 2007: 890).

Their influential article can be read as a restatement of Mills (1959). The bugbears of the sociological imagination remain grand theory and abstracted empiricism. Indeed the *crisis* confronting a meaningful sociology is that corporations have got their hands on all the good data and are increasingly unwilling to share it with critical sociologists.

However I think Savage and Burrows overshoot the target. Rosemary Crompton offered a more balanced account:

“I shall argue that if there is a ‘crisis’ in empirical sociology it is one relating to an absence of quantitative expertise, rather than the presence of the ‘wrong’ variety. I shall further argue that a (possibly unintended) consequence of Savage and Burrows’ rejection of the survey method might be to reinforce the lack of inclination, amongst , amongst many sociologists, to acquire a reasonable level of quantitative expertise.’ (Crompton, 2008: 1218).

**CONCLUSION: TOWARD A REFLEXIVE POSITIVISM**

I agree with Rosemary Crompton insofar as moving beyond the qualitative and quantitative binary requires an uneven movement. In other words, while mutual movement toward some sort of fusion is required, I think qualitative researchers have a longer journey to make than their quantitative colleagues.

This assessment, in turn, reflects the incomplete nature of the 1970s Science Wars and wholly damaging impact of the 1990s Science Wars Redux on sociology.

It seems to be fairly unproblematic to describe the methodological landscape of sociology in terms of the Millsian critique of grand theory and abstracted empiricism. Research courses and textbooks are either (1) dominated by qualitative offerings that are heavy on epistemology and theory and inadequate in terms of methods and technique; or (2) dominated by quantitative research and more-or-less blind to the criticisms of ‘the three P’s’.

Is it unfair to highlight Denzin and Lincoln’s (2011) long running *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* as an exemplar of the qualitative fascination with abstraction? Regardless, I challenge anyone to undertake some research on the basis of the materials found there.

This lack of method extends to even useful contributions. For example, Chandler’s (2007) highly informative book and integrated website *Semiotics: The Basics* suffers from a paucity of practical material.

At the other end of the spectrum are single approach textbooks and courses that tend to be highly quantitative. The worst of these are simply introductions to software packages like SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and NVivo and NUD\*IST .

However the best of the quantitative accounts are very good indeed. For example, De Vaus (1986) on surveys, Krippendorff (2004) on content analysis. But even these highly practical texts and courses suffer from the positivist blind spot that reduces meaning, power and injustice to statistically measurable issues of reliability and validity.

Sadly the qualitative / quantitative divide also reduces the choice for students to that between interesting but fairly interesting or possibly useful but deathly dull.

Crompton (2008) was aware of this. Sociology students seem to be innumerate and highly resistant to obtaining these skill sets. It probably doesn’t help the majority of academic sociologists seem similarly biased.

**Things to be done**

Here is my list of steps to move ‘beyond qualitative and quantitative’. I start from the most concrete and straight-forward:

1. Require compulsory research design and basic statistics courses at stage 1. Ideally these would be taught by sociologists / social scientists rather than statisticians. And, by realists rather than positivists. These courses would introduce notions of hypothesis-testing, critical paths in research (i.e., a bit of commonsense) as well as expected and observed, null hypothesis, covariance.
2. A reworking of quantitative texts and courses to taking into account the longstanding criticism of ‘the three P’s.
3. A more major reworking of qualitative texts and courses to include practical / empirical issues of method and technique.
4. The development of more texts and courses that abandon the qualitative / quantitative divide altogether and represent the best research as the inevitable combination of both. I see this more than just ‘mixed methods’ offerings and triangulation.
5. A re-engagement with original concerns of the Science Wars. I believe that the major intellectual outcome of this paradigm debate and the subsequent Science Wars Redux was an epistemological (re)consideration around reflexive realism. This missed the mark, in particular the notion that grand theorising does more to damage empirical sociology than abstracted empiricism ever will. I suggest that Science Wars 3 have as its aim developing a ‘reflexive positivism’. Reflexive positivism would retain the rigour and modesty of positivist endeavours, while opening research and researchers up to the sociological imagination.

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