

# “Igniting Student’s Sociological Imagination through Collecting Oral Histories of the Homeless”

## Professor Laura Khoury - Sociology Department

“Sociological imagination is a quality of mind that cannot be adopted by simply teaching students its discursive assumptions. Rather, it is a disposition, in competition with other forms of sensibility, which can be acquired only when it is practiced” (Kebede, 2009: 353).

### ABSTRACT

Collecting oral histories provide an important pedagogical tool because it has the potential to make the listener hear "the voice" of the marginalized. Learners practice their sociological imagination when they are engaged in a valuable experiential learning. This is a quality of mind, a way of seeing and knowing. It is like resocialization of old habits -where a person thinks that their troubles are simply not repeated or experienced by others, thus they are happening in a void not in a structure and system of inequality. It is seeing the big picture, a revelation, or seeing the forest not a singular tree. Student who developed a sociological imagination can "distinguish between "personal troubles" and "public issues," link one's biography to the social structure of society, explore the interplay between man & society, biography & history, the self & the world and synthesize how our personal problems have sociological causes. This research studied students while collecting oral histories of the homeless in Racine/Kenosha that increased their social responsibility- a strong indicator for practicing the sociological imagination. Using qualitative content analysis, a deeper analysis of student's thinking process, and assessing the effect of the "voice" on student's sociological imagination via student's critical reflections throughout the semester, their sense of social responsibility increased, especially in challenging their basic instincts, asking the harder questions, seeking answers, seeing the bigger picture, but, at the same time, when asked to generate realistic scenarios and solutions they returned to a "default" of seeing homelessness as an individualistic problem. Based on this variation between capturing and solving social issues I recommend that when experiential opportunity allows for producing independent thinking, it must be a situated learning experience, where learning, in context, allows the learner to engage with others and develop collective understanding, where scaffolding, help and support via feedback, continues and allows for continuous critical reflections. I argue that reflective practice should be a lifelong practice because it turns experience into learning.

### RATIONALE

Sociology students are introduced to the term "sociological imagination" in the very first unit of our Introduction to sociology courses. They are encouraged to practice it throughout the courses that meet our conceptual competencies. The sociology department has one specific sub-competency that states: "Appraise the impact of the social and physical environment on individual experience." To impart what is meant by this competency, beyond the simple recognition of an intersection between biography and social structure, a transformative consciousness experience is needed and in collecting oral histories one may listen, empathize, experience the lives of others. The current project is based on the premise that "[I]n stories the social comes alive" (Denzin 1989:6). The stories are accounts of lived, emotional experience... "they anchor the self of the teller in the center of the story that is being told, inviting the listener to become part of the "storied world" the teller is creating (p.7). Storrs (2009) thought that developing a sociological imagination may take place through story-telling, ...and based on the premise that story-telling, when paired with inquiry and dialogue, can promote change. Students gain the fullest sense of the sociological imagination, one that includes social responsibility, "when they are able to have encounters and experiences that challenge their pre-existing world-views and allows them to see first-hand the sociological concepts they learn in the classroom" (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace 2009: 76).

### RESEARCH QUESTION

- How does collecting oral narratives ignite student's sociological imagination and help them "make small things big" as they question the interplay between real life stories and social history?
- How do students display a stronger sense of social responsibility – social responsibility is one strong indicator of using their sociological imagination?
- What social responsibility indicator was stronger? Tying biography to history or asking the hard question (see Social responsibility table)?
- All in all, did the collection of oral histories, hearing the voice lead to igniting the sociological imagination?

### SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

- "SI is "The awareness of the relationship between personal experiences and wider society"; It is a quality of mind, a way of seeing and knowing, a process of re-socialization of old habits when you think your troubles are simply not repeated or experienced by others, but are happening in a void not in a structure/system of inequality. "It is seeing the big picture, a revelation, seeing the forest not a tree. Students who developed a sociological imagination can "distinguish between personal" troubles" and public" issues," or "link one's biography to the social structure of society," or "explore the interplay between man & society, biography & history, the self & the world," or "Synthesize how our personal problems have sociological causes."

### METHODOLOGY: STOREYTELLING

- It provides an important pedagogical tool and has the "potential to inspire change by creating "emotional geographies of public significance" (Johnston & Pratt 2010: 133)
- Research storytelling not only embodies subjective experience but also embraces the knowledge sharing traditions inherent in "the culture and context of indigenous people and communities" (Kelly et al. 2001: 348).
- Story telling research allows for analyzing how students interpreted, constituted, mapped, encouraged, managed, and lastly, invited change.
- Looking into students' reflections of the stories they collected is a tool in identifying how collecting oral histories enhances their social responsibility and thereby using their sociological imagination.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Tie Biography & History                 | MOST TIED BIOGRAPHY TO POPULAR KIDS MOVIES, OTHERS "DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED THEN"; ONLY ONE TIED THE DAY THEY WERE BORN WITH MANDELA'S BIRTH   |
| Tie The Self & The World                | MOST USED THE WORD MOTIVATION AND HARD-WORK. THE SELF WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT TO TIE WITH THE WORLD, BUT NOTED WHEN THE HOMELESS BLAMED EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING FOR THEIR PERSONAL TROUBLES    |
| Tie the Troubles & the Social Issues    | FEW KNEW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TROUBLES AND ISSUES: ONE THINKS TROUBLES ARE SHORT TERMED AND WILL GO AWAY, BUT TROUBLES OF OTHERS WERE NOTED   |
| Tie Processes & Relationships           | ONE FEMALE STUDENT –NOT BORN IN THE US- MENTIONED THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, ONE OTHER STRESSED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POWER RELATIONSHIPS   |
| Note Interplay between People & Society | NOTED INTERPLAY IN RELATION TO SOCIETY'S EXPECTATIONS, BUT ONE FEMALE STUDENT NOTED THE FINANCIAL MARKET THAT SCREWED US UP. MOST OTHERS DISCUSSED BETTER HEALTH WHEN INTERPLAY IS FUNCTIONAL |
| Ask Hard Questions about Social World   | THE HARD QUESTIONS WERE: POOR ECONOMY & EXPENSIVE HOUSING & GOVERNMENTAL ASSISTANCE, SOME IN THE WAY THE SOCIETY IS SET UP  |
| Seek Answer/s About the Social World    | THERE WERE VARIATIONS BETWEEN STUDENTS: SOME SUGGESTED IMMIGRANTS ARE TAKING THEIR JOBS OR OUTSOURCING; OTHERS BLAMED THE INDIVIDUAL  |
| Challenge One's Basic Impulse/s         | ALL STUDENTS CHALLENGED THEIR BASIC IMPULSES AND SOUGHT A LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCE, GENUINELY FACED STEREOTYPES AND HASTY JUDGEMENTS  |
| Generate Realistic Scenarios            | NO REALISTIC SCENARIOS WERE PROVIDED: RESPONSES WERE: REDUCE OUTSOURCING, BRING THE JOBS BACK. ONE STUDENT ASKED FOR CHANGING THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM   |

### REFLECTIONS OF THE FIRST DAY

- "At First I was very nervous. I had an image on what homeless people would look like and why they are so but once I started hearing their voice I understood that most people weren't there because of a decision they made but because life at the time was not on their side, inflation has a lot to do with it."
- "I thought it was going to be formal it ended up to be a conversation."
- "Oral history tells me anything could happen to anyone: someone in the wrong place in the wrong time."
- "After listening I appreciated my house more than ever"
- "I gained new view point, new whole understanding."
- I learnt to be less judgmental, I am better educated now."
- "Telling stories make people sympathize."

### STUDENT'S FINAL REFLECTIONS

- "Homelessness is due to factors outside their control not lack of ambition."
- "They are there but that does not mean they are not trying to better themselves."
- "I thought they were just lazy with addiction problems but 'work for food' sign proved me wrong."
- "How can America not have a place to live? Give a job for all? What is wrong with the society? Where is the government? Something is not right!"
- "Reasons for why they are there is eviction, new landlord, new rules, but in fact one car accident, missing one pay check and there you are homeless."
- "Most homeless seem to know that it is an external factor why they are there few blamed themselves... "some are not in the shelter for the first time but they believe it is a god' plan for them."

### MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Students' sense of social responsibility increased, they challenging their basic instincts, but at the same time, when asked to generate realistic scenarios and solutions they move back to a default seeing homelessness as an individualistic problem.
- Students used their sociological imagination when troubles relate to others but when it comes to their own problems they tend to search for answers within their selves (false consciousness) not relate them to social issues!
- Students were quick to identify the source of the problem in the economy, government, or structure, but when asked is it the economy, most of them provided that it is the relatives who are not supporting, it is their luck, in other words they were blaming the victim.
- This is what I mean by the idea that they turn back to "default!"

- Everyone suddenly becomes homeless!
- Social environment changes the person!
- Most are in shelter not their as their fault!
- Our society as a whole is not very neighborly!
- The system is set up to make them fail!

- The homeless needs to come up with a plan to get out of the cycle. Sadly, only few had a plan to get out of this.
- The homeless took things for granted and never really imagined that they will become homeless.
- Life was not on their side but things in life can just happen. Once a person is homeless there is not much that can be done!
- If they do not work while they are at the shelter they should be thrown away!
- Things in life can just happen to anyone, anywhere, any time!

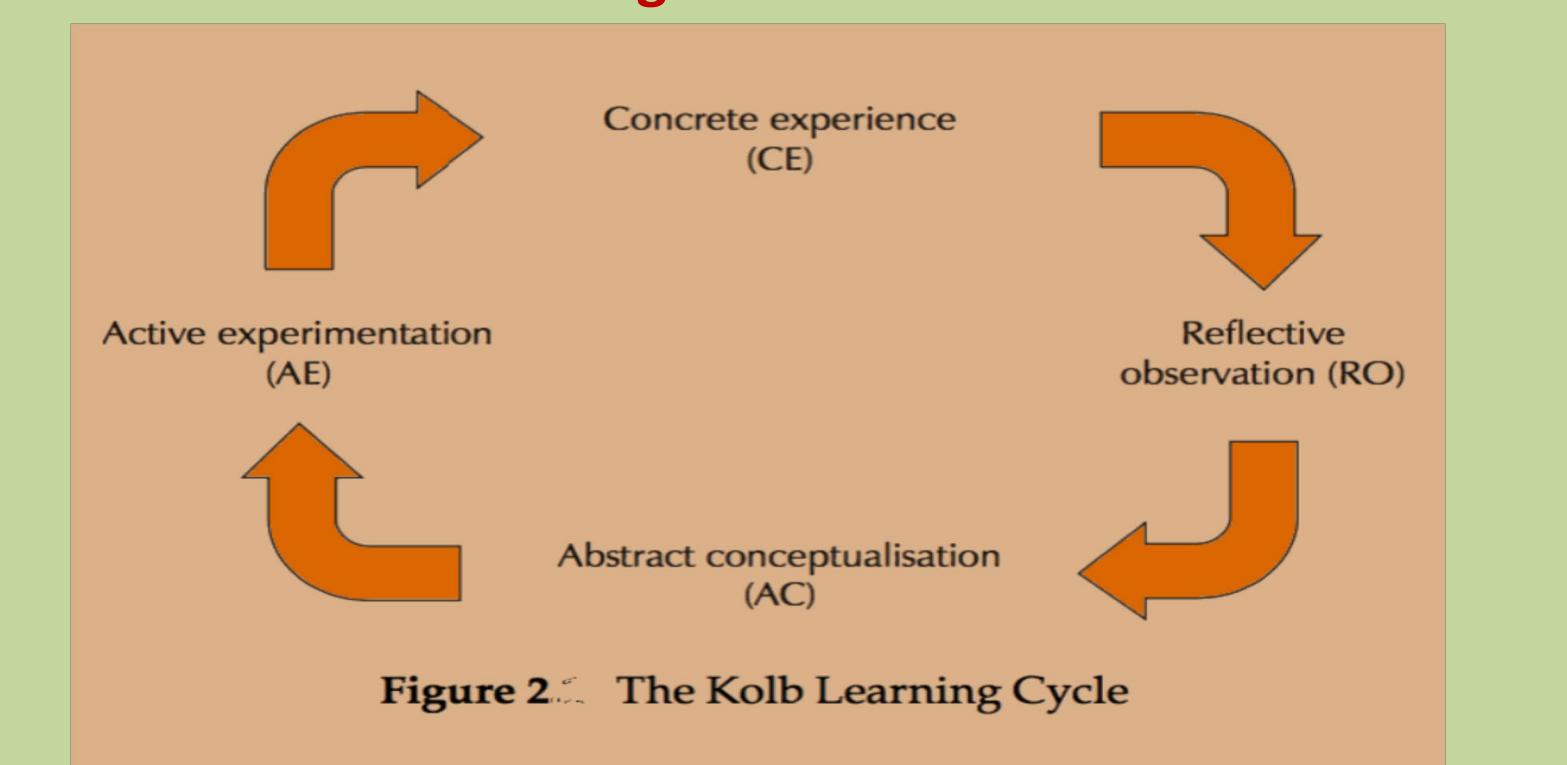


### REFERENCES

- Christensen, J. 2012. Telling stories: Exploring research storytelling as a meaningful approach to knowledge mobilization with Indigenous research collaborators and diverse audiences in community-based participatory research. *The Canadian Geographer*, 56(2): 231–242.
- Dandaneau, S. P. 2001. Taking it Big: Developing Sociological Consciousness in Postmodern Times. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge.
- Denzin, N. K. 1990. Presidential Address on "The Sociological Imagination" Revisited. *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 31 (1): 1-22.
- Hironimus-Wendt, R. & L. E. Wallace. 2009. The Sociological Imagination and Social Responsibility. *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 37: 76-88.
- Johnston, C., and G. Pratt. 2010. Nanay (Mother): A testimonial play. *Cultural Geographies*, 17(1): 123–133.
- Kebede, A. 2009. Practicing Sociological Imagination through Writing Sociological Autobiography. *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 37 (4): 353-368.
- Kelly, J. G., L. O. Mock, and D. S. Tandon. 2001. Collaborative inquiry with African-American community leaders: Comments on a participatory action research process. In *Handbook of Action Research*, ed. P. Reason and H. Bradbury. London, UK: Sage, 348–355.
- Kolb, D. A. 1984. *Experiential Learning*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Mills, C. Wright 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Stores, D. 2009. Teaching Mills in Tokyo: Developing a Sociological Imagination through Storeytelling. *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 37 (1): 31-46.



Kolb Learning Cycle (1984) four kinds of abilities/undertaking if learning is to be successful!



When experiential opportunity allows for producing independent thinking, it must become a situated learning experience, where learning, in context, allows the learner to engage with others and develop collective understanding, where scaffolding, help and support via feedback, continues and allows for continuous critical reflections. Reflective practice should be a lifelong practice as it turns experience into learning.

### Acknowledgements

Special Thanks to the WTFS Program, Provost Ducoffe's Office, The Teaching and Learning Center at UWP, the Students and Instructors of WTFS: Dr. Cyndi Kernahan & Dr. David Voelker.



### COMPARISONS IN DEFINITIONS

- In my course these definitions were provided:
- To understand one's self you must understand the others.
- What is it like being in other's shoes.
- Being able to feel with others without being part of their life.
- What happened to them was typical to them but different for me.
- It helped me put into perspective a lot and allowed me to see the bigger picture.
- Using the sociological imagination showed me how bad our system is set up to make people fail.
- Definitions were not unanimous but flexible and informal in my course.

### INTERESTING COMPARISONS

- In the other course, students gave a word by word definition as stated by Mills at first because this is what the book says and at the end of the semester their definitions were unanimous again but this time word by word from instructor.
- The instructor's exact words and even same examples: Definitions: "Things are not what they seem to be" or "it is when one imagines things that are not there." "We view the world as if false" "SI does not have an image of things." Examples: "The sun moves everywhere you go but the sun is not following us." "The sun is moving but in reality it is actually not moving."

### SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

- Collect oral histories in community based projects.
- Transform most everyday consciousness into a critical sociological self-consciousness; this can be done by de-mystifying, re-ifying, re-enlivening, and re-enchanting truths.
- Having the courage to move into transformative deep learning education allowing students to face alienation by self-teaching.
- Invite students "to take it big" - dispel the impersonal nature of society.
- Reconsidering the ways Millsian theory is presented (i.e. Read original work) and experiment with pedagogy – (Dandaneau 2012, 2001).