

On The Limits Of Single-Issue Social Science



Max Weber - Illustration
by Ingrid Bouws

The state of the art of the social sciences at the end of the sixties of the past century was characterized by a strong mood of optimism.

The rediscovery of the critical roots of social sciences as exemplified by the work of Marx and Weber contributed to the idea that one of the main tasks of social science should be to unravel the dynamics of social inequalities and to demystify ideological legitimatizations of those inequalities. Besides, the development of analytical tools and the recognition of the fast growing capabilities of computer software that could process huge amounts of data offered new opportunities to study the complexities and dynamics of modern societies. The combination of theoretical ambitions and research-technical possibilities seemed to promise new ways for social research inspired by 'sociological imagination' (C. Wright Mills, 1967).

A well-known example is the ambitious project of The Club of Rome: a group of interdisciplinary researchers who aspired to develop a model encompassing a variety of social, economical, cultural and environmental factors to study the development and possible futures of the living conditions of societies, social groups within these societies, and mankind in general (Meadows, 1972). The

explicit ambition of Dennis Meadows and his colleagues was to combine a holistic approach with a well-founded research strategy using new analytical tools. However, the validity of their research results was rather limited due to the fact that the theoretical focus of their research was biased by a neo-Malthusian political agenda.



Johan Galtung

Another example is the project initiated by Johan Galtung to study structural inequalities within societies as well as between societies (Galtung, 1978). The '*Social Position Theory*' developed by Johan Galtung is also characterized by a holistic approach of the dynamics of societies and relations between societies: *The general aim is to study the combined effects of different types of social inequalities between Social Positions within societies and the way these effects are influenced by structural inequalities between societies.*

Of course, the state of the art of sociology at the end of the sixties was far more varied than summarized above. First, there were different viewpoints concerning the relation between critical ambitions and scientific goals of social science. The risk of politicizing social science constituted the major topic in these debates. Second, in empiricist research traditions there was scepticism about the holistic ambitions of grand theories. Third, in qualitative sociology and anthropology the idea of combining a holistic approach with a predominant quantitative research-methodology was viewed as unfeasible.

Nevertheless, the general mood in the sixties was dominated by the idea that the possibilities of new research methodologies could be used to study major social problems from a holistic viewpoint.

The sixties is almost half a century ago. So it is worthwhile to wonder about what has happened to the ambitious research agenda of the sixties concerning social inequality? What has sociological research since the sixties contributed to our knowledge of social inequality? To what extent are the expected promises fulfilled?

A review of recent literature on social research on social inequality is in several respects a disappointing experience. Of course, social inequality is still an important issue in social research and as a consequence there is an abundance of empirical studies of social inequality. Nevertheless, the growing quantity does not reflect a growing quality of our knowledge of the dynamics of social inequality.

Symptomatic is the fact that a holistic research agenda such as the one envisaged by the Club of Rome or its methodological approach have not acquired an influential position in sociological research in the western world.

The same is more or less true for the *Social Position Theory* of Johan Galtung.

Sociological research on social inequality is dominated by the tendency to focus on one or a few dimensions. Research agendas inspired by a holistic approach such as implied by the *Social Position Theory*, are virtually absent.

The reduction of sociological research on social inequality to 'single-issue' studies is the main topic of this chapter. First, the main traditions of empirical research on social inequality are discussed. Second, I deal with the epistemological, methodological background of social research and the social conditions of scientific production that privilege single-issue research practice. Third, the main weaknesses of single-issue studies are outlined. Finally, some strategies are discussed to overcome the weaknesses characteristic of traditions of single-issue sociology.

Current sociological research on social inequality

The mainstream of relevant empirical research in this field is focused on a specific type or form of social inequality. Interrelations between different forms of social inequality are either neglected or the focus remains limited to the relations between only a few different forms. Several research traditions can be distinguished.



Studies on social class

The most important research traditions on social inequality are focused on social class. The history of research on social class is in itself a good example of the

growing dominance of reductionist approaches to social inequality. In the first half of the former century it was more or less taken for granted that social class should be viewed as a multidimensional concept. In his famous studies on social class in American cities, Lloyd Warner developed a measurement instrument that was intended to capture the richness of different dimensions of what he called '*the status system*' (Warner & Lunt, 1942). Besides the main source of income (salary, private or public welfare, profit-earning from inherited or acquired capital) and occupational prestige, he also tried to measure cultural aspects of living conditions and life style such as the quality of the residence and the socio-cultural prestige of the environment. The inclusion of cultural indicators of class inequality was partly based on the well known studies of Stuart Chapin (1933) who developed the so called '*living room scales*' that focused on differences in life style by measuring items in the home. The general approach of Lloyd Warner was very much inspired by Karl Marx and Max Weber. As a matter of fact, the whole series on '*Yankee Cities*' can be viewed as an ambitious effort of Lloyd Warner to translate the theoretical notions of Marx, Weber and Sorokin in methodological procedures on behalf of the measurement of social inequalities. Lloyd Warner and his colleagues were not the only researchers who tried to capture the multidimensionality of class. Another example is Richard Centres (1949) who focussed on the relationship between criteria used to define different objective class positions and the subjective criteria used by the people themselves to distinguish different classes as socio-psychological groups. Centres used a variety of different criteria to measure objective class positions such as educational level, type of job, power, income, standard of living and social prestige.

A common denominator of research on class inequality in those days was a general awareness that power positions should be distinguished according to the type of resources that functioned as the powerbase. For example, power based on economic resources (i.e. economic classes) should be distinguished from power based on political resources, cultural resources or social prestige.

The issue of multidimensionality remains a relevant topic of theoretical debate throughout the sixties and seventies (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Goldthorpe & Hope, 1974; Parkin, 1972; Runciman, 1968; Svalastoga, 1959). However, in actual research on social class most attention focused on the occupational structure, especially on the way occupations can be used as indicators of positions in a general system of social stratification. This development had two important implications. First, social prestige became the main topic of social research on

class inequalities while other dimensions of social class disappeared to the margins of the research agenda. Second, the focus on occupational hierarchy implied that the measurement of social prestige was narrowed down to occupational prestige. In case other dimensions of class were included, very often the original theoretical concepts were also narrowed down on behalf of 'efficient' empirical measurements. For example, 'economic class' is often operationalized as income. As noted by Frank Parkin (1972) this is '*almost the antithesis of Weber's own much broader and more useful definition*' (Parkin, 1972. p. 31).

Up until now reductionism is characteristic of the current main stream of social research on social class. The ranking of professions along the social ladder is viewed as the preferred indicator of general social prestige (Ganzeboom et. al., 1992). However, the construction of an unambiguous ranking of professions is not without difficulties. Rankings of professions can vary over time and between societies. Even within a society there may be differences between socio-cultural groups. Last but not least, occupational prestige of a profession is also dependent on gender characteristics of those who exercise that profession (Van Doorne-Huiskes, 1984). To circumvent those complexities, educational level is often used instead as a measure of social prestige.

Main Topics

There are two main topics within the tradition of social class in terms of occupational prestige. First, the effects of social class on the living conditions of individuals occupying different class positions. Especially income is used as an indicator of those living conditions. Second, mobility between classes. The research agendas concerning these topics are rather straightforward: they include changes in effects of social class over time and changes in mobility over time. Comparative studies about the differences between societies with respect to effects of social class and the mobility of social class constitute a growing field (Ganzeboom et al., 1992).

In the research tradition in which social class equals occupational prestige, attention is paid to the interrelation between social class and some other forms of social inequality. Mainly due to feminist criticism of male-biased research traditions in studying social class, the interrelation between social class and gender receives more attention than it did some decades ago (Blees-Booij, 1994). However, the attention for these interrelations is still rather marginal. As Blees-Booij rightly argues, up until now '*the position of women as subject of stratification research is even worse than their position on the labour market*'

(op.cit. p. 53).

Besides the mainstream research on occupational prestige, there are approaches in which the concept 'social class' refers to positions within the relations of production (neo-Marxian tradition; see for example: Erik Olin Wright, 1979, 1985) or to general relations of power (conflict-sociological approach; see for example Dahrendorf, 1959). Especially within the neo-Marxian tradition the interrelation between class, gender and race is considered a relevant research topic (Erik Olin Wright, 1979).

However, empirical research based on neo-Marxian or conflict-sociological approaches of social class constitute a marginal position in comparison with the vast amount of social research on occupational prestige.

Gender studies and the study of race relations

Since the seventies gender studies has become a more or less accepted branch of sociological research. Gender studies filled the gap left by the dominant sociological approaches. It goes without saying that the main focus of gender studies is on different aspects of gender inequality. There is a growing interest in the interrelations between gender inequality and other forms of inequality. First, in order to tackle the blind spots of male-biased research traditions in studying social class, the interrelations between inequality of class and gender inequality is part of the research agenda of gender studies. Second, in the eighties another branch of sociological research emerged. Students of this approach criticized gender studies for underestimating the structural differences between the Social Positions of black women and those of white women (Kimberley Crenshaw, 1989). In order to overcome colour blindness, the concept of intersectionality was introduced in gender studies as a central category of analysis (Leslie McCall, 2003). This concept focuses on the intersection of different forms of inequality and is based on the assumption that the study of gender inequality requires that interrelations with other forms of inequality be taken into account. This approach has led to interesting empirical studies. For example, Leslie McCall (2001) studied how gender, race and class differences interact and intersect in different economic conditions.

Notwithstanding the promising possibilities of this development, a holistic approach, which aims to encompass all relevant forms of social inequality, is still absent in gender studies and the study of race relations (see also: Lutz, 2002). Intersectionality remains restricted to the interrelation between gender inequality and racial inequality or inequalities of social class (Albeda, Drago & Shulman,

2001; Andersen & Collins, 2000; Gruski, 2001; Johnson, A. 2001; Rothenberg, 1992; Smith, 2005).

Studies of age discrimination and relations between age groups

Along with class, gender and race, age is one of the key components of structured inequality especially in industrialized societies. In comparison with the other components age discrimination is the least acknowledged issue. As a consequence structured inequality between age groups is a rather new field of social research (Macnicol, 2006). The research in this field is mainly focused on the effects of age on job opportunities, and mobility within or between classes (Bessey & Ananda, 1991). The question of how age intersects with other forms of social inequality, such as gender inequality and inequality of social class, has not yet received much attention.

Cultural studies

A rather recent phenomenon is a research field that is dominated by a culturalist viewpoint on inequality. Of course, the unequal disposition of cultural resources constitutes an important form of social inequality. And culture may play a decisive role in reproducing and/or transforming relations of inequality. But unfortunately, the research agenda is often based on the exclusive attention towards cultural inequalities. A major example is the revival of the '*culture-of-poverty*' theory developed by Oscar Lewis in the sixties of the former century (Lewis, 1966). This approach is not only an example of narrowing the theoretical focus down to a specific form of social inequality, i.e. social inequality due to cultural differences. This approach is also an example of theoretical imperialism. The ambition of the culturalist viewpoint is far from modest. It pretends to explain all other forms of social inequality. As a consequence culturalist theories on social inequality fulfil ideological functions by justifying structural inequalities. Very often, research from a culturalist viewpoint boils down to produce blaming- the-victim theories on social inequality (Dalrymple, 2001).

International studies

The study of the relation between different states constitutes a separate branch of social and economic research. Power relations between states are the main focus of these studies. But there is a tendency to focus on specific aspects of those power relations. Especially within economics there is a substantial branch of research that focuses on economic differences between the Centre and the Periphery between and within countries (Hout & Meijerink, 1996; Köhler, 1998).

Holistic studies that focus on the interactions between political, military, economical and cultural power relations are scarce (but see: Samir Amin, 1977, 1980). Holistic studies of how interstate relations of inequality affect structural inequalities between social groups within states are virtually absent.

On the popularity of single-issue sociology

The brief summary of the current state of art of sociological research on social inequality does pose the question how to explain the general tendency to focus on one form of social inequality or the interrelation between just a few different forms or dimensions? Why is single-issue sociology so prominent and why is multi-issue (or better: multidimensional) sociology so absent?

The answer is that single-issue sociology as a social practice is stimulated by a variety of factors. In this section the theoretical, epistemological and methodological characteristics of mainstream sociology that contribute to single-issue sociology are more closely examined.

The decline of 'Grand Theories' and the rise of Empiricism

In mainstream sociology, the self-restraint to focus on one specific form of social inequality (racial inequality or gender inequality, or inequality due to social class or social prestige, etcetera) within a specific domain (e.g., labour relations or family relations) is viewed as a way to guarantee to conduct research meticulously. It is believed that, in order to avoid the pitfalls of 'Grand Theories', empirical research should be limited to those phenomena that can be measured in standardized procedures.

The 'grand stories' about society are viewed as something of the past. As a consequence, the theoretical and empirical contributions of those scientists who try to understand the dynamics of historical developments of social formations and the structural relations characteristic for those social formations such as Marx, Weber and Sorokin are marginalized (see also: Johan Galtung & Sohail Inayatullah, 1997). Holistic approaches are distrusted as either indefensible forms of reductionism or untestable forms of theoretical speculation. Even the term 'holism' as such is often associated with just 'bla,bla'. According to this view, the complexity of modern or post-modern society should focus on empirical testing of hypotheses of survey-able phenomena. The rules for scientific publication stimulate research practices that fit in with this narrow empiricism. Ironically, this empiricism is often presented as '*theory driven research*' because the hypothetic-deductive method requires that research should start from testable

hypotheses. However, it is seldom argued how theoretical premises from which those testable hypotheses are deduced, fit in with a more general theoretical framework.

The dominance of Methodological Individualism

Besides empiricism, the mainstream of research on social inequality is either implicitly or explicitly based on methodological individualism. The 'fait social' is viewed as the sum total of the interactions of individuals. This viewpoint is nicely summarized by the well-known one-liner of Margaret Thatcher: '*Society doesn't exist*'. As a consequence, social inequality is conceptualized in terms of differences between individuals, who possess different amounts of assets (income, prestige, etcetera). From this viewpoint inequality is essentially a ranking of individuals based on some type of asset. The focus on research of separate ranking systems is conceived of as a necessary prerequisite to build up a more complete representation of the combined effects of different forms of social inequality. How the construction of a complete representation should be achieved, is seldom reflected. Our hypothesis is that most researchers assume or dream that this goal will be achieved somewhere in an unspecified future by combining and adding results of specialized single-issue research.

This dream is based on a very simple concept of causality: *Causality is viewed as linear and additive*. Of course, there is some attention for possible interactions of different causal factors. But the baseline of the general research strategy is the assumption that additive causal relations are the rule and interactions are the exceptions to the rule.

From a holistic viewpoint this dominant concept of causality is inadequate for several reasons. First, causal relations should be conceived as fundamentally context-dependent. As a consequence, the real meaning of single-issue research is always uncertain, because this context-dependency is seldom studied. Second, a holistic approach implies a dialectical view on the causal relations between structure and agency. The aggregate of structural relations of social inequalities determines the live chances of social actors occupying the distinguished positions in these relations. But those relations are also reproduced and transformed by those actors. Gender, race, and social class are social constructions and the meanings and boundaries of gender categories, racial categories and class divisions are object of social struggles.

Besides the inadequacies of the dominant concept of causality, the ranking

concept of social inequality that dominates single-issue research underestimates important structural characteristics of social inequality. From a holistic viewpoint a relational concept of social inequality is more appropriate. A relational concept of social inequality implies that inequality is characteristic of relations between interdependent structural positions. Social inequality is primarily about positions and only secondary about the individuals occupying these positions and their mobility between positions.

To summarize, methodological individualism neglects the specific nature of social reality: Social reality cannot be reduced to the sum of contextually independent causal relations between individual characteristics constructed by single-issue research.

Arbitrary eclecticism & reductionism

The '*grand*' theories are not completely absent from the current scene of social research. But the way in which conceptual frameworks developed within these theories function within research on social inequality is rather ambivalent. General theoretical concepts, that are part of those frameworks, are used to legitimize the research in question. At the same time however, these concepts are often reduced to very specific aspects of the phenomena under study.

A good example of this form of eclecticism is the use of Bourdieu's theoretical framework in current social research on social inequality. In fact, Bourdieu is one of the last inheritors of the tradition of '*grand*' theories who is still rather popular in the field of empirical research on social inequality. His work is much cited. But the interest remains restricted to only one of the three main forms of '*capital*' distinguished by Bourdieu, namely: *social capital*. And even this form is often reduced to a position in a social network in a specific field (labour organization, friendship relations, etcetera).

The other side of the coin of theoretical eclecticism is theoretical reductionism, i.e. the assumed predominance of a specific form of social inequality. In the seventies of the former century, social inequality in terms of social-economic classes constituted the main focus of empirical research. Mainly due to neo-Marxist theories, this focus was often legitimized by the claim that socio-economic class is the '*ultimate*' decisive factor in explaining all kinds of social inequality. This type of reductionism can also be found in some feminist approaches of social inequality and in some approaches in the field of race relations.

Since the nineties of the former century, a new branch of reductionism has acquired a dominant position in the field of social research on inequality: the

study of the cultural roots of social inequality. This approach is part of a more general theoretical focus on the assumed importance of cultural phenomena in social changes. The concept of identity plays a central role in these developments. Identity construction is at the forefront of theoretical work and scientific debate. And identity politics seems to replace traditional concepts of politics concerning structural change. These developments run the risk to result into a new form of reductionism in which cultural identities are viewed as 'basic'. As a consequence, Social Position and structural inequality are neglected as important factors determining social and cultural developments. An example is the popularity of the '*culture-of-poverty*' theorists, who claim that social inequality is mainly due to cultural characteristics of the lower classes.

Another example is the influence of the '*Clash of Civilizations*' theory in the field of international relations between western societies and non-western societies (Bernard Lewis, 1993, Samuel Huntington, 1993). International conflicts are explained in terms of assumed cultural homogenous societal formations classified by labels such as 'The Western World' and '*The Islamic World*' or just '*The West*' versus '*The Rest*'.

To summarize, the twin sisters '*theoretical eclecticism*' and '*reductionism*' constitute a major force in the legitimization and promoting of simplifying single-issue sociology.

On the social conditions of single-issue sociology

The popularity of single-issue sociology is partly due to the way sociologists construct aims, norms and methods and the way in which they develop and use specific epistemological assumptions and methodologies to legitimize their research practices. But the popularity of single-issue sociology is not merely the outcome of the sum of preferences and convictions of individual researchers. Social research is embedded within scientific institutions and is also partly dependent on features of the broader social and political context. Therefore it is worthwhile to scrutinize how single-issue sociology is related to general institutional as well as political characteristics of the context of social research.

The institutionalized labour division in social research

In most western countries, a strong labour division within social sciences has gradually emerged. As a consequence, social research is divided along disciplinary boundaries and within each discipline research is further divided along different domains and themes of social research. That labour division is

firmly institutionalized and conditions the development of social research and the (im) possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation. Unfortunately the prevailing segmentation and fragmentation of the academia constitutes optimal conditions for the strategy of single-issue sociology. Different forms of social inequality are studied in different organizational contexts. Socio-economic departments restrict themselves mainly to inequality in terms of social class and/or social prestige. As a consequence, gender studies are often organized within separate departments and the same is true for other forms of social inequality, such as the study of race relations. Inequality in interstate relations is furthermore the privileged object of departments of international relations, etcetera. From a historical point of view this organizational structure of scientific research is understandable, but one of the unintended effects of the prevailing division of scientific labour is the reproduction of single-issue sociology. Besides, research fields that do not fit in with these institutionalized divisions run the risk of being marginalized or removed. For example, peace-studies focuses on the unravelling of the complex dynamics of socio-economic, cultural and political forces that constitute the conditions for the development of violent conflicts and for their solution. Therefore, peace-studies is only viable as an interdisciplinary practice that transgresses traditional boundaries between disciplines. The dominance of organizing scientific research within separate disciplines constitutes a barrier for the development of peace-studies.

The social norms regulating the production and productivity of research activities
During the last decades of the former century general norms were developed to control and measure the productivity of research groups and individual researchers. The norms in the field of social research are mostly copied from those traditionally used in the natural sciences. These productivity rules make it more attractive to produce short articles about specialized topics than to write lengthy books in which complex research is presented. Nowadays social scientists as Weber or Sorokin, who spent years to write voluminous interdisciplinary studies on the development of societal formations, would not survive in modern academic institutes. Besides, the quality journals require articles in which a few well-developed hypotheses are tested. As a consequence, these social norms privilege single-issue sociology.

The political interest in key factors on behalf of managing social change
Government agencies and private companies play an important role in financing

social research. Policy makers are often only interested in finding just a few crucial key factors as instruments for policy measures. Moreover, the general public discourse has also a tendency to frame social problems in simplified terms. It is rhetorically attractive to explain social problems by focusing on just one of the possible explanations. Both tendencies make it tempting to reduce social research to single-issue studies. An example is the growing focus on cultural aspects of social relations between immigrants and native inhabitants in western societies. This corresponds with the public discourse on cultural differences as *'the'* cause of racial or ethnic inequalities. In other words, the practice of social research tends to adapt to the dominant culturalist discourse in society and in the political scene while critical research is marginalized.

How to overcome single-issue social science?

In the sections above we outlined the theoretical foundations of single-issue sociology and the conditions that favour social research that conforms to the rules of single-issue sociology. In fact single-issue sociology constitutes an elaborate discourse in the sense of Foucault (1969, 1971): It is not just an ideology or a way of thinking, talking and evaluating social research; it is also materialized in institutionalized forms of social practices and the norms that rule research practices. These practices fit in with the wider social context (policymaking practices, the practices of the mass media and the institutionalization of social research).

This makes it difficult to overcome the deficiencies of single-issue social by developing new ways of studying social reality from a holistic viewpoint. It is not only necessary to construct new research strategies. It is also imperative to create social conditions that make these strategies viable.

In this paper I only deal with the problem of research strategies. It is possible to distinguish between two main roads that aim at studying social inequality from a holistic viewpoint.

Developing and renewing the ethnographic road

Research from a holistic viewpoint has always been one of the hallmarks of qualitative research, especially ethnography. But in the history of anthropology, ethnography has gradually developed from a general research strategy into a specific strategy mainly used to study small communities within a society such as cultural groups in urban neighbourhoods. The advantage of these small-scale ethnographic research designs is that the complexity of interrelations between

different types of social inequality can be studied in-depth while taking into account the context-dependency and the dialectics of complex causal processes. This strategy plays a considerable role in gender studies that try to capture the dynamics of the intersection between gender inequality and other forms of inequality. In the research practice of gender studies two variants of this strategy can be distinguished.

First, this strategy is used to scrutinize the complexities of the lived experience of a social group whose living conditions are determined by the intersection of different forms of social inequality. Leslie McCall (2003) labelled this approach as '*intra-categorical*'.

Second, within a post modern approach this strategy is used to deconstruct the way the social group is categorized by questioning the boundary-defining process itself. Leslie McCall (2003) used the label '*anti-categorical*' to characterize the latter approach. From the viewpoint of a holistic approach such a division between structure oriented and agency oriented research strategies is rather unfortunate. To unravel the dialectics of processes of reproduction and transformation of structural relations of inequality, one should combine both strategies.

A common feature of the different strategies following the ethnographic road is the tendency to focus on particular social groups at specific points of intersection between different relations of inequality. In this respect intersectional oriented ethnographic research fits in well with traditional characteristics of ethnography in general. Ethnography is often equated with a research design focused on the micro-worlds of the social life of a single group. Multi-case designs focused on a comparative study of different social groups constitute the exception to the rule of single group studies.

But there is not a methodological restriction to use the ethnographic approach in a multi-case design to study the general dynamics of a society as a whole. In terms proposed by Leslie McCall, such a multi-case design is compatible with an inter-categorical approach.

A well-known example of such an inter-categorical approach is a nationwide study on the effects of social inequalities on social life: *the ambitious research project led by Pierre Bourdieu on social suffering in contemporary society* (Bourdieu, 1993). The concept of social suffering does not only include poverty but all kinds of deprivations and feelings of failure. The research of Bourdieu and his colleagues aims at how the combined effects of different forms of social inequalities and aspects of living conditions are experienced by individuals and

contribute to different kinds of suffering. This holistic ambition is realized by conducting a series of ethnographic studies of the life of different individuals and their families living in very different social and physical spaces. Each of these studies is based on in-dept interviews and observations. The results that are presented in an extensive publication makes it possible to create a general representation of how different forms of social inequality interact and function in the daily life of ordinary people in French society at the end of the eighties and how these people cope with these inequalities. Of course, this is a labour-intensive research design, but the strategy followed by Bourdieu and his colleagues could be further developed by combining this type of qualitative case studies with quantitative data about the social conditions in the society to be studied.

Developing and renewing the Social Position Theory

A second road that is compatible with the inter-categorical approach is the development of a quantitative model based on a holistic approach of social inequality. This research strategy could depart from with the theory of Social Position as developed by Johan Galtung at the sixties. Before this approach is elaborated, it is necessary to review the dimensions of inequality as conceptualized four decades ago. New social developments (such as the recognition of the inequality of access to natural resources) and new theoretical insights (such as the proto-theory for the empirical study of social inequality developed by Veit-Michael Bader and Albert Benschop (1988) should be taken into account in the re-conceptualization of the different dimensions of inequality. The proto-theory of Bader and Benschop is an important step in the development of an all-embracing holistic theoretical framework for the analysis of structural inequalities. It breaks through the compartmentalization of social research in separate disciplines or even sub-disciplines and it overcomes the limitations of narrow-focused research traditions.

Up until now, the scientific community largely neglected the important study of Bader and Benschop. There are a few exceptions. Benschop himself conducted an extensive study to develop an integral theory of social class (1993). Inspired by the proto-theory of Bader and Benschop, Helma Lutz (2002) proposed to incorporate, besides gender, class, race and ethnicity, other forms of structural inequality such as age, state of health, environmental conditions, cultural resources, possessions, state of societal development, and position of the society in international relations ('North-South' and 'East-West').

Of course there are other possibilities to conceptualize the different forms and dimensions of structural inequalities.

Besides conceptual innovations, new analytical tools should be introduced to unravel the complexities of the interactions of different forms of social inequality. The original Social Position Theory proposed a research strategy that aims at the construction of an overall index that is conceptualized as the sum total of positions on dimensions of social inequality. Such an index assumes an additive causality. Fortunately, there are new research possibilities to take into account conditional causality that is characteristic for social reality. Different analytical techniques are developed that can be used to analyse the complexities of the intersection of different forms of inequality. For example, in case of large datasets multi-level research may be used to analyze context dependency of the way different forms of inequality intersect. In case of comparative studies of a limited number of groups, regions or countries, the research tools and analytical procedures – known as the Comparative Method and developed by Charles Ragin (1994) – can be useful to analyze the dynamics of the way different forms of social inequality interact in social life of individuals. The Comparative Method is based on the assumption that any research strategy should take into account that conditional causality is the rule and that the simple model of additive and linear causal relations is the exception to the rule. That assumption fits in quite well with the general approach of the Social Position theory as outlined by Johan Galtung (see chapter 2 and 3 in this book).

To summarize, new theoretical insight as well as new research techniques enable the development of the conceptual framework and of the methodology of the Social Position Theory. This helps us to tackle the complexities of the modern social world and the combined effects of different forms of social inequality.

Conclusion

In this paper I outlined the consequences of current research traditions for research on social inequality. Especially the dominant position of single-issue social science constitutes an obstacle that impedes substantial progress of scientific knowledge. Of course, in-depth research that focuses on a detailed study of a very specific phenomenon can be very important. But if single-issue research becomes paradigmatic for the way social research in general should be carried out, then real progress of knowledge will turn out to be fictitious. Unfortunately, the dominant position of single-issue social science is very well institutionalized within social science.

However, dominance is never complete, and can be challenged. Therefore it is important to discuss possible research strategies that can overcome the deficiencies of single-issue sociology. In this paper, two different strategies are discussed. One strategy departs from the virtues of the ethnographic method and tries to avoid the limitations of traditional ethnographic research. The other strategy departs from a holistic conceptualization of social inequality and the virtues of quantitative modelling and analytic procedures.

In fact both strategies could be combined. Such an approach would fit in with the growing interest in mixed method research. The development of such a combined strategy could constitute a serious challenge to the dead-end road travelled by single-issue social science.

—

Published in: Kees van der Veer, Ake Hartmann & Harry van den Berg (Eds.)

[Multidimensional Social Science – An inclusive approach to social position and inequality](#)

ISBN 978 90 361 0140 0 – Rozenberg Publishers 2009

About the author

Harry van den Berg, sociologist, VU University Amsterdam and Cultural Studies Foundation SCS Amsterdam (www.culturalstudies.nl) works on research projects concerning methodological issues, discourse analysis, social communication, inequality of opportunities in the labour market, and discrimination

Extra Link: www.transcend.org