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W.E.B. Du Bois discussed key aspects of the new field of sociology in his early writings. This article presents Du Bois' conception of the developing field and his sociological perspective based on nine of his key original sociological writings. Rather than generating theoretical formulations and studying abstract concepts, Du Bois insisted that sociology be an empirical science adhering to the methods utilized by the physical sciences. Sociology's major objectives are to study the "deeds of men" and to provide a science of human action. Sociological research seeks the discovery of "truth" which can form the basis of social policy. Noting that the regularity of human behavior is evidence of laws and acknowledging that human behavior is also subject to chance factors, sociology must seek to determine the limits of each. Du Bois' research methods, based on methodological triangulation, were formulated to provide the "truths" which he eagerly sought. Du Bois was convinced that these truths were worth knowing and that sociology had the promise of becoming one of the "greatest sciences." Attention directed toward Du Bois' key sociological writings within sociology curricula will introduce current and future readers to the groundbreaking sociological work of the pioneer sociologist.

The purpose of this essay is to identify the primary sources of W.E.B. Du Bois' original writings where he discussed material pertinent to the development of the discipline of sociology. He was one of the first social scientists to identify as a sociologist and to start writing about the development of the new field of study. His primary topic of sociological interest was the scientific study of "the Negro problems," and his quest for a scientific sociology was paramount and aligned with his incessant compulsion to alleviate the evil effects of racism.

Today, there are well over a dozen books and dozens of scholarly articles focusing on some aspect of Du Bois' sociology, and several scholars have recently made strong arguments justifying his preeminent role in the development of American sociology (Gabbidon 1999; Green and Wortham 2015; Morris 2015; Wright 2016). In fact, there is sufficient evidence that Du Bois established the first school of sociology in the United States at Atlanta University, predating the "Chicago School" by approximately twenty years (Gabbidon 1999; Morris 2015; Wright 2002, 2006, 2008, 2016; Wright and Calhoun 2006).

However, his status as a pioneer sociologist whose scholarly work pre-saged that of the Chicago School by decades could be better understood and more widespread among the larger sociological community if his key sociological studies and the work of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory were more infused within the sociology general education, undergraduate, and graduate curricula (Wright 2012). If these studies were included in the sociology curriculum, awareness of Du Bois' seminal contributions to the development of scientific sociology among scholars, students, and the general public would be greatly enhanced.

Reviewing Du Bois' scholarly work, from 1896 to 1905, seven published papers, one unpublished speech, and one book are identified which showcase key studies by this pioneer sociologist. This material, which is listed below and forms the basis of this essay, could be utilized as a way to effectively integrate Du Bois' work into the sociological curriculum:

1897: "A Program for a Sociological Society" (unpublished speech).

1898: "The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia: A Social Study."

1898: "The Study of the Negro Problems."

1899: *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*.

1900: "Postgraduate Work in Sociology at Atlanta University."

1900: "The Twelfth Census and the Negro Problems."

1903: "The Laboratory in Sociology at Atlanta University."

1904: "The Atlanta Conferences."

1905: "Sociology Hesitant."

Based on a critical discussion of the above set of primary sources, this essay adds new information to the growing body of studies on Du Bois' contributions to the discipline by exploring his ideas about the conception of sociology and sociological research. Relying on Du Bois' own formulations, interpretation is kept to a minimum. Although Du Bois provided considerable statements germane to the development of the discipline, albeit at times brief, it is important to note that he offered no thorough, extensive, systematic

statement. While Du Bois scholars have extracted and discussed material from Du Bois' extensive writings including some of those listed above, there has been no systematic analysis of Du Bois' key ideas, derived from his earliest original writings, with regard to the development of sociology. To emphasize this point, this study highlights sociological insights from W.E.B. Du Bois developed between 1897 and 1905 during the dawn of American sociology. Edited collections featuring Du Bois' early sociological work have been created more recently by Chandler (2015), Wortham (2009a, 2011a), and Green and Driver (1978). These sources represent a sample of edited works designed to introduce persons to Du Bois' key early sociological writings.

To accomplish this task, attention now turns to a discussion of Gustav Schmoller's impact on Du Bois' early sociological ideas. This will be followed by sections addressing Du Bois' understanding of the nature of sociology and what sociology has accomplished as a field of inquiry. In the next section, we present material which we believe demonstrates a striking similarity between Du Bois' sociological perspective and the now-classic sociological perspective of C. Wright Mills (1959). This study concludes with a discussion of the key role methodological triangulation played in Du Bois' research and his lasting contributions to the discipline.

Becoming a Sociologist: Schmoller's Impact on Du Bois

Among the pioneer American sociologists, W.E.B. Du Bois was far ahead of his peers in his quest to develop sociology as an empirical science, thereby separating it from the philosophical analysis, the focus on progress, and the various theoretical orientations advocated by many of the discipline's white male pioneers such as Lester F. Ward, Albion Small, William Graham Sumner, and Franklin H. Giddings. His commentary on the development of sociology as well as his empirical research clearly demonstrates this. In retrospect, he wrote that as social thinkers were engaged in "vague statements and vast generalizations," he turned his gaze from "fruitless word-twisting" steadfastly determined to put science into sociology through a study of the conditions and problems of his own group (Du Bois 1940:51). He staunchly believed that "the Negro problem was a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation" (Du Bois 1940:58).

Du Bois' understanding of scientific investigation was heavily influenced by his encounters with Gustav von Schmoller while he was a doctoral student at the University of Berlin from 1892 to 1894. Schmoller was associated with the historical school of economics which favored an interdisciplinary approach to the social sciences known as *Staatswissenschaften*. This interdisciplinary approach integrated insights from such diverse fields as political economy,

statistics, history, and sociology (Broderick 1958a,b; Fisher 1968; Wortham 2009b). Du Bois took a course in Prussian constitutional history and a seminar in political economy under Schmoller (Broderick 1958b). Schmoller's methodological perspective was grounded in an interdisciplinary, inductive approach to the study of social phenomena where historical and descriptive data could be used to provide a basis for social policy (Broderick 1958b). Essentially, Schmoller's analyses sought a basis for social justice through social policy and economic change.

Under Schmoller, Du Bois learned that the social scientist's goal is the collection of facts. One studies "what is," not "what ought to be" (Broderick 1958b:369). Since data can be utilized to formulate social policy and since empirical analysis precedes action, decision making is data-based. This approach to the study of social conditions would be demonstrated by Du Bois a few years later in *The Philadelphia Negro*, the Farmville, VA social study, and the annual Atlanta University Conference studies where he relied on the use of the inductive method as well as historical, ethnographic, and statistical data to present the social and economic "truths" about racial inequality. Social and economic change would be grounded in data-driven decisions.

Du Bois also typically began his early sociological research by carefully and thoroughly gathering empirical data about the history of his subject matter. This is particularly the case in *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996) where two chapters are devoted to a discussion of the history of the African American community in Philadelphia from 1638 to 1896. Although much of Du Bois' sociological work was novel, much of his sociology was based on elements learned from his mentor, Gustav Schmoller. Social justice was to be grounded in social policy which in turn was grounded in accurate qualitative and quantitative information (Broderick 1958b).

According to Rampersad (1976), Schmoller led Du Bois to his career as a sociologist by showing him how to combine objectivity and activism. Sociology allowed Du Bois to "serve simultaneously his moral imperatives, his commitment to truth, the advancement of his people, and his love of the scholarly life" (Rampersad 1976:44). Having taken only two sociology courses while at Harvard (Broderick 1958a) and having virtually no direct exposure to the white sociological pioneers, one might wonder where Du Bois gained his forward thinking sociological astuteness. The answer would seem to be from his exposure to Gustav Schmoller and the *Staatswissenschaften* perspective (Boston 1991; Broderick 1958a,b; Fisher 1968; Wortham 2009b).

The Nature of Sociology

Du Bois conceptualized sociology as an empirical science. He was adamant that sociology must follow the scientific method which had been so

profitably used by the physical sciences. This approach to the discipline stood in stark contrast to many of the other sociological pioneers of the era. As the other pioneers were ruminating about the nature of society, Du Bois was theorizing about sociology and was actively engaged in empirical sociological research (Green and Wortham 2015; Zuckerman 2004).

Du Bois' earliest written discussion of the field of sociology is a typed draft of a speech given to the "First Sociology Club" at Atlanta University around 1897. The title of this unpublished presentation is "A Program for a Sociological Society." In this speech, Du Bois defined sociology and laid out the rudiments of his "theory" of sociology which he would develop further in an unpublished 1905 manuscript, "Sociology Hesitant." This latter manuscript was eventually published in 2000 and republished in 2009 (Wortham 2009a) and 2015 (Chandler 2015).

In the "First Sociology Club" presentation, Du Bois also addressed what sociology as a science had accomplished, specified various research methods employed by the discipline, and stated how data could be best collected and utilized. (These aspects of the sociology club presentation are addressed in later sections of this study.) He also provided a candid assessment of the club's work and suggested the future direction it should take (Du Bois 1897). Early in the speech, Du Bois maintained that the Industrial Revolution had brought about many changes in human societies and that only the field of political economy understood the study of human action. However, this science was limited in scope and accounted for only a few human activities under stable societal conditions (Du Bois 1897). At this point in the presentation, Du Bois defined the scope of sociology:

Sociology is. . . the name given to that vast field of inquiry into human action as manifested in modern organized life. It cannot study all human action under all circumstances, but that human action which by its regularity gives evidence of the presence of laws. What these laws are we hardly know, and yet we do know that there are in life curious and noticeable coincidences—rhythm in life and death, a working out of cause and effect, evidence of force, action and reaction, which cannot be ignored or neglected (Du Bois 1897:3).

Du Bois further argued that many distinguished persons insist that sociology cannot be a science if science is defined as a body of knowledge with definitely stated laws and systematized facts. However, if sociology is defined as "a vast and fruitful field of inquiry into the mysterious phenomena of human action," which has partially revealed evidence of scientific laws and shows much promise, "then Sociology is one of the greatest sciences" (Du Bois 1897:3-4).

In 1900, in an unpublished speech about graduate study in sociology at Atlanta University, Du Bois noted that the study of society is deliberate and

difficult. Sociologists cannot lay claim to laws and accurate measurement like those in chemistry or astronomy. However, researchers can observe and collect data on human behavior which others can evaluate further. He claimed that sociology studies human interaction and cooperation (Du Bois [1900a] in Aptheker 1985). Commenting on cross-cultural and historical comparisons of human interaction, Du Bois ([1900a] in Aptheker 1985:70) remarked as follows:

What is the real difference between the man that walked the deserts of Arabia 3,000 years ago and the citizen of New York: the greatest difference lies neither in clothing nor culture but rather in their relations to their fellow men. The nomad Arab is bound simply to a few score individuals by ties of blood—herein lies [sic] his love, his ambition, his simple striving; he works for them alone and knows none others save his enemies. But the citizen of New York is bound to the whole world by ties of commerce, work, thoughts, and ideals. He is part of one great throbbing whole which we call modern civilization. . . it is this mighty subject of human cooperation in modern society that the essence of sociology seeks to study.

At this point in his sociological career, Du Bois believed that the race problem could be solved by discovering the facts and presenting them to uninformed whites, who, he believed, were largely ignorant of the negative consequences of their treatment of African Americans (Du Bois [1899] 1996, 1901). Between 1905 and 1910, Du Bois began to expand his understanding of sociology so that his work would increasingly focus on audiences outside of academia as well as inside academia. He could accomplish this by integrating empirical sociology with applied sociology and addressing policy concerns and social reform. This is seen in his 1905 work with the Niagara Movement, his concern over the Department of Labor's refusal to publish the results of his extensive rural social survey and study on African American life in Lowndes County, Alabama, between 1906 and 1908, and his joining the staff of the NAACP in 1910. Du Bois would maintain this integrative approach to sociological inquiry throughout his work with the NAACP and during his second academic tenure at Atlanta University. This integrative approach undergirds his classic 1935 study, *Black Reconstruction in America*. Thus, to the extent that Du Bois utilized verifiable knowledge to engage audiences inside and outside academia to stimulate dialog and action related to social, political, and moral issues, it appears that Du Bois' increasingly integrative sociological approach foreshadowed what Burawoy (2004) identifies as public sociology.

Yet, in a 1904 essay on the Atlanta University Conferences, Du Bois (1904a:85) believed that "The present condition of sociological study is peculiar and in many respects critical. Amid a multitude of interesting facts and conditions we are groping after a science—after reliable methods of observation and measurement, and after some enlightening way of systematizing and arranging the accumulated material." Du Bois (1904a) maintained that the goal

was to make a science of human action. Unfortunately, rather than studying human interaction, other sociologists were more willing to study abstract concepts such as “society.” Arguing that the time had come for sociology to identify its focus and scope of inquiry, Du Bois (1904a:85) clarified the issue by stating “In reality we seek to know how much of natural law there is in human conduct. Sociology is the science that seeks to measure the limits of chance in human action, or, if you will excuse the paradox, it is the science of free will.” Du Bois believed that human actions could be best studied through the accurate observation and measurement of the behavior of isolated groups. From these studies, natural laws may emerge. He summarized his thought as follows:

Now to bring about this result it is certain that we cannot at once compress all human action in time and eternity—the field is too vast and much valuable time has already been wasted in trying to do the impossible under the brilliant but questionable leadership of Herbert Spencer. We must more and more school ourselves to the minute study of limited fields of human action, where observation and accurate measurement are possible and where real illuminating knowledge can be had. The careful exhaustive study of the isolated group then is the ideal of the sociologist of the twentieth century—from that may come a real knowledge of natural law as locally manifest—a glimpse and revelation of rhythm beyond the little center and at last careful, cautious generalization and formulation
(Du Bois 1904a:85).

In the unpublished 1905 manuscript, “Sociology Hesitant,” Du Bois set forth his most formal statement on the nature of sociology (Du Bois [1905a] 2000). Here, Du Bois argued that confusion about the field and method of sociology existed among its current practitioners. Comte was correct in crowning “his scheme of knowledge with Knowledge of Men”; however, rather than observing and measuring human actions, sociologists following the traditions established by Comte and Spencer chose to study abstractions such as “Society,” “Consciousness of Kind,” and “Social Imperative” (Du Bois [1905a] 2000:38–40). Although Comte may have meant to study the elements that comprise society, Du Bois wondered why Comte had hesitated to name any elements (Du Bois [1905a] 2000). Although Du Bois frequently mentioned or referred to the term, “social structure,” like many others, he did not inform us of the elements of this structure.

Clearly, Du Bois maintained that sociology is the study of human beings and includes the notion that human behavior is explained by patterns or recurring regularities as well as incalculable factors such as chance. However, as Du Bois further argued in his 1905 manuscript, “Sociology Hesitant,” sociologists were reluctant to state this as they feared criticism from physical scientists who would claim that a person’s deeds were a matter of physical law, which physics studied (Du Bois [1905a] 2000). Others could insist that human beings are able to exercise free will which would mean that some human behavior is outside the realm of scientific law. Neither criticism, he declared, could be ignored.

Recognizing that some human actions could conform to natural laws (the "Hypothesis of Law") while other human actions could be shaped by chance factors (the "Assumption of Chance"), sociological research and measurement seek to determine the limits of each rather than being content with the description of abstractions (Du Bois [1905a] 2000:42).

Continuing his argument, Du Bois [1905a] 2000:42) claimed that "true students of sociology" have "refused to cloud their reason with undiscovered and undiscoverable metaphysical entities." Sociologists must assume that some behavior is recurring, patterned, and guided by physical law, but to some degree, people are capable of behavior which is inexplicable and incalculable by physical law. Given this, the primary objective of sociological analysis is the determination of the limits of each of these key factors (Du Bois [1905a] 2000).

In addition to identifying the focus and scope of sociology, Du Bois offered a definition of the concept, "social problem." He identified a social problem as "the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life" (Du Bois 1898a:2). As an example, Du Bois noted that a community where economic and social development was impossible and a sizable percentage of the population refused to abide by the societal rules of order would constitute a social problem of crime and lawlessness. Du Bois' conception of a social problem foreshadows Merton's strain theory (1957) whereby blocking legitimate means to a culturally defined goal may result in a strain, which, in turn, may become a social problem. Consequently, "a social problem is ever a relation between conditions and action, and as conditions and actions vary and change from group to group from time to time and place to place, so social problems change, develop, and grow" (Du Bois 1898a:3).

It is within this context that Du Bois framed his study of "the Negro problems." The social problems confronting the African American community have a lengthy history, have changed with the growth and evolution of the nation, and represent a plexus of social problems. To study these issues adequately, one must utilize an interdisciplinary approach which integrates historical investigation, statistical and anthropological analysis, and sociological evaluation (Du Bois 1898a).

Du Bois was insistent about the importance of what he called "truth" in sociological analysis. He became a sociologist with the hope that his work would alleviate the race problem, believing that knowledge was the key and that ignorance and misinformation collectively were the problem. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois ([1899] 1996) boldly stated that the social problems facing the African American community deserved thorough study and investigation. He argued that: "We must study, we must investigate, we must attempt to solve, and the utmost that the world can demand is not lack of

human interest and moral conviction, but rather the heart-quality of fairness, and an earnest desire for truth despite its possible unpleasantness” (Du Bois [1899] 1996:3). Du Bois firmly believed at this initial point in his sociological career that the findings of this massive empirical study of education, crime, marriage, occupation, health, family, and housing among Philadelphia’s African American community in the Seventh Ward could provide a basis for social reform (Du Bois [1899] 1996).

The scientific method could similarly help the new field of sociology gain useful knowledge by being able to sort out “truth” from opinion, myth, and belief (Du Bois 1898a). This perspective was stated clearly in a 1901 essay on race relations in the South:

I take it that the examination of the most serious of the race problems in America is not in the nature of a debate but rather a joint endeavor to seek the truth beneath a mass of assertion and opinion, of passion and distress. And I trust that whatever disagreement may arise between those who view the situation from opposite sides of the color line will be rather in the nature of additional information than of contradiction (Du Bois 1901:121).

Likewise, discussing the Atlanta University Conference Studies years later, Du Bois (1948:64) noted that “The object of these studies is primarily scientific—a careful search for truth conducted as thoroughly, broadly, and honestly as the material resources and mental equipment at command will allow: “but this is not our sole object; we wish not only to make the Truth clear but to present it in such shape as will encourage and help social reform”. Not solely interested in analyzing social phenomena out of intellectual interest or mere curiosity, Du Bois believed his program for a scientifically based sociology would lead to the generation of a significant body of valid empirical data.

What Has Sociology Done?

With an air of cautious optimism, Du Bois (1897), in his 1897 address to the Atlanta University “Sociological Society,” claimed that the work that sociology has accomplished thus far is only a beginning. He remarked that the field of sociology has collected data about many aspects of social life such as number of births by country, number of deaths from various diseases, number of communicants in different churches, extent of illiteracy, prevalence of suicide, extent and kinds of crime, migration, and income expenditure. These data could be analyzed to identify patterns in the data and generate comparative findings for various social groups and the aggregate society. Where research reveals that significant differences in the conditions of different groups of people exist, one suspects evidence of some “unseen cause” of the unexpected variation (Du Bois 1897). For example, comparing the occupational structure between blacks and whites in Philadelphia, one finds a striking difference. White workers

dominate the skilled jobs and professions, whereas black workers dominate domestic services and other lesser status occupations. For Du Bois, this racial difference in the occupational structure for Philadelphia's African American workers could be attributed to the legacy of slavery (Du Bois 1897). In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois ([1899] 1996) would go on to maintain that a significant number of Philadelphia's African American residents were migrants from the South. These migrants lacked the skills needed for industrial work and were often discriminated against by the labor unions. This denied African Americans access to many of the trades.

Returning to the sociology club presentation, Du Bois maintained that sociologists were making significant strides in the empirical study of crime. Examining the connection between crime and age, Du Bois (1897:6) observed the following:

In Germany, for instance it has been found that 15 percent of all persons between 21 and 40 have been convicted of crime, 9 percent of those between 40 and 60, 7 percent of those between 12 and 18 years of age. Further analyzing these figures it is found that the most criminal age is between 20 and 30, and among young, unmarried men. Taking for instance the Negro criminal in the eastern section of Pennsylvania, we find the remarkable fact that 67 percent of them were under 30 years of age and 11 percent under 20.

Furthermore, based on the detailed collection of statistics on various aspects of group life, sociologists can describe the country village as a social group characterized by an age and sex distribution, marriage rates, and birth and death rates, which regulate population change. A village may also have some crime, a school, a church, various associations and clubs, a community store, and an occupational structure (Du Bois 1897).

This type of rural community description is essentially what Du Bois provided in his 1898 social study on African American quality of life in Farmville, Virginia. For example, he remarked that the Negroes of Farmville and the neighboring county districts formed a closed, independent group life: "They live largely in neighborhoods with one another, they have their own churches and organizations and their own social life, they read their own books and papers, and their group life touches that of the white people only in economic matters" (Du Bois 1898b: 40). A more specific, detailed description was provided of a successful African American brick maker:

The entire brickmaking business of Farmville and vicinity is in the hands of a colored man—a freedman, who bought his own and his family's freedom, purchased his master's estate, and eventually hired his master to work for him. He owns a thousand acres or more of land in Cumberland County and considerable Farmville property.... In his brickyard he hires about 15 hands,... Probably over one-half the brick houses in and near Farmville are built of brick made in his establishment, and he has repeatedly driven white competitors out of business (Du Bois 1898b:23).

In this rural social study, Du Bois also provided an ethnographic description of a social gathering he attended. The description provided a glimpse of life among Farmville's highest social class:

The party consisted of a mail clerk and his wife, a barber's wife, the widowed daughter of the wood merchant; a young man, an employee in a tobacco factory, and his wife, who had been in service in Connecticut; a middle aged woman, graduate of Hampton; and others. After a preliminary chat, the company assembled in a back dining room. The host and hostess did not eat themselves, but served the company with chicken, ham, potatoes, corn, bread and butter, cake, and ice cream. Afterwards the company went to the parlor and talked, and sang—mostly hymns—by the aid of a little organ, which the widow played (Du Bois 1898b:42).

Du Bois utilized a twenty-one item survey questionnaire in the Farmville study to collect data on such topics as sex, age, marital status, educational attainment, occupation, wages, family size, home ownership, and church attendance (Du Bois 1898b). However, he utilized ethnographic, qualitative data like that presented in the two examples cited to provide further contextual understanding of African American quality of life in this small rural town.

Du Bois also argued that social reform must be grounded in available data. Rather than relying on ideology and ideas deemed no longer valid, Du Bois (1897:8) maintained that "The facts and the meaning of the facts are the first steps in modern social reform." This is the age when lasting and effective reform has become systematic, replacing sentiment and untested theory (Du Bois 1897). With so much emphasis today being placed on data-driven decision making, Du Bois' focus on providing an empirical basis for social reform was pioneering and foreshadowing. Furthermore, in a formal essay on the study of the Negro problems a year later, Du Bois (1898a:1) remarked as follows:

The present period in the development of sociology is a trying one; it is the period of observation, research and comparison—work always wearisome, often aimless, without well-settled principles and guiding lines, and subject ever to the pertinent criticism: what, after all, has been accomplished?... the phenomena of society are worth the most careful and systematic study, and whether or not this study may eventually lead to a systematic body of knowledge deserving the name of science, it cannot in any case fail to give the world a mass of truth worth the knowing.

This insightful revelation is as accurate today as it was when Du Bois wrote it 1898.

Rather than taking a deductive approach to scientific inquiry, Du Bois employed an inductive approach grounded in the collection and analysis of valid, reliable, empirical data (Du Bois 1897, [1899] 1996). Following his mentor, Schmoller, Du Bois was unyielding in claiming that inductions would provide the best available information upon which to base social policy.

Du Bois and the Sociological Imagination

In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), C. Wright Mills offered a perspective, that is, the type of insight, that sociologists should use in examining social phenomena. Although there are differences in the interpretation of Mills' concept, there is general agreement about his primary focus. Paraphrasing Mills, many of the problems that individuals face day to day are rooted in the social structure of their existence and are shared with many others. This single point brings one to the heart of the study of social life. An examination of Mills' sociological perspective and Du Bois' earlier insights to the study of social life shows that both were writing about the manner in which one should study social behavior. Mills offered readers a "primer" of sorts for the accurate study of social behavior; W.E.B. Du Bois, during the early formative years of the discipline of sociology, offered readers a comparable, albeit less formal, viewpoint.

Mills' "sociological imagination" has become an intrinsic part of the sociological vocabulary and addresses a person's ability to gauge the impact of social forces and the social environment on the individual (Mills 1959). Mills (1959:8) maintained "Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure.'" Troubles occur within an individual's character and within the range of one's interpersonal relations; in contrast, public issues, matters that transcend local environments and impact the individual, are an aspect of the larger social structure (Mills 1959).

Du Bois' early sociological writings on the nature of sociology and sociological research foreshadow the basic ideas of Mills' sociological imagination. For example, his study of "the Negro problems" was based on the fact that these social issues were not personal, individual problems; they had nothing to do with one's character or personal demeanor (Du Bois 1898a). Rather, they were rooted in a society's social structure and transcended an individual's sociocultural milieu. The "sociological imagination" asks the investigator to look beyond everyday life experiences and examine how behavior is impacted by social structure and historical factors (Mills 1959). Thus, the root of one's successes and failures may be discovered beyond one's immediate milieu. Du Bois (1898a:10) argued that if one wanted to study African American life intelligently, one must realize that not only is the African American "affected by all of the varying social factors that act on any nation at his stage of advancement, but that in addition to these, there is reacting upon him the mighty power of a peculiar and unusual social environment which affects to some extent every other social force." This, of course, includes an understanding of the history of the situation.

In *The Philadelphia Negro*, for example, Du Bois ([1899] 1996) apprised the reader that a comprehensive study of African American quality of life and social stratification must focus on subgroups and social classes within Philadelphia's African American community. A comprehensive social study must focus on the group's social environment as well as the group itself. Such a study would address "the physical environment of city, sections, and houses, the far mightier social environment—the surrounding world of custom, wish, whim, and thought which envelopes this group and powerfully influences its social development" (Du Bois [1899] 1996:5). After providing a methodological introduction in his book, Du Bois foreshadowed Mills by devoting the next two chapters of his study to historical growth and development of Philadelphia's African American community.

To Du Bois, and Mills, much later, an understanding of the history of a group was paramount to the study of a group. For example, earlier, in "The Study of the Negro Problems," Du Bois (1898a) argued that to understand the factors that impact a social group's current situation, one must examine their history. This history could be grounded in colonial statutes and records; archives of Great Britain, France, and Spain; congressional reports; personal narratives; opinions of various observers; and periodical material covering nearly three centuries (Du Bois 1898a). Du Bois (1905b) would comment a few years later that one could have little real understanding of "the Negro problems" without first having a thorough understanding of their historical root:

We can only understand the present by continually referring to and studying the past; when any one of the intricate phenomena of our daily life puzzles us; when there arises religious problems, political problems, race problems, we must always remember that while their solution lies in the present, their cause and their explanation lies in the past. Study the past then, if you would comprehend the present; read history if you would know how to vote intelligently, read history if you do not know what sound money is, read history if you cannot grasp the Negro problem (Du Bois 1905b:105).

Mills (1959) advised that social phenomena should be perceived from a multidimensional perspective. Du Bois (1898a) similarly commented that social phenomena must be examined from various perspectives which include historical investigation, social and cultural analysis, and collection and utilization of available statistical data. Furthermore, he concluded, too often the study of the African American community had been conducted primarily from a single point of view: "that of his influence on the white inhabitants" (Du Bois 1898a:14). This notion that social phenomena should be studied from a diversity of observed perspectives also seems to foreshadow W.I. Thomas' (1923) concept of the "definition of the situation." Rather than presenting itself objectively,

Thomas maintained that a situation tends to be perceived from the point of view of the observer. Hence, to obtain an accurate picture, one must have multiple points of view.

Another key aspect of the sociological imagination is the practice of sociology. To Mills, sociological work tended to address two general orientations. One, denoted as grand theory, offers a systematic theory of the nature of man and society and is “concerned with a rather static and abstract view of the components of social structure on a quite high level of generality” (Mills 1959: 23). Grand theorists become ensnared in the philosophy of everything, including the structure and explanation of institutions; unfortunately, their grandiose explanations are usually so abstract that they are incomprehensible. In contrast, the second orientation, abstracted empiricism, represents a quantitative approach focusing on the collection of data, obsessed with method and anathema to the sociological imagination. As sociological practices, these “may be understood as insuring that we do not learn too much about man and society—the first by formal and cloudy obscurantism, the second by formal and empty ingenuity” (Mills 1959: 75). Du Bois (1903b) speaking of the teaching of sociology remarked that some sociology courses entail prolonged discussions of society and social units which degenerate into bad metaphysics and false psychology; in contrast, others take a statistical turn and become merely a mass of data. He opined that he hoped that the teaching at Atlanta University followed neither extreme and had adequately resolved this matter of scope.

It is extraordinary just how much Du Bois and Mills, independently, shared similar insights about the proper analytical course for the discipline of sociology. Both sociologists clearly understood that an individual’s problems are shared with others and are rooted in the immediate social structure. Both Du Bois and Mills were brilliant, insightful sociologists, dissatisfied with the nature of the discipline, yet keenly interested and concerned with shaping its future.

Du Bois and Methodological Triangulation

The “truths” that Du Bois believed were the primary concern of sociological analysis were valid conclusions drawn from data derived from studying social phenomena using the scientific method. The methods Du Bois employed in his research and research designs were formulated to generate valid and reliable empirical data. Following his mentor, Gustav Schmoller, Du Bois implicitly argued against the use of deduction, proclaiming that the basis of science is induction, data-based generalizations based on observation or inquiry. While these generalizations may not be wholly accurate, they nevertheless are a necessary aspect of the research process. Du Bois ([1899] 1996:2–3) explicitly states this in the opening methodological chapter of *The Philadelphia Negro*:

The best available methods of sociological research are at present so liable to inaccuracies that the careful student discloses the results of individual research with diffidence; he knows that they are liable to error from the seemingly ineradicable faults of the statistical method, to even greater error from the methods of general observation, and, above all, he must ever tremble lest some personal bias, some moral conviction or some unconscious trend of thought due to previous training, has to a degree distorted the picture in his view.

Yet given these methodological limitations, social issues must be studied empirically in an attempt to present scientifically derived “truth.” While there will be many sources of error, such as personal bias and previously held convictions, important social issues must be studied, and researchers must offer data-driven “truths” (Du Bois [1899] 1996). Today, sociology students, faculty, and researchers are well aware of this methodological approach. However, are they as equally aware of Du Bois’ pioneering contributions to the development of scientific sociology?

Du Bois (1898a,b) noted that during the decade of the 1890s, there had been an increasing interest in the observation of social phenomena. Being careful not to disparage the existing work on the study of “the Negro problems,” he maintained that these studies had been uncritical, unsystematic, and not based on a thorough knowledge of details. Accordingly, the proper method of studying “the Negro problems” must distinguish between the study of African Americans as a social group and the study of this community’s peculiar social environment. Consequently, careful studies must integrate historical, statistical, anthropological, and sociological approaches, but literature, music, and folklore could also be utilized to provide further contextual analysis (Du Bois 1898a).

Du Bois’ methodological approach was interdisciplinary and grounded in the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data broadly defined. To demonstrate this broad understanding of data, Du Bois later provided a study of the “sorrow songs” in his best-known, now-classic work, *The Souls of Black Folk* ([Du Bois 1903a] 1994). The “sorrow songs” provided readers with a glimpse of African American identity and spirit as well as highlighting African American contributions to American culture and Western civilization. Likewise, Du Bois employed historical fiction in his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* ([1911] 2007), to comment on economic conditions in the Southern Black Belt. In many respects, this novel provided Du Bois with an opportunity to convey some of his findings from his suppressed Lowndes County, Alabama study (Du Bois 1968; James 2012; Wortham 2011b).

Du Bois’ experience with his Philadelphia study, which he conducted single-handedly, likely led him to reconsider the efficacy of pursuing large-scale studies. Although Du Bois relied on census data in much of his research, he remarked in a 1900 article on census data that many variables, such as education and crime, are incapable of being accurately enumerated by the ordinary

machinery of the census (Du Bois 1900b). Perhaps valid and reliable data on certain topics could best be gained by limiting a study. He noted that the indefinite term, “social study,” had been used to designate investigations that “seek to go further and deeper than a national census and study definitely and, within limits, exhaustively, the conditions of life and actions in certain localities” (Du Bois 1900b:306). Even though small-area studies could be costly, Du Bois concluded that only intensive studies in definitely limited areas by competent investigators, following a prescribed general plan, could provide the necessary specific data about the overall status of African American quality of life.

Writing about the work of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory and the Atlanta University Conferences, Du Bois (1903b, 1904a) maintained that over the next several decades, their efforts must focus on making the science of human behavior a valid and systematic statement of verifiable facts as discovered by observation and measurement. Rather than studying broad, general abstractions, which had been the focus of Herbert Spencer’s work exemplified in his ten-volume *System of Synthetic Philosophy* published between 1862 and 1891, Du Bois maintained that sociologists must train themselves to “study limited fields of social action, where observation and accurate measurement are possible and where real illuminating knowledge can be had” (Du Bois 1904a:85).

Throughout his research, Du Bois used a diverse array of research methods to gather data. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, he used six schedules to gather data for what is the earliest extensive social survey by an American sociologist (Green and Wortham 2015; Morris 2015). It is likely that he modeled his Philadelphia study after Booth’s community survey of London, England (Booth 1892–1897; Bulmer, Bales, and Sklar 1991). His map of individual houses of the Seventh Ward identified by “grade” (social class) shows he almost certainly followed Addams’ Hull House study (Addams 1895). Furthermore, Du Bois’ study utilized official statistical data, historical records, and the expertise of knowledgeable African Americans and whites (Du Bois [1899] 1996).

In his social study of Farmville, Virginia, Du Bois (1898b) again used a triangular methodology. In collecting data for this small-area study, census data were supplemented by participant observation, informal conversation with townspeople and school teachers, interviews, general observation, and records in the county clerk’s office. Utilizing these diverse methods, W.E.B. Du Bois was the first American sociologist to institutionalize the research strategy known as methodological triangulation (Wortham 2005a,b).

Few, if any sociologists of the era, were as imbued with a methodological conscience as the intrepid Du Bois. This is best exemplified in the concept that he coined, “car-window sociologists.” He applied this term to sociologists who attempted to understand the South or the African American experience by

spending a few hours driving through the South, generally not straying too far from the main roads. An example of his use of this pejorative term appeared in a letter to Walter Wilcox, a Cornell economist, statistician, and sociologist, who had written about crime and the demographic characteristics of the African American population based on 1900 census data (Wilcox 1899, 1904). Although Du Bois and Wilcox had a lengthy and cordial relationship, Du Bois was disturbed by a letter Wilcox had written which was critical of an article Du Bois had published. Responding to Wilcox, Du Bois ([1904b] in Aptheker 1973: 75) commented that “The fundamental difficulty in your position is that you are trying to spin a solution of the Negro problem out of the inside of your office. It Can never be done. You have simply no adequate conception of the Negro problem in the south & of Negro character and capacity.” Reminding Wilcox of his own experience and expertise studying “the Negro problems,” Du Bois ([1904b] in Aptheker 1973: 75) continued: “If you insist on writing about & pronouncing judgement on this problem why not study it? Not from a car window & associated press dispatches as in your pamphlet on crime but get down here & really study it first hand.”

In his work with the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, Du Bois utilized Atlanta University students to assist with the collection of qualitative and quantitative data in specific social settings, and at times, seasoned social researchers such as Lucy Laney, Monroe Work, and Richard Wright, Jr. were employed (Du Bois [1903c] 2003, 1968; Morris 2015; Wright 2009). Empirical data were collected from surveys administered and first-hand ethnographic observations. These primary data sources were then supplemented with information obtained from historical records, available public use secondary data and secondary sources.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding his paucity of formal training in sociology, which was not unusual among the American pioneers of sociology, Du Bois’ sociological perspective, his research, his methodology, as well as his work at Atlanta University, without equivocation, qualify him as an American sociologist non-pareil. As the white pioneers of the incipient field of sociology were seeking academic respect, an identity and an appropriate theoretical base by which to study social phenomena, Du Bois was shaping the new field of sociology into an independent social science based on his empirical research and pronouncements about the study of society, social groups, and social phenomena. While his community-based, empirical sociology which particularly addressed the “truth” about racial inequality offered a perspective that “the Chicago School” and American sociology eventually chose to follow, the existence of academic

apartheid contributed to the field's failure to recognize his pioneering efforts (Green and Wortham 2015; Morris 2015; Rabaka 2010; Wright 2016).

Yet, as this study demonstrates, a close examination of Du Bois' key sociological writings from 1897 to 1905 reveals that his ideas about the development of sociology are concurrent with "the Chicago School's" focus on community studies and presages "the Chicago School's" work on the study of race, racial inequality, and the focus on empirical sociology which are paramount to the development of modern American sociology. These facts provide a basis for promoting curriculum change within sociology. Unfortunately, Du Bois' direct influence, which other things being equal, should have been more significant than any other single individual, was never received. The deep shadow of Jim Crow precluded this recognition. Similarly, Du Bois' scholarly work anticipates nearly all that for which the Chicago School receives credit. According to Bulmer (1984: 8), "the Chicago school was the first great flowering of sociology in the United States." Let it be noted that W.E.B. Du Bois was tending to the flower garden at Atlanta University well before anyone had heard of the Chicago School. Many, including Gabbidon (1999), Wright (2016), and Morris (2015), among others would loudly contest Bulmer's assertion. Again, Du Bois' insistence that 1) sociology be practiced as an empirical science which studies human behavior, 2) his emphasis on limited, small studies, and 3) the use of a variety of research methods, including social surveys and existing data all precede the Chicago School. While Du Bois did not have the money, the colleagues, or the facilities that were available to the Chicago sociologists, his sociological studies compare favorably with those studies of the Chicago School (Morris 2015). His pioneer efforts as well as his plans for the development of sociology deserve recognition. Sociology curriculum reform would be an important step in this direction.

Du Bois' scholarly efforts, his body of empirical, sociological research, and the forming of the Atlanta University School of Sociology via the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory in 1897 are sufficient testimony to consider Du Bois as the founder of modern American sociology. In 1898, after completing his work on *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois assumed the editorship of the annual Atlanta University Conferences. Each year, a conference was held at the University and the proceedings were published. This led to sixteen volumes on various aspects of urban, African American life between 1898 and 1914. Twelve volumes were edited by Du Bois and four were co-edited. His idea was to provide a body of factual data which would demonstrate the pervasiveness of racial inequality and highlight black progress. Du Bois (1904a) envisioned the Atlanta University Conferences as a comprehensive plan for studying a human group. These pioneering studies formed an impressive body of research which strengthened racial pride among a large group of African

Americans and destroyed some of the myths about blacks. Again, the record indicates that he received little recognition for these scholarly accomplishments. Consequently, too many sociologists remain ignorant of his accomplishments, but again sociology curriculum reform could begin to remedy this.

In accord with his scientific training and orientation, Du Bois ([1905a] 2000, 1898a) stipulated that certain assumptions, in the form of postulates, must be stated prior to any sociological study. These postulates formed a logical foundation upon which empirical generalizations may be based, appropriate research methods selected and employed, and the ground rules for data collection and subsequent analysis could be established. He not only spoke of the need for postulates, he also used them in his research. Du Bois' insistence on an empirical orientation led him to adopt an inductive approach to sociology based on formal measurement and direct observation. He considered this approach akin to the laboratory observations of physical scientists. His propensity to make sociology scientific and his affinity toward the methods of the physical sciences led him to think of the study of African American quality of life in terms of near-laboratory experimentation (Du Bois 1968).

Later in life, Du Bois co-authored a book review of Pitirim Sorokin's *Social and Cultural Dynamics* published between 1937 and 1941. Coulborn and Du Bois (1942:511) argued that "a sociologist who has been trained in the natural sciences and regards sociology as one of them firmly believes—or at least dares not deny the conviction—that eventually all the facts of human action can be so measured and classified as to conform to natural law."

W.E.B. Du Bois understood that observation and measurement were critical in the development of a scientific discipline, and he considered a discipline lacking measurement less than scientific. Reflecting on the Atlanta University Conferences and his efforts to revive them in 1943, Du Bois (1968:324) opined:

Here was an unprecedented chance for an experiment in sociology; for measuring and classifying human action on a scale never before attempted. On such a base a real science of sociology could have been built. The opportunity was surrendered and the whole science of sociology has suffered. I had even projected a path of scientific approach: I was going to plot out beside the world of physical law, a science of sociology which measured 'the limits of chance' in human action. If this field proved narrow or non-existent, world law was proven. If not, the resultant 'chance' was what men had always regarded as 'free will'.

Throughout his academic and professional career, Du Bois remained firm in his conviction that sociological measurement could delimit social phenomena and that data would provide a rational basis for sound social judgment.

While W.E.B. Du Bois has been portrayed as a civil rights activist, a race leader, a 'radical' who opposed Booker T. Washington, and a scholar who later espoused communism, he is also hailed as one of "the most

imaginative, perceptive, and prolific founders of the sociological discipline—American or otherwise” (Zuckerman 2004:3). Whatever concerns one may have about various aspects of Du Bois’ sociology, compelling evidence bolsters our position that no better or more fruitful work was being done by any other American sociologist at the time. Above all, the quality and quantity of his empirical research serve as the strongest evidence of his sociological acumen. From 1896 to 1914, Du Bois was one of a handful of persons with the proclivity and training to pursue the serious, scientific analysis of society. Few scholars in American history have been as prolific as W.E.B. Du Bois.

ENDNOTES

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¹Dan S. Green is currently retired.

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