



## Big Ideas

## C. Wright Mills on intellectual craftsmanship

Although written over 50 years ago and comprising little over 30 pages, C. Wright Mills' short piece *On Intellectual Craftsmanship* (Mills, 1959) remains shockingly radical and hugely influential not only in his 'home' discipline of sociology but more widely across the humanities and social sciences. Published as an appendix to his book *The Sociological Imagination*, it offers a primer addressed directly to the 'beginning student' on collecting, constructing, analysing and presenting sociological data, ideas and theories. Readers might, at this point, be expecting from it some thoughts and guidance on research methods and methodologies, but what they are presented with is something quite different: Mills offers the idea of the social scientist not as a researcher but as a *scholar*, that is, as a writer. Indeed, he suggests that, when it comes down to it, social science is writing.

In order to understand how Mills arrives at this position, it is important to know a little of his intellectual background. Mills was an American pragmatist in the tradition of William James, C.S. Peirce, John Dewey, and latterly, Richard Rorty. As such, he believed that the worth of an academic project should be measured not by the rigour of the methods and methodologies it employs but rather by its usefulness and practicability; in William James' words, 'truth is what works'. Once the search for truth is divorced from the application of method, that is, if the validity of the findings is not considered to depend solely on the perceived validity of the research method used to produce those findings, then there is no reason to raise empirical scientific research above other forms of intellectual endeavour, to the extent that 'there is no more virtue in empirical inquiry as such than in reading as such'<sup>1</sup> (p.226). For Mills, then, method becomes a practical rather than a theoretical concern, a question of craftsmanship rather than philosophy, to the extent that 'it is much better ... to have one account by a working student of how he is going about his work than a dozen "codifications of procedure" by specialists who as often as not have never done much work of consequence' (p.215). *On Intellectual Craftsmanship* is just such an account of Mills' own working methods, 'a personal statement ... written in the hope that others, especially those beginning independent work, will make it less personal by the facts of their own experience' (p.215).

For Mills, social scientists are well placed to engage in such a personal and experiential undertaking, since they are quite literally immersed in their subject matter, which is immediately available to them at all times. Thus, 'the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives' (p.215). The inevitable conclusion, then, is that 'Scholarship is a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career' (p.216). For social scientists, this entails being aware at all times what is going on around them: 'you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it' (p.216). Mills' method is simple: '... keep a journal. Many creative

writers keep journals; the sociologist's need for systematic reflection demands it' (p.216).

Already we can see the scope and influence of Mills' work for nursing in the adoption during the 1990s of reflective journals in education and practice-based approaches to research and knowledge generation. Taken to their logical conclusion, however, Mills' ideas imply that systematic reflection should lie at the heart not only of nursing practice and nurse education, but also of academic nursing studies. If we accept his injunction to use our life experience as the basis for our intellectual work, then regular and ongoing immersion in nursing practice is not merely preferable for nurse academics – it is essential.

We now come to the notion of craftsmanship, a word that Mills uses deliberately to distance himself (and his discipline) from the scientific method. For Mills, the rigorous application of method limits not only what social scientists will find but, more worryingly, the very questions that they are able to pose. In using the term 'craftsmanship', Mills attempts to contrast the large-scale rigorous industrial methods of the technician with the 'hands on' personal practice of the artisan. He regards empirical research as generally 'thin and uninteresting', suitable only 'for beginning students, and sometimes a useful pursuit for those who are not able to handle the more difficult substantive problems of social science' (p.226). Mills is not rejecting empirical scientific research *per se* as having no role to play in the social sciences, but is suggesting that its role is limited and generally overvalued and overstated. For Mills, research is a mechanical, procedural activity undertaken by technicians, the purpose of which is merely 'to settle disagreements and doubts about facts' (p.226), and it stands in stark contrast to the creative and virtuoso application by the intellectual craftsman of the 'sociological imagination'. Empirical data collection, then, is a boring but necessary distraction from the more important and productive work of the social scientist, to the extent that 'I do not like to do empirical work if I can possibly avoid it. If one has no staff it is a great deal of trouble; if one does employ a staff, then the staff is often even more trouble' (p.225). Elsewhere he makes the point more overtly and at some length:

Be a good craftsman: avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to use the sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendancy of research teams of technicians. Be one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society. (Ibid., pp. 245–6)

With an allowance for the inherent gender-bias of the 1950s, this could stand as a powerful contemporary manifesto for the reflective practice movement in nursing and a persuasive rebuttal to the technocracy of evidence-based practice.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from Mills (1959) unless stated otherwise.

As we have seen, intellectual craftsmanship is essentially the practice of writing, and much of Mills' advice concerns the development of writing as a method of both presentation *and* discovery. Although written over 50 years ago, Mills' advice remains hugely relevant to all aspiring academic writers, including those hoping to publish in nursing journals. First, there is the question of what to write about, and whereas the scientific researcher has only her most recent project to draw on, the intellectual craftsman is relatively spoilt for choice. As Mills points out, 'you never "start working on a project"; you are already "working" .... Following this way of living and working, you will always have many topics that you want to work out further' (p.244). Second, there is the question of voice. Mills argues strongly that the craft of writing lies in finding and expressing our own individual voice. We should write as we speak, in unpretentious language that communicates directly in the first and second person with our imagined reader. Thus, 'Any writing ... that is not imaginable as human speech is bad writing' (p.242). Third, Mills distinguishes between the context of presentation and the context of discovery. When we begin, we must locate ourselves firmly in the context of presentation. Our first task as writers is to present our thought *to ourselves*, which as Mills points out, is often called 'thinking clearly' (p.244). He adds that our next task is to present it to others, at which point we often find that it is not clear at all. It is at this point that we enter the context of discovery: as we struggle to make our ideas clear to our audience, we modify, rethink and restructure our thoughts so that we often end up with something very different. In a nutshell, 'you cannot divorce how you think from how you write. You have to move back and forth between the two contexts...' (p.244).

I would suggest from personal experience that in the process of writing how we think, we eventually get into the habit of thinking how we write, to the mutual benefit of both thinking and writing.

I began this essay by suggesting that Mills' work remains 'shockingly radical', advocating as it does for a broad scholarly role that extends well beyond conducting and publishing research reports, for the exercising of the 'sociological imagination' over the unquestioning and mechanical application of method, and for thoughtful and reflective writing from experience as the primary activity of the academic. There is, for me, little doubt that *On Intellectual Craftsmanship* made some important observations about the state of the social sciences in the late 1950s. That it still appears ahead of its time as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century perhaps says as much about the current state of the academy, including academic nursing, as it does about Mills' insights and prescience.

### Reference

Mills, C.W., 1959. On intellectual craftsmanship. In: Mills, C.W. (Ed.), *The Sociological Imagination*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

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