

# “Towards theory and method *for* Africa”: A view from the South

How can reflecting on our methods help negotiate power  
differences/asymmetries?

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- Cooper, A., Swartz, S. & Mahali, A. (2018). Disentangled, decentred and democratised: Youth Studies for the global South. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1-17.
- How bodies of Youth Studies theory (produced almost exclusively in Europe and North America) are both useful and incongruent when used by researchers in contexts like South Africa
- I will try to apply some of these ideas to this panel

# The challenge laid down for this panel:

“Research on Africa engages with settings that differ markedly from those of Europe, North America, and perhaps other parts of the global south while at the same time drawing from theories and concepts developed in and, more often than not, for the global north. Postcolonial debates have shown the problematic nature of the knowledge produced under these circumstances. However, the critiques have stressed epistemological issues and failed to accord as much importance to methodological issues. One way of redressing the balance is to ask what Africa is a case of, i.e. how the **hidden descriptive and analytical assumptions** in research practice can be made more explicit.”

How can interrogating our methods- the **hidden descriptive and analytical assumptions** in research practice- improve research on Africa/negotiate power relations

2 arguments for this presentation:

- Our methods can't be separated from how we perceive our role as researchers (what a researcher 'is', is not universally agreed upon and is related to the context one works in)
- Our methods can't be separated from theory: theory and method as an iterative process

# 1 thing before I start...

## The politics of research

- South African academia in 2018
- My experience of VAD 2018

Drawing on 2 key texts to show how reflecting on methods can illuminate hidden aspects of research practice

1. Côté, J. 2014. *Youth Studies: fundamental issues and debates*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

-Key threshold meta-concepts

2. Burawoy, M. 2010. Southern windmill: the life and work of Edward Webster. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 72(1), pp.1-25.

-Research 'in', 'of' and 'for' Africa

# James Cote: key threshold meta-concepts

- I will use these meta-concepts to illustrate how Methodological issues (can be) more than “Hidden descriptive and analytical assumptions ”
- They relate to research practices
- Our roles as researchers

# Threshold Metaconcepts:

- Ideas that act as gateways or portals to studying an object or a field
- Don't just add to terminological repertoire (eg. "Insurgent citizenship")
- Not discipline specific
- Integrative- show how forms of knowledge are inter-related



# Threshold metaconcepts (Cote, 2014)

1. Ontological assumptions: nature of reality; what is a 'normal' life; the research process: subject-object
2. Political agendas: radical change or maintaining the status quo...linked to:
3. Value priorities: science or activism?

Cote argues that these 3 metaconcepts help to chart the field of Youth Studies

The value of Incorporating these metaconcepts into our methodological thinking, in order to reflect on

- The purpose(s) of our research
- The distances, differences and divisions between 'us' and 'them'
- The professional, personal, political aspects of knowledge production
- Our assumptions

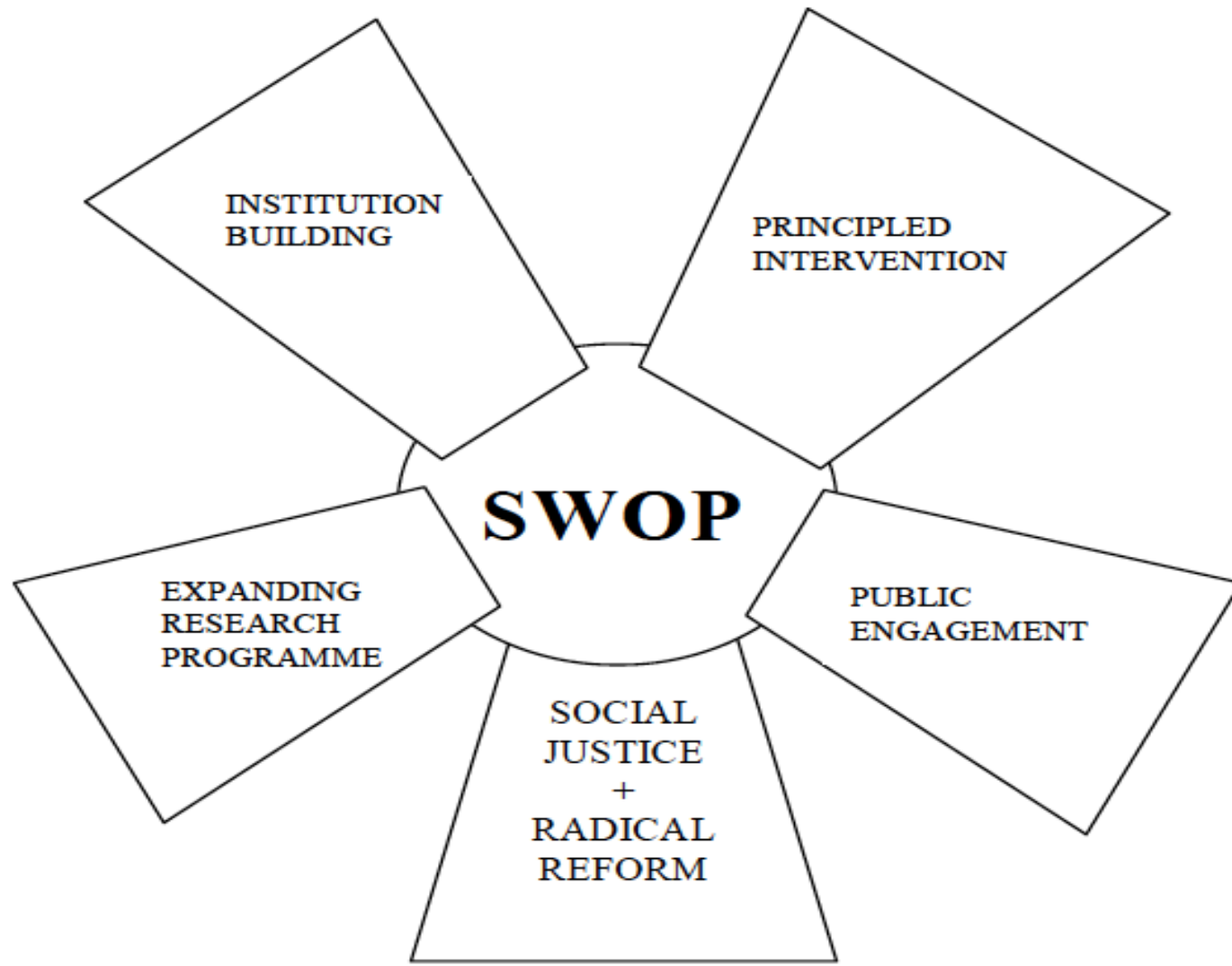
An example of using these metaconcepts:  
The fluid relationship between, theory and  
method; politics and research practices

- Michael Burawoy on Eddie Webster: “Southern windmill: the life and work of Edward Webster  
(2008, Transformation)
- An American Sociologist comparing himself to a South African peer

Burawoy (2008):

*“A typical day in the life of Edward Webster might start out with a run on the golf course, interrupted by a conversation with local workers, then a debate on the radio with the head of the trade union federation, moving on to a meeting of SWOP (Sociology of Work Unit that he founded in 1983), and then to a lecture to SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) journalists, who are taking the two week course at the university, to the completion of a scholarly article, to a meeting with NUMSA (National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa) who want him to undertake research on workplace control. Perhaps during the day he will find some time to visit with his grandsons...the intimate connection between his academic and his public lives: the one inseparable from the other.”*

## The Webster Windmill



“To be sure one can characterise Northern sociology as dominated by a division of labour in which sociologists are first and foremost defined by their professional role, barricading themselves within the university, *only rarely to venture forth.*”

# Burawoy sees different:

- Ontological assumptions
- Political agendas
- Value priorities

# But he also relates these different research practices to the theory Webster produces

- Differentiates between theory 'in', 'of' and 'for' the South.
- Theory 'in' the South is Northern theory transplanted into Southern contexts, with its universal relevance unquestioned.
- Theory 'of' the South shows how the use of theory in a different local context changes its meaning. What may be conservative or true in one place may be radical or false in another.  
GROUNDED IN THE LOCAL AND DEEPLY ENGAGED WITH IT
- Sociology 'for' the South is not content with showing local particularities, but moves towards universality in its theorising. It considers theory in relation to local ontologies, values and politics and tries to say something more general about the human condition, something that applies to us all.



# Sociology 'for' the South; Burawoy (2008)

“a sociology that selectively embraces theories from all regions of the world, that dissolves the blunt reifications of North and South, a sociology that can excite sociologists from Europe and North America as well as from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but a sociology that **never forgets its political origins and its political context.**”

- Webster's theoretical advances and knowledge production inseparable from his research practices

# What's my point?

- Our methods can't be separated from how we perceive our role as researchers (what a researcher 'is', is not universally agreed upon and is related to the context one works in)
- Our methods can't be separated from theory: theory and method as an iterative process

- The methodological challenge involves more than illuminating descriptions and assumptions
- How we do and imagine research
- The boundaries of research and practice and...politics
- This varies depending on where we work, as researchers