
Poverty and inequality across space: sociological reflections on the missing-middle subnational scale*

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The study of stratification is a foremost concern of sociologists. Historical engagement with this topic creates a distinct conceptual lens on poverty and inequality and a voluminous body of empirical work that set sociology apart from economics and to some degree, geography. At the same time, the discipline is limited in developing a spatial understanding of stratification processes. In this article, we put forth a critique of sociological research on poverty and other inequalities across space. We focus on a disciplinary impasse, the lack of a coherent, well-developed tradition at the subnational or regional scale. Drawing from research on the United States, we address how sociologists are making inroads against this impasse, in an emergent body of work.

Key words: inequality, poverty, regional scale, sociology, stratification, subnational scale
JEL Classifications: I3, J60, R11, R40

Introduction

Inequality, the differential allocation of valued societal resources, has been a foremost concern of sociology since its inception. The centrality of this topic distinguishes sociology from other social sciences, as reflected in its capstone field, stratification, the study of privilege and power across social groups (Grusky, 1994). However, until the 1980s, sociologists studying stratification within Western nations largely neglected space (Friedland and Boden, 1993; Soja, 1989; Walton, 1993).¹ Even today, space is brought in to the study of inequality in limited ways (DeVerteuil, 2007; Gotham, 2003; Lobao, 2004; Tickamyer, 2000). Well-developed bodies of research on poverty and

other inequalities are found mainly at two opposing scales: the city or local level and across the global system of nation-states.

Insofar as sociologists have privileged the urban and cross-national scales, there remains a missing-middle: a large swathe of places and people given less systematic investigation because they fail to fall into the binary way in which sociologists have traditionally carved up space. Illustrating the gap in attention is that sociology has no customary term for the middle (regional) geographic scale between the city or community and the nation state.²

The purpose of this article is to critically appraise current sociological approaches to the study of poverty and other forms of economic inequality across

space. We focus on a disciplinary impasse, the lack of a coherent inequality tradition at the subnational or regional scale. The ‘missing-middle’ describes sociology’s neglect of that scale relative to the extensive attention given to the cross-national and urban scales. Sociology’s impasse is problematic for social science at large because its distinct disciplinary lens and empirical strengths are not fully deployed to grapple with poverty and privilege in contemporary societies.

As discussed further below, we view the subnational scale conceptually as occupying the gray area between the aggregate nation-state and the urban or local scale that sociology has not systematically addressed. In this sense, it can be thought of as an area extending regionally beyond the city, potentially spanning a nation as a whole and the various territorial units that compose it. In practice, studies addressing the subnational scale range from those completely covering national territory to those covering portions or certain regions.

Spatial scale is important because it defines the territorial resolution by which processes creating inequality work out and the arena for targeting policy and political action. Sociology lags not only behind geography but other fields in building a distinct approach to the subnational scale. For example, economists have worked to extend the neoclassical model to explain regional variations in growth particularly since Krugman’s influential study (1991). Political scientists are developing a regional lens to the study of governance structures (Sellers, 2005). Policy-relevant research on poverty is also increasingly directed to places and populations at the subnational scale (Glasmeier, 2005; Partridge and Rickman, 2006).

Although a developed tradition does not exist, sociologists have produced a growing number of empirical studies on inequality at the subnational scale.³ These studies comparatively analyze a variety of territorial units that compose a nation. Researchers question why general relationships involving stratification do not work out evenly within a nation, seeking to understand regionally systemic processes. For example, some are interested in how poverty and prosperity vary across states, counties,

labour markets and other territories across a nation as a whole, focusing on the market and governmental forces responsible for these variations (Hooks and Smith, 2004; Lorence and Nelson, 1993; Mencken, 2000); others are concerned with the fortunes of specific regions, such as the persistence of poverty in the US rural south and Appalachia (Duncan, 1999; Falk *et al.*, 2003; RSS Task Force on Persistent Poverty, 1993). While sharing many commonalities, subnational studies build from disparate literatures, giving research a fragmented character and diminishing the power of its collective voice. These studies are coalescing as a body of work, as researchers recognize they share similar conceptual approaches, substantive questions and methodologies. We refer to this emergent work as sociology’s subnational approach to spatial inequality.

The contribution of this article is to put forth a synthesis and critique of sociology’s project of spatializing the study of poverty and other inequalities, with the goal of informing social scientists at large. Sociology’s development and urban literatures, which address inequality respectively at the cross-national and local scales, are widely familiar across the social sciences. Here we seek to make visible research that extends the sociological imagination to the subnational scale—and to move forward this work. We interrogate sociology’s distinct scalar approaches to inequality, provide an organizing framework around literatures conventionally viewed as disparate, and denote missing links for future research. In sociology, explicit discussion of the relationship between inequality and space is concentrated in specific subfields (Gotham, 2003; Small and Newman, 2001). By contrast, this is one of few studies to scrutinize spatial inequality as it spans subfields and among the first to identify the gap at the middle scale.⁴

Our discussion is organized in four sections. First, we explain sociology’s distinct lens and contributions to the study of economic inequalities that set it apart from economics and to some degree, geography. Second, we interrogate traditions that bring in space to the study of inequality, comparing the established urban and cross-national traditions,

to sociology's knowledge gap, emergent work at the subnational scale. Third, we provide an overview of extant subnational research. We then tackle a key obstacle in moving this research forward, the lack of synthesis among empirical studies: we demonstrate how existing work can be consolidated to provide a sociological framework for studying subnational disparities, using the case of the United States. We conclude with directions to advance the discipline's contributions to understanding inequality at the subnational scale.

At the outset, limitations of our discussion should be acknowledged. Sociology is broad and eclectic. We do not claim to speak for the discipline as a whole but rather seek to impose some order on the numerous voices within it. Our focus is territorial inequalities of poverty and prosperity within the nation state. The pattern and determinants of these inequalities obviously varies by nation. While the frameworks and literatures explored are applicable elsewhere, the geographic scope of the study centres on the United States. Our discussion draws largely from US sociology and seeks to consolidate its findings about disparities within that nation.

Sociology's lens on poverty and other economic inequalities

In contemporary sociology, poverty is theorized as part of a larger issue, the reproduction of inequality in a society (Tilly, 1998; Giddens, 1981). The study of poverty spans the social sciences. In this topical area, attention is often exclusively on poor populations: their characteristics and needs, and policies that might alleviate their situation. While to some degree, the extensive focus on the poor is understandable, it is myopic. Sociology takes the view that the poor cannot be understood apart from a society's stratification system, which entails the need to attend to the non-poor as social actors and to how economic inequality is created and maintained. Although empirical studies by sociologists vary as to explicit attention to these stratification processes, they remain an underlying assumption of most research.

Inequality in any society is assumed to arise from a general process, whereby the level of economic development sets the amount of surplus to be distributed and actors struggle over the allocation of this surplus (Lenski, 1966). The poor are those left behind in the struggle. Institutions such as the state and labour organizations may facilitate redistribution, channeling more of the social surplus to the poor, but the degree to which they do so varies historically and by nation (Esping-Anderson, 1990). In delineating sociology's distinct lens, our discussion casts the net broadly in focusing on the larger question of economic stratification, which entails the study of both poor and non-poor populations.⁵

Poverty and privilege in the social sciences

Historically, two competing approaches have informed the study of poverty and privilege (Rank, 2004; Schiller, 2004). Each spans a family of theories that underpin academic research, policy and public discourse. We briefly review these approaches for the purpose of situating sociological research.

The conventional approach, a status-quo oriented view, is grounded in neoclassical economic theory, including human capital theory (Becker, 1964), and its sociological counterpart, functionalist theory (Davis and Moore, 1945) that dominated the discipline through the late 1960s. These perspectives share similar assumptions, viewing economic differences largely as an outcome of individuals' choices and characteristics. The conventional approach views differential economic rewards as resulting from a process whereby workers with appropriate supply attributes, such as education and skills, are rewarded consummately in a meritocratic labour market. Economic inequality is seen as not only necessary but just, with individuals' position in the social order reflecting their productivity or social value. When attention is given to persistently poor populations, culture often enters into these arguments via the culture of poverty thesis. Here the poor are viewed as locked into a cultural system that perpetuates dysfunctional values and behavioural adaptations intergenerationally. Perspectives

within the conventional approach have evolved over time. Economists, for example, have relaxed competitive market assumptions and recognized employers' tastes for discrimination.

In the US case, the conventional approach dominates public policy and discourse (see Rank, 2004; Schram, 2006). Since the source of poverty resides largely in the individual, the solution does also. Hence promoting individuals' investment in human capital has been a central component of policy. Policies centred on people rather than places create portable investments that facilitate labour mobility and increase economic efficiency. Even as welfare reform's emphasis on work-first meagerly reduces the ability of the poor to develop human capital, it in no way takes the focus off the individual as responsible for his/her own poverty.

The contemporary study of poverty in sociology evolved as a reaction against the conventional approach. Much of the literature is a relentless engagement with the neoclassical economic paradigm, particularly human capital theory, and the culture of poverty thesis. The charges levelled against the conventional approach are numerous, most centring on its inadequacy to explain often observed empirical relationships. First, the conventional framework is seen as being limited in terms of how much poverty can be explained. It can provide an insight into the types of people who work in jobs that pay poorly, but it cannot explain why there are poverty-level jobs in the first place (Schiller, 2004). It faces difficulties in explaining the relatively large and similar proportions of people in poverty over time (10–15% of the US population in recent decades, sizable compared to other advanced nations), the fact that poverty bouts tend to be short-term (under three years for the majority of poor) and the systematic life-course nature of poverty (Rank, 2004). For example, using PSID (Panel Study of Income Dynamics) data, Rank (2004, 63) estimates that by age 75, 59% of Americans will have spent at least a year in poverty. The poor are thus best characterized as a churning rather than persistent population. Other critiques are levelled at human capital arguments (see Schiller, 2004). Earnings vary markedly by race/ethnicity

and gender net of education and other human capital variables. As educational attainments increase over time nationally, poverty rates do not decrease accordingly. Critiques of the culture-of-poverty thesis dispute the view that the poor hold values different from the non-poor and demonstrate that any 'culture' is but a short-term response to dealing with economic hardship (Duncan, 1999).

These sorts of critiques spurred the second approach, which we refer to as the structural approach, for it locates the source of inequalities in social structure rather than in the individual. As Rank (2004, 50) notes: 'when focus is on the individual ... focus is on who loses out in the economic game, as opposed to the fact that the game produces losers to begin with.' In treating poverty as a structural problem, this approach implicates market forces that produce aggregate economic conditions, and state and other institutional forces that foster redistribution. Sociologists have long argued that levels of poverty and other income-related well-being are determined by the quality and quantity of jobs (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1987). Lack of adequate, well-paying jobs makes it difficult for workers to maintain families above poverty thresholds and reduces labour's bargaining power. In terms of institutions fostering redistribution, attention has been on the state's social safety net, labour/professional organizations and civic society. These institutions are seen to be weaker and particularly ineffective in ameliorating poverty in liberal-welfare regimes like the USA (Esping-Anderson, 1990).

In the structural approach, attributes of poverty-prone populations treated as personal shortcomings in the conventional approach are reinterpreted as systematic group marginalization. Explanations for gender and race/ethnic variations in poverty rates, earnings and other economic well-being centre on patriarchy and racism, respectively, rather than failure to invest adequately in human capital or even individual employer tastes. Age and disability, systematic life-course attributes, make certain groups prone to poverty in societies with weak social safety nets (Rank, 2004).

Sociologists building from the structural approach also attend to enabling forces, variously conceptualized as human agency, social capital and cultural capital, that reduce structural constraints (Bourdieu, 1989; Giddens, 1981). They do not disagree that individuals' choices, such as obtaining greater schooling and migrating out of depressed areas, can alter the propensity for falling into poverty. But the stance remains that any rational-choice decision making occurs foremost within a structural constraint set.

Policy-related research and engagement in sociology

Sociology's structural stance influences the manner by which policy is addressed.⁶ First, it yields a critical view, leading sociologists to question in whose interests government policies and programmes are developed and who loses/gains when these are implemented. There is an ethic of defense of the disadvantaged (Burawoy, 2005), and an emphasis on structural barriers that state policy may reinforce or discount as individuals strive to move out of poverty (Rank, 2004).

Second, multiple genres of social policy-related research exist, each with large bodies of theoretically-informed empirical work. For instance, a body of research on policy development focuses on the manner by which specific social programmes and welfare-state regimes emerge from struggles among capital, labour, civic society and the state (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Quadagno, 2005; Piven and Cloward, 1997). Another genre of research centres on the real and potential impacts of programmes and policies directed to the poor, such as US welfare reform (Litcher and Jayakody, 2002; Pickering et al., 2006; Tickamyer et al., 2007), housing programmes (De Souza Briggs, 1997), and economic development programmes (Mencken, 1997, 2000). For the most part, however, rather than directly focusing on social programmes and policies, sociologists address policy implicitly, through research that has policy relevance. Here we mean empirical research centred on the livelihood conditions of disadvantaged populations and the social forces

reproducing those conditions that could be ameliorated through a more just and egalitarian society. Under this banner falls sociology's large literature on urban neighbourhood effects that examines the impacts of lack of employment, poor quality schooling, segregation and crime on the life chances of the poor (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2000; Sampson et al., 2002).

Finally, although sociologists have long studied policy-related issues, direct policy engagement still encounters disciplinary hesitation. In its most radical form, sociology's structural lens sees policy engagement as fruitless as only fundamental societal change can alter institutions under capitalism-creating poverty. Divergent stances on policy engagement stem in part from different views of the state. Some see the state, particularly the central state, as the last bastion of defence of the poor (Rank, 2004); others are highly sceptical of the state's interest in and capacity to act on behalf of the disadvantaged (Quadagno, 2005; Piven and Cloward, 1997). The first view places a greater emphasis on working with policy-makers, while the second emphasizes engaging civic society, a strategy advocated by recent American Sociological Association president Michael Burawoy (2005) that he terms 'public sociology'. But concerted efforts at policy engagement exist in some subfields. For example, the Rural Sociological Society has long informed federal, state and local officials about issues of economic well-being and it has recently started a policy-brief series.

Sociology's comparative advantages and limitations

Relative to other social sciences, sociology's comparative advantage comes from disciplinary-wide interest in stratification. This yields an immense reservoir of research on poverty and other inequalities, detailed by age, gender, race/ethnicity, poverty status (e.g. persistent versus working-poor), and so forth. The discipline also offers a distinct theoretical, structural lens on inequality, which gives systematic attention to the market, state and other institutional forces. Sociological research often challenges the neoclassical economic paradigm, thereby promoting development of an alternative public discourse.

Sociology's structural stance would seem to lend itself easily to the study of poverty and prosperity across space. After all, if the sources of inequality are to be found outside the individual, geographic territory should be a logical extension. However, the sociological imagination has always been geographically constrained. Its extensive stratification literature remains relatively aspatial, as discussed by a number of analysts (Gotham, 2003; Lobao *et al.*, 2007; Soja, 1989; Tickamyer, 2000). Institutions, social actors and social groups—not places—command primary attention. A recent review of sociological research on economic inequality, entitled 'Who gets what and why', but is minus any 'where,' illustrates the point (Myles and Myers, 2007). Policy-related research on poverty is typically explored at the national aggregate. When a spatial lens is taken, it tends to be in discrete contexts, in large cities and only less frequently in rural settings (Pickering *et al.*, 2006; RSS Task Force on Persistent Poverty, 1993).

Sociology compared to geography: studying poverty and spatial scale

In sociologists' efforts to spatially expand inequality research, there is a need for greater dialogue with human geography. We broach this topic briefly to provide additional scrutiny of sociology's strengths and limitations. Although researchers in each discipline may borrow from the others, there are surprisingly few explicit attempts to compare how they study economic inequalities. Recent reviews by Del Casino and Jones (2007), DeVerteuil (2007), and Lobao *et al.* (2007) give some attention to this topic.⁷ As we write from the gaze of sociology, our observations should be seen as partial and situated. We address two issues pertinent to our focus on subnational inequality, the treatment of economic inequalities and spatial scale.

Poverty and other economic inequalities. With regard to treatment of inequality, the centrality of stratification in sociology gives it a longer and deeper tradition. As DeVerteuil (2007, 8), a geographer, notes, sociologists have produced a 'staggering amount of theoretical and empirical work' compared to geographers. Similarly, a number of

geographers argue that attention to poverty and other economic inequalities has ebbed and flowed in their discipline (Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Glasmeier, 2002; Martin, 2001; Sheppard, 1995; Storper, 2001).

Looking out upon geography, we observe a range of strands of literatures. Some tackle poverty and other inequalities directly, but most others indirectly, as a residual outcome of state and market changes. We also observe somewhat of a divide between empirically-oriented (particularly quantitative) research and theoretical literature. These attributes slice-up the geographic imagination, leading to what appears as a more diffuse and segmented tradition of studying stratification. For example, a school of past work directly attended to the geography of poverty by drawing from quantitative data and taking a critical subnational focus (Kodras and Jones, 1991; Kodras, 1997; Morrill and Wohlenberg, 1971; Smith, 1982). From our view, one sees less of this type of work in geography today, a point echoed by Del Casino and Jones (2007). Geography's large literature on the political economy of uneven development from the 1970s onward (Harvey, 1973; Smith, 1984) considers poverty, but treats it as one of many destructive outcomes of capitalism. This work has had a strong theoretical influence on urban sociology (Walton, 1993) and contributed to sociologists' interest in the subnational inequality (Lobao *et al.*, 2007). With regard to current work, we observe a focus on select poverty-related issues (such as homelessness) of understandable interest to geographers (e.g. DeVerteuil, 2003; Del Casino and Jocoy, forthcoming; Mitchell, 1997)—relative to the entire package of deprivation. We also note a great deal of interest in neoliberalism, with poverty/inequality considered as an outcome of state and market changes (e.g. Cameron, 2007; Peck, 2001). By contrast, sociology has been slower to engage debates about neoliberalism.

Finally, sociology and critical human geography share an ethic of concern with the interests of the poor. Although often aspatially deployed, sociology's structural stance complements geography's stratification-oriented research on the geography of social exclusion (Mohan, 2002), the geography of

power (Allen, 2003) and the geography of social justice (Smith, 1994).

Spatial scale. As noted, scale is important in addressing inequality because social processes work out, are best studied and may be politically harnessed to alleviate inequality in different ways at different scales. However, scale presents particular challenges to sociological research in large part because the discipline is relatively silent on the meaning and significance of scale itself. To our knowledge, no systematic comparisons between sociology and geography exist with regard to their treatment of scale. We put forth several contrasts.

First, scale in sociology is an underlying but unacknowledged attribute in most studies. This is because sociologists start with social relations and inequalities, and if space is addressed at all, it is nearly always a secondary interest. Gotham (2003) argues even sociology's large urban poverty literature places much more primacy on social over spatial relationships. In contrast to the outpouring of work on spatial scales in geography over the past two decades (Marston, 2000), one sees little direct discussion of the topic at present in sociology. Any analysis of sociologists' treatment of scale has to be derived implicitly from the literature.

Second, as we have stressed, sociology is segmented by subfields that specialize in inequality globally, across nation-states (development and cross-national sociology) and locally (urban sociology). This subfield-approach means that scale itself is intertwined with and arguably inseparable from research traditions: scale takes on meaning largely as it can be situated into pre-existing traditions. Scales, such as the subnational, not colonized by any one subfield are left out of systematic theorizing. This approach contrasts with geography which theorizes scale more as an independent concept (Sheppard and McMaster, 2004), noted further below.

Third, sociology tends to treat spatial scales a priori, as fixed and segmented, while geography treats them as more fluid and overlapping. In sociology, the cross-national and local, urban scales are privileged for historical, theoretical and pragmatic reasons. By contrast, geographers have argued for theorizing social relationships as a 'power geome-

try, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity, and cooperation' (Massey, 1994, 265). Power geometries make clear that inequality must be studied at a variety of scales (Allen, 2003; Hudson, 2001; Massey, 1994). Even when sociologists recognize that processes across scales are linked, they typically treat these in a schematic manner that separates scales. For example, urban poverty research is distinguished by its interest in charting the relative contribution of household level versus neighbourhood context determinants (Gotham, 2003). In globalization studies, global versus local remains emphasized over glocalization and other blending of scales, as noted by Chen (2005).

Relatedly, sociologists tend to treat scale as a platform and context for the study of inequality—rather than as intrinsically tied to it (Del Casino and Jones, 2007). Since sociologists' interests are foremost in inequality, there is typically an isomorphic translation when space is added: similar types of inequality relationships, institutions, social actors and social groups are investigated at the discipline's customary scalar platforms. Del Casino and Jones (2007) note that this approach differs from geography's emphasis (grounded in critical realism) that social relationships are intrinsically tied to space. For example, capitalist class relations have an inherent spatial logic, operating through capital mobility and other spatial processes at every turn to create variations in poverty across places and people. Few sociological studies explicate how social processes are connected at each point to spatial ones. One example that takes on this task is Tickamyer et al.'s (2007) study on the spatial politics of welfare reform. The authors trace how space was tied to each stage of welfare policy development and, in turn, to outcomes which benefited richer, urban counties at the expense of poor, Appalachian counties.

A final contrast is that geographers have long studied scale itself, the processes by which actors construct scales of production, reproduction and consumption (Marston, 2000; Sheppard and McMaster, 2004; Smith and Dennis, 1987). Marston (2000, 221) notes geographers' distinct contribution

is ‘to understand how particular scales become constituted and transformed in response to socio-spatial dynamics.’ In sociology, elements of scale construction sometimes appear in studies, particularly those on globalization (McMichael, 2000). But at present little direct engagement with the topic exists, although this is may be changing (see Brenner, 2004).

In the final analysis sociology is not geography and vice-versa. While each discipline can be enriched with greater scrutiny of the others’ work, a task we have opened in comparing the two disciplines, each must also be taken on its own terms.⁸ To make visible sociologists’ efforts to construct a body of research on subnational inequality, we must contextualize the project in light of the sociological imagination: relative to how subnational research compares to established traditions and within the parameters of how scale is understood in sociology, as tied to distinct subfields. Geographic research reinforces the point that inequality must be addressed beyond the binary scales and subfields customary in sociology and to go further, to question how scale itself is constructed. Moving forward subnational research is challenging precisely because such dialogue about scale is largely absent in sociology. While sociologists need to attend to conceptualizing scale itself, our purpose here is to show how they are making inroads in to the study of inequality at a new scale, outside those traditionally studied.

Subnational inequality research versus established traditions

As discussed, well-recognized traditions that build from sociology’s structural or critically-oriented stance are found in subfields addressing opposite ends of the spatial continuum. A large urban literature explores poverty, unemployment, housing, racial/ethnic segregation, and other inequalities within and across cities, much of it focusing on large and/or world cities. At the other extreme, sociology’s cross-national and development literature charts the socioeconomic position of entire nations in the global system. Thus, the discipline is left with

a relatively missing-middle scale, addressed today in a growing but fragmented literature.

Rather than providing a dogmatic delimitation of research at the subnational scale, we view it in two overlapping ways. First, it is an emergent disciplinary project, where researchers study inequality at a scale that falls between the interests of cross-national and urban sociology. Subnational inequality research has its own mode of analysis centred at the middle scale: it argues for the need to study and explain why general national relationships do not work out evenly within a nation; at the same time, its scale of interest involves generalizing beyond individual localities and local-level actors and processes. Second, subnational research is a growing body of empirical work that centres on comparatively analysing forms of inequality and their determinants across territorial units in a nation.

An example of inequality at the subnational scale is illustrated by mapping indicators of prosperity and poverty, respectively, median family income and family poverty rates. Both variables are highly correlated with each other: areas with higher median family income have lower poverty rates. The maps in Figures 1 and 2 highlight subnational disparities across time using data from the last four Censuses of Population for US counties. For each Census time-point, we calculate Moran’s I, a statistic commonly used to measure spatial clustering. Global Moran’s I statistics (not shown) indicate significant clustering in both median family income and family poverty for each time point. We map this clustering using local Moran’s I that expresses the degree to which a county’s values on median family income and poverty are correlated with those of its nearest neighbours. Counties that have positive spatial clustering with their neighbours (those with a statistically significant local Moran’s I) are displayed. Pockets of prosperity can be seen where counties with higher median family income cluster with neighbouring counties with higher median family, while conversely, low income pockets can also be seen (see Figure 1). Maps for family poverty show a similar clustering of counties with higher or lower poverty (see Figure 2). Both sets of maps highlight longstanding trends whereby northern

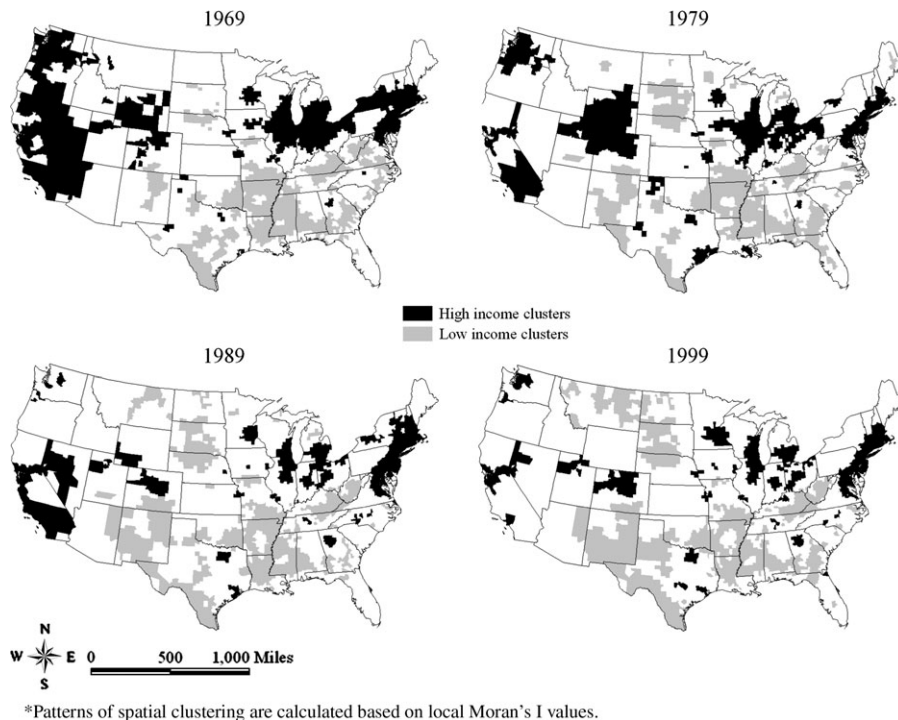


Fig. 1. Median family income*

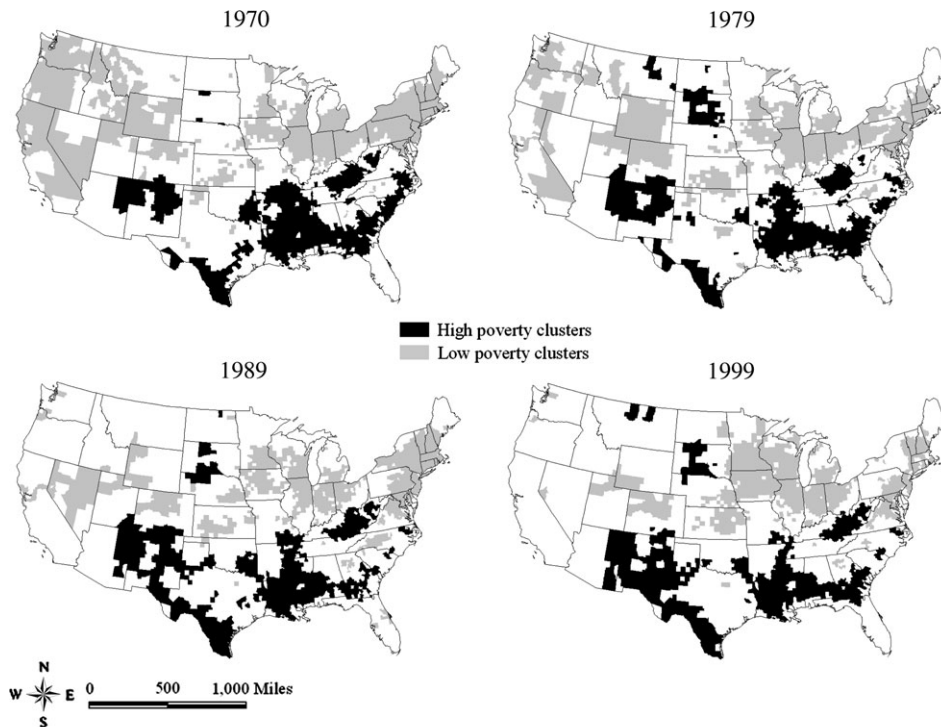
and western counties historically enjoyed higher economic well-being relative to the south. However, there is some evidence that past regional differences are eroding as pockets of income prosperity become more isolated over time. Meanwhile, high poverty clustering remains in the south and Appalachia and appears to have grown in the southwest. While sociologists study regions such as the south and Appalachia, there are few attempts to theorize the causal determinants of these spatial-temporal patterns across the nation.⁹

The importance of the subnational scale: research, public debates, and theory

The subnational scale is significant for addressing the contours of inequality for a variety of reasons. Serious inequalities are empirically manifest at this scale. One example is recent US development patterns where economic growth is combined with in-

come polarization between the affluent and the poor, as in the bicoastal west and northeast (Lenz, 2004). Another is persistent regional disparities in economic well-being, health status and racial/ethnic segregation (Glasmeier, 2005). In the USA, regions such as the rural south, Mexican-border locales, Appalachia and rural Native America have long lagged behind others.

Second, the subnational scale now has an unprecedented link with public policy and poverty due to the neoliberal rollout and related global trends toward decentralization that have elevated the role of subnational governments (Brenner, 2004; Gereffi, 2006). A number of analysts argue that subnational governments such as states, counties and provinces in advanced and developing nations have become important sites of intense social welfare and economic development policy-making and implementation (Brenner, 2004; Gereffi, 2006; Leicht and Jenkins, 2007). In the US case, counties are the



*Patterns of spatial clustering are calculated based on local Moran's I values.

Fig. 2. *Poverty Rate Among Families**

fastest growing general governments and most Americans reside in states where counties have major responsibilities for social welfare programmes (Lobao and Kraybill, 2005). Decentralization creates new rounds of spatial inequality, more regionally-specific than in the past, because the poor are less protected by the central state and subnational governments vary in capacity to carry out growth and redistributive functions.

Third, public debates about the impacts of business and government are often most rigorously evaluated through comparative subnational research. Examples include research addressing debates about whether low-wage firms such as Wal-Mart contribute to poverty across places, with Goetz and Swaminathan (2006) finding support for that assertion. Another debate is whether US prison building efforts benefit poor, rural areas, as often touted by officials. Hooks *et al.* (2004) find no sup-

port that prisons promote economic growth in these areas.

Fourth, the subnational scale is important for political responses to inequality. The last two US presidential elections provide a powerful example. Marked partisan variation between and within red-blue states, highlight the need to understand socioeconomic conditions facing populations across urban, suburban, exurban and remote rural areas.

Finally, as noted, the subnational scale remains a theoretical frontier in sociology. The gap in theorizing this scale creates an unbalanced view of stratification. Ordinary, unexceptional places such as slow-growing, rural or marginal regions and their populations are particularly left out of the discussion. This contributes to an overemphasis on change and an under-emphasis on inertia in theorizing inequality processes. In turn, because social processes cut across scales, the subnational scale

requires attention. This scale is important for theorizing connections between urban processes and national/global ones (Chen, 2005). To understand poverty in the urban core, regional processes creating urban–suburban–rural gaps must be incorporated (Drier et al., 2001). Last, as noted above, the subnational scale is central to theorizing the neoliberal rollout.

Comparing sociology's scalar traditions of studying inequality

Defining attributes of subnational research are highlighted by comparison with the established urban and cross-national traditions. These traditions are large and varied. We provide only a brief sketch. Also, research traditions are porous and researchers themselves span traditions. At the same time, there is ample evidence that sociology segments the study of inequality from the study of space—and that when the two are bridged, it occurs most directly at the urban and cross-national scales (Daipha, 2001; Ennis, 1992). Our goal here is to make visible subnational research by denoting similarities and differences with established traditions.

Spatial inequality research in sociology shares attributes irrespective of scale of focus, although subnational research is less developed on many of them. As we noted, a structural stance emphasizing state and market forces as reproducing inequality forms the conceptual core. Actors such as capital, labour, the state and civic society—the staples of critical theories of stratification—figure prominently. Researchers pose similar questions: How and why are forms of poverty and prosperity distributed across places (i.e. cities, regions, nation-states)? How do places themselves become stratified from one another? The first question addresses the determinants of patterns of inequality and their effects on populations, individuals and households. The second is more concerned with uneven development processes. Studies use similar research designs, irrespective of the scale of focus. These include quantitative studies using territorial-level data, multi-level studies linking contextual

attributes of territories to individuals/households, and comparative case study designs.

In Table 1, we compare attributes of subnational inequality research with those of the urban and cross-national traditions. We first present an overview of the three traditions including their contributing subfields, research designs and the degree to which research and theory have evolved into a coherent tradition. Second, the table describes the special contributions of each tradition to the study of poverty and other inequalities.

Established traditions of spatial inequality

Established traditions analysing poverty and prosperity across space are found in cross-national sociology and urban sociology, as noted in Table 1. Sociology's large, well-known cross-national inequality tradition spans advanced and developing nations and attends to a variety of customary inequalities (e.g. typically poverty, income inequality, health, education) (Firebaugh, 2003; Lenski, 1966; Wallerstein, 1979). The comparative welfare states literature (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Goodin et al., 1999) is part of this tradition. At the urban scale, large bodies of work are concerned with inequality processes internal to cities, reflected in literatures on poverty, segregation and other forms of social exclusion (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2000; Massey and Denton, 1993; Sampson et al., 2002; Wilson, 1987). Among this work is the well-known neighbourhood effects literature that documents how the urban poor are isolated from employment and education opportunities, hindering opportunities for class and geographic mobility (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2000; Burton and Jarrett, 2000). Inequality processes across cities are addressed in another large literature on comparative urban development (Sassen, 2000; Zukin, 1991).

Both cross-national and urban inequality research are coherent traditions where theory, concepts, methods and substantive topics are routinized by decades of systematic inquiry. Place units of analysis, the nation-state, the city and neighbourhood, are of intrinsic interest, deeply

Table 1. *Poverty and other inequalities across space: established sociological traditions versus subnational research^a*

	Established traditions		Subnational research
	National/cross-national	Urban	
Contributing subfields	Cross-national, development sociology	Urban sociology	Currently mixed: spatially-oriented subfields (e.g. demography, rural sociology) and inequality-oriented subfields (e.g. stratification, political sociology, economic sociology)
Spatial scale of interest	Nation state, global system	City or local area	Between nation-state and city: all subnational territory, regions, states
Development of research tradition	Established: well-recognized, coherent literature where theory, key concepts, research questions, and methodological protocols tend to be routinized	Established: well-recognized, coherent literature where theory, key concepts, research questions, and methodological protocols tend to be routinized	Emergent: literature in consolidation phase, where theory, key concepts, research questions, and methodological protocols are not well-defined or routinized
Common research designs	Comparative, cross-national research; studies of specific countries; multi-level designs. Both qualitative and quantitative research	Comparative, cross-urban research; studies of specific cities; multi-level neighbourhood effects. Both qualitative and quantitative research	Comparative, cross-territorial unit (states, counties, various other units); studies of specific regions; multi-level effects. Both qualitative and quantitative research
<i>Contributions to the study of poverty and other economic inequalities across space</i>			
Extending sociological study of inequality through attention to space	Intrinsic focus on sociological questions about inequality with reference to geographic space	Intrinsic focus on sociological questions about inequality with reference to geographic space	Incomplete: some work, such as that on labour markets, has long addressed inequality questions with reference to space; other work seeks to newly extend inequality literatures via space
Theoretical contributions	Longstanding, well-known theories about development of nation-states and determinants of inequality between nation-states	Longstanding, well-known theories about development of the city and determinants of inequality within and between cities	Currently, no concerted theorizing about uneven development and inequality. Eclectic theories applied to explain determinants of inequality
Empirical research on forms of inequality	Large literatures on economic well-being, particularly inequality, poverty and economic growth; other large literatures on health, education and gender inequalities	Large literatures on economic well-being, particularly poverty and employment; other large literatures on extra-economic social exclusion such as racial/ethnic segregation, crime, service and community resource allocation	Most work centres on economic well-being, particularly poverty, income levels and inequality and employment; other well-being indicators such as health, environment, civic capacity, gender/racial inequalities are studied
Consideration of subnational inequality	Limited. Some work on regional underdevelopment within developing societies. Usually does not extend to full coverage of subnational territory	Limited. Research on city-regions and suburbanization processes. Usually does not extend to full coverage of subnational territory	Central but subnational inequality processes remain under-theorized

^aOverview adapted from Lobao and Hooks (2007).

studied as research settings; these units have de-facto legitimacy across sociology, whether used as case sites or as observational units in large quantitative studies. Contributions to the study of poverty and other inequalities are deep at their particular scales of interest. Attention is to both determinants of different forms of inequality and to uneven development processes that stratify places from each other. While unresolved debates remain in these traditions, they too are typically discussed in large literatures.

Between established traditions: subnational research

Sociologists turning a spatial lens toward poverty and other inequalities outside the urban and cross-national traditions confront the discipline's gray areas. Two alternative ways in which spatial inequality is addressed outside these traditions can be delineated. Both are foundations for current subnational research (see Table 1). One starts from spatially-oriented subfields, such as demography and rural sociology, then brings in questions about inequality. The other starts from inequality-oriented subfields, such as economic and political sociology, then bring in questions about space. A large body of empirical work has been amassed from these two approaches. Although this body of work is less routinized than urban and cross-national work, it employs comparable research designs and statistical methods.

As a research tradition, the subnational approach remains in a consolidation phase. Segmentation of literatures and limited conceptual development add ambiguity to research. Today there are no commonly used sociological theories explaining uneven development and the distribution of inequalities at the subnational scale. Research questions, their appropriate spatial scale of resolution, and concrete places of focus are less defined and aligned in a systematic protocol of research. This approach assigns no priority to any place unit: a territorial mosaic, including counties, states and labour markets are employed. These place units are less familiar to sociologists, requiring continual justification as to their relevance. Analysts are less interested in the

intrinsic character of any given place and more interested in how social processes work out across them. As a result, research yields a view of poverty allocation somewhat along the lines of a power geometry (Massey, 1994) discussed earlier. That is, relationships among place units are fluidly explored as nodes of intersecting relationships involving power and inequality that allocate poverty differentially across populations. Most attention is given to determinants of different forms of inequality across space, with uneven development as a whole little theorized.

Sociology's inequality research at the subnational scale

Subnational research, as we noted, is both an emerging project and body of research that straddles a scale not colonized by existing spatial inequality traditions. Here we draw out commonalities in the body of work. Then we tackle a key obstacle in moving forward, the need to consolidate research to produce a more coherent disciplinary approach.

An overview of existing work

Conceptual commonalities

Sociology's subnational studies share kindred interest in forms of inequality examined in cross-national and urban sociological research. Most studies examine how and why well-recognized stratification indicators, such as poverty, income inequality, employment opportunities, as well as inequalities by race/ethnicity, and gender vary across territory. Other forms of inequality that spread broadly across regions, such as environmental and health disparities are also addressed.

Research is characterized by a comparative focus, where place units within a nation or variously defined region are studied *vis-à-vis* each other. While research often uses local units of observation (e.g. counties, municipalities, local labour markets), scholars' interests lie beyond the local: concern is a higher-order level of explanation about territorial groupings formed as a combination of local, state or

other units. Although we have sought to impose some order on what constitutes research at the subnational scale, any delineation raises challenges and complexity. For example, it should be recognized that scales within scales of analysis exist. In the USA for example, municipalities are embedded in counties as regions, and both are embedded in states, in regions of the county and the nation as a whole. To us, the comparative study of places that compose any one of the above regional scales could be considered subnational. However, in practice, most studies are aimed at covering national territory, major regions such as the south, Appalachia, nonmetropolitan regions and, less frequently, individual states.

Sociologists have overlapping conceptual objectives for situating their work at the subnational scale. First, they may have a direct conceptual interest in processes at this scale. Some are concerned with specific regions. In the US case, researchers have explored processes creating persistent poverty in Appalachia and the rural south, focusing on the historical legacy of poor quality employment, weak social safety net and civic society, and racism (in the case of the south) (Duncan, 1999; Falk *et al.*, 2003; Lyson and Falk, 1993; McGranahan, 1980; Tickamyer *et al.*, 2007). Others are interested in the manner by which changes in the economy and state play out subnationally. Sociologists have long studied industrial restructuring, such as the growth of services and decline of manufacturing, and its impacts on poverty and income inequality at the subnational scale (Bloomquist and Summers, 1982; Lobao, 1990; Lorence and Nelson, 1993). There also is growing interest in the processes by which the state, including federal defence operations (Hooks, 1994; Hooks and Smith, 2004), general federal programmes (Mencken, 2000) and social welfare policy (Soule and Zylan, 1997) affect regional well-being. Finally, there is interest in the state at multiple scales, such as the degree to which devolution may create a race-to-the bottom in regional well-being (Lobao and Kraybill, 2005).

A second reason for focus on the subnational scale is to test claims derived from abstract theory. Here, researchers are interested in how theory

works out on-the-ground and in extending aspatial or underspatialized literatures. A longstanding example is labour market research, where researchers are concerned with extending general stratification theories on the allocation of jobs, earnings and poverty (Fernandez and Su, 2004). More recently, sociologists have been concerned with the degree to which relationships expected from macro-level theories on income inequality hold subnationally (Lobao *et al.*, 1999; Nielsen and Alderson, 1997).

Third, researchers may have policy and social justice interests, what Markusen (2001) calls the politicization of space. For example, early subnational research on industrial restructuring built on Bluestone's and Harrison's (1982) classic call-to-arms about its deleterious impacts on the northern manufacturing belt. Another example is the use of subnational territory to make visible multiple interlocking oppressions. Hooks and Smith (2004) for example, find that US defence policy targeted poor counties with Native American reservations for post-war munitions testing, degrading the environment and jeopardizing residents' well-being.

Conceptual starting points: spatially-oriented and inequality-oriented subfields

As noted above, researchers studying the subnational scale typically start from two alternative approaches. Analysts build from spatially-oriented subfields of demography and rural sociology to extend these fields through a critical analysis of inequality issues. In both demography and rural sociology, it is often customary to frame research questions with explicit consideration of subnational space. Both traditions emerged from human ecology roots, which saw spatial variations as resulting from human adaptation to different ecological settings. Critical perspectives that view spatial variations in terms of power and inequality are more recent (Horton, 1999; Lobao, 2004). Both traditions span the urban and rural divide. Since the 1990s, rural sociologists have been developing a large literature on rural poverty centred at the subnational scale (RSS Task Force, 1993), with a recent update of this work provided by Tickamyer (2006).

The second approach is to begin from a subfield whose foremost concern is inequality, then bring in space. Researchers build from subfields specializing in different aspects of inequality allocation but which are underspatialized. Some build from general stratification literatures that examine how valued resources are allocated according to class, gender, race and ethnicity, and other statuses (Cotter et al., 2007; McCall, 2001). Others focus on the actors and institutions responsible for allocating inequalities, the market and the state. Thus, economic sociologists (Grant and Wallace, 1994) and political sociologists (Leicht and Jenkins, 2007) have looked to the subnational scale to extend questions germane to these subfields.

Challenges to building the body of work

Sociologists have a rich empirical work on inequality at the subnational scale, as we show below, but face challenges to move forward. Foremost is the need to bridge segmented literatures and develop a better theoretical understanding of subnational inequality. With the eclipse of the human ecology framework, sociologists have no widely used theories to study the subnational scale. This contrasts with urban research where the eclipse of human ecology was met with extensive theory building from Marxist and other approaches (Walton, 1993).

A conceptualization of subnational inequality occurs largely through independent, spatially-oriented or inequality-oriented literatures. As each study tends to focus on one or two concepts central to its home literature, the body of work appears as if it were a series of disconnected stories rather than a concerted effort to address inequality. While building a common theoretical approach remains for the future, a prerequisite task is to show how existing work can be consolidated to overcome present fragmentation.

Empirically, there are also gaps. The most systematic knowledge about determinants of subnational inequality centres on private sector economic forces. Less attention has been given to the public sector and to institutional arrangements among social actors representing capital, labour, the state and civic society.

Consolidating research: disparities in economic well-being across the subnational scale

We take up a key challenge above, not yet addressed by previous studies—the need to consolidate research and bridge current fragmentation. We draw together research that seeks to explain the determinants of poverty and other economic inequalities across places, synthesizing lines of inquiry from different traditions into an organizing framework. Although broad theoretical efforts are not yet on the horizon, we argue that existing studies provide a foundation for extending sociology's distinct disciplinary approach to its neglected middle-scale.

A commonality across subnational studies is that they reflect a *genuinely sociological* stance grounded in the structural principles discussed earlier. Stratification theorists have long recognized that the organization of the economy sets the level of economic growth and that social actors struggle over its distribution (Grusky, 1994; Lenski, 1966). Inequalities arise from and are mediated by the institutionalized relationships emerging from struggles among actors such as capital, labour, the state and citizens. These insights, staples of sociology's inequality subfields (stratification, political sociology and economic sociology), have primacy for explaining subnational inequality. Further, although researchers may draw from geography and regional science, they do not seek to reinvent work in these disciplines. Rather, they seek to understand from a sociological perspective who gets what, where and why. Given this overriding stance, two sets of structural forces—the organization of the economy and institutional arrangements—can be viewed as central determinants of subnational disparities in economic well-being. In the discussion below, we outline the manner by which sociologists expect these two sets of structural determinants to operate at the subnational scale and the findings from empirical research. It should be noted, however, that empirical studies themselves often do not clearly explicate the processes by which structural determinants work out.

Economic structure

As noted, most attention to determinants of subnational inequality is given to the structure of the economy. The manner by which surplus is accumulated from economic activities affects levels as well as the distribution of economic well-being across places. In studying economic structure, researchers often draw from economic sociology's industrial segmentation literature, which sees sectors as varying by the quality and quantity of employment generated (Lobao *et al.*, 1999; Snipp and Bloomquist, 1989; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1987). Higher wage industries, such as durable manufacturing and producer services, are usually contrasted with lower wage industries, such as consumer services and agriculture. Although rarely explicitly articulated by researchers, economic structure as commonly measured by sector of employment, influences income levels and distribution across regional populations in direct and indirect ways. Primary impacts are through earnings and occupational structures (Bloomquist and Summers, 1982; Lorence and Nelson, 1993). Secondary impacts occur through economic multiplier effects (Bloomquist and Summers, 1982). Higher-wage employment also creates regional wage spreads, driving up labour costs as employers compete in the labour market. Insofar as sectors such as manufacturing depend on skilled and stable labour and generate oligopoly profits, employers may be more likely to support a stronger social safety net that can enhance regional well-being (Lobao *et al.*, 1999). Finally, economic structure may affect well-being indirectly via family structure. Areas more dependent on lower wage industries, for example, are likely to have greater social disruption due to poor quality, unstable employment, and in turn, to have a higher proportion of single family households, a known correlate of poverty (Albrecht *et al.*, 2000; Lichter and McLaughlin, 1995).

Thus, empirical studies tend to find that areas with greater durable manufacturing and higher wage service sector employment have better economic well-being: family incomes are higher and poverty rates lower (Bloomquist and Summers,

1982; Cotter, 2002; Haynie and Gorman, 1999; Horan and Tolbert, 1984; Mencken and Singelmann, 1998). Income inequality also has been found to be lower in such areas (Bloomquist and Summers, 1982; Lobao and Hooks, 2003; Nielsen and Alderson, 1997). By contrast, areas with greater dependence on the extractive sector (e.g. mining and agriculture) which tends to generate lower wage and/or unstable employment are usually found to have higher poverty rates (Albrecht *et al.*, 2000; Fisher, 2001; Lichter and McLaughlin, 1995; Lobao, 1990). While most research focuses on the private sector, public employment also varies in quality, affecting regional fortunes in a similar manner. For example, earnings per capita in federal employment tend to be higher than earnings in state/local government, so the former has more beneficial effects on family incomes (Lobao and Hooks, 2003). As the US economy shifts, sociologists have modified classifications of economic structure, but the principles above remain. Where higher quality employment is present, there tends to be a shadow effect on the population at large—poverty rates are lower and economic well-being of all residents is higher.

Regional packages of institutional arrangements

Although sociologists argue that power relationships among social actors influence economic well-being, they view these relationships partially and separately rather than as a conceptual package. Drawing research together, disparities in well-being arise in part from institutionalized arrangements between capital, labour, the state and citizens created as these actors struggle over economic and other resources. By institutionalized arrangements, we mean established power relationships, reflected in social practices, laws and organizations, that regulate economic growth and its distribution. Where these arrangements tend to favour workers, the poor and civic society as a whole, economic well-being should be higher. We provide several examples of how institutional arrangements affect subnational economic well-being.

First, regions vary by the degree to which workers are advantaged in securing material demands from employers. Labor forces possess different sets of resources that enable them to press for a greater share of economic surplus (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1987; Lobao, 1990). Researchers have given most attention to education, arguing that it increases the bargaining power of labour. Greater years of schooling are almost always highly related to higher income levels and lower poverty across locations (Cotter, 2002; Fossett and Siebert, 1997; Levernier et al., 1996). Labour unions and professional associations are other resources available to workers. Where unionized labour is higher, median family income tends to be higher and poverty and income inequality lower (Lobao et al., 1999; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1987) and labour's share of all earnings higher (Brady and Wallace, 2000). The bargaining power of all workers is also thought to be higher where race/ethnic and gender labour market inequalities are lower, as measured by labour force participation rates, earnings gaps and relative group size (Albrecht et al., 2000; Falk and Lyson, 1988; Fosset and Siebert, 1997; Nielsen and Alderson, 1997). The economic well-being of the general population tends to be greater where these inequalities are lower, as found in the previous studies. However, some studies also find that segments of the labour force, particularly white and/or male workers may benefit relatively from these inequalities, enjoying wage premiums (Cohen, 1998; McCall, 2001; Tomaskovic-Devey and Roscigno, 1996).

Second, regions vary by the degree to which the state protects the livelihood of citizens and the poor. Government policies and programmes have spatially uneven impacts due to their target populations and the nature of the US federalist system, where funding is often derived from a mix of governments and where federal programmes are often administered through county offices with different political cultures (Lobao and Hooks, 2003; Tickamyer et al., 2007). Decentralization also allows state and local governments to act more autonomously, creating greater spatial variation in the degree to which the interests of citizens and the poor are served

(Humphrey, 2001; Lobao and Kraybill, 2005). Compared to other disciplines, sociologists have given less attention to how state programmes and policies affect subnational well-being (Leicht and Jenkins, 2007; Mencken, 2000). The state's role in redistribution was analysed by Lobao and Hooks (2003). They found that where the state provides a stronger social safety net, populations at large benefit and aggregate economic well-being is greater over time. Alternatively, a few studies have investigated state intervention in regional growth. Federal defence spending has been found to bolster the effects of local manufacturing, in turn, promoting growth in earnings, income and employment (Mencken, 2004), but total federal spending itself appears to have little and/or mixed effects on growth (Kasarda and Irwin, 1991; Mencken, 1997).

Third, regions vary in their legacy of racial/ethnic subordination, where state and market forces combine to disadvantage areas with higher proportion of African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans. Persistent poverty is found subnationally in regions with high minority populations (Cotter, 2002; Duncan, 1999; Falk and Lyson, 1988; RSS Task Force, 1993) and recent immigration has created new pockets of poverty.

Fourth, regions vary in the degree to which a civic society has developed. Empirical studies have only recently examined civic society, which potentially decreases dependence from both an increasingly neoliberal, federal state and large, external corporate interests. Researchers measure civic society through the presence of small businesses and other indicators of an independent middle class, voting rates and church attendance. Where civic society is more developed, economic conditions (Lyson et al., 2001; Tolbert et al., 1998) and other forms of well-being (Grant et al., 2004; McLaughlin et al., 2007) tend to be higher.

In sum, existing research provides the foundation for considering the role of institutional arrangements in subnational disparities. Since sustenance comes from two sources, the market and the state, workers and citizens centre their claims on concessions from employers and government. Where they are more successful and/or where populations have

a strong capacity to reproduce themselves more independently from the state and large, external capital, economic well-being appears to be higher.

Place-specificity and territorial processes

Another set of conceptual determinants found in sociology's subnational research revolves around the territorial nature of inequality. These determinants too may be recognized in individual studies, but are not yet seen as a common thread. They add complexity to any generalizations about the subnational scale. For example, there is no one-to-one correspondence in the impact of economic and institutional forces across this scale, because unique (internal and external) attributes of place units and regional processes intervene. Most often these attributes are used as simple control variables. Sometimes they are centrally theorized as independent variables, endogenous or mediating effects, or moderating effects of the economic and institutional determinants discussed above.

Internal attributes of place units include demographic characteristics of their populations, ecological features of their built and natural environment, and their specific history. In addition to race and gender, researchers often examine demographic variables such as age and household structure. A higher proportion of working age people and two-parent families are usually related to better economic well-being (Albrecht *et al.*, 2000; Cotter, 2002; Lichter and McLaughlin, 1995; Lobao *et al.*, 1999). Measures of infrastructure, such as interstate highways and airports, and natural amenities are sometimes included in studies, with these attributes usually found to be more important in the fortunes of rural places than urban ones (Mencken, 1997; Weber *et al.*, 2005).

External factors involve the location of places in the broader political economy. Places vary in socio-economic conditions in part due to their location relative to neighbouring places and because they are nested in territorial units, such as states, the nation and the global economy. Closer proximity to metropolitan centres continues to be associated with better well-being, as the large literature on

rural poverty demonstrates (RSS Task Force, 1993; Tickamyer, 2006; Weber *et al.*, 2005). Embeddedness in larger territorial units affects place conditions in a variety of ways. Places located in a particular state may gain or lose relatively as federal policy is deployed to benefit some states over others (Hooks, 1994; Mencken, 1997). Position in the global economy affects variations in well-being. Brady and Wallace (2000), for example, find that in states where foreign corporations have greater direct investment, labour loses relatively in its share of earnings. By and large, however, changes in the global economy may serve as a backdrop for research but are rarely explicitly investigated in subnational inequality research.

Finally, territorial processes studied by geographers and more recently urban sociologists, are being incorporated into subnational research. As noted, however, dependence on secondary data and a lack of research into how social actors operate in places beyond city-limits, hampers sociologists' direct knowledge of these processes. The greatest attention to territorial processes is directed to diffusion or regional clustering of well-being as well as its determinants (Irwin, 2007; Voss, 2007). Some studies are concerned with spatial-mismatch processes in the supply and demand for labour, a topic traditionally covered at the urban scale. For example, regions with large minority populations are often observed to lack access to employment, contributing to higher poverty (Fosset and Seibert, 1997). Endogeneity in regional processes, whereby variations in subnational well-being potentially result from differential residential selection has been called to sociologists' attention by regional economists (Weber *et al.*, 2005), but it remains little studied.

In sum, we argue that although research gaps persist, a general sociological approach to disparities at the subnational scale can be derived from existing research. Economic structure and institutional arrangements, broadly construed, are determinants appearing across studies. In turn, there is recognition that place-specific attributes and spatial processes need to be incorporated into research. This view builds from sociology's stratification heritage,

from economic and political sociological insights about the market and state as allocators of inequality, and from spatially-oriented traditions. This organizing framework does not replace deeper theorizing. Rather, we see it as useful for synthesizing research and highlighting conceptual gaps—necessary tasks toward developing more holistic theory.

Conclusions

Although social scientists increasingly recognize the subnational scale as an important site for addressing inequality, sociology lags behind in attending to this scale. As a consequence, the understanding of poverty and other forms of disadvantage is set back across the social sciences, because sociology's distinct structural lens and rich stratification literature are deflected from key substantive topics, places and populations. The emerging body of work that investigates subnational inequality thus has broad significance: it situates sociology's big questions about power and privilege within the heart of its spatial knowledge gap. To advance research, present limitations need to be overcome and we briefly outline some directions.

Developing a more coherent approach to the subnational scale via sociology's own literatures and debates is a prerequisite toward engaging other social sciences and advancing the study of poverty and other inequalities across space. Sociologists exploring subnational inequality are not interested in duplicating work in other disciplines; rather they seek to create something new, a distinct approach that goes beyond the confines of their traditional locally-oriented, urban and cross-national research. This does not mean that sociologists should forgo interdisciplinarity, as we discuss below. Rather, a foremost step is the need to look inside the discipline to build a more coherent body of research.

Fragmentation among studies needs to be overcome. Research directed to the subnational scale from inequality-oriented traditions, including political and economic sociology, from spatially-oriented traditions such as demography and rural sociology, and from the developed spatial inequality traditions of urban and cross-national sociology,

offer linked conceptual and empirical approaches. These traditions highlight the need for multifaceted attention to: members of different class, race, ethnic, gender and other social groups experiencing different types of inequalities; economic and social institutions allocating resources; actors such as capital, labour, the state and civic society; place-specificity; and spatial processes.

Advancing sociological research will require modifications in the manner by which theory is currently deployed. Most studies centre on theorizing how a single or a few determinants, primarily economic structure, affect disparities in well-being across places and populations. This limits the study of subnational inequality overall and fragments the body of research. Synthetic approaches which build conceptually from inequality-oriented and spatially-oriented traditions and spatial extensions of under-spatialized theory have the potential for making broader theoretical headway.

In a related issue, most studies centre on one side of the inequality question, the structural determinants of different inequalities across regions, rather than the question of how poor or prosperous regions come to be created historically. The second question entails greater attention to distinct global, national and local social forces and actors creating uneven development, how they shape a gestalt of place attributes, and how they set in motion potential path-dependency in subsequent development. Even when the focus is on persistently poor regions such as the rural south and Appalachia, attention tends to be on certain forms of inequality (e.g. poverty, education and employment status indicators) rather than to development processes that reproduce regional marginalization. Although geographers have devoted extensive attention to theorizing uneven development, their insights are still not well incorporated into sociological research. The study of uneven regional development is a key area where sociologists would benefit from a stronger engagement with geography.

Advancing subnational research also requires attention to territorial units whose political economic operation has received little direct scrutiny. For example, counties are often employed in US

subnational research. Their boundaries remain relatively stable over time and extensive secondary data on populations is available for them. These attributes make counties vulnerable to use for convenience sake and to underestimating their conceptual significance. However, as noted, counties are now important to understanding poverty and other inequalities due to decentralization and welfare reform (Lobao and Kraybill, 2005). Little is known about counties' role in subnational governance because federal sources contain virtually no information about activities directly undertaken by them. Even the Census of Governments, the major data source on US counties, has little information about counties' provision of social and general public services and economic development activities. Counties, like other non-city units are still black-boxes: understanding their role in inequality processes will require in-depth studies on the growth and redistribution activities of these governments as important arms of the state.

Conceptual-methodological gaps in understanding territorial processes also need to be sorted out. There remains little direct attention to the pathways by which economic and state institutions affect inequality and how regional processes intervene in relationships. Dependency on secondary data limits the understanding of regional processes. Quantitative studies using aggregate-level data face common methodological concerns, such as spatial autocorrelation and endogeneity in regional processes. Although sociologists increasingly draw from geographic methodologies, they are still at early stages of routinizing their approach to these common methodological concerns.

The subnational scale also ushers in complex research questions beyond singular issues about poverty and other economic well-being. Examples include studying the manner by which economic growth can be combined with income inequality, as is increasingly the case in the bicoastal USA, and the spatial distribution of noneconomic inequalities such environmental and health conditions. Complex inequalities of race/ethnicity, class and gender intersectionalities are just beginning to be explored (McCall, 2001). Subnational research on the state tends to be limited to government em-

ployment and sometimes specific policies or programmes. Casting a broader net on neoliberal governance would contribute to a better understanding of how the state, along with its private sector partners, affects inequality across places.

As we noted, sociologists have been ambivalent about policy engagement. This is one of the consequences of the discipline's structural stance that stresses the need for fundamental social change and often views the state as benefiting elite interests as opposed to those of civic society. Current subnational research by sociologists, however, focuses on numerous issues discussed earlier, such as industrial restructuring, devolution, environmental degradation, prison-building efforts and economic development programmes that have significant policy implications. Rather than wait by the sidelines and allow neoliberal voices to dominate policy discourse, sociology's subnational research creates opportunities to weigh in on these issues. Progressive, policy-relevant research aimed at this scale by other social scientists (Glasmeier, 2005; Partridge and Rickman, 2006) and within subfields such as rural sociology (RSS Task Force, 1993; Tickamyer, 2006) provides examples of how sociologists can both adhere to their disciplinary integrity and bring research to bear on important public policy issues.

Finally, as sociologists carve out their lens on stratification at the subnational scale, they might work toward a larger project, the development of a critically-oriented approach to the general study of inequality across space. Here, the importance of framing questions about power and privilege at and across a variety of spatial scales would be widely recognized and the concept of scale itself would be directly interrogated. Such an approach would blend the sociological imagination with the geographical imagination, enriching the study of poverty and other inequalities across the social sciences.

Endnotes

¹ That is, while sociologists have perennially studied inequality, large, well-known coherent literatures on the *spatial* manifestations of inequality are concentrated in development/cross-national sociology and since the

1980s in critical urban sociology (Soja 1989; Walton 1993). Although other subfields address inequality across space, cross-national/development sociology and urban sociology specialize in the topic.

² In economics and geography, the term region is usually applied to this scale. Smith and Dennis' (1987, 167) classic article on scale uses both 'subnational' and 'regional' to describe this scale. In sociology, however, region tends to be equated with nominal regions such as the South, New England and Appalachia.

³ Our discussion seeks to characterize sociology as a discipline and its body of work. The missing middle is a metaphor for the relative lack of attention to the subnational scale compared to the extensive attention given to inequality at the cross-national and local, urban scales. This lack of attention is reflected in fragmented studies that do not provide the analytical power of sociology's mature spatial inequality traditions. Sociologists are not homogeneous and some work in settings such as the US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service where subnational research is conducted. But our focus is the body of work in the discipline. As discussed below, researchers studying subnational inequality draw from the body of work in several subfields, notably rural sociology, demography, stratification, economic sociology and political sociology.

⁴ The failure to analyse how inequality is studied by different sociological subfields with their respective scalar traditions in sociology limits the understanding of connections among literatures and reinforces the invisibility of research outside dominant discursive scales. For other discussions that address spatial inequality across different sociological subfields see Lobao et al. (2007), Soja (1989) and Tickamyer (2000). For an earlier articulation of sociology's neglect of the subnational scale see Lobao and Hooks (2007).

⁵ In addition to conceptual reasons for treating poverty as part of a larger question of inequality, there are empirical reasons. In sociology, the study of poverty evolved intertwined with the general study of stratification, making it difficult to draw the line between where poverty research begins and ends today. Certainly, poverty as defined in the US case by a measure of absolute deprivation, taps a distinct dimension of stratification. However, in empirical research, poverty is often studied alongside other stratification indicators and used as a measure of general economic well-being. This is particularly true in subnational research. Poverty correlates closely with other stratification indicators such as income inequality, educa-

tional attainments and health status across the subnational scale (Glasmeier 2005; Lobao 1990).

⁶ Policy research and engagement usher in complex issues in sociology due to debates about the role of the state and also about how sociology should function as a profession. For discussion about these issues see Burawoy (2005), Lo and Schwartz (1998); and Wilson (1993).

⁷ We can only provide a brief discussion of this topic insofar as it relates to the focus of our paper, sociology's emergent subnational literature. For brief discussions of geographers' views of sociological research on spatial inequality, see De Verteuil (in preparation) and Del Casino and Jones (2007). For a discussion of how human geography influenced the development of sociologists' study of subnational inequality, see Lobao et al. (2007).

⁸ For each discipline to grow a deeper tradition of studying stratification across space, insights from the other must be incorporated. It is premature and beyond the scope of this study to detail exactly how this might be done. As we have noted, there have been only scattered attempts to directly compare the discipline's treatment of stratification across space.

⁹ Negative spatial clustering, where rich counties are surrounded by poor counties (and vice-versa) exists in a very few areas, mainly in the mountain west, but it is not shown here due to resolution. While sociological studies on nominal regions such as Appalachia and the South exist, they are largely case study based and/or treat these regions and the forces creating poverty within them as separate and unique from other regions. Today, little theoretical attention is directed to the manner by which poverty and prosperity shift unevenly across time within a nation-state as a whole.

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