In the essay “The role of theory in ethnographic research, William Julius Wilson and Anmol Chaddha examine the criticisms to three popular studies utilizing ethnographic research by the authors Elijah Anderson, Mitchell Duneier, and Katherine Newman. The critic, Loic Wacquant, argues that the three authors’ research represents “an inappropriate disconnect between theory and observation” and that the author’s do no offer well-rounded analysis of the populations which they observe. Because of this, Wacquant contends, their subsequent theories seem weak. Wilson and Chaddha also examine the authors’ respective responses to these criticisms in which they explain their reasoning and rationale for the motivations for and execution of the research. In this way, Wilson and Chaddha hope to educate the reader and assist him or her from performing common missteps in both observation and theory which can make findings unclear.

In order to better understand Wacquant’s arguments, we must first understand the two main contexts of ethnographic theory: *discovery* and *validation*. Discovery focuses on “the way in which fruitful concepts, hypotheses, and theories are discovered” whereas validation refers to the analysis and evaluation of the products of research and the explication of these products as valuable. In Wacquant’s criticism of the three studies, he maintains that too much focus was put on the discovery aspect and not enough on validation. In his view, this is dangerous because the researcher could begin to simply become the stenographer for social groups – relaying information without adequately and objectively analyzing the results of the research. More specifically, “the research may be organized according to the terms of public discourse around certain social issues, instead of applying the analytical lens of social science.”

Wilson and Chaddha begin by examining Wacquant’s criticism of Elijah Anderson’s book *The Code of the Street* (1999) in which Anderson attempts to analyze the social order of a small population in inner-city Philadelphia. In his book, Anderson uncovers what he sees as two “codes” – the “code of the street” which is centered on interpersonal interaction and respect with the threat of physical violence used in order to assert oneself; and the “decent” code which is centered on middle-class values of hard work and morality. According to Wacquant, categorizing the community in this way causes an “either/or” distinction – placing the individuals in the community into one of two buckets as opposed to viewing the two codes as ends on a continuum. Wacquant asserts that this view limits the researcher from examining how social interactions facilitate or inhibit one’s location toward one end or the other. Secondly, Wacquant argues that Anderson fails to incorporate social stratification that may be internal to the community and how that affects one’s position in street-decent dichotomy, saying that it would have been wise for Anderson to include a “systemic map of social differentiation in the ghetto.” Lastly, Wacquant contends that Anderson fails to provide an adequate theoretical definition of “code”, making it difficult for the reader to understand if the code is cultural tool that shapes behavior or a behavior that shapes culture.

Anderson responds to these criticisms with his own, claiming that Wacquant is tethered to a “top down” approach to ethnographic research wherein the researcher is tied to a specific theory and that subsequent research should be tied to that theory. In Anderson’s view, ethnographic research should use sociological theories as tools rather than be enslaved by them, and that the researcher should “use his sociological knowledge, in combination with local knowledge gained from the site, to formulate the analytical questions that guide the research.” Furthermore, Anderson refutes the opinion that he needed a map to better explicate his results by asserting that “there *is* no map and none is required,” maintaining that the results he gained clearly reflect the social realities of the community.

Next, Wilson and Anmol examine Wacquant’s criticisms of Duneier’s book *Sidewalk* (1999) where he studies street vendors and their role in providing safety and promoting moral behavior in public spaces. Wacquant claims that Duneier “was not led by an interest in addressing specific sociological questions” but rather projecting his own morality “unrealistically” onto his participants. Wacquant repeats the argument that Duneier, like Anderson, does not critically assess the information given to him by his participants, taking what they say at face value and weakening his sociological explanations. Lastly, Wacquant argues that Duneier does not provide data to substantiate his claim that street vendors promote safety.

Duneier responds to these criticisms by explaining that he used both inductive and deductive approaches in his research, saying that he was influenced by research in public spaces by theorists like Jane Jacobs (1961) and had some of his own research questions at the beginning of the study. However, he maintains that, as research progresses, new questions arise and the researcher must be willing to adapt to these in order to adequately assess his or her observations. Duneier, like Anderson, is also critical of Wacquant’s macro-level approach to research and theory which leaves no room for “micro-level specificity.”

Lastly, Wilson and Chaddha summarize Wacquant’s critique of *No Shame in My Game* by Katherine Newman, which provides research on low-income service workers in Harlem. Newman uses information gathered from these subjects to form a theory as to why these individuals, given limited opportunities, reject the street economy. According to Wacquant, Newman illustrates a weak link between theory and observations, saying that she assumes too much, juxtaposing normative behavior on her subjects without the research to back it up. As Wilson and Chaddha explain, “[t]his notion gives rise to a normative judgment of her subjects that leads Newman to associate their behavior with their cultural or moral orientation, without incorporating other theoretically informed explanations of their actions.” (554) Additionally, Wacquant argues that Newman incorrectly makes the assumption that these individuals have the opportunity and the ability to make a rational choice between legitimate and illegitimate means of income.

Newman counters these arguments by explaining that her work in *No Shame in My Game* was intended to buttress previous theoretical research on inner-city individuals engaged in the street economy and what influenced their choices, including a lack of “mainstream” morality. She also criticizes Wacquant’s view that she focuses too much on the existence or absence of morality, saying that all inner-city research deals with morality, and to say that it does not it “head-in-the-sand thinking.”

Wilson and Chaddha end with a discussion of both Wacquant’s critiques as well as the responses by the authors in order to analyze the role of inductive and deductive methods in ethnographic research. Beginning with Anderson, they explain that Anderson’s defense of his inductive approach, that “the most penetrating ethnographic questions often result from a fusion of concerns that reflects both the ethnographers’ engagement of the social setting as well as his or her own sociological orientation,” is convincing. Here, Wilson and Chaddha help to bolster the use of both indcutive and deductive approaches in constructing a grounded theory. However, Wilson and Chaddha believe that Anderson’s response to Wacquant’s argument that he fails to apply a social map to help illustrate the street-decent dichotomy misses the mark. As they explain, Wilson and Chaddha reason that Wacquant was arguing that Anderson did not explicitly explain where his theory was coming from, leaving the reader to assume that he was coming from a background of, as he later explains, Simmel, Weber, Durkheim, and so on. Additionally, Duneier’s response that Wacquant relies too much on a “top-down” approach, using theoretical backgrounds to interpret ethnographic observations, is too rigid and limiting. However, Wilson and Chaddha argue that, while Wacquant advocates for more deductive methods, he does not say that inductive approaches while interpreting the data do not have their place. As Wilson and Chadda explain: “The extent to which work can withstand critical and prolonged scrutiny in the context of validation will be based in large measure on the researcher’s creative insights in the discovery and integration of empirical findings and theoretical ideas.” (560)

While Wilson and Chaddha see Anderson and Duneier’s research as falling within the context of both discovery and validation, and their responses to Wacquant as positive explanations of their presented findings, they do not feel the same about *No Shame in My Game.* According to Wilson and Chaddha, Newman’s argument that she was attempting to add to “under-class theory” does not hold water, as under-class theory attempts to examine structural forces that lead to poverty and joblessness, as well as examine how these factors influence inner-city residents. Wilson and Chaddha argue that “[s]imply describing supposedly contrary evidence showing that, indeed, many people in the inner city are working and subscribe to mainstream values does not refine or challenge this theory.” (561) In Wilson and Chaddha’s view, Newman would have done better if she had explained how her research added to the current body of work surrounding poverty in the inner city, rather than trying to change stereotypes about the working poor.

In this article, Wilson and Chaddha explain the use of deductive and inductive approaches in ethnographic research. Naturally, any author can choose the extent to which he or she wishes to use these methods. However, the authors raise a few points to watch for when constructing a solid theory. For instance, it is wise to assume the reader knows nothing about your research or theoretical background. From this viewpoint, the importance of explicitly stating your background, as well as how your theory adds to the current body of research, is clear. As Wilson and Chaddha explain, “good ethnography is theory driven.” Furthermore, good ethnography incorporates both inductive and deductive approaches in order to produce a more well-rounded theory which is more concrete.

**Reference:**

Wilson, William Julius, and Anmol Chaddha. 2009. "The Role of Theory in Ethnographic

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