Culture and Education

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Abstract: I review the primary frameworks through which North American sociologists have conceived of the relation between formal education and culture, and explain how sociologists’ preponderant conception of formal schooling as an individual-level phenomenon and a metrical quantity has come to constrain intellectual progress in much of the subfield. I offer two analytic strategies which might help loosen this constraint.
Entries for the word “culture” in a commonly used dictionary make education a definitive component of the concept. The third listed definition is “Development of the intellect through training or education…Enlightenment resulting from such training or education.” The deep implication of formally organized schooling in cultural formation, transmission, and social stratification has long been appreciated by sociologists, although the nature of this appreciation has varied widely over time and across disciplinary space. The primary goal of this essay is to provide a schematic map of this terrain.

The three most influential modes of cultural explanation in the sociology of education trace directly to the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. While it may seem excessively didactic to begin with the classics, it is my contention that analyses deriving from these different theoretical traditions offer fundamentally different conceptions of the relationship between culture, education, and social structure, and that elision of these differences has brought theoretical confusion to the sociology of education. Going to the blunt beginnings of cultural explanations in the subfield enables us to more clearly appreciate the implications, limitations, and occasional contradictions of recent scholarship, and to better see how sociologists might invigorate their studies of education with insights closer to cultural theory’s cutting edge.

The core of sociological research on education at present is defined by a particular theoretical and methodological commingling of Marx and Weber’s ideas. I sketch this core in the first section of this essay, arguing that sociologists’ enduring penchant for quantification has tended to obscure the essentially cultural character of educational processes. I flesh out this argument in the essay’s second section by describing the trouble North American sociologists have had with annexing the insights of Pierre
Bourdieu and his colleagues in French sociology. The third section takes up the two largest strands of Emile Durkheim’s legacy on the sociology of education in the United States. One was most clearly explicated in the work of Talcott Parsons at Harvard in the 1950s; the other came out of Stanford through the work of John Meyer and his colleagues from the 1970s onward. As I will explain in this essay’s fourth section, the Parsonian strand was largely evacuated with the rights movements and intellectual fragmentation of the culture concept in the latter decades of the twentieth century, while the Meyerian strand has became something of an explanatory archipelago, often cited by those at the Marxo-Weberian core but only tenuously connected to them. I conclude by discussing how three other bodies of scholarship which at present are removed from the core – the study of peer culture, of social networks, and of schools as formal organizations – hold promise for moving cultural explanation in the sociology of education out of its storied but constraining past.

**How Marx, Weber, and Statistics Formed an Intellectual Core**

Ever since Marx penned his famous dictum that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas (Tucker 1978:172),” inheritors of his insights have developed ever more sophisticated analyses of how the production and transmission of knowledge serve the interests of power. The starkness of the earliest formulations of this idea seem almost quaint to contemporary readers, a consequence of their now deep embeddedness in the strata of sociological thinking: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production….The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant
material relationships (ibid);” “Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class made into a law for all [.](487).” Countless scholars would add texture and nuance to these ideas over time, but the notion that culture is derivative of economic relations has remained a definitive mark of cultural studies in the Marxist tradition.

Among the most influential exponents of this notion for the sociology of education were, in fact, economists. Herbert Bowles and Samuel Gintis’ *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) influenced an entire generation of social scientists who studied schools. The book was a quite orthodox Marxist analysis of formal education. It argued that self-interested, internally coherent ruling classes had created and maintained a schooling system which systematically christened children from privileged backgrounds with ostensibly class-neutral educational certifications, while systematically preventing working- and lower-class children from achieving these certifications in comparable measure. The big point was that the primary social consequence of formal schooling was to legitimate preexisting economic and political power. Formal schooling, and our faith in its socially ameliorative capacities, is for Bowles and Gintis little more than false consciousness concealing fundamental class conflicts.

Max Weber’s famous argument with the Marxian conception of the world was that modern societies are characterized by not one but multiple kinds of power. It is not just economic relations which define social hierarchy. Political and status systems also have independent effects on the character of inequality. Weber held that formal education is an important mechanism of status aggrandizement, economic organization and political legitimation in complex societies as different as industrial Germany and
imperial China. Weber was especially astute in his theorization of the importance of formal education in the development of Western modernity. He explained that as societies modernize, inequalities of family, caste, and tribe gradually give way to hierarchies predicated on individual achievement. In modern times individuals accumulate status as they move through the elaborate bureaucracies that characterize industrial societies: large corporations, centralized governments, big religious organizations, and schools. These forms of organization tend to distribute rewards on the basis demonstrated individual accomplishment, not inherited privilege (Weber 1946). In this vision schools are crucial organizations in modern societies because they embody the official separation of persons from positions of privilege. Privileged parents put their children through schools so that they might acquire official license to occupy relatively desirable positions in government ministries, religious organizations, and the myriad bureaucracies of modern capitalist economies.

By no means was Weber naïve about the capacity of economic or political power to privilege itself through education, or for schools themselves to be instruments of economic and political influence. His was less an analytic of meritocracy than of legitimacy, and Weber’s echo of Marx is clear here. However in contrast with Marx, Weber realized that holders of academic credentials and the engineers of academic organizations (often but not always the same people) have some power independent of economic and political clout. Educational attainment on the one hand, and formal schooling’s bureaucratic reach and capacity on the other, can have independent effects on the structure of inequality in modern societies.
An important legacy of this insight in North American sociology was the consistent empirical finding that, when it is modeled mathematically, formal schooling has statistically independent effects on the inter-generational transmission of social hierarchies. If the statistical correlation between quantitative measures of parents’ social position and children’s educational attainment were exact – if accomplishment in school unerringly paralleled household income, for example – then schooling would not be so coveted by people from humble backgrounds. As it happens formal education is broadly perceived by people from all social classes as an effective mechanism of social mobility, because it is capable of moving people up, and down, social hierarchies.

The 1960s and 70s are when social scientists became adept at assessing these ideas empirically, using statistical techniques to model the relationships between family background, educational attainment and individual prosperity over the life course. Exploiting a growing cache of numerical data sets and ongoing advances in computer technology, researchers such as James Coleman (1966), Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan (1967), Christopher Jencks (1972) and many others developed a rich tradition of empirical scholarship about the role of schooling in mediating social inequality. While work in this tradition is vast and diverse, two of its findings have been remarkably consistent: formal schooling does indeed have independent effects on individual life chances; at the same time, parents tend to use formal education as a primary means of handing privilege down to their children. In other words, and as some of the field’s most famous theorists first articulated (Sorokin 1959 [1927]; Collins 1971), Marx’s domination and Weber’s legitimation go hand in hand.
Abundant and compelling scholarship in what came to be called the status-
attainment tradition solidified this conception of education within mainstream U.S.
sociology. Blau & Duncan’s classic *American Occupational Structure* (1967),
specifically, provided definitive statistical evidence that formal education has
independent effects on young men’s fate in labor markets. Their work demonstrated that
formal education mediated the intergenerational transmission of labor market position
between fathers and sons. How much school sons completed was partly -- but not
entirely -- a function of their fathers’ income and education. Further, the amount of
school sons completed had direct effects on their own labor market positions. This and
much subsequent research provided consistent empirical support for the large, and
historically expanding, role of formal education in the distribution of social rewards.
This empirically careful line of work consistently has shown that formal education is an
important catalyst of family advantage, and also has independent effects on individual
income, occupational, and marital outcomes (for a recent review see Breen & Jonnson
2005).

Even while sociologists of education came to presume that domination and
legitimation went hand in hand, however, they continued to argue about which hand was
the more decisive one. The data could be read both ways. Christopher Jencks and his
colleagues’ landmark book in this tradition, *Inequality* (1972), demonstrated that social
background characteristics explained approximately half of the statistical variation in
educational attainment among a nationally representative sample of young people. Was
this domination’s glass half empty, or legitimation’s glass half full? As Scott Davies
(1995) suggests in his meta-analysis of sociological scholarship on education in North
America over the last quarter century, it depends on who one asks. Davies divides educational sociologists into two camps whose explanatory preferences reflect an enduring divide between those who tend to favor one side or the other of this theoretical partnership. In one group are those who often call themselves critical scholars or reproduction theorists, who are keenly attuned to how formal educational systems systematically privilege the economically well-positioned and re-enforce the subordinate position of the economically disadvantaged. In the other camp are those who study empirical patterns of school achievement and socioeconomic stratification statistically; their primary occupation is to pursue ever more precise ways of measuring and assessing the relative influence of educational and socioeconomic inputs of all sorts on educational and socioeconomic outcomes of all sorts. I will here call them stratification-and-achievement scholars.

Cultural explanations are crucial tools for both kinds of scholars, although the explanations themselves are quite different. Among reproduction theorists cultural explanations tend to take dialectical forms. American educational culture is characterized by an “achievement ideology” which promises quid pro quo meritocratic rewards that are rarely delivered in full (MacLeod 1987). At the same time, disadvantaged young people and their families often creatively “resist” the machinations of oppression in schools by creating alternative conceptions of themselves and their circumstances. As Paul Willis argued in his classic Learning to Labor (1981), this meaning-making resistance can take forms that legitimate continued subjugation. But it sometimes can engender real change in oppressive social structures, as in the “cognitive liberation” among African Americans that facilitated the civil rights movement (McAdam 1982). It also can foster promising
innovation at the fringes of conventional schooling, as in the recent embrace of charter schools by some members of disadvantaged groups (Rofes & Stulberg 2004). In this tradition culture oppresses, but it also can liberate, at least potentially.

Stratification-and-achievement scholars have purveyed a decidedly cultural explanation as well, of course. The inclusion of measures of formal schooling in status-attainment models is essentially a means of formally modeling a Marxo-Weberian cultural legitimation hypothesis: cultural experience and cultural knowledge, crystallized as schooling, both mediates preexisting family privilege and has independent effects on life outcomes. This operationalization has been so influential that it virtually has replaced its underlying theory in the sociological imagination. Cultural legitimation has become so commonly represented by quantitative measures of formal schooling that sociologists scarcely recognize schooling as a cultural phenomenon anymore.

Social scientists have long understood that numbers have enormous utility for facilitating cooperation and control in complex societies. Parties who otherwise know little about each other can coordinate their behavior as long as they have some numerical version of reality in common. Numerical currency systems make economic exchanges possible between people who know nothing about each other except the price at which they are willing to buy or sell. Numerical time and navigational systems facilitate nautical, rail, and air travel across far-flung geographies, regardless of the languages spoken by the parties behind the wheels. Censuses, “vital statistics,” and profit-and-loss statements enable leaders of political and economic empires to capably rule their provinces from a distance, as long as the relevant stakeholders agree on the validity of the numbers on which big decisions are being made. The great utilities of quantification
come at a cost, however. Quantification tends to radically simplify otherwise complex phenomena, rendering empirically intricate reality deceptively straightforward. Once particular forms of quantification become institutionalized in the routines of researchers and policy-makers, the numbers themselves come to be regarded as coextensive with the underlying phenomena they measure. In market economies, value tends to become synonymous with price; in social science and public policy, social processes tend to become statistical associations (Espeland & Sauder 2007; Espeland & Stevens 1998).

This transformation of a complicated reality into fairly simple metrics is precisely what happened to education in post-WW II North American sociology. As quantitative means of empirical analysis became ever more preponderant in the discipline generally, sociologists of education increasingly presumed that quantitative measures of the amount of formal schooling individuals completed were not only necessary but also sufficient representations of educational processes. What schooling actually, empirically entailed – namely, the formalization and transmission of such fundamentally cultural phenomena as language, mathematics, art and literature – became a static quantity akin to money. Whether proxied as the number of years of school completed (Jencks 1972), degrees earned (Collins 1979) or school transitions navigated (Mare 1981), education became a metrical phenomenon. The content of formal schooling, which not only was essentially cultural but varied, amorphous, processual, and often hard to measure, disappeared.

**The French Incursion**

European sociologists of education integrated culture into their explanatory models rather differently than the Americans. In England, disciples of Stuart Hall at the University of
Birmingham developed a Marxist-inspired, heavily ethnographic field called “cultural studies,” while Oxford’s tradition of stratification research continued with a computational sophistication on a par with Blau & Duncan’s University of Wisconsin. In France, where the humanities enjoy especially high status within the national intellectual world (Lamont 1987), Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and their followers brought novel, elaborate, and discipline-crossing conceptualizations of social hierarchy to full fruition in the 1970s and 80s. While both French thinkers have been very influential on American sociology, the imprint of Bourdieu is stronger at this point in history, particularly in the sociology of education. Among Bourdieu’s earliest American importers were a cadre of ambitious sociologists – among them Paul DiMaggio, Michèle Lamont, Annette Lareau, John Mohr, and Loïc Wacquant – intent on developing a sociology of culture that would have explanatory power and methodological sophistication sufficient to earn respect within the quantitatively oriented North American sociological world. A good bit of this intellectual project has played out in the sociology of education.

While Bourdieu’s work is extensive, intricate, and often textually opaque to American readers, a few definitive insights distinguish it. Most important among them is the notion that class stratification and cultural stratification are inseparable. In contrast to both Marx and Weber, Bourdieu held that economic and political hierarchies are not just legitimated but constituted culturally. For Bourdieu, hierarchies of wealth, political influence, social status, even physical appearance and comportment are empirically indistinguishable. Second, Bourdieu gave much explanatory weight to *habitus*, which he defined as class-specific ways of seeing, consuming, acting and feeling that instantiate
class in sentient human subjects. Third, Bourdieu developed the notion of *cultural capital*, an idea which metaphorically blurred the distinction between economic and cultural resources. Bourdieu regarded possession of cultural knowledge as a kind of currency that, in the right contexts, was fungible with other kinds of social advantage. Finally, Bourdieu had an abiding interest in the transmission of class differences across generations (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977).

Among sociologists of education in North America, Bourdieu’s ideas have found advocates among both reproduction theorists and stratification-and-achievement scholars, though the two groups have tended to carry the insights forward quite differently. Reproduction theorists have embraced Bourdieu’s holistic conception of inequality and his deep implication of culture in the perpetuation of class differences. In keeping with Bourdieu’s own early statements on education (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), the reproduction theorists tend to argue that education transfers both habitus and cultural capital in stratified fashion and more or less directly: inequality begets inequality, whether through middle school classrooms and parent networks (Brantlinger 2003), college counseling (McDonough 1997), or parenting styles and orientation toward school (Lareau 2003; 2000).

For stratification-and-achievement scholars, the idea of cultural capital received the earliest empirical attention – almost surely because it is the easiest of Bourdieu’s key concepts to proxy with quantitative data. Path-breaking articles by Paul DiMaggio and John Mohr demonstrated that children’s experiences with elite cultural forms outside of formal schooling have positive effects on educational outcomes, independent of the social

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1 For a succinct overview of Bourdieu’s life and work, see the entry under his name by Richard Jenkins, pp. 66-71 in the *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, George Ritzer, editor (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005).
background characteristics typically measured in status-attainment research (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr 1985). Subsequent scholarship in this area sought concrete elaboration of the cultural capital idea with whatever relevant phenomena were available in large quantitative data sets: measures of children’s non-cognitive capacities and their classroom character; the amounts and kinds of printed materials in their homes; and the nature and extent of their extracurricular activities (e.g. Farkas 2003; Farkas et al. 1990; for a critical review see Lareau & Weininger 2003). In general the results of such studies have been sufficiently significant in the statistical sense for Bourdieu’s followers to get through the peer review process, while detractors have emphasized the often modest magnitudes of net statistical relationships between cultural-capital variables and educational outcomes as indication of a theory far short on evidence (Kingston 2001).

In keeping with the metrical presumptions of their overall enterprise, stratification-and-achievement scholars tend to assess Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital with measures of magnitude: to what extent variation in some particular aspect of cultural capital (musical ability, say) affects variation in formal educational attainment, net of other variables. The modest success of this research program has come at a high price: it elides the essential challenge of Bourdieu’s work to North American sociology, whose definitive conceit has been to presume that quantification is merely a tool for “operationalizing” theory. Yet the transformation of culture into an ever denser forest of supposedly “independent” variables directly undermines Bourdieu’s holistic conception of cultural and material hierarchies, a conception in which meaning and the material world are, like conjoined twins who share the same heart and brain, impossible to separate without killing the entire organism.
Perhaps the most fateful instance of this problem is the way in which Bourdieu’s early advocates in the U.S. measured cultural capital and formal schooling as separate variables (Dimaggio 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr 1985). Doing so left wholly intact the stratification-and-achievement scholars’ conception of formal schooling as a possession rather than a process, and also mathematically excluded “cultural capital” from whatever it is that goes on in school. The researchers simply added new measures, representing cultural experiences outside of formal schooling, and assessed the statistical relationships between these new measures of culture with variables describing school performance. However well intended, this methodological strategy reinforced the legitimacy of carving up culture into variables and of imagining formal education as somehow distinct from culture (see Lareau & Weininger 2003 for a related critique).

More recently, Bourdieu’s American followers have challenged the capacity of statistical modeling to adequately capture the essential logic of Bourdieu’s arguments. Unequal Childhoods (2003), Annette Lareau’s influential comparative ethnography of upper middle-class and working-class parenting styles, has galvanized this camp. The book derides much previous work in the stratification-and-achievement tradition as an endless “hunt for single determinants (64)” of children’s educational outcomes and calls instead for holistic pictures of class-specific parenting practices “coming together in a messy but still recognizable way (8).” Alas the conceptual advance – that the cultural capital conveyed by parents to their children is exquisitely intricate, its effects diffuse and cumulative – is, from the standpoint of quantitative sociology, an enormous problem. How quantitative researchers might plausibly assess the relative impact of one aspect of culture (parenting style, say), net of all others, let alone the other status-attainment
variables that usually are not thought of as culture per se (household income, parent age, marital status, race) remains a methodological frontier. Bourdieu himself was better positioned to elide this problem because of the weaker authority of quantitative research relative to theorizing in continental European sociology. Bourdieu’s American followers, however, have been more obliged to operationalize their claims in the form of quantitative empirical research. At present they remain caught in a three-pronged vise: one prong is the fundamentally holistic character of Bourdieu’s ideas; the second is the preponderance of statistical modeling of individual-level outcomes within American educational sociology, which proceeds through the systematic decomposition of empirical wholes; the third is the “black-boxing” (Latour & Woolgar 1979) of formal education into a singular quantity, which renders its cultural content and complexity largely exempt from scrutiny. It is a tight squeeze that leaves little room for innovative theorizing.

**Two Durkheimian Legacies**

Among Emile Durkheim’s most definitive intellectual moves was to appraise industrial societies with intellectual equipment first developed to make sense of pre-modern ones. The move was great because it encouraged early sociologists to wrestle with the simultaneity of continuity and change in the dynamics of human groups, even through the massive social-structural changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Durkheim was concerned that industrialization and urbanization would be accompanied by an inevitable weakening of traditional forms of group cohesion – the family, the village, the church – and that if modern societies were to foster the allegiance of their
members, they needed to devise novel means for producing solidarity. This, for Durkheim, was the job of formal secular schooling: to educate young people in the ever more abstract knowledges that knitted together ever larger collectivities; to foster deference to formal authority; and to generate emotional fealty to the nation (Durkheim 1977, 1961, 1957; see also Walters 2007).

Productive though it was, Durkheim’s comparison of modern and pre-modern group formations also was fateful, because it tended toward the view that challenges to solidarity were problems that groups were obliged to solve. As the progress of the twentieth century would make all too clear, the hard facts of cultural difference, political exclusion, and economic stratification in modern societies tend to make the dream of large-group solidarity seem ominous: at what price does it come, and who pays? As the reproduction and education-and-attainment versions of educational sociology gained traction over the course of the late twentieth century, especially among the academic left, Durkheim’s conception of schooling as a universalizing glue holding modern societies together often appeared nostalgic, reactionary, and even dangerous.

Along with the almost wholesale dismissal of Durkheimian solidarity went the notion of socialization elaborated by Talcott Parsons at Harvard under the banner of functionalism (1951, 1959). The socialization idea – that initiates of any group necessarily undergo a learning process in order to become competent group members – still holds considerable sway in the sociology of the professions, and in popular imaginations of what all formal schooling is about. Among sociologists of education, however, socialization fell into disfavor in the 1970s and 80s. During those decades the morally positive Parsonian socialization became a morally suspect hidden curriculum in
the eyes of many sociologists and education reformers. To wit, if schools “socialized,” they probably did so in suspect ways: enabling children of privilege to “prepare for power” (Cookson & Persell 1985) and cooling out the aspirations of the socioeconomically disadvantaged (Bowles & Gintis 1976).

It is no little irony that the author widely credited with coining the term “hidden curriculum,” the philosopher Phillip Jackson, did so in a now classic treatise on classroom socialization (Jackson 1968; also Snyder 1970). While Jackson himself was ecumenical regarding the value of the many things not on lesson plans that nevertheless get taught in classrooms, the notion that hidden curriculum has to do with legitimating the strong and controlling the weak fueled the passion of many critics in a politically turbulent era. Reformers such as Herbert Kohl, James Herndon, John Holt, and Ivan Illich elaborated the dark side of hidden curriculum and called for radical changes in the hierarchical organization of schools. Within sociology, this dark inflection gained popularity as a means of critiquing everything from standard Anglo-European versions of civics, literature, and history to the explicit stratification of educational opportunity.

Consider for example the title of James Rosenbaum’s 1976 book: *The Hidden Curriculum of High School Tracking*.

Not coincidentally, this period witnessed an intensification of concern with the relationship between education and race that has remained unabated in the subfield ever since. The U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark decision on civic integration, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), had powerful cultural resonance in part because its context was schools – long-touted organizational embodiments of the ideal of meritocracy. Most sociologists of education have had unequivocal commitments to racial integration and
racial equality in schools, and in the 1960s and 70s they put this commitment to the task of assessing chronic and often glaring disparities in educational attainment between whites and members of other racial groups, particularly blacks and Latinos. It was in this context that many new and often controversial cultural explanations in the sociology of education proliferated.

Perhaps the most controversial among them was the so-called “acting white” thesis, first developed by anthropologists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu. Fordham and Ogbu’s idea was straightforward and rhetorically compelling: black youth had come to associate high academic accomplishment with Anglos; for many of them, doing well in school was tantamount to “acting white” and derogating black identity (Fordham & Ogbu 1986). The thesis garnered much attention, and ultimately a compelling body of empirical challenge (e.g., Tyson 2002; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey 1998). The acting-white debate is only the most prominent of a wide range of scholarly endeavors seeking to assess how formal schooling inculcates and rewards certain cultural formations while ignoring or punishing others. So for example conventional public schooling is called “subtractive” for many Mexican youth, especially boys (Valenzuela 1999); preschool teachers tend to accommodate certain masculine gender performances while derogating certain feminine ones (Martin 1998); and middle-class parents definitively shape policy conversations about public schooling to their own advantage (Brantlinger 2003).

Much of this research picks up explicitly on Bourdieu’s insights about the constitutive role of culture in social stratification. Scholars speak, for example, of the “organizational habitus” that socio-economically privileged families bring to the college search relative to other households (McDonough 1997), and of the of the “non-dominant
cultural capital” nurtured by students of color (Carter 2005). But despite this theoretical
commonality, this scholarship remains divided along the very dimensions of difference
its advocates typically try to critique: race, class, and gender. With very few exceptions
(Arum 2003; Brint, Contreras & Matthews 2001), mainstream sociologists have
essentially abandoned consideration of formal schooling as a virtuous or even benign
means of generating social solidarity.

During the same years that the Durkheimian idea of socialization-for-solidarity
fell into disfavor at the core educational sociology, a different elaboration of Durkheim’s
work coalesced Stanford University, where John Meyer and his colleagues mentored
what are now multiple generations of students in a mode of educational analysis that
marries Durkheim and Weber. Put most simply, the Stanford school views formal
education as the religion of the modern secular state. In this vision the primary functions
of modern schools are to produce culturally and functionally autonomous citizen-
workers; to sacralize and stratify secular knowledge as the meaningful core of modern
societies; and to lend legitimate primacy to the modern nation-state over all other
organizational systems. This is a tall order for any social formation. Meyer and his
colleagues appreciate this, and they reiterate Durkheim in seeing formal education as a
constitutive, irreplaceable component of modern societies (see, e.g., Meyer, Boli &

Two things distinguish this Stanford scholarship from the rest of North American
educational sociology. First, analysts in this tradition have been little interested in
socioeconomic stratification and inequality. Their guiding interest has been how formal
education reconfigures the institutional structure of modernizing societies: families cease
to be preponderant units of socialization and instead come to produce human raw material for schools; sons and daughters become citizens and workers; religious institutions cede the arbitration of official knowledge to universities. The Meyerians are enthusiastic cross-national researchers, but their interest is less in material inequalities among nations than in a supposedly global tendency toward similar organizational formations.

This obliviousness to stratification has rendered the Stanford school something of a boutique taste. Meyer and his students assess socioeconomic inequality, unquestionably the central problem of American sociology, only occasionally. Additionally they have not been shy at dismissing educational research of the Marxo-Weberian sort as the earnest examination of surface variation – while Stanford investigates the institutional strata further down (Meyer 2001; 1986). The swagger and iconoclasm inherent in such a stance has earned the Meyer school intellectual respect but also a measure of disciplinary isolation.

A second distinguishing characteristic of this line of scholarship, and very important for purposes here, is that it lends explanatory primacy to cultural over material aspects of social organization. For Meyer and his colleagues, modern systems of formal education are the material embodiments of the dream of reason. The primary figure in that dream is the Enlightenment citizen-individual: the autonomous, rational bearer of rights and preferences. For the Meyerians this figure remains a philosophical contrivance until modern societies give it flesh by building citizen factories, specifically, democratic governments and schools.
For those eager to theorize a constitutive role for culture in the structural organization of modern societies, the Stanford vision provides an option of incomparable grandeur, but to date it has come at the cost of under-acknowledged cross-national variations and poorly conceptualized processes. The “Western cultural account” and its attendant institutions – representative democracies, schools, market or quasi-market economies, and international diplomatic organizations – often too easily “diffuse” in these analyses. Eastern European and Asian communism, fundamentalist religions, and ethnic conflicts are difficult to accommodate within the Stanford school’s framework at present. Making the framework more amenable to historical process and unintended consequences are this tradition’s most promising theoretical and methodological frontiers.

Peer Cultures, Social Networks, and Schools as Organizations

That people spend ever greater stretches of their lives in schools has had profound consequences for normative conceptions of the life course. Among the most important of these consequences has been the incremental delay of adulthood. People now are regarded as children for much longer periods than ever before in human history, and a whole new period of age and human development -- “adolescence” -- has been theorized into existence in tandem with the expansion of formal schooling (Aries 1962; Mintz 2004).

James Coleman was among the first sociologists of education to notice how all this time in age-segregated organizations engenders the formation of novel cultural systems produced and maintained by young people themselves. Coleman’s Adolescent
*Society* (1961), a breathtakingly capacious analysis of the worlds young people create among themselves in high school, posited a complex relationship between the formal organization of education and what would come to be called peer cultures. Schools may set the official rules of good behavior and accomplishment, but young people themselves create the status orders that are most salient to kids on a daily basis. *Adolescent Society* was based primarily on survey, interview, and academic data from students at ten U.S. high schools – a mixed-method design whose elegance and clarity impress even decades later. It was first published prior to the appearance of several of large-n quantitative studies, including Coleman’s own landmark federal-government commission (Coleman et al. 1966; Blau & Duncan 1967; Jencks 1972). The emphasis on schooling and macro-stratification and statistical orientation of these latter works would long define the sociology of education’s intellectual core, while peer culture enjoyed ongoing attention from qualitative sociologists in the symbolic interactionist tradition (see Corsaro & Eder 1990 for a review).

To date, scholarship on peer culture has been another archipelago: robust in itself but linked only tenuously to the core. So we are shown, for example, that contemporary young people produce status orders in their classrooms much like their counterparts Coleman’s account (Milner 2004); that athletics are an important vehicle for the development and maintenance of peer culture (Adler & Adler 1991; Fine 1987); and that race and gender differences continually are reproduced through face-to-face interactions in classrooms and playgrounds (e.g. Lewis 2003; Thorne 1993). Yet just how micro-level interactions are linked to macro-level patterns of stratification and inequality remains a large puzzle for the sociology of education, as it is for the sociology of culture.
generally (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003). I conclude this essay by suggesting two directions in which sociologists of education might pursue novel solutions to it.

The first direction is network research. Just as advances in data-gathering and computational technologies ultimately made the empirical demonstration of status-attainment theories in educational sociology possible forty years ago, scholars now are developing means for assessing whether and how interactions at particular locations produce, reproduce, or inhibit the development of particular network structures. Such research may ultimately reveal that “peer cultures” are as much configurations of persons and groups as they are of meanings and behaviors (see also Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994). If so, networks may be the theoretical and empirical link between micro-interactions and macro-level patterns of inequality. Provocative research by Armstrong (2007) on undergraduate status hierarchies, Carley (1985) on the relationship between network position and decision making among dormitory residents at MIT, and Kossinets and Watts (2006) on the network structure of e-mail correspondence at Columbia University, are excellent starting points for further inquiries into the mutual implication of micro-interaction, social networks, and larger patterns of social stratification.

A second way in which sociologists of culture and education might profitably link micro- and macro-levels of analysis through renewed attention to organizational perspective. As Charles Bidwell (1965) explained a generation ago, schooling is as much an organizational phenomenon as an individual one – even though educational sociologists have given most of their attention to individual-level data on student inputs and academic outcomes (the Stanford school is an important exception here). Organizational approaches are ideal for theorizing micro-macro linkages, however, since
organizations constitute the strata between particular local contexts and larger processes of social inequality (Mehan 1992). Culturally minded sociologists of education now are examining such disparate phenomena as how the organizational configuration of undergraduate social life reproduces gendered sexual stereotypes and facilitates sexual assault (Armstrong, Hamilton & Sweeney 2006); how the organization of educational transitions around formal measures of academic accomplishment is consequential for the character of bourgeois family life (Stevens 2007); and how “school” is a distinctively meaningful organizational form for social reformers, policy makers, and welfare recipients (Binder & Davies 2007). Whether and how such approaches will be integrated with the sociology of education’s intellectual core remains an open question.
References


