

1 Theory and Research in the Sociology of Education¹

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The sociology of education has mirrored the larger theoretical debates in the discipline of sociology. From its roots in the classical sociology of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim to the contemporary influences of symbolic interactionism, postmodernism, and critical theory, sociology of education research has been influenced by a number of different theoretical perspectives. This chapter provides an overview of the major theoretical perspectives in the sociology of education—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—as well as contemporary theoretical approaches: the code theory of Basil Bernstein, the cultural capital theory of Pierre Bourdieu, the status-competition theory of Randall Collins, the institutional theory of John Meyer, and postmodern critical theory.

Functionalist Theory²

Functionalist sociologists begin with a picture of society that stresses the interdependence of the social system; these researchers often examine how well parts are integrated with each other. Functionalists view society as a kind of machine, where one part articulates with another to produce the dynamic energy required to make society work. Most important, functionalism stresses the processes that maintain social order by stressing consensus and agreement. Although functionalists understand that change is inevitable, they underscore the evolutionary nature of change. Further, although they acknowledge that conflict between groups exists, functionalists argue that without a common bond to unite groups, society will disintegrate. Thus, functionalists examine the social processes necessary to the establishment and maintenance of social order.

Functionalist theories of school and society trace their origins to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1858–1917) general sociological theory. At its center, Durkheim's sociology (1893/1947; 1915/1954) was concerned with the effects of the decline of traditional rituals and community during the transition from traditional to modern societies. Durkheim's analysis of the differences between mechanical and organic solidarity in the *Division of Labor* (1893/1947) and his concept of anomie in *Suicide* (1897/1951) examined the need for societies to create rituals and institutions to provide for social cohesion and meaning. Like Ferdinand Tönnies' (1887/1957) analysis of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Durkheim provided a sociological analysis of the effects of modernity on community.

For Durkheim, the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization led to the breakdown of traditional rituals and methods of social control, which in turn led to the breakdown of social solidarity and cohesion. In *Suicide* (1897/1951), he demonstrated empirically how the breakdown in traditional community resulted in the decline of collective conscience and the rise

of individualism. Such a breakdown lead to what Durkheim called anomie, the condition of normlessness in individuals and society.

As the bonds that connected individuals to each other and to society became unhinged, modern societies faced disintegration from within. Durkheim, however, was not a reactionary; he did not believe that the solution to social disintegration was a return to the past, with its strict forms of social control and regulation. Rather, he believed that modern societies had to develop new forms of social control and cohesion that would allow for the newly developed individualism of modernity to exist within a cohesive modern society. Such a society, what Durkheim called organic solidarity, would allow for a balance between individualism and community.

Durkheim was the first sociologist to apply sociological theory to education. His major works on education include *Moral Education* (1962), *The Evolution of Educational Thought* (1977), and *Education and Sociology* (1956). While Durkheim recognized that education had taken different forms at different times and places, he believed that in virtually all societies, education was of critical importance in creating the moral unity necessary for social cohesion and harmony. For Durkheim, moral values were the foundation of society.

Durkheim's emphasis on values and cohesion set the tone for how present-day functionalists approach the study of education. Functionalists tend to assume that consensus is the normal state in society and that conflict represents a breakdown of shared values. In a highly integrated, well functioning society, schools socialize students into the appropriate values and sort and select students according to their abilities. From a functional point of view, then, educational reform is supposed to create structures, programs, and curricula that are technically advanced and rational and that encourage social unity. It should be evident that most American educators and educational reformers implicitly base their reform suggestions on functional theories of schooling. When, for example, *A Nation at Risk*, a government report on U.S. schools, was released in 1983, its authors argued that our schools were responsible for a whole host of social and economic problems. There was no suggestion that perhaps education might not have the power to overcome deep social and economic problems without changing other aspects of American society.

Functionalism is concerned with the functions of schooling in the maintenance of social order. Whereas conflict theory (see the next section) argues that schools function in the interests of the dominant groups in a society, functionalism sees schools as functioning in the interests of the majority of citizens, at least within democratic societies. Therefore functionalists examine the specific purposes of schooling and their role in society. These purposes or functions are intellectual, political, social, and economic (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990, pp. 5–21) and refer to their role within any existing society. Functionalists, however, are most concerned with the role of schools in modern, democratic societies.

The intellectual purposes of schooling include the following: to teach basic cognitive skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics; to transmit specific knowledge, for example, in literature, history, and the sciences; and to help students acquire higher order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.

The political purposes of schooling are to inculcate allegiance to the existing political order (patriotism); to prepare citizens who will participate in this political order (for example, in political democracies); to help assimilate diverse cultural groups into a common political order; and to teach children the basic laws of the society.

The social purposes of schooling are to socialize children into the various roles, behaviors, and values of the society. This process, referred to by sociologists as socialization, is a key ingredient in the stability of any society; it enables members to help to solve social problems; and by participating in socialization, schools work, along with other institutions such as the family, and the church or synagogues, to ensure social cohesion. The economic purposes of education are to prepare students

for their later occupational roles and to select, train, and allocate individuals into the division of labor. Whereas the degree to which schools directly prepare students for work varies from society to society, most schools have at least an indirect role in this process.

Sometimes these purposes contradict each other. For example, the following question underscores the clash between the intellectual and political purposes of the school. If it is the intellectual purpose of the school to teach higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking and evaluation, then can the school simultaneously engender patriotism and conformity to society's rules?

Modern functionalist theories of education have their origin in the work of Talcott Parsons (1959). Parsons (1902–1979) believed that education was a vital part of a modern society, a society that differed considerably from all previous societies. From this perspective, schooling performs important functions in the development and maintenance of a modern, democratic society, especially with regard to equality of opportunity for all citizens. Functionalists such as Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945) argued that inequality was functional and necessary in all societies, as it ensured that the most talented individuals would fill the functionally most important positions. Nonetheless, modern democratic societies differ from previous, traditional agrarian societies because they are meritocratic; that is, talent and hard work should determine the allocation of individuals to positions, rather than accidents of birth. Thus, in modern societies education becomes the key institution in a meritocratic selection process.

This democratic-liberal functionalist perspective views education as a vital institution in a modern capitalist society defined by its technocratic, meritocratic, and democratic characteristics (Hurn, 1993, pp. 44–47). Although considerable inequality remains, society in this framework is characterized by the evolutionary movement from ascription to achievement, with equal educational opportunity the crucial component. According to this perspective, the historical pattern of academic failure by minority and working-class students was a blemish on the principles of justice and equality of opportunity expounded by a democracy. This educational pattern necessitated the formulation of reform programs to ensure equality of opportunity. While functionalist theorists disagreed on the causes of academic failure, they vigorously believed that the solutions to both educational and social problems were possible within the capitalist social structure. As Diane Ravitch argued:

It is indisputable that full equality has not been achieved, but equally indisputable in the light of the evidence is the conclusion that a democratic society can bring about effective social change, if there is both the leadership and the political commitment to do so. To argue, against the evidence, that meaningful change is not possible is to sap the political will that is necessary to effect changes (1977, pp. 114–115).

The central distinction made by the functionalist perspective was between equality of opportunity and equality of results. A democratic society is a just society, according to this tradition, if it generates the former. Therefore, functionalist theory rested on a positive view of meritocracy as a laudable goal, with education viewed as the necessary institutional component in guaranteeing a fair competition for unequal rewards. The just society, then, is one where each member has an equal opportunity for social and economic advantages and where individual merit and talent replace ascriptive and class variables as the most essential determinants of status. Education is thus the vehicle in ensuring the continual movement toward this meritocratic system.

In addition to its role in a meritocratic society, education plays a significant function in the maintenance of the modern democratic and technocratic society. In a political democracy, schools provide citizens with the knowledge and dispositions to participate effectively in civic life. In an ever increasingly technical society, schools provide students with the skills and dispositions to work in such a society. Although schools do teach specific work skills, they also teach students how to learn so they may adapt to new work roles and requirements.

Functionalist theory was the dominant paradigm in sociology and the sociology of education until the 1960s. In the 1960s, conflict theory emerged as a significant critique and alternative to functionalism. Conflict theorists argued that schools functioned in the interests of dominant groups, rather than everyone, and that functionalists confused what is with what ought to be. According to this critique, whereas schools ought to be democratic and meritocratic, the empirical evidence did not support the functionalist contention that they were. Although the specific nature of conflict theory is developed in the next section, it is important to note some of the problems with functionalism. First, conflict theorists argue that the relationship between schooling, skills, and jobs is far less rational than functionalists suggest (Hurn, 1993, pp. 50–52). Second, conflict theorists point out that the role of schools in providing equality of opportunity is far more problematic than functionalists suggest (Hurn, 1993, pp. 52–54). Third, large-scale empirical research on the effects of schooling casts significant doubt on the functionalist assertion that the expansion of schooling brings about an increasingly just and meritocratic social order (Hurn, 1993, pp. 54–55).

Conflict Theory³

As suggested above, not all sociologists of education believe that society is held together by shared values and collective agreement alone, but on the ability of dominant groups to impose their will on subordinate groups through force, cooptation, and manipulation. In this view the glue of society is economic, political, cultural, and military power. Ideologies or intellectual justifications created by the powerful are designed to enhance their position by legitimizing inequality and the unequal distribution of material and cultural goods. One argument, for instance, is that differences are an inevitable outcome of biology or history. Clearly, conflict sociologists see the relation between school and society as problematic. Whereas functionalists emphasize cohesion in explaining social order, conflict sociologists emphasize struggle. From a conflict point of view, schools are similar to social battlefields, where students struggle against teachers, teachers against administrators, and so on. These antagonisms, however, are most often muted for two reasons: the authority and power of the school and the achievement ideology. In effect, the achievement ideology convinces students and teachers that schools promote learning and sort and select students according to their abilities, not according to their social status. In this view, the achievement ideology disguises the “real” power relations within the school, which, in turn, reflect and correspond to the power relations within the larger society (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

Although Karl Marx (1818–1883) did not write a great deal about education specifically, he is the intellectual founder of the conflict school in the sociology of education. His analytic imagination and moral outrage were sparked by the social conditions found in Europe in the late 19th century. Industrialization and urbanization had produced a new class of workers—the proletariat—who lived in poverty, worked up to 18 hours a day, and had little, if any, hope of creating a better life for their children. Marx believed that the class system, which separated owners from workers and workers from the benefits of their own labor, made class struggle inevitable. He believed that, in the end, the proletariat would rise up and overthrow the capitalists, and in doing so, establish a new society where men and women would no longer be “alienated” from their labor. Marx’s powerful and often compelling critique of early capitalism has provided the intellectual energy for subsequent generations of liberal and leftist thinkers who believe that the only way to a more just and productive society is the abolition or modification of capitalism and the introduction of socialism. Political economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in their book, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), use a Marxist perspective for examining the growth of the American public school. To their minds, there is a direct “correspondence” between the organization of schools and the organization of society; and until society is fundamentally changed, there is little hope of real school reform. Other conflict sociologists

of education, however, argue that traditional Marxism is too deterministic and overlooks the power of culture and human agency in promoting change. That is, they suggest that Marxism places too much emphasis on the independent effects of the economy and not enough on the effects of cultural, social, and political factors.

An early conflict sociologist who took a slightly different theoretical orientation when viewing society was Max Weber (1864–1920). Like Marx, Weber was convinced that power relations between dominant and subordinate groups structured societies, but unlike Marx, Weber believed that class differences alone could not capture the complex ways human beings form hierarchies and belief systems that make these hierarchies seem just and inevitable. Thus, Weber examined status cultures as well as class position. Status is an important sociological concept because it alerts us to the fact that people identify their group by what they consume and with whom they socialize. Weber also recognized that political and military power could be exercised by the State, without direct reference to the wishes of the dominant classes. Moreover, Weber had an acute and critical awareness of how bureaucracy was becoming the dominant type of authority in the modern state and how bureaucratic ways of thinking were bound to shape educational reforms. Weber made the distinction between the “specialist” and the “cultivated man.” What should be the goal of education—training individuals for employment or for thinking? Or are these two goals compatible?

The Weberian approach to studying the relation between school and society has developed into a compelling and informative tradition of sociological research. Researchers in this tradition tend to analyze school organizations and processes from the point-of-view of status competition and organizational constraints. One of the first American sociologists of education to use these concepts was Willard Waller. In his book, *The Sociology of Teaching* (1965), Waller portrays schools as autocracies in a state of “perilous equilibrium.” Without continuous vigilance, schools would erupt into anarchy because students are essentially forced to go to school against their will. To Waller’s mind, rational models of school organization only disguise the inherent tension that pervades the schooling process. Waller’s perspective is shared by many contemporary conflict theorists who see schools as oppressive and demeaning and portray student noncompliance with school rules as a form of resistance.

Contemporary conflict theory includes a number of important approaches. First, a major research tradition that has emerged from the Weberian school of thought is represented by Randall Collins (1978). He believes that educational expansion is best explained by status group struggle. He argues that educational credentials, such as college diplomas, are primarily status symbols, rather than indicators of actual achievement. The rise of “credentialism” does not indicate that society is becoming more expert but that education is increasingly used by dominant groups to secure more advantageous places in the occupational and social structure for themselves and their children.

A second school of conflict theory is based on the work of Stanford sociologist John Meyer and his collaborators. Called institutional theory, Meyer argues that the expansion of education worldwide has not been due to functional requirements or labor market demands but rather to the worldwide process of citizenship and the democratic belief that educational development is a requirement of a civil society. Like Collins, Meyer does not believe that such expansion is a proof of democracy, but rather the belief that educational expansion is necessary. Through comparative, historical, and institutional analysis Meyer and his colleagues (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, 1978; Meyer et al., 1992; Rubinson, 1986) demonstrate that educational expansion often preceded labor market demands and that educational expansion is legitimated by institutional ritual and ceremony rather than actual practices.

Third, a variation of conflict theory, referred to as the “new sociology of education” (Young, 1971) began in France and England during the 1960s. Unlike most Marxists, who tend to emphasize the economic structure of society, social and cultural reproduction theorists argued that school processes reflect the interests of cultural and social elites. The “new sociologists of education” attempted to link micro and macro processes into a comprehensive theory of school and society. Pierre Bourdieu (1931–2002)

examined how cultural capital (particular forms of culture, such as knowledge of music, art, and literature) is passed on by families and schools (1977). The concept of “cultural capital” is important because it suggests that, in understanding the transmission of inequalities, we ought to recognize that the cultural characteristics of individuals and groups are significant indicators of status and class position. There is a growing body of literature that suggests schools pass on to graduates specific social identities that either enhance or hinder their life chances. For example, a graduate from an elite prep school has educational and social advantages over many public school graduates in terms of acceptance to elite colleges and occupational mobility. This advantage has very little to do with what prep school students learn in school and a great deal to do with the power of their schools’ reputations for educating members of the upper class. Bourdieu’s theories extend the work of other sociologists who have argued persuasively that human culture cannot be understood as an isolated and self-contained object of study but must be examined as part of a larger social and cultural structure. To understand the impact of culture on the lives of individuals and groups we must understand the meanings that are attributed to cultural experiences by those who participate in them (Mannheim, 1936).

Another social reproduction theorist, Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) synthesized macro- and micro-sociological approaches, primarily using a conflict perspective (1990a, b, c, d). He argued that the structural aspects of the educational system and the interactional aspects of the system reflect each other and must be viewed holistically. He examined how speech patterns reflect students’ social class backgrounds and how students from working class backgrounds are at a disadvantage in the school setting because schools are essentially middle class organizations. Bernstein combined a class analysis with an interactional analysis, which links language with educational processes and outcomes. Bernstein demonstrated empirically how school processes at the micro-level result in the reproduction of social stratification at the macro-level. Later in the chapter, the work of Bernstein, Bourdieu and Collins will be examined in more detail.

Interactionist Theory⁴

In general, interactionist theories about the relation of school and society are critiques and extensions of the functionalist and conflict perspectives. The critique arises from the observation that functionalist and conflict theories are very abstract and emphasize structure and process at a societal (macro-sociological) level of analysis. While this level of analysis helps us to understand education in the “big picture,” macro-sociological theories hardly provide us with an interpretable snap-shot of what schools are like on an everyday level. What do students and teachers actually do in school? Interactionist theories attempt to make the “commonplace strange” by turning on their heads everyday taken-for-granted behaviors and interactions between students and students and between students and teachers. It is exactly what most people do not question that is most problematic to the interactionist. For example, the processes by which students are labeled “gifted” or “learning disabled” are, from an interactionist point of view, important to analyze because such processes carry with them many implicit assumptions about learning and children. By examining the micro-sociological or the interactional aspects of school life, we are less likely to create theories that are logical and eloquent, but without meaningful content.

Interactionist theory has its origins in the social psychology of early twentieth century sociologists George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929). Mead and Cooley examined the ways in which the individual is related to society through ongoing social interactions. This school of thought, known as symbolic interactionism, viewed the self as socially constructed in relation to social forces and structures and the product of ongoing negotiation of meanings. Thus, the social self is an active product of human agency rather than a deterministic product of social structure. This more existential perspective, with its origins in the school of philosophy known as

phenomenology (Giddens, 1975), stresses what sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1963) called the social construction of reality.

Interactionist theory is usually combined with functionalism and/or conflict theory to produce a more comprehensive theory of society. One of the most influential interactionist theorists was Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman, whose work examined the microsociology of everyday life and the functions of interaction rituals in holding society together. Trained as an anthropologist in the functionalist tradition of Emile Durkheim and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Goffman was interested in how everyday taken-for-granted patterns of interactions serve to hold society together. Goffman's brand of interactionism was functionalist, as he viewed social interaction patterns as rituals that served to maintain society through an invisible micro-social order. Although Goffman did not directly study education, his writings on mental hospitals in *Asylums* (1961a), on the labeling of so-called deviant behavior in *Stigma* (1963a), and of patterns of interpersonal behavior in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *Encounters* (1961b), *Behavior in Public Places* (1963b), and *Interaction Ritual* (1967) have provided a rich tapestry of concepts for sociologists of education, particularly through the use of labeling theory, which has been applied to the study of teacher expectations (Persell, 1977), ability grouping and tracking (Oakes, 1985), and the study of schools as total institutions (Cookson and Persell, 1985).

Ray Rist has provided some of the most important insights on the ways in which school processes affect educational achievement. Rist's (1970, 1973, 1977) research into the everyday processes of schooling in an inner city school provided an understanding of how school practices, such as labeling and ability grouping, contribute to the reproduction of educational and social inequalities. In his classic essay, "On understanding the processes of schooling: the contributions of labeling theory" (1977), Rist argued that interactionism has provided important understandings of the way in which the everyday workings of schools (including teacher and student interactions), labeling, and linguistic discourse are at the root of unequal educational outcomes. Drawing upon labeling theory, originally a key approach in the sociology of deviance, Rist demonstrated how teacher expectations of students based on categories such as race, class, ethnicity, and gender affect student perceptions of themselves and their achievement. In another classic essay, "Student social class and teacher expectations: the self fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education" (1970), Rist reported findings from his ethnographic study of a St. Louis elementary school, consisting of primarily African American students. Rist demonstrated how African American teacher labeling of students based on their different social class backgrounds resulted in low-income students being placed in lower ability reading groups and middle class students in higher ability groups, independent of ability. These labels became "life sentences" that had profoundly negative effects on the achievement of the low-income students, who remained in low ability groups throughout their careers. Rist concludes that the interactional processes of the school resulted in educational inequality mirroring the larger structures of society. He concluded that "the system of public education in reality perpetuates what it is ideologically committed to—eradicating class barriers which result in inequality in the social and economic life of the citizenry" (Rist, 1970, p. 449). Combined with the findings of conflict theory, Rist's interactionist approach provides an empirical documentation of how schools reproduce inequality.

Contemporary Approaches in the Sociology of Education

*Code Theory: Basil Bernstein's Contribution to Understanding Education*⁵

Code theory is the term used to describe the theoretical and empirical project of British sociologist Basil Bernstein. This approach is concerned with how the macro-level (social, political, and economic structures and institutions) is dialectically related to the way in which people understand systems of meaning (codes). For over three decades, Bernstein was one of the centrally important and controversial

sociologists, whose work influenced a generation of sociologists of education and linguists. From his early works on language, communication codes, and schooling to his later works on curriculum and pedagogy (teaching methods), Bernstein attempted to produce a theory of social and educational codes (meaning systems) and their effect on social reproduction. Although structuralist in its approach, Bernstein's sociology drew on the essential theoretical orientations in the field—Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and interactionist—and provided the possibility of an important synthesis.

Bernstein's early work on code theory was highly controversial because it discussed social class differences in language that some labeled a deficit theory. Nonetheless, the work raised crucial questions about the relationships among the social division of labor, the family, and the school and explored how these relationships affected differences in learning among social classes. His later work (1977a) began the difficult project of connecting macropower and class relations to the microeducational processes of the school. Whereas class reproduction theorists such as Bowles and Gintis (1976) offered an overtly deterministic view of schools, viewing education as exclusively influenced by the economy without describing or explaining what goes on in schools, Bernstein's work promised to connect the societal, institutional, interactional, and intrapsychic levels of sociological analysis. In doing so, it presented an opportunity to synthesize the classical-theoretical traditions of the discipline: Marxist, Weberian, and Durkheimian.

The concept of code is central to Bernstein's structural sociology. From the outset of its use in his work on language (restricted and elaborated codes), the term refers to a "regulative principle which underlies various message systems, especially curriculum and pedagogy" (Atkinson, 1985, p. 136). Bernstein's early work on language (1958, 1960, 1961) examined the relationship between public language, authority, and shared meanings (Danzig, 1995, pp. 146–147). By 1962, Bernstein began to develop code theory through the introduction of the concepts of restricted and elaborated codes (1962a, 1962b). In *Class, Codes, and Control*, Volume 1 (1973a), Bernstein's sociolinguistic code theory was developed into a social theory examining the relationships between social class, family, and the reproduction of meaning systems.

For Bernstein, there were social class differences in the communication codes of working class and middle class children, differences that reflect the class and power relations in the social division of labor, family, and schools. Based upon empirical research, Bernstein distinguished between the restricted code of the working class and the elaborated code of the middle class. Restricted codes are context dependent and particularistic, whereas elaborated codes are context independent and universalistic. For example, when asked to tell a story describing a series of pictures, working-class boys used many pronouns, and their stories could only be understood by looking at the pictures. Middle-class boys, on the other hand, generated descriptions rich in nouns, and their stories could be understood without the benefit of the pictures (Bernstein, 1970). Although Bernstein's critics (see Danzig, 1995) argued that his sociolinguistic theory represented an example of deficit theory (alleging that he was arguing that working-class language was deficient) Bernstein consistently rejected this interpretation (see Bernstein, 1996, pp. 147–156). Bernstein argued that restricted codes are not deficient, but rather are functionally related to the social division of labor, where context-dependent language is necessary in the context of production. Likewise, the elaborated code of the middle classes represents functional changes necessitated by changes in the division of labor and, as a result, by the middle class's new position in reproduction rather than production. That schools require an elaborated code for success means that working class children are disadvantaged by the dominant code of schooling, not deficient. For Bernstein, difference becomes deficit in the context of macro-power relations.

In the third, fourth, and fifth volumes of *Class, Codes, and Control* (1977a, 1990, 1996), Bernstein developed code theory from its sociolinguistic roots to examine the connection between communication codes and curriculum and teaching methods. In this respect, code theory became concerned with the processes of schooling and how they related to social class reproduction. Bernstein analyzed the

significant differences between different forms of educational transmission and suggested that social class differences in curriculum and pedagogy are related to inequalities of educational achievement between working-class and middle-class students. Schools that serve middle-class students have different curricula and teaching methods than schools that serve working-class students, and these differences result in educational inequality. Through a careful and logical consideration of the inner workings of the dominant forms of educational practice, Bernstein contributed to a greater understanding of how the schools (especially in the United Kingdom and United States) reproduce what they are ideologically committed to eradicating—social-class advantages in schooling and society. Bernstein's analysis of the social-class assumptions of pedagogic practice is the foundation for linking microeducational processes to the macrosociological levels of social structure and class and power relations.

Despite the criticisms that Bernstein's work is sometimes complex and difficult, it is undeniable that it represented one of the most sustained and powerful attempts to investigate significant issues in the sociology of education. Over 35 years ago, Bernstein began with a simple but overwhelming issue: how to find ways to "prevent the wastage of working-class educational potential" (1961, p. 308). Taken as a whole, Bernstein's work provided a systematic analysis of the relationship between society, schools, and the individual and of how schooling systematically reproduces social inequality.

Cultural Capital and Symbolic Violence: The Contributions of Pierre Bourdieu

Like Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1973, 1977, 1984) attempted to test empirically a theory of society, culture, and education that synthesizes Durkheim and Marx (Swartz, 1997). As the director of the Centre de Sociologie Europeenne in Paris, Bourdieu and his research colleagues provided a theoretical and empirical understanding of culture and stratification. As Collins (Collins and Makowsky, 1993, p. 259) notes, for Bourdieu "culture itself, is an economy. . . . Stratification in the cultural economy and in the material economy are reciprocally related. For Bourdieu, culture is a realm of power struggle, related to the struggle over the means of violence that characterizes the realm of politics."

Thus, Bourdieu's central concepts of cultural capital and symbolic violence, which were developed in Bourdieu and Passeron's *Education, Society, and Culture* (1977), are used to understand how schooling is part of a symbolic process of cultural and social reproduction. Symbolic violence is "power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force" (Collins and Makowsky, p. 259). This type of power is found not only in schooling but also in other educational realms, including such arenas as child-rearing, museums, musical and artistic institutions. Although schools appear to be neutral, they actually advantage the upper and middle-classes through their symbolic representations. These classes possess cultural capital, or symbolic representations of cultural domination, such as language, ideas, and knowledge of music, art, and literature, all of which have important exchange value in the educational and cultural marketplace.

Drawing upon the functionalism in the sociology of Durkheim and the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu, like Bernstein, provided more of a conflict, neo-Marxist dimension that demonstrates that cultural capital reproduces social classes and that schooling reproduces cultural capital unevenly among social classes. Schooling corresponds to the dominant interests of society; as a result, upper and middle-class forms of cultural capital become codified in the school's curriculum. Unlike functionalists, Bourdieu and Bernstein did not view these patterns as leading to social cohesion and agreement but rather to class domination.

Bourdieu was not without his critics. According to Collins (Collins and Makowsky, 1993, p. 264), "Bourdieu's theory is completely closed. It is totally cynical, totally pessimistic. We are eternally doomed to stratification. . . . We cannot get outside our skins; we can only change places inside an iron circle." This view, as Collins suggests, fails to point out the intense organizational and societal conflicts

that often result in some reshaping of social stratification (p. 265). Nevertheless, Collins (1993) includes Bourdieu as among the most influential European sociologists of the late twentieth century.

Status Competition and Interaction Ritual: The Contributions of Randall Collins

Like Bourdieu and Bernstein in Europe, U.S. sociologist Randall Collins has attempted to synthesize Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, as well as the microsociologist Erving Goffman, into an overall conflict theory of society. The role of education is central to his theory.

In *Conflict Sociology* (1975), Collins outlined a theory of sociology as an explanatory science, and tested a series of propositions about the nature of social order and change. In it, Collins, although rooted in a Weberian conflict perspective, attempted to synthesize the sociologies of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Goffman. Beginning in this ambitious volume, Collins argues that the role of sociology is to understand scientifically the relationship between macro power relations and micro social processes. From Durkheim and Freud, Collins argues that the world is held together by nonrational as well as rational factors and, from Weber, that conflict between social groups over wealth, power, and status are the fuel of social life. Collins (1978) distinguishes between productive and political labor within organizations: Productive labor represents the rational and functional processes that are related to goals and objectives; political labor represents the often nonrational processes related to status competition and group domination and advantage. Although most groups argue that their work in organizations is functional and productive, it is often nonrational and used as a means to legitimate control and domination by dominant groups. Unlike Marxists, who see dominant groups as defined largely by economic forces, Collins provides a Weberian analysis that sees group formation as defined by cultural and political forces as well.

Collins's work on education began with his important article, "Functionalist and conflict theories of educational stratification" (1971), which provided a critique of functionalist theories of social stratification. Unlike functionalists, who viewed the expansion of education as a result of an ongoing expansion of democracy, meritocracy, and technology, Collins argued that educational expansion was far less rational. Rather than seeing the expansion of educational systems in democratic-liberal societies as a rational response to democratic processes of equality of opportunity and meritocratic ideology, and as a result of the rise in requirements for expert knowledge in a highly technological society, Collins (1978) argues that the rise in credentials cannot be explained by the demands of political process or the needs of the labor market.

In *The Credential Society* (1978), Collins suggests that the expansion in educational credentials has been a result of status-competition among groups who engage in symbolic conflict over scarce cultural, political, and economic rewards. For example, elevation of the college degree over the high school degree as an entry-level requirement is not, as functionalists argue, the result of the higher skills and knowledge required in an increasingly technological society. Rather, Collins argues, the competition for good positions, combined with the expansion of opportunities in higher education in response to democratic claims for equality of opportunity made by historically marginalized groups, has raised the stakes for all groups. As groups who historically had not attended college gained access, advantaged groups did not sit by idly, waiting for them to catch up. Rather, through professional organizations they raised the entry-level requirements for professions by using a rational-functional argument that such credentials were necessitated by increased skills of the professions.

Based on a historical and empirical analysis of the requirements of different professions, Collins demonstrated that educational credentials have increased far in excess of an increase in occupational skills and requirements. For example, whereas pharmacists now need a five-year college program rather than the apprenticeship program of the 1930s, the actual knowledge and skills of the profession have not increased dramatically. In fact, in the 1930s pharmacists were called chemists because they made medication from scratch. Today, most pharmacists distribute manufactured medications from bottles

and use computer programs to prevent harmful drug interactions. Certainly medical knowledge has increased; however, the requirements of the profession have not increased to a level that justifies the increase in educational requirements.

A second example is the rising educational requirements for nurses. Although it is still possible to become a registered nurse through a two-year community college associate degree program, the movement to require a four-year bachelor's degree is becoming the norm. Proponents of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing argue that the explosion of medical knowledge, combined with the need for a liberally educated nurse who can think on her feet, necessitates elevating the requirement. Collins, however, suggests that there is little empirical evidence to support these claims or that nurses with baccalaureate degrees are more effective than those with degrees in Associate Arts and Sciences. Rather, the movement for increased credentials is an attempt by nurses to raise their own status, especially in relation to doctors, through increased educational levels. Likewise, the increased educational credentials required by pharmacists is viewed as their attempt to raise their own status and income. Similar movements are now occurring for teachers, where teacher-educators and policymakers are arguing that a master's degree should be the minimum entry-level requirement rather than the baccalaureate because of the increased knowledge required to teach children. Although this argument is presented as a rational and functional requirement, there is little evidence to suggest that teachers who enter teaching with master's degrees are more effective.

The rise of credentials, according to Collins, is a result of middle-class professional attempts to raise their status—and to raise the stakes. As historically marginalized groups struggle to catch up, advantaged groups use professional organizations not only to raise their own status but also to increase their advantage in the competition for professional positions. Since they already possess higher credentials, they can continue to distance themselves from competitors who do not have them.

Critics of Collins suggest that his view is too cynical and nonrational and often denies the important functional aspects of educational expertise and the need for increased education. Although these critics are correct in suggesting that, given rising technological demands, increased education is sometimes important, it is also the case that the dramatic increase in credentials cannot be explained by functional demands alone.

Institutional Theory: The Contributions of John Meyer

The work of John Meyer and his colleagues on the development of mass systems of public education worldwide has been an important theoretical approach in the sociology of education since the 1970s. Called institutional theory, Meyer argued that schools are global institutions and have developed similarly throughout the world since the 19th century. Although schools do reflect national cultures and there are differences among national school systems, Meyer and his colleagues have argued that mass educational systems have developed as part of international patterns of democratization and globalization. Meyer argues that all over the world mass systems of public education have developed giving access to more and more people. Meyer, however, does not necessarily agree with the functionalist argument that such expansion is automatically democratic, but rather like conflict theorists, he argues that education as an institution is often controlled by dominant groups and that like Collins, he does not believe that educational expansion is predominantly caused by the needs of the labor market. Rather, it is the belief in education in a democratic civil society that fuels demands for mass schooling. Finally, Meyer and his colleagues have applied institutional theory internationally and comparatively to provide a global analysis of educational systems.

David Baker and Gerald LeTendre (2005) have applied institutional theory to a comparative analysis of international educational systems and processes. Based on Meyer's theory, they argue that there are a number of related themes in the development of worldwide educational systems. These include "the worldwide success of mass schooling," that "schooling is an institution," and that "educational

change is institutional change" (Baker and LeTendre, 2005, pp. 6–12). They argue that there are a fundamental set of beliefs that have influenced the development of mass schooling, including that all children should be educated, that nations should invest in schooling; that education functions for the collective good of society; that children should receive early and ongoing schooling; that the types of cognitive skills learned in schools are good for individuals and society; and that one's social, economic, or racial status should not limit access to schooling (Baker and LeTendre, 2005, pp. 7–8). Although these are similar to the democratic-liberal functions of schooling outlined by functionalists, institutional theorists also see how conflict between groups over access and opportunity to mass schooling has affected educational institutions. According to Baker and Letendre, "Over a thirty-year research program with colleagues, institutional theorist and comparative sociologist John Meyer has convincingly established a strong case for thinking about schooling as a product of a world culture that renders education as a resilient and powerful institution in modern society (see, as examples, Baker, 1999; Meyer, 1977; Ramirez and Boli, 1987; Meyer, Ramirez and Soysal, 1992; Fuller and Rubinson, 1992). They have shown that mass schooling takes similar forms throughout the world, and that there are common beliefs in what schooling can and should do for society. This process, they argue, has to a large degree been driven by a dynamic world culture" (Baker and LeTendre, 2005, p. 10). Although Meyer and colleagues believe that national differences are important, they stress the commonalities among educational institutions and the worldwide belief that mass schooling is important.

*Postmodern critical theory*⁶

Postmodernism developed out of a profound dissatisfaction with the modernist project of enlightenment and reason. Beginning with the poststructural writings of Jacques Derrida (1973, 1981, 1982) and Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1984), social theorists, particularly in France, questioned the appropriateness of modernist categories for understanding what they saw as a postmodern world, a world that transcended the economic and social relations of the industrial world that modernist thought had sought to understand. In particular, the work of Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) rejected the Marxist perspective and the Enlightenment and modernist assumptions underlying Marxist theory and sought to create a different theory for the late twentieth century.

Postmodernist thought consists of many interrelated themes. First, postmodernism insists on what Lyotard (1984) has labeled the rejection of all metanarratives. By this, Lyotard meant that modernist preoccupation with grand, total, or all-encompassing explanations of the world need to be replaced by localized and particular theories. Second, postmodernism stresses the necessary connection between theory and practice as a corrective to the separation of them in much modernist thought. Third, postmodernism stresses the democratic response to authoritarianism and totalitarianism. In particular, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1991), Giroux (1991), and Peter McLaren and R. Hammer (1989) call for a democratic, emancipatory, and antitotalitarian theory and practice, with schools seen as sites for democratic transformation. Fourth, postmodernism sees modernist thought as Eurocentric and patriarchal. Giroux (1991), Patricia Lather (1991), Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), and others provide an important critique of the racism and sexism in some modernist writings and of the failure of modernism to address the interests of women and people of color. Fifth, postmodernist theorists believe that all social and political discourses are related to structures of power and domination. Sixth, postmodernism stresses what Nicholas Burbules and Susan Rice (1991) term "dialogue across differences." Recognizing the particular and local nature of knowledge, postmodern theorists call for the attempt to work through differences rather than to see them as hopelessly irreconcilable. Thus, postmodern theories of education call for teachers and students to explore the differences between what may seem like inherently contradictory positions in an effort to achieve understanding, respect, and change.

Although much of postmodern theory developed as a critical theory of society and a critique of modernism, it quickly became incorporated into radical writings on education that are often called critical theory. Critical educational theory, which over the past two decades has involved an interdisciplinary mixture of social theory, sociology, and philosophy, has been profoundly affected by postmodernist thought. In particular, by the 1980s critical theories of education, which from the late 1970s attempted to provide an antidote to the over-determinism of Bowles and Gintis (1976), regularly incorporated postmodern language and concerns. There have been numerous postmodern theories of education or applications of postmodernism to education, which will be referred to as postmodern-critical theory. Postmodern-critical theories of education often draw heavily on the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1985, 1987), whose influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) became the foundation for critical educational theory in the United States (Macedo, 1990, 1994; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998). Postmodern-critical theories of education are similar to neo-Marxist theory with respect to curriculum and pedagogy. A school of thought called critical pedagogy (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998, ch. 1) stresses the classroom as a site for political action and teachers as agents of change. Finally, postmodern theories of education eschewed what it saw as the overly quantitative approach of traditional sociology of education research and instead argued for more qualitative, narrative, autobiographical approaches to research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2006).

Sadovnik (1995) points out a number of problems with postmodern-critical theories of education. First, postmodern theories of education often are written in a language that is difficult to understand. While this is problematic for all academic work, it is more so for a theory that purports to provide an agenda for critique and change in the school. Second, they usually eschew empirical methods to study schools. As a result, they are sometimes long on assertion and short on evidence. Finally, and most importantly, postmodernist theories of education often fail to connect theory to practice in a way that practitioners find meaningful and useful. Although this does not suggest that postmodernists write exclusively for practitioners, if one of the stated aims of theorists such as Giroux is to develop teachers as transformative intellectuals and to provide a critical pedagogy for school transformation, then the problem of language is of central importance. How can we have dialogues across difference if teachers are excluded from the dialogue?

What separates postmodern critical theory from the rest of the sociology of education is the absence of empirical evidence. Although many of the sociological approaches discussed in this chapter are conceptual and theoretical, theory is the foundation for empirical research. For example, functionalist theory resulted in a rich empirical research project on the relationship between education, achievement, and mobility. Conflict theory resulted in a rich array of comparative, historical, and empirical research on the relationship between education and social reproduction, between educational expansion and labor market requirements, and on the beliefs in citizenship. Interactionist theory resulted in a rich variety of qualitative, ethnographic studies of schools and classroom practices, describing how school processes related to social stratification.

Postmodern-critical theory does not provide sufficient empirical research to test its often tautological propositions. Therefore, although it represents an important social theory, it fails to live up to the promise of sociology: to develop a scientific, empirically tested set of propositions about how the social world works. The following section examines the different types of social scientific research employed in by sociologists of education.

The Rise of Empirical Sociology of Education: Methodological Approaches to Studying Educational Effects

Beginning in the 1960s, quantitative methods dominated research in the sociology of education. Large scale data sets, such as High School Beyond, the National Educational Longitudinal Study, and the

School and Staffing Surveys collected by organizations such as the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago and the National Center for Educational Statistics were mined using sophisticated statistical techniques, including multivariate analysis, hierarchical linear modeling, path analysis, and others. The purpose of this type of research was to examine the independent effects of schooling on educational and economic outcomes, while controlling for a series of independent variables, both inside and outside of schools. Beginning with the Coleman Report in the 1960s (Coleman et al., 1966) and Jenck's analyses of family and school (1972 et al., 1979), these quantitative analyses examined the explained and unexplained variation in academic achievement among different groups, based on race, social class, ethnicity, gender, age, disability and others. This type of research also examined school effects on these groups by comparing different types of schools, including public, private, and charter schools, as well as the effects of school organization and processes, including ability grouping, tracking, and school and class size (Hallinan, 2000; Levinson, Cookson and Sadovnik, 2002).

Although this type of research provided important evidence on the effects of school organization and processes and the independent effects of factors outside of schools, such as poverty, family, neighborhood, community, and peer groups, interactionist sociologists of education argued that research based on large scale data sets often missed the reasons for these effects, as they did not examine school processes. As an antidote to large data set quantitative research, qualitative researchers provided complementary approaches to understanding schooling using ethnographic methods. Based on the methods of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1930s (Vidich and Lyman, 1994) researchers such as Annette Lareau (1989, 2004), Lois Weis (1990, 2005), and Michelle Fine (1992) provided important analyses of how school processes affect students from various backgrounds.

Some qualitative researchers have remained squarely in the scientific tradition of positivism insisting on objectivity, rigorous research design, and examining causality (Maxwell, 2004). Others are more rooted within interpretive traditions, including symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, postmodernism, feminism, critical theory, and cultural studies (Riehl, 2001: 116) and in varying degrees reject post-positivist notions of scientific rigor. As noted above, many of the postmodern critical studies prefer narrative and autobiographical approaches. Despite critiques of qualitative research as unscientific (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2006), qualitative research continues to be an important part of research in the sociology of education.

By the beginning of the 21st century, as a response to this critique of the unscientific nature of some qualitative educational research, policy makers and governmental officials at the U.S. Department of Education called for educational research to mirror the scientific methods of the natural sciences. Arguing that experimental research design with randomized trials, "the gold standard" of medical and pharmaceutical research should be the preferred method in educational research, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines for funded educational research privileging experimental design in particular and quantitative methods in general. In addition, the Department of Education's policies, including the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required scientific evidence for programs and curricula to appear on its What Works Clearinghouse list, or to be eligible for federal funds in Title I (high poverty) districts or for comprehensive school reform model grants. Although social science and educational research organizations such as the American Educational Research Association issued statements opposing this strict definition of scientific research and called for the inclusion of qualitative studies on an equal footing, federal policy and funding continues to privilege quantitative methods.

A number of researchers have argued that there are weaknesses in both quantitative and qualitative research methods and that mixed-methods approaches make more sense (Chatterji, 2005; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Maxwell, 2004). Based upon these strengths and weaknesses, it is clear that both quantitative and qualitative methods should be an important part of sociology of education research. Riehl (2001) argues that qualitative research in the sociology of education has made valuable

contributions to our understanding of educational problems and has offered policy makers useful data for school improvement. Large scale data set analyses have provided essential evidence on the effects of schooling and have been invaluable to policy makers. In an age where educational research is dominated by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education labeling of experimental research design and randomized field trials modeled after the pharmaceutical and medical research communities as the "gold standard" for evaluating what works and recommending policy and programmatic interventions, it is imperative that both quantitative and qualitative research are recognized as important tools for policy makers. Whether studies are totally quantitative or totally qualitative or part of a mixed-method approach that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, sociology of education research provides important data for public policy. Chatterji (2005) argues convincingly that a mixed-method approach rich in qualitative methods must be part of extended-term mixed-method (ETMM) evaluation designs to ensure researchers provide policy makers with the best evidence of what works in education, although this approach is difficult and costly.

Conclusion

The sociology of education originated in the concerns of classical sociology in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It came of age in from the 1960s onward and concentrated on the significant questions regarding meritocracy and equality. Contemporary theories in the sociology of education have attempted to synthesize the major theories in the field, functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism and have provided a rich theoretical foundation for empirical work. At the same time, the concern with educational inequalities has resulted in a preoccupation with empirical, mostly quantitative investigations of school effects. Using large data sets such as *High School and Beyond* and the National Education Longitudinal Study, these investigations have focused on school processes such as tracking and their effects. Although these studies have provided important findings on educational outcomes and the independent effects of schooling, family, and other student background characteristics, they have often lacked theoretical sophistication.

Today, the sociology of education is at a crossroads. The 20th century represented the attempt to refine and empirically test the theoretical insights of the classical sociology of the 19th century. Through sophisticated methodological approaches, sociologists of education provided important empirical evidence on the effects of education on different groups and have been an important source of data for discussions of the achievement gap. However, postmodern theorists and researchers, usually using qualitative methods, provided an alternative to what they perceived as the overly scientific, quantitative focus of much of the sociology of education research. For many sociologists of education, this response has weakened the scientific base of educational research. For others (Cookson, 1987; Hallinan, 1996), sociology of education of all types has been too removed from policy and practice. In the coming years, sociologists of education need to combine varied research methodologies, quantitative and qualitative, to examine the most important question common to functionalist and conflict theory: to understand why students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do less well in school and to provide pragmatic policy recommendations for successful school reform and to reduce the achievement gap. Although sociological theory in the sociology of education will continue to be an important part of this project, the separation of theory, research, and practice needs to be diminished.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this chapter appeared in A.R. Sadovnik, "Theories in the Sociology of Education." Pp. 7-26 in *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education, Second Edition*, edited by J. Ballantine and J. Spade, Wadsworth, 2004 and A.R. Sadovnik, "Theories in the Sociology of Education." Pp. 15-34 in *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education*, edited by J. Ballantine and J. Spade, Wadsworth, 2001.

2. Adapted from A. R. Sadovnik and P. W. Cookson, Jr. "Functionalism," in *Education and Sociology: An Encyclopedia*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
3. This section is adapted from A. R. Sadovnik, P. W. Cookson, Jr., & S. F. Semel, *Exploring Education: An Introduction to the Foundations of Education*, chapter 4. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994; 2001, 2006.
4. This section is adapted from A. R. Sadovnik, P. W. Cookson, Jr., & S. F. Semel, *Exploring Education: An Introduction to the Foundations of Education*, chapter 4. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994; 2001, 2006.
5. This section is adapted from A. R. Sadovnik, "Basil Bernstein's theory of pedagogic practice: A structuralist approach," *Sociology of Education* 64(1), January 1991: 48–63. Reprinted by permission of the American Sociological Association.
6. This section is adapted from A. R. Sadovnik, "Postmodernism and the sociology of education: Closing the rift among scholarship, research, and practice." In George Noblit and William Pink (Eds.), *Continuity and contradiction: The futures of the sociology of education* (Hampton Press, 1995).

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