Classical Sociological Theories and the Modern Sociology of Education

Ari Antikainen, Department of Sociology, University of Joensuu, POB 111, 80101 Joensuu, Finland
(email ari.antikainen@joensuu.fi)

1. Classical social theory and sociology of education

- social in contrast to the idea of nature or natural; by modernization a set of oppositions between the sacred and the profane, individual and social, authority and power, status and social class, and community versus association (Holton 1996)

- social structure (how is society possible under modern conditions?): systems of enduring social relationships which affect as external forces to individual’s life (Karl Marx: basis/infrastructure and superstructure; Emile Durkheim: social solidarity as moral duty, mechanic – organic) (See Appendix 1.)

- social action (why people act as they do?): social action carries a subjective meaning for the actor/agent; no account of society is acceptable that excludes the meaning of relevant actions to the actors involved; multidimensional approach, the actor may be motivated by both material concerns (e.g. class interest in relation to income) and ideal concerns (e.g. the honor and status of the group), a distinction between power (Macht) and dominance (Herrschaft) (Max Weber)

- self as a social entity (“I”, “me”, “others”) (George Herbert Mead)

- sociology of education; Emile Durkheim: “Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and develop in the child certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are required of him both by the political society as a whole and the special mileu for which he is specifically destined.”; sociology is the science of institutions, their emergence and function; society as a moral community (“every society has its own
ideal man, of what he should be, as much from the intellectual point of view as the physical and and moral”), sacred – profane, in a way school replaces church and teacher replaces priest in organic solidarity, functionalism

- Max Weber: status, status groups, knowledge (credentials) as a mechanism of the competition between social groups (“the main activity of schools is to teach particular status cultures, both in and outside the classroom” Randall Collins), bureaucracy

- G.H. Mead: interaction, learning, plurality of communities as an educator

2. One sociology of education or many sociologies of education?

- early educational sociology: “By educational sociology we mean the science which describes and explains the institutions and social forms through which the child gains and organizes his experiences and those institutions and social forms in relation to which the child must function in adult life. These institutions and social forms are regarded particularly in their relation to the educational system in its evolution and changing functions.” (George E. Payne, Editor of Educational Sociology)

- a rapid growth of educational sociology and then its crisis; towards sociology of education

- levels of social action: micro level (“micro theories treat societies and institutions as contexts or constraints, attention is focused on the social consciousness, the patterns of interaction and meaning, the taking of social roles, the study of leadership…), meso level (“the analysis of social institutions and social organizations”..), macro level (“tackle questions of social order, social stratification, and the nature of interactions among social institutions”..) (Turner & Mitchell 1997, 21.)

- major theories (based on tensions and contradictions between action and praxis, agency and structure, micro and macro approaches, individual and society) (Turner & Mitchell 1997; Isquierdo & Minguez 2003; Jordan 2003) :
1. functionalism (how social structures meet the needs/requisities of a more inclusive social system; basic functions of education: qualification (transmission of knowledge, skills and attitudes), selection (allocation of individuals to social positions), integration (or maintenance and transmission of culture) (Talcott Parsons)

2. economic theories (or utilitarian theories, rational choice, human capital) (James Coleman, Gary Becker, Mark Blaug)

3. conflict theories (dynamics of education revolve and are implicated in the unequal distribution of resources in society, Marxian and Weberian theories)

4. interactionist theories (tend toward meso and micro level analysis of individual within educational settings, three traditions: a) symbolic interactionism and role theory (G.H. Mead, situated selves and others), b) interaction ritual theory, especially dramaturgical interactionism (Erving Goffman, every-day rituals and their effects on social structure), c) interactionist phenomenology and ethnomethodology; social constructionism (Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Harold Garfinkel, Michael F.D. Young; processes that produce and sustain people’s sense of reality, how knowledge, abilities, intelligence etc. are socially constructed) (Plummer 1997, 242 argues that at the core of interactionist theory of meaning lie certain ideas: 1) meaning is never fixed or coded but always emergent, 2) meaning is ambiguous, 3) meaning is triadic, it depends on gesture of one, the response of another, and the joint act that emerges between them, 4. meaning depends upon interactive process and this process is always readjusting itself in the collective social process)

5. postmodernism and poststructuralism (postmodernism as an umbrella concept, often includes a critique of Kantian reason and the rational autonomous subject, Lyotard: the crisis of meta-narratives, especially the Enlightenment narratives (the postmodern condition of knowledge; Michel Foucault: the relations between truth and power in educational discourse and discursive practices; according to critical pedagogy “the classroom should become the arena for intellectual resistance towards the ways in which roles, our lives, and our subjectivities are defined and constituted”; structuralists study societies as meaning making systems, which have
under or beyond the appearances of social reality/surface, structures that require a deeper theoretical analysis; poststructuralists deny that there exists any subject or center outside of the signs

3. Towards a synthesis?

- classics’ contribution: the agenda of sociology of education (except a.o. gender, ethnicity); more coherent theories have been developed from the corpus of their work

- map of theories: majority of the sociology of education has been only loosely theoretical (more concerned on the problems of policy and practice), applications of more general sociological approaches

- Bourdieu’s field theory; society as a network of specific fields or social spaces (like education) with internal differentiation and hierarchical structures, struggles over capitals (e.g. cultural capital, legitimate knowledge), structures made through human action, agents do so by internalising the social structure of the field, the hierarchy of positions, its history, its traditions and institutions; that means habitus (for example in the educational field, agents must acquire dispositions enabling them to understand relations between students and teachers, rules of class discussion, tutorials and relations with others); habitus is “the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations … a system of lasting and transposable disposition which, integrating past experiences, functions at very moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks.” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 18.)

References:


Further reading:


Advanced:


Handbooks:
