ASPECTS OF SOCIOLOGICAL NATURE IN EDUCATION

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Abstract. *The aim of this article is to present several central concepts of sociological nature and theoretical perspectives on gender to analyse how values are developing at the individual level, to analyse classroom environment issues and to reflect on how gender should be addressed by teachers. I am using a selective, free-form approach and I am focusing on the microsystem of the education such as students and teachers' beliefs and their interactions when analysing how central theories of sociology could help in interpreting daily situations in school.*
Keywords: *Conflict, sociology of education, values, control, compliance*

Introduction

The aim of this article is to present several central concepts of sociological nature and theoretical perspectives on gender to analyse how values are developing at the individual level, to analyse classroom environment issues and to reflect on how gender should be addressed by teachers. I am using a selective, free-form approach and I am focusing on the microsystem of the education such as students and teachers' beliefs and their interactions when analysing how central theories of sociology could help in interpreting daily situations in school.

1. About Durkheim´s mechanical and organic solidarity

Based on his view, in mechanical solidarity people connect because they are rather similar while in organic solidarity, people connect because they depend on each other based on specialization of work. While reading Sadovnik[1], I found this dichotomy somehow in contradiction with the dichotomy between traditionalist societies where individuals define themselves as part of the communities and adopt the values of the community they belong and modern societies where individuals define themselves based on their own competencies, are more independent and develop their own system of values based on individual interests and beliefs. I always thought that in traditional societies, people are more dependent while in modern societies people are more independent. For instance, in a small traditional community, girls feel the

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[1] Alan Sadovnik, *Sociology of Education*. In Provenzo E. & Provenzo, A. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education*. Sage knowledge, 2008.

pressure to get married before a certain age while in modern communities, it is considered norm to get married at any age.

Durkheim position is definitely and surprisingly antagonistic to the layman's view, as he was analyzing this from the functionalism perspective, looking at the social system level, at the mechanisms involved in maintaining the social order (as shown by Sadovnik). I am seeing this from the microlevel of society, from the individual that in traditional societies does not always have the freedom to make choices, rather must rely on traditions, rituals, and community values. Any other option is penalized by the other members of the community. In modern societies, liberties such as this are overarching. People define themselves based on their own values. It is a matter of choice what values to adopt. Perhaps, while the mechanic versus organic solidarity are concepts focused on the macro level of the society, the dichotomy between adopting community values versus individual values focuses on the individual, so on the micro level of the society.

2. Conflict theories and classroom environments in US

I find conflict theories relevant in explaining the perception of school environment among teachers, parents and students. Free play and breaks are at times uncommon in many public schools in the United States. Keeping the students busy, so to speak, is a suggestion often used by administrators and mentor teachers when guiding younger teachers' planning. It is considered that too much freedom and lack of structure will lead to misbehaviour. As a consequence, students have two- or three-minutes breaks between classes, just enough to travel between classrooms. Teachers are responsible for integrating activities focused on physical movement during their teaching to ensure that students stay focused during the class. Administration considers students' misbehaviour a sign of poor planning from the teacher. Cultural background and children's socio-economic status are less taken into consideration when assessing teachers' performance. Consequently, as mentioned in an article published by Joe Heim in the Washington Post[2], there is the highest shortage of teachers in history in most of the states and the trend is ascendant. Many young teachers quit teaching jobs after the first teaching years.

I think the conflict theories could be an appropriate framework to analyse the above situation.

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[2] Joe Heim, *America has a teacher shortage, and a new study says it's getting worse*. In The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/america-has-a-teacher-shortage-and-a-new-study-says-its-getting-worse/2016/09/14/d5de1cee-79e8-11e6-beac-57a4a412e93a_story.html?utm_term=.935106e7248f

Willard Waller, the famous researcher that adopted the Weberian approach, considered that schools would easily lose control over students and become anarchies if they were not autocratic institutions. Based on conflict theories, students are considered to be forced to come to schools and there is always a tension between students, teachers, and administrators. Probably this way of thinking with deep roots in the American culture now explains why classrooms are always a 'battlefield' where teachers and students both target the control of the classroom. I think students are very aware of this battle, they respect teachers that keep the class under control and strongly penalize the teacher who fails to do so by being defiant and oppositional. I see students' reaction as a vicious circle, a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', to use the term coined by Robert Merton.

I would argue that this need for control coming from students could be explained by 'capitalist' theories like the ones developed by the ground-breaking work of Bowles and Gintis[3]. Based on their theory, students have little control on their education process. Maybe in an environment where there is not much space for initiative, these kinds of feelings develop easily.

3. Foucault and the microphysics of power – From the institutional to the individual level

Foucault focused on how power is exercised at the individual level. The shift of power from the traditional society where an authority exercised it over the population to the modern society where power is exercised by institutions concerned with regulation of norms and the wellbeing of individuals is used by Foucault to explain how this modern power is reconceptualised. First, it is considered that the important thing about power is how it is exercised and not by whom it is possessed. There are institutions that foster the development of power. He calls them disciplinary institutions and school is considered one of them. They are successful because humans are obedient, and it comes natural to obey. This is something I struggle believing. Wouldn't it be so that only the ones that are not able to develop their own values, would easily adopt the values promoted by schools and institutions and become an easy target for the power to be exercised on them? Or maybe this is exactly what is happening, and Foucault wants to capture. That in fact there is not much freedom in a modern society, it is just that the forms of control moved to the individual level. For instance, the students who abide school norms and regulations are rewarded by the school system. They are therefore motivated to adopt the values promoted by the school and exercise surveillance and control of own behaviour. So schools have this role of normalizing individuals. To do this, schools empower students with

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[3] Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1976.

mechanisms of control and work on developing the inner control, by developing self-regulating behaviour. Thinking at the diversity of students in terms of compliance, I see three categories here: students who refuse to comply to school norms and perceive the school as oppressive in accordance to their own values, students who adopt the school norms and understand that these norms are instruments to foster a good learning environment and students who take to the extreme the practice of being good students and neglect other needs in an effort to be perfect students. Maybe Foucault´s theory can be used to explain how school can foster the development of maladaptive perfectionism for some students.

4. The risk of categorizing gender

In the area of education, I understand that gender equality as sameness means that no differentiation should be made between boys and girls when planning the academic curriculum. I see this perspective as rather reductionist. If gender is socially constructed, then boys are educated, first at the family level, to have different interests, different preferences compared to girls. For instance, they are educated to inhibit their emotions, while girls are encouraged to show theirs. Gender stereotypes probably already exist among children, such as some activities are considered appropriate for boys while some are considered appropriate for girls. The motivation for different school activities will differ. What I think is needed is a type of awareness that some differences exist and should be addressed. Maybe boys need a bigger push to enrol in a ballet class, while girls need to be encouraged to take computer programming courses. As mentioned by Lynch and Baker[4], I do agree that schools need to be inclusive institutions. The authors explain that equality should refer to equal chances for wellbeing. For this, a lot of differentiation might be needed. For instance, an immigrant student might need more language courses to have equal opportunities. Teachers must be open and flexible when dealing with gender differences. I think it is extremely risky for a teacher to adopt for instance the 'boy discourse'[5] and assume that boys will underachieve, boys will have more behaviour problems, etc. Based on the theory of self-fulfilling prophecy[6], this might actually happen if expected. Also, as Lahelma mentioned, categorizing boys and girls as different makes it difficult to see the potential interaction between gender and inequalities coming from different cultural background, different family education or different economic status. The author explains that

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[4] Kathleen Lynch; John Baker, *Equality in Education: The importance of Equality of Condition.* In Theory and Research in Education 3 (2), 2015, pp. 131–164.

[5] Elina Lahelma, *Troubling discourses on gender and education,* in Educational Research, 56:2, 2014, 171-183, DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2014.898913.

[6] Robert King Merton, *The Self-Fulfilling prophecy*. The Antioch Review. Vol. 8, No. 2, 1948, pp. 193-210.

the lack of understanding that gender interacts with other socio-cultural factors might explain the ineffectiveness of programs designed to address boys' underachievement, for instance.

Conclusions

Sociology of education provides an informative theoretical framework when analysing school reality. I think that major frameworks such as functionalism and conflict theories are relevant in understanding how individuals negotiate and adopt values, how school exercise control, why school is perceived as both oppressive and inspirational, how individual differences interact with general policies of education.

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