

Sociology and Pedagogy: Some Reflections

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Four sociological frameworks show how sociology may contribute to understanding the school-student dynamic. We evaluate each in terms of its capacity to embody human agency and to incorporate students' connections to the wider society. The result is a tentative pedagogical model and research agenda based on the cultural studies perspective.

Quatre cadres sociologiques nous permettent de mieux saisir la dynamique école-élève. Chacun met en relief l'intervention de l'homme et intègre les rapports des élèves avec la société. L'analyse de ces cadres conduit à la création d'un modèle pédagogique provisoire et à un programme de recherche adoptant une perspective propre aux études culturelles.

Sociologists have neglected the school-student relationship, and in particular the teacher-student dynamic. I should like to draw attention both to these matters and to the more general theoretical question of the relationship between social structure and the human actor. Does the sociological interest in the impact of social structure on individual behaviour allow for a conception of the actor that retains an element of agency, that is, the capacity for purposive, willful behaviour?

My desire to incorporate an active human agent into sociological theory has two sources:

1. my observation of social life, including reflection on my own behaviour, tells me that people are not mechanical products of social structure, but that they do act against the structural parameters of dominant values and norms. Further, even though most people conform most of the time to these structural elements, the act of conforming can itself be conceived of as purposive behaviour—the result of what Buchanan and Tulloch (1962) call “the calculus of consent”;
2. if one is committed to the idea of human emancipation from various forms of oppression, one must posit the ability of people to change the conditions of their existence.

Traditional sociology has nonetheless ignored the issue of agency. Either agency has been “bracketed” (that is, we know it exists, but it isn't our

business—we're in the business of structure; leave the issue of agency to philosophers and psychologists), or it has been treated as synonymous with role performance.

Three traditional perspectives—functionalism, symbolic interaction, and exchange theory—each have a view of structure and agency, and thus of a kind of school-student relationship. Recent neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives on the structure-agency issue are more isomorphic with social life and more compatible with human emancipation.

Under functionalism, human action is the result of socialization into societally defined roles. The extreme position is Parsons' notion that individual personality systems are largely reflections of wider cultural patterns (Parsons, 1951). Sociologists of education, no less than other sociologists, have echoed the basic principle underlying this position. That is, the school or classroom is a major site for the reproduction of social structure. Implicitly or explicitly functionalist, the assertion is that schools are major socializing agents that prepare the young to occupy adult roles. The image of the social actor—the student—is that of a passive internalizer of culture. The teacher-student relationship is unproblematic in such models.

Those who espouse a symbolic interactionist framework (Mead, 1934; Meltzer, 1972) claim to incorporate a more active human agent into sociological theory. For Mead and his followers, society is a constructed phenomenon—it arises from adjustive interactions among individuals constantly interpreting others' linguistic cues and other symbols, convincing one another that there is a shared definition of the situation, and acting accordingly. At first glance, this suggests that an individual may have impact on social structure. Reflective human beings monitor their own actions and those of others, and are able to modify the nexus of shared understandings. However, symbolic interaction clearly emphasizes the primacy of social structure. For Mead, role taking, putting oneself in the place of another and seeing oneself and one's behaviour as objects, is essential, since this process allows individuals to monitor their behaviour and to develop a self-conception. Child development culminates when the child can see himself or herself from the standpoint of the generalized other—according to the dominant values and beliefs constituting the individual's social world.

Sociologists of education operating in this perspective have emphasized Mead's role-taking notions, arguing that teachers are significant others in the child's life, capable of shaping the child's self-perception and academic performance. This framework sensitizes teachers to the impact their expectations of students may have on social and academic development. Although some symbolic interactionists studying education have proposed a more

active conception of the student (for instance, Martin, 1976), the notion of labelling conveys the primacy of structure over agency.

Exchange theory more explicitly develops the notion of a calculating human agent. Borrowing from micro-economics and behavioural psychology, such sociologists as Blau (1964), Emerson (1972), and Homans (1974) conceptualize human actors as engaging in market-like behaviour—that is, buying and selling a wide range of social commodities including prestige and services. Such principles as rationality of action, profit maximization, and diminishing returns underlie this perspective. The classroom can thus be conceptualized as a market. Students “buy” teacher attention, information, praise, and freedom of movement in exchange for academic and social compliance. Pedagogy from this viewpoint would emphasize the development of teachers’ negotiation skills, including the ability to recognize rewards of potential value to students.

Although there is some merit in recognizing students’ capacity to redress the inherent inequality in teacher-student relationships (through granting or withholding compliance), this perspective suffers from what I would call the *individuation of agency*. I see human emancipation as collective or group emancipation, which is inconsistent with a view of atomized units operating individually in a social unit. A further weakness is that the classroom is conceived as a self-contained unit, unconnected to the wider society. Analysis of human subordination and potential emancipation must recognize the school’s role as cultural reproducer *and* the rather obvious point that students (and teachers, of course) have lives outside the schools. Both the functionalist and symbolic interaction approaches recognize the school’s role as cultural reproducer, seeing schools as a repository of dominant societal values. However, neither approach explicitly considers the connection of students to the wider society. Further, they offer no notion of a collective human agent.

I want to argue that those two principles—the conception of a collective agent and the student’s connection to the wider society—are inextricably linked. Frameworks emphasizing the possibility of collective resistance to cultural transmission are essential precisely because students are connected to the wider society. Forms of collective resistance come largely from students’ structural location in the wider society, mainly their class location.

Schools typically recruit children from the same neighbourhood. Children in a school already know one another, play together, and share a common set of symbols, values and norms. These cultural aspects are at least in part due to the class composition of the neighbourhood. Schools will vary in the extent to which their students share a common subculture, and in the extent to which student subcultures overlap with the dominant (typically middle-class) culture manifested by teachers and other school personnel.

Students are already constituted as a subcultural unit before they enter school, and the seeds of collective resistance are already present. This possibility is heightened by four essential features of schools:

1. they are authoritarian organizations. Not only are they compulsory organizations (until they attain a certain age, all youth must attend), but, also, much pupil behaviour is at teacher initiative (Richer, 1981, 1988);
2. they are highly bureaucratic organizations, emphasizing control by rule and official authority;
3. they are age-graded. Students progress through the system in age-homogeneous cohorts;
4. they have adults in positions of power, and youth in positions of subordination, so that any generational division in the wider society is institutionalized in the power structure of the school itself.

These factors force us seriously to question the simplistic models of socialization proposed by traditional sociological frameworks. In one kind of circumstance these models may be appropriate—in a professional and/or managerial neighbourhood where the culture of the school staff is the same as that of the student body (situation 1 below). Yet even here the authoritarian and bureaucratic nature of schooling, and the age difference between staff and students would arguably produce student resistance. The main source of resistance would in this case be generation rather than class. The less overlap between dominant and youth subcultures, of course, the less useful is any simplistic socialization model. As one moves from situation 1 to 2 to 3, there are fewer and fewer shared cultural elements. Situation 3 (for instance, a predominantly working-class neighbourhood) would resist analysis by any model based on unproblematic socialization or on an individual conception of agency. In this situation as in Figure 2, socialization would be contested, and often at a collective level.

There is, then, a dialectical relationship between the transmission of the message and its reception. The message is filtered through a set of shared meanings (largely the effect of class location), may then be distorted, subsequently reconstructed, and at last flung back to the teacher, with the potential for penetrating and modifying the teacher's own cultural world.

As I intimated, the youth subcultures I speak of, according to studies in Britain, the U.S., and Canada (Apple, 1985; Brake, 1985; Everhart, 1979; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; McLaren, 1986; Willis, 1977) are largely class-based.¹ The contradictions of capitalist society along with class location produce such cultural forms as the punks, greasers, rockers, head bangers, mods, skinheads, and preppies, to name the most conspicuous. The analysis is further complicated by gender. Increasingly, there is evidence that it is a mistake to talk about youth subcultures in general without analyzing differences between male and female subcultural forms in particular. Most

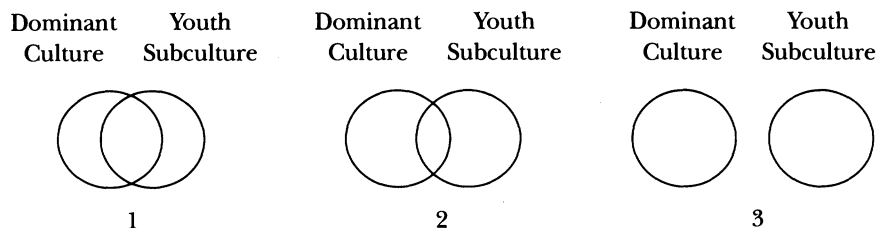


FIGURE 1
Three Relationships Between Dominant and Youth Subcultures

research deals with male youth, particularly male working-class youth, but recent work by feminists on adolescent girls offers new understandings of how class and gender produce various types of subcultural groups.

This relatively new work in sociology—cultural studies—has developed mainly in Britain but has been taken up elsewhere. Its impetus is Marxist, offering considerable autonomy to the cultural domain in the mediation of social reproduction and class struggle. The school is a major site for both class and gender struggle; for some, it is thus a potential arena of social change.

In order to present concrete examples of forms of class and gender-based resistance in schools, and to draw out some possible research and pedagogical implications, I think it useful to distinguish among types of resistance. One may classify these along two dimensions: (a) whether resistance is formal or informal (by formal, I mean resistance expressed through institutionalized channels; by informal, resistance expressed outside such channels), and (b) whether resistance is active (is a direct challenge to school/teacher authority) or passive (is not a challenge).

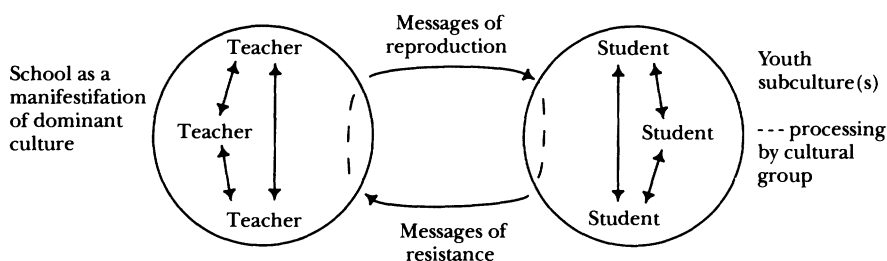


FIGURE 2
Situation 3 Elaborated

	<i>Formal</i>	<i>Informal</i>
Active	• student council • ombudsman • PTA • parent-teacher meetings	• laughing, mocking humour, physicality, vandalism • makeup and dress, language
Passive	• failure • not completing and/or failing to hand in assignments	• day-dreaming • going to sleep • tardiness • skipping classes • truancy • dropping out

FIGURE 3
Types of Student Resistance

For reasons I cited earlier, I am less interested in individual resistance than in collective resistance, resistance that is collectively *expressed* or that at least draws its form or content from a subcultural base. Formal, active collective student resistance would thus be a rarity. The channels legitimize *parents* as major school clients, so any organized resistance would in all likelihood bypass students. Further, the bulk of parental acts would likely be manifestations of individual parental resistance, and largely confined (given what we know about participation in school activities) to middle-class families.

As for passive resistance, I hypothesize that it would also be predominantly individual in form. However, the latter three forms of resistance in the informal passive cell of Figure 3 (skipping classes, truancy, and dropping out), may in addition be subculturally supported, if not collectively expressed. This could also be the case for failing to hand in assignments. Further, the correlation between social class and truancy/drop-out rates suggests these may be differentially supported by working-class groups.

Most writers who discuss resistance refer to informal active resistance. The classic work on this is Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977), an ethnographic study of working-class youth in Britain. The major subcultural attributes of the "lads" were exaggeration of masculinity (mainly physical toughness and sexism) and subscription to such values as fooling around, "having a laugh," and in general not taking schoolwork seriously. All of these reinforce oppositional culture, itself a response to alienation from schooling. That alienation is the outcome of (1) the contradiction between the stated aims of schooling (to enhance upward mobility) and its true function (to reproduce the class system), and (2) the school's failure to grant legitimacy to salient

elements in working-class culture.

Willis' work, though ground-breaking, suffers, as do other studies of this ilk, from a distinct gender and class bias. It heavily emphasizes male working class youth, partly because most researchers are male. The class bias stems from the Marxist orientation of these writers, who search for potential harbingers of organized resistance, if not revolution, among the labouring class. On the whole, such studies have ignored adolescent women. Recent feminist writings argue that there are analogous forms of resistance among female students (Davies, 1983; McRobbie & Nava, 1984; Stanworth, 1983). For example, just as male working-class youths exaggerate masculinity (swearing, toughness, sexism), working-class females appear to exaggerate female characteristics—wearing excessive makeup, crying, and playing the maternal role (especially with male teachers). In addition, shared jokes about teachers, and patterns of tardiness and truancy seem characteristic of both males and females. To what extent these are subcultural as opposed to individual phenomena, however, is as yet unclear.

There is evidently much work to be done in this area, then, particularly:

1. to identify the wider societal forces to which such resistance is a response (for instance, unravelling the complex interaction between patriarchy and capitalism is obviously a priority);
2. to document the extent of collective versus individual resistance;
3. to document the extent and forms of class- and gender-based variation in resistance among adolescents;
4. to expand the research to include elementary and post-secondary students;
5. to examine cross-cultural variation in extent and forms of student resistance;
6. to examine the responses of teachers and other personnel to student resistance.

Concerning the last of these, one may tentatively outline at least four possible types of response:

1. resistance—teachers themselves may collectively or individually devise strategies to deny legitimacy to these subcultural forms. This may imply confrontation as teachers seek to defend traditional roles;
2. co-optation—strategies to appropriate various aspects of the subculture in order to neutralize it (for example, using subcultural leaders as teachers' aids);
3. accommodation—a compromise solution that would yield subcultural space to students in exchange for compliance;
4. collaboration—granting legitimacy to various subcultural forms and acting to encourage their cohesion. This particular response is consistent with an emancipatory pedagogy since it encourages subgroups to gain

control over the conditions of their existence. Minimally, such a pedagogy would reveal to members of subculture groups the true nature of their relationship to the wider society (as a working-class youth or a female, for instance) and indicate to them how their subcultural behaviour is in some measure a response to their subordination (Richer, 1981). At the same time, one would seek a re-structuring of the schooling process to allow for increased subcultural input into both the curriculum and the organization of schools.

The question here is twofold: (a) under what conditions (historical, structural, and biographical) do teachers and other school personnel display these types of responses? and (b) how do these responses interact with the types of resistance outlined in Figure 3?

I argue that models will not take us far in understanding school and classroom dynamics unless they take into account students' positions in the wider society, particularly as these lead to various forms of subcultural behaviour. This paper was meant to function heuristically: to argue the point, and to provide concepts for a research agenda.

NOTE

- ¹ Recent work, though, questions the notion that the subcultures of Canadian youth are class-based. See Baron, 1979.

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