Reconceptualising Structure and Agency in the Sociology of Education: structuration theory and schooling

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ABSTRACT Since the 1970s there has been considerable debate among sociologists of education about the macro-micro gap in educational analyses. However, educational research remains divided largely into the study of large-scale phenomena such as social systems and national policies on the one hand, and case-studies of individual schools and social interaction on the other. This split has had a number of unfortunate consequences for the development of the field. Most importantly, the dominant conceptions of structure and agency employed in the sociology of education are characterised by a dualism which makes it difficult to conceptualise adequately the processes involved in social change. In this paper, I briefly describe this structure-agency dualism before critically examining three attempts which have been made to address this problem. The ability of structuration theory to overcome this dualism is then examined, and I conclude by arguing that this approach offers an important new direction for the sociology of education.

Introduction

Since the 1970s there has been considerable debate among sociologists of education about the relative importance of macro- and micro-levels of analysis. This debate is not peculiar to education and its existence has prompted some of the most creative work in the social sciences as a whole (e.g. Knorr-Cetina & Cicourel, 1981; Archer, 1982, 1988). However, educational analyses remain divided largely into macro-level work (the study of large-scale phenomena such as social systems and national policies) informed by variants of neo-marxism and other forms of (post-)structuralism on the one hand, and micro-level work (the study of small-scale phenomena such as case-studies of individual schools or specific instances of teacher–pupil interaction) which draws on symbolic interactionism and phenomenology on the other.

This division has allowed sociologists of education to focus on their chosen
areas of study without being distracted by the deep-rooted problems facing attempts to unite levels of analysis. It has also been the cause of some productive tension; as sociologists have sought to construct their macro- or micro-level explanations without completely obliterating the importance of individual action on the one hand, or social structure on the other. However, this split has also had a number of unfortunate consequences for the development of the field. The paucity of attempts to integrate and reconcile levels of analysis means that sociology of education has frequently neglected the problems which arise in seeking to combine in one approach the insights gained from structural analysis and interpretive work. Epistemologically, the debate about what counts as knowledge when combining levels of analysis has still to be addressed adequately in the sociology of education. This includes such issues as the relative weight that should be given to actors' accounts compared to sociological constructs in documenting 'reality'; how the adequacy of teachers' and pupils' beliefs about schools are to be assessed; and if educational theories can be tested by independent data/criteria or whether knowledge is inevitably theory laden and can therefore only be judged by its internal coherence (Hammersley, 1984). Methodologically, many important issues concerning how research should or does proceed when attempting to combine macro- and micro-levels remain hidden. For example, sociologists of education have still to sort out precisely how 'grand' theoretical narratives (e.g. Feminism, Marxism) can or should be applied to particular pieces of micro-level research. Ontologically, educational research rarely even addresses questions concerning the fundamental conditions through which social processes are generated and shaped. Instead, while there tends to be an assumption that either agents or structures possess the capacity to create social life, the foundations of this capacity are rarely explored (Cohen, 1989).

This is not to say that these issues have always been neglected within macro- or micro-level perspectives in the sociology of education. For example, the growing ethnographic literature has focused on how knowledge is gained through interpretive research methods while West's (1984) paper remains an impressive attempt to address epistemological and methodological issues involved in applying Marxism to educational research. However, this work has generally been marked by a division of labour which has left to one side the problems involved in integrating macro- and micro-levels of analysis.

Probably the largest obstacle to the integration of macro- and micro-perspectives, and the one I shall concentrate on in this paper, is the dominant conceptions of structure and agency in educational research. Not only are the respective conceptions of structure and agency found in macro- and micro-level work deficient in their own right, they also contribute to an unresolved dualism which has characterised the sociology of education. Educational research is typically constructed as addressing either large-scale structural processes and policies, or small-scale individual interaction patterns; the assumption being that social life itself exists on different levels. As well as being a false assumption, since individuals simply do not occupy different 'levels' of existence (Levine et al., 1987), splitting social life into hierarchical levels makes it difficult to conceptualise change as a dynamic process involving both structures and human agents.

This structure–agency dualism in educational research has contributed to the epistemological, methodological and ontological problems raised above, and needs to be reconciled before substantial theoretical advances can be expected in
educational research. After briefly highlighting instances of this dualism, I examine several attempts to overcome this problem before arguing that structuration theory offers a promising basis for bringing together micro-and macro-approaches in the sociology of education. Space restrictions necessitate that my treatment of structuration theory in this paper be relatively brief, and I shall limit my discussion to its direct implications for social structure and human agency. My aim is to highlight the potential of this approach to facilitate a more sophisticated understanding of the degree to which structures are reproduced in and through social interaction in schools and classrooms. This is an important task in its own right as, with a few exceptions (e.g. Watkins, 1985, 1986; Shilling, 1991), the potential of structuration theory has hardly been touched on in the sociology of education [1].

Structure and Agency in the Sociology of Education

Since the early 1970s the sociology of education has been characterised by two dominant (types of) approaches which are both flawed. In brief, structuralist (and emerging post-structuralist) accounts of education tend to be relatively strong on constraint yet weak on agency, while interpretive approaches tend to be relatively strong on dealing with human agency yet weak on recognising and conceptualising social structures.

Early structuralist and correspondence theorists (Althusser, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) attempted to provide totalising explanations of the structure and functioning of schooling. They located the education system within the social whole, and viewed it as overdetermined by broader social structures. While they did much to refute the liberal myth that educational institutions operated independently of economic pressures, these approaches tended to write off human agency. Accounts of actors were simply not required as they could be deduced from the determining effects of social structures on the one hand or the correspondence principal on the other. Although politically dissimilar, the over-integrative accounts of Althusser and Bowles and Gintis had methodological similarities with classical functionalism in that they exaggerated the degree to which normative obligations were ‘internalised’ by members of societies (Giddens, 1984, p. 30; 1976, pp. 108–110).

Bernstein’s structuralism also tends to be strong on analysis of linguistic and (other) social structures, while underplaying the importance of human agency. Bernstein’s analyses of linguistic codes, the organisation of educational knowledge, and the primary, secondary and recontextualising contexts involved in the production of pedagogic discourse overcame the idealism and extreme voluntarism characteristic of elements within the “new sociology of education” (e.g. Bernstein, 1986). However, through their overriding concern with the relationships between social phenomena and the impersonal structures that work behind people’s backs (Atkinson, 1985; Evans, 1990), Bernstein’s analyses tend to dissolve the importance of human agency. Recent studies which have been critical of, yet draw heavily on, Bernstein’s work (e.g. Kirk & Colquohoun, 1989) fail to overcome this problem as they examine the contexts of pedagogic discourse production as themselves determined by wider social discourses. In doing this, the source of structural domination has been shifted (though precisely where to is never clear), while agency remains both hidden and untenable.
Bernstein's recent work on pedagogic discourse has anticipated the rise of post-structuralist (and post-modern) approaches to the sociology of education. Post-structuralism is a broad label referring to a range of theoretical positions developed, following the structuralist linguistics of Sassure, in and from the writings of Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva and Foucault. These writers share a concern with the importance of language and representation (Weedon, 1987). Language does not reflect a pre-existing world, but conditions and creates all meaning we have of the world. Language is constituted by a multiplicity of signs and signifiers whose meaning is ever slipping and resistant to interpretation. Further, it is impossible to gain access to any interpretation of the world separate from language (MacDonald, 1990). This is because language itself is a system of arbitrary signs which derive their meaning not from an intrinsic connection with 'reality', but as a result of their difference from other signs. Post-modernists take this form of analysis a step further by viewing language (and indeed all life) as having reached a stage of 'hyperreality'; where images and electronic texts constitute the only 'reality' experienced by individuals (e.g. Lyotard, 1984; Baudrillard, 1988a, b). In stark contrast to Bernstein's structuralism, though, the development of post-modernism views language as detached from any basis that can be traced back to social structure [2].

Sociologists of education have not been slow to recognise the reactionary, epistemologically relativist, 'anything goes' implications of forms of post-structuralism and post-modernism. In drawing on post-modernist analyses they have sought to 'weed out' what they see as the progressive as opposed to the reactionary elements of this approach (e.g. Wexler, 1988; Giroux, 1988; Ellsworth, 1989; Leach & Davies, 1990). However, there is a fundamental problem here of tying together post-modernist analysis within a modernist project of action and progress (i.e. constructing analyses of the power of language, communication and the 'information society' on the one hand while wanting to maintain essentially modernist notions of human resistance and development on the other) [3]. A good example of this tension can be seen in the work of Cherryholmes (1988) who deconstructs the dominant totalising foundations on which traditional education is based, yet struggles and fails to reinstate criteria for critical action and progress. The problem is that Cherryholmes cannot escape from the charge that these criteria for action are in contradiction to the main thesis of the work; that it is impossible to recognise a 'correct' form of agency and resistance when one's whole analysis has argued for the validity of deconstructionism and the structuring power of texts (Kelly, 1990).

Despite their self-proclaimed differences from structuralism, post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches to education share with their antecedents a dissolution of the acting subject. Individual agency is ruled out by the determining power of discourses and texts in our 'post-industrial', 'information' societies which structure both consciousness and action behind people's backs.

Ethnographic work and case-studies informed by phenomenology and symbolic interactionism constitute the second main approach to dominate the sociology of education since the early 1970s. This research has generally had more limited aims than the totalising explanations sought by structuralism. For example, while Lacey (1966, 1970) sought to integrate a study of the school as a social system within its industrial context, the other 'Manchester studies' focused far more on how intra-school processes related to one aspect of social inequality, i.e. academic
performance (Hargreaves, 1967; Lambart, 1976). These institutionally focused explanations were continued by the successors of these pioneering studies (Woods, 1979; Ball, 1981), and continue to concern much ethnographic work.

The popularity of ethnographic methods has led not only to an increase in studies of single (or small numbers of) schools (e.g. Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Wolpe, 1988), but to an explosion in studies of single classrooms, schemes, or groups of participants within educational sites (e.g. Shilling, 1987; Skeggs, 1988; Parry, 1990). Studies in this tradition have done so much to illuminate 'what goes on' in educational settings through providing 'thick descriptions' of events and complementary reports of interviews. They have also reinstated the importance of agency to educational research by taking seriously the intentions, actions, strategies and monitoring of events carried out by individuals. Indeed, in opposition to various forms of (post-) structuralism, this interpretive work has implicitly been concerned to rescue the acting, reflexive subject and place her/him at the centre of the sociological project. However, the treatment of structure in interpretive work has generally been less than satisfactory [4].

Ethnographic studies tend to neglect the fact that events are not produced uniquely by autonomous individuals. Social and institutional contexts, patterns of behaviour, and educational outcomes do not exist apart from wider structures which themselves enter into the construction of these phenomena. Furthermore, attempts to introduce structural influences into interpretive accounts have not usually met with success. When an examination of social structures does appear in ethnographies, there tends either to be an assumption that events in the case-study directly contribute to their maintenance, or, ironically, that the structure has caused the processes being studied (Anderson, 1989). In the first instance there is no attempt to trace the links between structure and action while in the second, human agency is, paradoxically, dissolved into an overintegrative notion of social structure.

In direct contrast to forms of structuralism, these interpretive approaches have attempted to reintroduce the importance of the acting subject to educational research. However, in doing this, they have tended to be weak in their treatment of social structures.

Attempts to Bridge Structure–Agency Dualism

Since the late 1970s there has been a recognition that the macro–micro division has hampered theoretical progress in the sociology of education (e.g. A. Hargreaves, 1978; Hammersley, 1984). Since that time a number of attempts have been made to address, and in some instances overcome, the structure–agency dualism which has characterised educational research. This work has not always been explicitly addressed to that goal at a theoretical level, but has sometimes sought to integrate macro- and micro-levels through a substantive focus on a particular area of research such as 'coping strategies' or teachers' work (A. Hargreaves, 1978; Ozga & Lawn, 1988). In what follows, I shall focus on three attempts to address the structure–agency gap. This is not an exhaustive coverage of relevant work (e.g. see D. Hargreaves, 1978) but each of the approaches examined represent important attempts to address the macro–micro problem in the sociology of education.
Teaching Strategies and ‘Linked’ Micro-studies

The work of Andy Hargreaves has demonstrated a consistent concern with bridging the structure–agency gap. This is evident in the critique of what he sees as the conceptual confusion and logical inconsistency of relative autonomy theories, and in his writings on coping strategies, and the micro–macro problem in the sociology of education (Hargreaves, 1980, 1984, 1985).

At a substantive level, A. Hargreaves (1978, p. 75) developed the notion of classroom “coping strategies” as a way of “linking features of the social structure to issues in the classroom” and exploring “how the former impinge upon or even shape the latter”. The importance of linking social structures with individual actions in studying teacher (and pupil) behaviour has been recognised by others (e.g. Lacey, 1977; Pollard, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1984; Woods, 1980a, b) and has been judged by Woods (1985) as representing a cumulative development of theory (for a critique of this position see Hammersley, 1987; Scarth, 1987). On the plus side, this body of work has undoubtedly sought to map the interconnections between the creativity of individuals attempting to cope in the classroom, and the constrains which limit the feasibility and adoption of these strategies. However, this work is unable to go beyond a view of structure as separate from and setting limits to teacher agency. Structures still operate to set boundaries to action, and clash with any ‘unrealistic’ strategies pursued by teachers. Consequently, structure and agency remain (inadequately) on different levels of social life and the connection between the two is reduced to teachers internalising and adapting to external constraint. This is illustrated by A. Hargreaves’ (1978, p. 82) work:

Experience is a great teacher. Where constraints persist, the unwilling adaptation becomes the unwitting educational goal. Practitioners ‘discover’ that a way of coping might be educationally desirable after all. Necessity can indeed be the mother of both invention and intention.

Hargreaves introduces the notion of “institutional mediation” to enable “a bridge to be built between features of the society and issues in the classroom without reducing statements about structure to statements about action” (1978, p. 89). However, this fares no better in bridging the structure–agency gap as it merely reproduces the question of how constraints and opportunities interact. The only difference is that the focus of analysis has shifted from the societal to the institutional level.

Hargreaves’ attempt to bridge the structure–action gap does not, however, end with his analysis of classroom coping strategies. In his 1985 paper on the macro–micro problem in the sociology of education, he returns implicitly to the importance of the institutional level of society by suggesting that sociologists of education might profitably concentrate on developing what Merton (1968) calls theories of the middle range. Middle-range theories involve abstraction from concrete data, but remain close enough to this data to be incorporated into testable propositions. As such, they lie between all encompassing grand theory on the one hand and detailed descriptions which have been the province of ethnography on the other. However, this ‘solution’ sidesteps, rather than offers answers to, the problem of structure–agency dualism. In proposing middle-range theories, Hargreaves simply seeks to restrict the explanatory capacity of the sociology of education. Furthermore, he views attempts to go beyond the middle
range as doomed to failure as they face an "unbridgeable gap" between "the world of small-scale face-to-face interaction, on the one hand, and vast social structures of immense proportions on the other" (1984, p. 170). In order to construct middle-range theory, Hargreaves advocates conducting linked micro-studies of educational settings. Now, these may generate interesting data and a number of theoretical insights—as Hargreaves' own (1985a) work on middle-schools has shown—but such studies simply leave the structure–agency problem unresolved and serve to recreate the micro–macro gap in a slightly different form.

Ethnography as Theory

Over the last 10 years, Martyn Hammersley has established himself as the major critic of conventional ethnography. He has written a series of papers (several of which have been brought together in his 1990 book) which seek not only to identify the "disabling problems" suffered by existing ethnographic studies, but to reconstruct this form of research into a new paradigm consistent with the formation and empirical testing of hypotheses (e.g. Hammersley, 1981, 1985, 1986, 1987). The direction of Hammersley’s work has been influenced by a critical engagement with the macro–micro problem in the sociology of education where he argues that attempts at synthesising these approaches are premature:

We can rank theories according to the scale of the units to which they apply, from individual human beings (or even genes) at the one end of the spectrum to the world system...at the other. Equally obvious, it seems to me, is that this issue is not one which can be resolved by philosophical analysis alone. Whether there are valid macro and/or micro theories is a matter for empirical observation. (Hammersley, 1984, p. 178)

Consequently, Hammersley argues for the construction of theory via the formulation of explanatory hypotheses and the conducting of research specifically designed to ascertain the circumstances when specific regularities hold and when they do not. A prime example of this is the 'differentiation–polarization' theory which is taken from the work of Lacey (1966, 1970), Hargreaves (1967) and Ball (1981), and has been subsequently tested by Abraham (1989), (see Hammersley, 1985). Hammersley argues that this form of testing is the best way of ultimately linking together levels of analysis in the sociology of education. However, the problem with this approach is that it leaves intact the existing division of labour between macro- and micro-level analysis in education, and assumes that theoretical progress can be achieved before structure–agency dualism is addressed. There is also a further potential problem with Hammersley’s approach which concerns his focus on the importance of ascertaining regularities in order to construct theory.

The search for causal regularities assumes the existence of mechanisms that reproduce familiar patterns of events. The danger with this presupposition, though, is that it overlooks the power of people to act differently. As Giddens (1984, p. 9; 1979, p. 56) argues, in principle any given pattern of social conduct may be altered by agents acting differently than they have done in the past. This is not to deny that much of social life is comprised of regularities in conduct, but it
does make it untenable to conceptualise these regularities as part of trans-
historical or cross-cultural orders of uniformities (Cohen, 1989). Positivist
methods of observation and measurement also risk the danger of neglecting and
distorting the complex cognitive rationalities and strategies that comprise funda-
mental aspects of human social praxis. Indeed, Bhaskar (1979) argues that
beneath any empirically demonstrable pattern of events there must be mecha-
nisms conceivable in ontological terms that operate together to constitute actual
occurrences in the world.

None of this is to argue that Hammersley falls into any of these traps. His
project is limited in scope, carefully conceived and qualified, and rigorously
reported. However, the logical implications of his positivistic view of educational
research would restrict the sociology of education’s scope in ways which would be
fundamentally limiting to the study of human praxis; the multiplicity of ways in
which educational life is generated in and through social conduct. Far from
enhancing the explanatory power of educational research, this approach may
restrict an appreciation of the complexity of educational life.

Teaching and the Labour Process

Ozga and Lawn’s recent work on the labour process of teaching represents an
attempt to resolve at a substantive level the structure–agency dualism charac-
teristic of educational research. Partly as a reflexive self-critique of their earlier
(1981) work, Ozga & Lawn (1988, p. 329) highlight the inadequacy of the
proletarianisation thesis in terms of its determinism, its technicist and masculinist
construction, and its neglect of worker and management strategies in the work-
place. Instead, Ozga and Lawn argue for the importance of human agency by
focusing on the social construction of skill in analysing teachers’ work. Their
discontent with structuralist approaches to teaching is apparent when they argue
that, historically, even though “feminisation may have been connected to prole-
tarianisation in structural terms... for some women it represented up-skilling and
the recognition of previously unrecognised skills” (1988, p. 331).

Ozga and Lawn recognise the problems with structuralist approaches which see
teachers as caught up in an inevitable process of de-skilling and this explains their
focus on the social construction of teaching and the subjective experiences of
teachers. However, they also want to avoid an approach towards teachers’ work
which merely describes the social relations of work as this would, they argue, lack
explanatory power (p. 334). As a result, Ozga and Lawn return to the importance
of contextualising their analysis of human agency, experience and the social
construction of teaching, within labour process theory:

The social construction of skill is a powerful tool, but it comes from a
particular ‘kit’, and needs to be located in labour process theory. (Ozga
& Lawn, 1988, p. 334)

The problem with this approach is that it leads Ozga and Lawn into a methodolo-
gical cul-de-sac from which they cannot adequately escape. Despite their focus on
human agency, they recognise that switching completely to a view of teaching
based on individual experience would merely replicate the extreme subjectivism
of those who focus on the meaning of teaching for individuals (e.g. Nias, 1988).
Consequently, they want to hold onto both ends of the structure–agency polarity
(for example, by examining teacher strategies yet also hanging onto some notion of technical proletarianisation, p. 329). However, they provide no basis for actually linking together structure and agency in their analysis. As a result, the dualism Ozga and Lawn recognise as flawing their earlier work (1988, p. 329) reappears at the end of their analysis.

The unresolved struggle with dualism implicit in their 1988 paper also has the effect of obscuring the actual meaning of labour process theory. By failing to locate it as an explanatory concept which provides an adequate resolution to the structure–agency gap, labour process analysis appears to degenerate into a shopping list of areas requiring research (pp. 325–327). Despite the fact that they argue for the importance of bearing certain factors in mind when undertaking such research, it is difficult to see how their approach ultimately differs from the charge they lay against micro-political approaches to the social relations of work; that they merely offer ‘descriptions’ of teachers’ work which are bereft of theory (p. 334).

The three approaches to educational research which have been briefly examined above illustrate some of the ways in which the structure–agency gap has been addressed by sociologists of education. I have argued that each of these fails to overcome the dualism which has traditionally characterised educational research (although in the case of Hammersley, this is by design). However, each of these approaches has raised important conceptual issues about central aspects of the education system. Unfortunately, this in itself is becoming increasingly rare in a field of study where untheorised policy (e.g. Knight, 1990) and management studies are gaining ascendency. In recent years, there has been a retreat from theory by many of those working in the field of education. In many cases, research has become dominated by technical approaches which take problems as given and set out to find ‘solutions’ to those problems within existing social, political and economic parameters. However, as Dale (1986) points out, educational research cannot escape from implicitly containing a theory about how social phenomena are constituted, no matter how hard it tries to do so explicitly. Similarly, the dualism which has hampered sociology of education is not absent from such work. Refusing to recognise a problem does not make it go away, and the recent rise of technical approaches to policy and management is as flawed by failing to overcome the division between structures and agency as anything that has gone before it.

**Structuration Theory: from dualism to duality**

Structuration theory offers a resolution to the dualism which has hampered theoretical progress in the sociology of education. Giddens began to develop the outlines of this approach in the mid-1970s, but his most comprehensive elaboration of structuration theory was published as *The Constitution of Society* in 1984. At the core of structuration theory is a reconceptualisation of traditional notions of structure on the one hand, and human agency on the other.

**Reconceptualising Structure**

Social structures are not seen as purely constraining, impersonal forces which stand above and apart from individuals, but instead are both implicated in and
reproduced by actors interacting with others through time and space in their daily lives. This takes us away from the dualism traditionally found in educational research, to what Giddens refers to as the duality of structure. ‘Structures’ are both the medium and outcome of social intercourse (Giddens, 1979, p. 5; 1981, p. 171; 1984, p. 26).

In reconceptualising traditional conceptions of structure as a determining force, structuration theory makes a distinction between social system and structure; concepts which are usually collapsed in the sociology of education. Following the legacy of Durkheimian sociology, functionalist approaches (and indeed much Marxist work) in education tend to view social systems as structures. Social systems are seen as functioning structures whose parts are related to the whole, and whose maintenance can be explained by the needs of the social totality. Social systems are characterised by a number of ‘social facts’ which are both external to individuals and constrain them. The problem with this view of structure is that society becomes a disembodied entity which stands apart from human action. Society is viewed as having certain ‘needs’ (e.g. for a certain level of social mobility to legitimise the education system, or a reserve army of labour to discipline the workforce) which exist and are reproduced irrespective of individual action. Dualism is built into this formulation and such an approach makes it methodologically impossible to trace, adequately, links between interaction in schools and wider social outcomes.

Instead of collapsing these concepts, structuration theory sees social systems as possessing structural properties but not as being structures in their own right (Giddens, 1979, p. 66). Instead, social systems consist of “reproduced relationships between individuals and/or collectivities across space and through time” (Giddens, 1981, p. 169). This means that social systems are not necessarily conterminous with nation-states. A nation-state may contain within it a number of different social systems, and a social system may extend beyond the boundaries of nation-states. Advanced capitalism, for example, tends to ‘bind’ and reproduce certain relationships between peoples way beyond the parameters of a nation-state. By viewing social systems in this way, the concept structure is free to perform other conceptual work. ‘Structures’ are not social facts which exist apart from individuals, but sets of ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ which actors draw on, and hence reproduce, in social interaction. Again, particular ‘structures’ are not necessarily confined to specific nation-states but may be drawn on by actors living in contrasting parts of the world.

Structural rules are techniques or generalisable procedures applied in the enactment and reproduction of social practices. They include knowledge of social conventions and their contexts of application, and provide actors with a set of ‘tools’ for accomplishing social interaction. These structural rules can vary widely from the rules of language to the procedures used by actors in managing appearances in public settings (Goffman, 1963, 1971). For example, as numerous ethnographic studies show, rules concerning gender-appropriate behaviour are frequently drawn on by girls and boys in interacting with others in schools and classrooms (e.g. Mahoney, 1985; Lees, 1986). Teachers also draw frequently on racially stereotyped ‘rules’ when interacting with black pupils (Mac an Ghaill, 1988). It is important to note though, that while structural rules may be drawn on, and hence reproduced, through interaction, they do not determine behaviour. Far from being ‘social facts’ in the Durkheimian sense, rules
only become structural features of society as a result of their instantiation in action.

Structural resources are also drawn up by actors in situations of interaction and communication. In contrast to rules, though, resources consist of goods and services, and the authoritative power to control both these and influence the actions of others. Resources refer to phenomena which provide individuals with "capabilities of making things happen" (Giddens, 1981, p. 170). In structuration theory, then, rules and resources are reproduced only in and through the actions of individuals. This does not, of course, prevent them from 'stretching' away, beyond the control of any individual actor (e.g. one teacher may implement anti-racist teaching practices but this does not, by itself, change the racist character of our education system). Nor does it stop 'structural' rules and resources from stretching away beyond the control of a particular institution. For example, a major criticism of the innovations which have been seen as constituting the 'new vocationalism', such as TVEI, is that they overestimate the capacity of the educational system to effect changes in the economy (Dale, 1989; Dale et al., 1989). Indeed, one of the main tasks of sociology according to structuration theory is to examine how deeply embedded in time and space are the major structural principles (sets of rules and resources) of society. However, this does not negate the fact that 'structures' are dependent for their continuation on the actions of individual agents located across the spaces which constitute social systems.

The separation of social system from structural rules and resources has important implications for comparative work. In comparative studies, the units of analysis are the education systems of particular nation-states. It is frequently assumed that comparisons of different national systems can identify those variables (e.g. the national economy, system of government, cultural traditions) central to the emergence or relative importance of different forms of educational provision. However, given the increasingly global nature of the structural rules and resources drawn on in the development of education systems, this is a problematic assumption. While comparisons drawn between nation-states can yield much of value, they do not provide the whole picture and it is important to account for the influence on education systems of internationally utilised rules and resources (e.g. Appadurai, 1990). Otherwise, if I do not realise that the main features of a national education system are the result of global 'structures', I may believe that I understand that education system when in reality I will understand only the effects of international rules and resources.

This view of social 'structures' is an advance on existing approaches in the sociology of education. In contrast to structuralist work, it places human agents at the centre of social reproduction. Individual teachers, students and policy makers are not collapsed into 'wider' structural supports, but themselves reproduce (or fail to reproduce) the major structural principles of society in particular social spaces. In terms of education policy, the implications of this view mean that it is not feasible to conceptually policy as constructed by the logic of capital or any other force which operates entirely above and out of reach of individuals. Neither is it possible to construct a feasible, 'policy sociology' simply by adding on a concern with "individual's perceptions and experiences" to a state-centred analysis (Ozga, 1987, 1990). Instead, a major concern of education policy should be how people formulate, implement, mediate and oppose policies, which seek to
bind together social systems in time and space, by drawing on rules and resources in particular locales.

In contrast to interpretive approaches, structuration theory also goes beyond the ‘action frames’ of ethnographers who account for interaction outcomes by constructing typologies of behaviour (e.g. Woods, 1979). Instead, it recognises that action occurs through individuals implicating, and hence reproducing, ‘structural’ rules and resources (such as gender norms of behaviour) in their daily lives. Individuals are neither completely autonomous (as pre-existing rules and resources are heavily implicated in most people’s lives), nor do they create situations anew (as teachers, for example, always act in an existing school system). However, patterns of events are not self-supporting and they rely for their continuation on human agents drawing on the major structural principles which characterise the institutions in which they work. Change is an ever present possibility; a view which takes us away from deterministic views of the history of education and the education–society relationship. Teachers and students can and do make a difference by drawing, for example, on anti-sexist and anti-racist rules and resources and constructing ‘safe’ spaces within conventional classrooms and schools. Historically, socialist and other progressive educators have made changes to a class-based education system (Simon, 1974).

Giddens’ formulation of structuration theory has been criticised for failing to include a sufficiently strong institutional dimension which would account for how certain sets of rules and resources are more enduring than others (for relevant debates, see Held & Thompson, 1989; Clark et al., 1990; Craib, 1992). Given Giddens’ stress on the importance of time and space and the consequences of modernity in the constitution of ‘structures’, this criticism appears at least partially misplaced (Giddens, 1984, 1990). Furthermore, his concept of social position is a useful way of capturing some of the more enduring rules and resources which are attached to particular positions in society (Giddens, 1979, pp. 117–120; 1984, pp. 83–92). For example, analysing the social position of teachers can help overcome some of the deficiencies of Ozga and Lawn’s work.

A social position can be regarded as “a social identity that carries with it a certain range (however diffusely specified) of prerogatives and obligations that an actor who is accorded that identity (or is an ‘incumbent’ of that position) may activate or carry out” (Giddens, 1979, p. 117; 1984, p. 84). It is important to note that social position does not carry the same sociological implications as the functionalist notion of role. Much educational analysis tends to emphasise the given character of roles (e.g. Taylor, 1979; Walford, 1980; Browne, 1990; cf. Ahier, 1988). Roles are supplied by society and actors adapt to these roles as best they can. This static conception of society is rejected by structuration theory which also rejects the idea that roles exist without internal contradictions; that there is a social consensus about what a specific role consists of; and that roles are the basic constituents of social systems (Giddens, 1979, pp. 116–117). Instead, structuration theory views social systems as consisting not of roles but of reproduced practices. Bearing this in mind, then, social positions consist of bundles of practices that are expected to be carried out by those occupying particular social places. Social positions carry with them the expectation that actors will draw on, and hence reproduce, certain ‘sets’ of rules and resources. Hence, these positions occupy a central space in the institutionalisation of ‘structures’ as embedded across time and space in social systems.
The fact that social positions carry with them a bundle of expected practices does not mean that they are in any way fixed or unalterable. There can be tensions between elements of an actors' social position. For example, literature on the Education Reform Act suggests that the social position of teachers contains increasing numbers of tensions. The position of teacher entails having to cope with the strain of implementing a highly bureaucratised national curriculum, with its attendant assessment requirements, and responding to the demands of school governing committees and the local management of schools (Demaine, 1988; Deem, 1990; Murphy, 1990; Thomas, 1990). Evidence that the tensions embodied within the social position of 'teacher' are increasing is also supplied by the numbers of individuals leaving the profession (Blackburne, 1990), and the increased problems facing many schools and LEAs in maintaining a sufficient pool of supply teachers (Shilling, 1990, 1991a). The numbers of school governors resigning from their posts also suggests that tensions associated with this social position, one that is central to the government's educational reforms, are also increasing (Farley, 1990; see also Deem, 1990).

In summary, social positions embody within them a number of expected practices which, if carried out by their incumbents, can help reproduce the structural principles which characterise a social system. However, there is no guarantee that these expectations will go uncontested or that these social positions will allow their incumbents the resources to undertake their expectations. Indeed, in the case of schools, there is mounting evidence that the social position of teacher is not equipping individuals with the capacity to carry out the expected practices attached to this identity as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Treating teaching as a social position overcomes some of the methodological problems apparent in Ozga and Lawn's analysis. Examining the social position of teachers allows us to separate the bundle of practices officially associated with the job, from the tasks undertaken by actual teachers. So, in terms of labour process theory this takes us away from the determinism implicit within an historically uncontextualised proletarianisation thesis. However, in retaining a notion of the social position of teacher, it also enables analysis of the job which does not simply rely on the subjective responses of teachers. Examining the social position of teachers also removes us from conflating issues associated with the proletarianisation of teachers, with the actual individuals who carry out the job. The social position of teachers may indeed have been proletarianised (according to specified criteria within a particular time period), but this does not mean that the new incumbents of these positions (whether they be women or men) have had their skills decreased in comparison with their previous social positions.

Reconceptualising Agency

Giddens' radical reconceptualisation of structure is paralleled by his rethinking of human agency. Although it is generally assumed in ethnographic work in the sociology of education that agents can and do make a difference, this work lacks a coherent theory of human agency. Structuration theory provides a framework to rethink the subject by distinguishing between capability, knowledgeability and motivation.

Capability refers to the capacity of individuals to act otherwise and make a difference in human affairs. Capability does not require agents to be fully aware
or even intend to act in a particular way. It merely refers to the transformative capacity of humans; their power to intervene in social life.

... to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends on the capability of the individual to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power... power is logically prior to subjectivity. (Giddens, 1984, pp. 14-15)

Capability is an intrinsic property of human beings. Even those in oppressed positions have the power to influence events because of the "dialectic of control"; the fact that power relations are reciprocal and depend on the actions of both dominator and dominated (Giddens, 1979, p. 149). For example, despite the aggressive steps the government has taken to dominate the teaching profession in recent years, it still has to rely on teachers to implement the National Curriculum.

Now, interpretive work in the sociology of education usually simply assumes the capability of teachers and pupils. However, Giddens provides a layered theory of agency which accounts for how individuals are able to act.

Structuration theory presupposes the knowledgeability of human agents. This recognises that members of a society know a great deal (if not all) about society and the way it is constituted. Individuals 'carry on' in their daily lives with the aid of both discursive and practical consciousness. Discursive consciousness refers to what actors are able to articulate about social conditions and the contexts surrounding their own behaviour. Discursive consciousness recognises that actors routinely monitor their own activities, those of others, and the contexts in which they move. It also recognises that agents take into account the consequences of their actions, and are able to alter their actions in light of the information gained from discursive consciousness. This first 'layer' of human agency is that most frequently assumed by ethnographic and other interpretive work in the sociology of education. Interviewing and listening to pupils and teachers talk are particularly appropriate methods of gaining a degree of access to the discursive consciousness of individuals involved in schooling. However, while this is the most visible level of agency, it does not provide a complete account of why agents act in particular ways or what motivates agents to act. Discursive consciousness is also class-based in that the different levels of cultural capital acquired by individuals are likely to affect their interest in, and mode of, articulating information about social conditions and behavioural contexts. Consequently, it warns us about the adequacy of sociological accounts constructed wholly upon interview data.

While discursive consciousness can be a particularly visible feature of action, the knowledgeable character of human conduct is displayed above all through tacit modes of awareness and competence, or 'practical consciousness'. Numerous examples of practical consciousness can be found in the work of Goffman, who highlights the "stocks of knowledge" individuals use in carrying out daily encounters without being fully able to articulate the techniques they employ in social interaction. Actors are often unable to provide reasons for how they act, but this does not mean that their actions are not based on implicit knowledge of their circumstances and surroundings. It is important to stress that despite the differences between discursive and practical consciousness, there is no immovable barrier between the two types of knowledge. So, while Woods (1980a) appears to suggest that teachers' strategies are adopted consciously, and the reasons for their
adoption could be articulated discursively, he also mentions the possibility that such strategies can become routinised, and thereby be described more accurately as examples of practical consciousness.

The concepts of discursive and practical consciousness highlight two dimensions of the knowledgeableability of individuals which enter into the capability of agents to make a difference. However, neither of these concepts accounts for why individuals act in particular routinised ways. While acknowledging the power of individuals to make a difference, structuration theory also recognises that individuals commonly reproduce the main structural principles of society by regularly drawing on similar sets of rules and resources. Now, interpretive and policy-oriented work in the sociology of education often explains such regularities of behaviour by arguing that individuals are committed to certain values and goals and act in ways deliberately designed to perpetuate them. Structuralist approaches assume that individuals are either forced to act in certain ways by external constraints, or have internalised dominant norms. In contrast, structuration theory explains regularities of behaviour primarily in terms of the deep-seated need humans have for ontological security; the need to maintain a sense that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, and that the view of self and social identities that individuals have are stable and reliable. So, people tend regularly to draw on the same types of rules and resources in social interaction as not to do so would threaten their basic 'security system' (Giddens, 1979, p. 123).

Taking seriously the needs of actors for ontological security has important implications for how teacher and policy maker's actions are conceptualised in the sociology of education. There is a tendency in much writing to view the teacher or policy maker as an intentional agent who is deeply committed to certain norms of behaviour (e.g. to classroom practices which are sexist or racist in character). However, instead of arguing that such individuals are necessarily intent on upholding existing societal norms, it may be more profitable to consider the possibility that such beliefs and actions are prompted more from a familiarity with routine and a sense of what is 'natural'. Now, this may lead teachers, for example, to defend gender inequities in schools on the basis that they are 'natural' and, as such, should not be tampered with. However, it also opens up possibilities for progressive change based on strategies which systematically challenge stereotypes purporting to provide images of 'reality', and install equal opportunity practices based on daily practices which become part of a school's routine life.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to highlight the structure–agency dualism which characterises the sociology of education, and outline an alternative approach to educational research which avoids this problem. By focusing on structures as external constraints, structuralist work in the sociology of education is unable to investigate social systems as reproduced by knowledgeable individuals. In contrast, despite its focus on individuals, most ethnographic work in education fails to see how its subject matter is implicated in the immediate reproduction of structural roles and resources. Instead of viewing structure and agency as separate phenomena, structuration theory lays stress on the duality of structure; 'structures' are rules and resources which are both the medium and outcome of social interaction.
Structuration theory focuses on how social life is maintained and highlights the complexities involved in the reproduction of social systems by individuals. While focusing on how social life is generated by human agents, this approach also has epistemological and methodological implications concerning the status of actors’ accounts and the inadequacy of theories which do not allow for the centrality of agency in the reproduction of society.

Structuration theory does not provide any answers to fundamental questions about the position of education in our society, and it leaves a number of sociological questions unresolved. For example, structuration theory says relatively little about the likely direction of social change (Archer, 1988) or the ontological depth of different social structures (Craib, 1992). It also tends to equate the conditions of agency with consciousness; thus failing to articulate either a fully embodied notion of human agents (Shilling, 1991b) or an adequate account of what an embodied sociology might look like (Shilling, forthcoming). However, structuration theory does provide a new way of looking at the relationship between social interaction in schools and the reproduction of the major structural principles which characterise society. It also has important implications for the study of education policy and comparative education. As such it deserves serious attention.

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NOTES

[1] Pollard invokes structuration theory as a guiding influence when he argues that his work aims to "produce a model of coping strategies which is... balanced and complete in terms of the duality of structure" (1982, p. 22). However, it is difficult to see how Pollard’s work actually draws upon Giddens’ writings as Pollard proceeds to build a model of coping strategies dependent upon macro- and micro-layers of influence—a model which is in direct antagonism to the theoretical premises of structuration theory.

[2] There is an enormous degree of variation between post-structuralist and post-modern writings. However, these approaches deserve attention as they have sufficient in common to be treated (minimally) as representative of a coherent position and are, unfortunately, exerting a growing influence on the sociology of education both in North America and in Britain.

[3] I am indebted to Stephen Ball for this point.

[4] The treatment of structure in ethnographic writings varies from the non-existent, to the exceptional piece of work which is sophisticated in its treatment of social structure (e.g. Willis, 1977; Valli, 1986).

REFERENCES


