Current Approaches to Research in Sociology of Education

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S tudents who attempt to tackle isues in Sociology of Education are often confused by the divergent, sometimes conflicting, research approaches adopted by exponents of this emerging discipline. This paper explains that the debate among sociologists about which form of systematic study constitutes the legitimate scientific method of tackling sociological problems has diminished in intensity. In line with Dave (1972) and Nisbet (1980) it suggests that traditional positions on whether the positivistic, or the interpretative, or the phenomenological approach, among others, is the only approach, have become less catergorical. It expands on Lacey's view that

> the tension that exists in modern sociology between the theoretical models is one of emphasis rather than exclusion and replacement (1977, p. 17)

The paper further suggests that it is acceptable to apply an investigative strategy which incorporates aspects of different approaches if these are the most suitable to a particular enquiry.

Sociology and the Human Consciousness

M ost modern sociologists accept the empirical emphasis of the positivistic approach which regards the collection of accurate data as an essential element in the social researchers' work (Kalakowski, 1972), and at the same time reject the more restricted Comtean notion of positivism. The latter stresses that sociological research should emulate the traditional natural sciences where researchers regard themselves as detached observers totally unaffected by the subject under study as well as from its possible outcome. Apart from the fact that contemporary 'natural' scientists are more concerned with notions of probability than

absolute universal laws, many scientists stress the human emphasis even when they deal with inert substances. Bronowski, for example, relates science with its human origin, and emphasises that

> knowledge in general and in science in particular does not consist of abstract but of man-made ideas, all the way from its beginnings to its modern and idiosyncratic models... discoveries are made by men, not merely by ideas, so that they are alive and charged with individuality (1981, p. 10)

Furthermore, most sociologists agree that their type of research differs significantly from natural sciences research in that it deals with people and their interactions with each other as well as with their environment, not with inert substances. While retaining the ideology of science as a free and unfettered pursuit of knowledge, contemporary sociologists are acutely aware that researchers and their subjects are people who inevitably interact, and are influenced by each others' perceptions (Denzin, 1970; Blalock, 1977). As a result most current sociological studies are influenced by the interpretative approach which Worsley stresses that:

> the 'external' world can only be known to us through the operation of our minds, and that our minds are not blank, but furnished with mental structures which affect our perception and understanding of the world (Worsley, 1977, p. 10)

The interpretative approach recognises that empirical data, regardless of their scientific origin, are collected, selected and interpreted by the sociologist as a human being. Thus, the sociologist is able to bring to bear the 'human consciousness', that is, the ability to act and react, to think and speculate, to recall and to project. These human attributes go well beyond the mere collection of empirical data. In Sociology of Education, this principle was well established as far back as 1932 by Waller in his seminal work *The Sociology of Teaching*, and later by Musgrave (1965).

The Relationships Between Sociology as Science and Society at Large

Sociologies cannot ignore the Marxists' emphasis on the definite interrelationship that exists between sociology as a science and society at large. Both the sociologist conducting the research and the actors being researched form part of a larger complex. All are influenced by the particular situations, concerns, and occurrences taking place at a particular point in time. The behaviour of an individual whether it is conventional and accepted, or whether it is deviant and abnormal, tends to have an impact not only on the individual concerned but also on the other members of the community. Expected behaviour reinforces the conventional norms of the group; deviant behaviour creates a social problem which is noted or ignored depending on its impact. The point is, then, that the social enquiry of individuals leads to the study of those individuals in relation to their peers. The search for an understanding of the daily lives of individuals must necessarily be gauged against the norms operating in their social organization.

In view of the above contemporary sociologists relate their research to the wider social processes and cultural values operating in a particular society. They usually take great care to attune their work to the Weberian view that sociologists and society are interwined, that sociologists have to take into account the existence of others since they are affected by the existence and actions of others.

Such an approach is particularly relevant to enquiries in the field of education. Indeed, most modern educational sociologists take good note of Gintis' (1972) complaint about their prerdecessors who have often ignored the fact that educational research takes place in a social context. Serious educational sociologists no longer treat education as if it exists in a social vacuum, as the works by Cortis (1979, 1985), Jackson (1968), Lortie (1973), Morris & McIntyre (1969), Musgrove and Taylor (1969), among others, amply demonstrate.

Deduction and Induction in Sociological Research

Most current researchers in sociology accept the principle that casual observations of social phenomena need to be formalized in conceptual terms to facilitate proper investigation through a systematic enquiry (cf Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg, 1955; Lazarsfeld,

1958; Willer 1967). Similarly, contemporary educational sociologists accept an emphasis on empiricism in so far as it translates non-systematic observations of the educational phenomena into hypotheses which can be tested through systematic analyses. At the same time, however, their work is generally approached with an awareness that the sociological — indeed the 'natural sciences' — process of the hypothetico-deductive research method is not as structurally perfect as some literature on the subject claims. It is generally acknowledged that the human interactionist element in sociological research renders neat, unshackled, unobstructed research processes utopian, if not bogus. Such an approach accepts Shipman's (1972) assertion that for social scientists to pretend otherwise is to perpetuate the dichotomy between the 'double faced' approach of structured processes as presented to the public and the actual reversals which take place in actual research. Bechhofer stresses the point further:

> The research process then, is not a clearcut sequence of procedures following a great pattern but a messy interaction between the conceptual and the empirical world, deduction and induction occurring at the same time (1974, p. 73).

Moreover, in developing a theoretical framework for sociological studies in education, contemporary researchers often take great care to guard against the danger inherent in a rigid application of the hypothetico-deductive method which starts from hypotheses that reflect the researcher's own assumptions, and proceeds within a structure that reinforces those hypotheses and his or her particular point of view. Instead, the pragmatic researcher is well aware of Kuhn's (1962) emphasis on the relative nature of observations, and his theory that discoveries are often made when the expected results fail to materialize. Such a frame of mind is more likely to enable the researcher to widen his or her vision, to incorporate the views and assumptions of others, and to regard the situation as others see it.

Such precautions become particularly pertinent in those studies where the researcher is directly involved, sometimes intimately, in the educational system, or institution or the project being investigated. Rigid adherence to one's point of view and arbitrary selection of data to reinforce the selected hypotheses can become easy temptations in a situation where educational and administrative decisions by others may have had

great impact on one's professional orientations, career and life-style. Similarly where one's own deeds and decisions may have had some influence or are likely to influence on the professional development of others.

On the positive side, such an involved position can provide the inside knowledge demanded by the interactionist and grounded-theory approach as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1964), or the phenomenological blend favoured by many contemporary sociologists (Blalock, 1964; Alker, 1965; Borgatta, 1971). Indeed, Nisbet argues that research directly related to one's regular work, allows the researcher to get "inside the skin of the situation" (1980, p. 6), and suggests that this type of research in education is more likely to lead to action and innovations. Good examples of this approach can be seen in the works by Flaners (1970), Galton (1980), Hilsum and Cane (1971) and Lacey (1977).

Finally, most contemporary educational sociologists are cautious about making predictions, for even if one accepts the sociological position that an enquiry of contemporary situations becomes unavoidably interlaced with events from the past and orientations towards the future, no researcher can be absolutely certain that his or her predictions will prove correct. Thus contemporary sociologists generally avoid the temptation to be prescriptive. If one were to accept the Mannheimian notion of "utopias" which regards people's behaviour as conditioned by their expectations and aspirations, one cannot ensure that people will react as expected and in identical responses even when the stimuli or the situations are identical. The majority of educational sociologists therefore, avoid offering absolute solutions. Instead, they prefer to identify problems and establish hypotheses. They attempt to explore the research parameters. test them for consistency and offer proposals on how some of the solutions can be approached. In the process most educational sociologists follow Taylor's advice (1973) and aim to make people aware, sensitize them about an educational problem in the hope that they will be willing to do something about it.

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