

Conflict Theory and Educational Stratification

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Attempting to explain and make practical sense of the complexities of individuals and their interaction with society has long been a goal of social theorists, philosophers and many of the world's great thinkers. As a result of these attempts, countless social theories have emerged. This paper seeks to provide a brief overview of conflict theory, and how it can, and does relate to educational stratification. It also focuses on historical aspects of the theory, and its applicability and relation to the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological (OEMA) framework. Finally, it utilizes data from several present-day schools in Virginia to draw comparisons relating to educational stratification through the lens of conflict theory.

Conflict Theory and Educational Stratification

For decades, sociological theorists have sought to better explain the perpetual cause and effect relationship between individuals, groups, and society. The attempt to cast a net over such comprehensive issues has spurred a rapid development of social theories addressing race, gender, culture, social class, stratification, and many other topics. One particular sociological theory, conflict theory, which focuses on the disparities between individuals, groups and classes, has thrived within the realm of academia, receiving a tremendous amount of attention from a broad spectrum of disciplines.

Originating in Europe through the works of Marx, Weber, and Simmel, conflict theory as a subject of study has garnered a great deal of attention, subsequently producing an enormous amount of literature. Modern conflict theory, or the development of conflict theory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has assumed a U.S. guise despite being reintroduced as a topic of

sociological study by European social theorists and critics of structural functionalism (Turner, 2005).

Aside from contributions of varying perspectives from a variety of social theorists, conflict theory, at its most basic level, supports the notion that human beings, social in their nature, are conflict-prone animals (Collins, 1975). The theory supports the notion that conflict manifests itself through many different conduits and pathways such as coercion, exploitation, domination, manipulation of emotions, and other methods used to suppress some individuals or groups while protecting others.

Two of history's most active participants within the field of sociology, Marx and Weber, both contributed substantially to the theory of conflict, albeit in distinctive ways. To help combat such exploitation and manipulation, Marx's goal was to help provide an inclusive analysis of a capitalistic society with an ideology to hopefully instill transformation, acting as revolutionary and social theorist (Crompton, 1993). Weber, a "value-free" proponent, contrasted Marx's revolutionary spirit, acting more as an individualist and claiming many societal and human phenomena must be reduced to their individual parts (Crompton, 1993).

Some, such as Weber, have argued that the development of social classes can be partially attributed to the accumulation of material and ideal interests, with such interests governing man's conduct (Wallace, 1994). Further, other social theorists have made claim that other class systems have focused on differential status, prestige, privilege, or a lack of privilege and power, ultimately boiling down to the age old adage of the haves and the have-nots.

What appears to be a common theme within conflict theory, shared almost universally by academics and social theorists, is the issue of social stratification and its implications on the individual and society, despite some claims that class and

stratification contribute little to sociological study (Pahl, 1989) and are a seemingly redundant issue (Holton & Turner, 1989). Since Pahl (1989) and Holton and Turner (1989), much research has developed, highlighting the need for studies focusing on specific disparities within the field of education.

By utilizing conflict theory as a lens, class and stratification studies as they relate to education, particularly during the beginning of the twenty-first century, have manifested into increasingly important topics in educational research. Studies in educational stratification have focused on racial inequalities in learning (Condrón, 2009), testing and assessment (Grotsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008) and parental school selection (Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1994).

These topics, and many others within the field of education, have continued to document that social stratification, class systems, and other disparities are alive and well. Whether these disparities manifest themselves financially and economically, culturally, socioeconomically, or interpersonally, schools and school districts have become breeding grounds for the components and roots of conflict theory to flourish.

Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, and Axiology

An examination of the theoretical principles that create the framework for application of conflict theory shows a theory that has developed from multiple systems and continues to operate from multiple perspectives. Hill's (1984) commentary that "no *a priori* limit can be placed on the number of knowledge-producing systems which may be introduced for discussion and utilization in sociology" (p. 60) seems particularly appropriate for understanding conflict theory, as no single paradigm applies.

Ontology

Conflict theory is grounded in positivism. Positivism posits a single reality which is

apprehendable by all (Crotty, 1998). In conflict theory, there is one true reality of equal resources and opportunities that all can attain. Though there are inequities which result in stratification, this single reality is understood and attainable. The subordinate strata must create conflict in order to enact this change and apprehend the reality of equality.

The influential neo-Marxist conflict theorist Dahrendorf's approach was firmly positivistic in its positing of a specific reality under which conditions of awareness and understanding would vary (Turner, 2005). Understanding that positivism transitioned to post-positivism, which upholds the idea of the single reality but is more critical of the assumption that any can attain it, the Weberian approach to conflict theory continues to fit into this framework. In describing the theory of neo-Weberian conflict theorist, Collins, Turner (2005) wrote, "the deference and demeanor patterns typical of clear hierarchies have broken down in modern societies, with those in less advantaged resource positions controlling public and interpersonal space vis-à-vis those who occupy resource advantaged positions" (p. 136). Here a single reality exists, but attainability is relative to one's established place in the hierarchy.

Epistemology

Like the social functionalists to whom they were responding, conflict theorists receive information via a nomothetic epistemology. A nomothetic epistemology is one that establishes the understanding and knowledge of reality through the macro level of society and its systems and structures, rather than through the micro level of individuals. Essential to the understanding of conflict theory is the acknowledgement that structures and strata are the foundations of reality. The individual exists in relation to these structures, and any knowledge of reality applies back to these structures.

Methodology

The methodology of the conflict theorists is most similar to a post-positivist paradigm. As is consistent with macro-sociological theories, observation and quantitative data are critical; however, qualitative and subjective methods are also used.

Axiology

The axiology of conflict theory is where it most diverges from a positivist tradition. In a positivist paradigm, research is value-free and unbiased (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Crotty (1998) wrote of positivist and post-positivist research, “we may be presenting our findings as objective truths, claiming validity, perhaps generalizability, on their behalf. In that case, we are calling upon people to accept our findings as established fact, or at least as close to established fact as our research has enabled us to reach” (p. 41). However, the very nature of conflict theory does require value. Conflict theorists are concerned with such issues as oppression, stratification, class, and the value we place on people and their positions in society. A desire to enact change is fundamental to the axiology of conflict theorists.

Does Conflict Theory Still Exist?

As conflict theory itself has evolved throughout history, it has expanded its application to a broader area of topics. What Marx has proposed as potential conflicts between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat is a product of the nineteenth century, based on the claim that power is gained through economics. According to Weber (1958), power is the ability to force one’s will upon another, even when the other objects. One might wonder: *Does conflict theory still exist?*

Yes, not only does it exist, but it has also been infused with many new theories. Contemporary conflict theorists have expanded the conflict issues from economic struggle to other arenas, and in society they are constantly existed between intergroups and intragroups (Dovidio,

Saguy, & Shnabel, 2009). There were certain goods that every group wants to pursue, such as wealth, power, and prestige (Collins, 1971), and authority has the legitimate power, which is established with consent of the ruled, while the distribution of power and authority provides the soil of social conflict. However, if subordinates believe in the authority, the conflict could be avoided. On the other hand, if authority is not recognized as a legitimate, conflicts would emerge.

One example of contemporary conflict theory is educational stratification. Since education has become highly valued in modern U.S. vocational attainment, it plays a central role in educational stratification and social mobility (Collins, 1971). From a micro-level examination of the individual, education will keep playing a significant role in changing patterns of mobility in the future (Noguera, Pierce, & Ahram, 2015), which solidifies the current belief that education helps increase one’s possibilities in being wealthy and having higher social status. Schools have become a tool to legitimize inequalities, and students who go to better schools stand a better chance of being employed for better positions in job market. These employees later become higher-ranking employers or elites in certain circles, such as business, legislation, and politics (McDonald, Lin, & Ao, 2009). The elites possess the right to make their voices heard and transmit the knowledge they want to convey in accordance with the powerful interests. Hence, from the macro-level lens of conflict theory, any unequal allocation of resources among groups generates conflicts with different classes in the society. People with wealth, power, and high social status become the dominant group, for they have controlled most of the resources and decide where the resources will be allocated. Conversely, people with less wealth, power, and lower social status have to deal with insufficient resources (Orfield & Lee, 2006). These social groups are referred to as status groups (Collins, 1971).

In higher education, over-education has developed into a phenomenon among the whole of society as a result of believing education being the

key to social mobility. The result of over-education leads to more severe competition between individuals. The focus has shifted from whether one has a higher degree or not to whether they possess a degree from a better school. Under such circumstances, schools with better reputations or resources are regarded as elite for their capability to provide their graduates better opportunities. Thus, the best resources will always be kept within the circle of the elite and gradually turn into an inner circle that does not open to outsiders. As a result, this will trigger more conflicts between the groups with different resources.

Educational stratification has not only caused competition in higher education, it has also affected K-12 education. In order to gain acceptance to better colleges and universities, students, parents, teachers, and administrators face serious competition obtaining access to more renowned and prestigious secondary schools. Ideas about social class awareness, ethnic superiority, and gender difference are transmitted through curricula, which furthers the stratification in K-12 education. Race and class have become the basis of school segregation (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield & Frankenberg; Ee, & Kuscera, 2014). The less advantaged students of color are concentrated together at under-resourced schools that have difficulty in meeting students' academic and social needs (Orfield & Lee, 2006).

Educational Inequality in the U.S.

In the United States, the myth of equality of opportunity is a primary tenant of education (Jacob, 1981). The idea that education is the key to future success has long been established; society views formal education as the provider of training for highly skilled jobs (Collins, 1971). As society evolves, technological changes increase skill requirements and further the importance of education. However, research shows that it is not the education itself that indicates future success in a career, but the status group associated with particular educational institutions (Collins, 1971).

Status groups are based on differences in economic situation, life situation based on power position, and life situation based on cultural conditions or institutions (Collins, 1971). According to conflict theory, there is a continual struggle between status groups for wealth and power (Collins, 1971). In K-12 education, the primary function of schools is to socialize students into status cultures by teaching them how to speak, dress, behave, etc. (Collins, 1971; Jacob, 1981). The status group in control sets the requirements for success (Collins, 1971). It is not the education that is important, but the social status.

Collins (1971) found that education is most important when the culture of the status group emerging from a school is most like the status group doing the hiring. A majority of supervisory positions in the U. S. are filled by White males (Collins, 1971; McDonald et al., 2009). Furthermore, studies show that in the 1970's, 60 to 70% of the American business elite came from upper and upper-middle-class families (Collins, 1971). While this statistic has changed for the better in recent years, we have yet to reach racial and gender equality in the workplace (McDonald et al., 2009), leaving students from segregated schools at a disadvantage for finding jobs.

Since 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, America has brought an end to formal segregation in schools, theoretically lessening the struggle between two status groups: Black and White. However, there is substantial evidence that today's schools have become segregated based on class and race (Noguera et al., 2015). In the United States, 70 to 80% of African Americans and Latinos attend schools where the majority of students are of the same race (Noguera et al., 2015). Additionally, the poorest students are concentrated together, often in schools that lack resources, including books, materials, and staff; therefore, they struggle to meet the social and educational needs of the students (Noguera et al., 2015).

Status groups centered on race and class are prominent in an assortment of educational issues

such as achievement gaps and school choice (Noguera et al., 2015). Noguera et al. (2015) found that racial and economic disparities in education are reflective of “disparities in health, wealth, access to housing and employment, and other critical matters that influence quality of life” (p. 2). School choice is a common strategy used in schools that fail to make accreditation according to federal standards. The school choice strategy allows families to choose another local school for students to attend when the assigned school fails to make accreditation for an extended period of time or the school closes. Advocates of this strategy contend that it can ensure access to high quality schools, but in reality it may be used to embed racial integration by distributing minority and low-income students into schools comprised primarily of the dominant status group (Noguera et al., 2015).

Currently, most demographers project that the historical minority will become the majority in the near future. By 2050, it is predicted that more than one third of children in the United States will be of Latino decent (Noguera et al., 2015). These shifts in demographics will indisputably have an effect on our educational systems. As conflict theory has stated, conflict arises to impart social change. As the make-up of the U. S. population changes, so will our status groups. As our status groups change so will the role of education. Education, without a doubt, will have a dramatic influence on the nation we become.

Case Study: Three Public High Schools in Virginia

Examination of three high schools in Henrico County, Virginia, clearly illustrates the educational inequities caused by racial and socioeconomic constraints.

Mills E. Godwin High School is fully accredited, with three-year average pass rates exceeding 93% in all accreditation benchmark standards for 2013-2014, including a graduation and completion rate of 96% (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2015). By contrast, Highland

Springs High School, had a graduation and completion rate of 84% in 2013-14 and did not exceed a three-year average of 83% in any other benchmark standard (VDOE, 2015). Highland Springs is accredited with warning, with a mathematics benchmark pass rate of 67%, which falls below the required 70% (VDOE, 2015). The three-year average dropped in all benchmark areas except graduation and completion rate – falling to 59% in mathematics – for 2014-2015 (VDOE, 2015). Like Highland Springs, Varina High School is accredited with warning due to a low three-year average in mathematics benchmarks, 64% in 2013-2014 and 58% in 2014-2015 (VDOE, 2015).

Though individual school budgets are not published, educational resources designated by the county are assumed to be comparable. Additionally, student-teacher ratios are similar across all three institutions, ranging from 16.3:1 at Highland Springs and Varina to 18.8:1 at Godwin (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015), and all three schools house magnet programs for specialized learning. All three high schools have total enrollments between 1,720 and 1,795 students (NCES, 2015). Neither Godwin, Highland Springs, nor Varina High Schools receives federal Title I funds (NCES, 2015).

In an effort to understand how benchmark performance can differ so considerably across a single county with comparable designated resources, an examination of the schools’ structures is essential. Socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity varies greatly between Godwin, Varina, and Highland Springs High Schools.

As shown in Table 1, 11% of Godwin High School students receive free or reduced lunch, which is one measure of socioeconomic status (NCES, 2015). The middle performing high school, Varina, has a free or reduced lunch percentage of 47%, while Highland Springs has 61% of its students receiving free or reduced lunch (NCES, 2015). These data indicate that a high percentage of students at Varina and Highland Springs High Schools are economically disadvantaged, while a

much smaller percentage of students at Godwin High School are economically disadvantaged.

Parallel to the socioeconomic disparities among the three schools, the student bodies of Godwin, Varina, and Highland Springs are comprised of different race and ethnicity backgrounds. Godwin High School is predominantly White, 75%, with Black students comprising 7% of the population and Hispanic students comprising 5% of the population (NCES, 2015). Varina High School is 67% Black, with White students comprising 26% of the population and Hispanic students comprising 3% of the population (NCES, 2015). Highland Springs High School is 80% Black, with White students comprising 12% of the population and Hispanic students comprising 4% of the population (NCES, 2015).

system of social control towards the minorities (Noguera et al., 2015). Racial disparity is evident in these three institutions, with the most segregated schools performing at the polar ends. Godwin, with its predominantly White student body exceeds all benchmarking requirements by large margins, while predominately Black Highland Springs falls below benchmarking standards. Socioeconomic segregation follows the same pattern with the respective institutions, with Godwin having a low percentage of economically disadvantaged students and Highland Springs have a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The middle performing school, Varina, also has the middle ranges of racial and socioeconomic make ups. This segregation establishes differences in students' experiences due to societal expectations and biases.

Conflict theory suggests that the disparities in academic performance at these schools directly correlate with the status groups at play. As illustrated, schools which are dominantly comprised of students with high socioeconomic status and where socioeconomic status parallels ethnicity demographics outperform the other schools. The schools comprised predominately of the subordinate classes, as understood via conflict theory, have fewer educational resources. Thus, the students in dominant high schools have greater access to educational and career opportunities after high school, while students at the lesser-performing schools have fewer opportunities available to them after high school and may become subject to dominant population (Noguera et al., 2015).

In order to provide greater opportunities for all students, it is necessary for society to recognize the status groups working within society and their effects on student learning. Educational systems must find ways to afford students equal educational opportunities. Furthermore, they must work to differentiate instruction to ensure that lesser-performing schools and students are given the tools necessary to overcome the many obstacles set before them.

Table 1
Socioeconomic Status and Ethnicity Breakdowns of Sample High Schools as Percentages

Characteristic	High School		
	Mills Godwin	Varina	Highland Springs
Socioeconomic Status			
Free/Reduced Lunch	11	47	61
Ethnicity			
White	75	26	12
Black	7	67	80
Hispanic	5	3	4

As noticed by Noguera et al. (2015), race continuously produces controversy and conflict in American society. Racial segregation exists in most areas of American life, and the society still has a

Conclusion

Despite many historical advances, stratification and inequality are still major tenets of education in the United States. Conflict theory offers a lens for examining the status groups at play such as those tied to race, culture, and class. Through this lens, it is evident that social change is a necessary next step for education. Demographics in the United States are constantly shifting and the educational system needs to change along with the student population in ways that work to create a more equitable system for all.

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