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title: Education as a chaotic system

I have been working as an instructional aide in a high school class while I attend school as a sociology major, and I plan to work as a teacher in the future, so when I was given an assignment of researching contemporary developments in a sub-area of sociology, I decided to examine the ways sociologists have viewed education. When I began examining the sociology of education, I found that most of the literature about the subject belonged to one or the other of two main categories: they were either all-encompassing theories about the functioning of the educational system in society, or they were limited studies concerning small areas within the educational system. The books and articles in the first category dealt with education as a social system, but they rarely explained the role of individuals within the system. The studies in the second category obviously had a theoretical basis, but often the theories were not clearly stated, or if stated, they were very limited in scope. A common way of referring to the distinction between these two broad categories of social thought is to say that the articles in the first category were macro theories and the studies in the second category were based on micro theories (Ritzer 1996 p. 353-355).

Macro and micro theories both offer insight into the educational system, but it seemed that a theory which could describe the interaction between the large scale structures and the individual actors would be much more useful (ibid., p.335). I began to look for theories that could help bridge the gap between macro and micro theories. When I learned about chaos theory, as it has been applied to education, it seemed that it might provide the means to integrate the macro and micro dimensions. Because chaos theory is newly emergent, it has not been applied to social reality in a consistent manner. Different sociologists have applied the concepts of chaos theory in different ways. Chaos theory as it relates to education needs to be more fully developed, yet it seems to offer great potential for understanding both the macro and micro levels of education. To understand the role of chaos theory in macro-micro integration, it is important to examine various macro and micro theories of education.

Categories of educational theory

Macro theory. The main macro theories of education are structural functionalism and conflict theory. They both view the educational system as a means of transmitting the values and beliefs of the dominant culture from one generation to the next. The main differences between these theories is that structural functionalists believe that social transmission is necessary to the functioning of a healthy society, whereas conflict theorists believe that social transmission is negative because it helps to maintain inequality between social classes. Both of these theoretical viewpoints rely on large scale quantitative analysis and they both attempt to understand institutions and the relationships between large groups of people (Bennett and LeCompte 1990 p.5-21).

Micro theory. Educational sociologists from the micro tradition include phenomenologists, ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists. These theorists share a focus on the ways that meaning is constructed through social interaction. For example they might study the way in which students in one classroom learn that being a “good reader” means having the ability to sound out words quickly and accurately and students in another classroom learn that it refers to a students understanding of written material. All of these micro theorists rely on direct observation and descriptive methods to explain small scale social phenomenon, without linking their observations and conclusions to a larger scale social, political and economic restrains (ibid, p. 21-23).

Critical theory. Critical theory draws from both macro and micro theories. It makes use of many of the concepts of structural functionalism and conflict theory, and it shares conflict theorists’ concern with social inequality, but it focuses on the responses of individuals to oppression. Because it deals with both large scale social structures and classes, and with individuals, critical theory is one type of macro-micro integration, but critics of critical theory maintain that critical theory is still too limited, because it is based on a white male working class perspective. These critics believe that a social theory must include “multiple voices,” or a variety of viewpoints, including those of women and people from a variety of ethnic groups. Other critics of this theory believe that it oversimplifies power relationships. They believe that resisting oppression may not work equally well for all social groups (ibid, p.24-30).