Understanding Inequality in Schools: The Contribution of Interpretive Studies

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Ethnographic studies in the interpretive tradition have made three interrelated contributions to theories that attempt to account for social inequality: (1) cultural elements have been introduced into highly deterministic macrotheories, (2) human agency has been interjected into theories accounting for social inequality, and (3) the black box of schooling has been opened to reveal the reflexive relations between institutional practices and students' careers. These developments provide a more robust sense of social life. Culture is not merely a pale reflection of structural forces; it is a system of meaning that mediates social structure and human action. Social actors no longer function as passive role players, shaped exclusively by structural forces beyond their control; they become active sense makers, choosing among alternatives in often contradictory circumstances. Schools are not black boxes through which students pass on their way to predetermined slots in the capitalist order; they have a vibrant life, composed of processes and practices that respond to competing demands that often unwittingly contribute to inequality.

esearch in the sociology of education reflects the distinction between "macro" and "micro" that has dominated the field of sociology more generally (see, for example, Alexander et al. 1987; R. Collins 1981a, 1981b; Giddens 1984; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981). In studies of education, the macro includes structural forces conceptualized at the societal level, including economic constraints and capitalist demands, while the micro includes individual or group actions and responses to constraints imposed on social actors. I am not content with this distinction because it perpetuates a false dichotomy, reifies social structure, and relegates social interaction to a residual status.

Recent research on social inequality contains provocative suggestions for ways to reconceptualize macro-micro interrelationships. These suggestions, as I will explain in this article, have to do with social agency, cultural mediation, and constitutive activity. It is no coincidence that many of these ideas have come from field research in schools and communities. It often takes intimate contact with people and a close analysis of their words and deeds to capture the subtleties, contradictions, and nuances of everyday life.

Perhaps because field research in the sociology of education has been perceived to address the less important micropole, its status has been problematic. The long and impressive tradition of studying school environments in the "Chicago tradition" (dating from Waller's [1932] classic, *The Sociology of Teaching* and extending through Becker's [1952, 1953] studies of Chicago schoolteachers and Jackson's [1967] description of classroom life) was eclipsed by the "scientific arithmetic" (Karabel and Halsey 1977; Young 1988) of status: attainment research and the debate over the relative influence of family background and schooling on achievement in school or occupational success (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Coleman et al. 1966;

Jencks et al. 1972, 1977). Starting in the mid-1970s, serious questions were raised about macrosociological approaches. Status-attainment models were criticized for not being able to explain differential academic achievement (Karabel and Halsey 1977, p. 44) and for being virtually silent about the processes that produced stratification (Bidwell 1988; Cicourel and Mehan 1983; Hallinan 1989), opening the door for alternatives (Bidwell 1988). Jencks et al. (1972, p. 13), significant representatives of the positivistic school in this debate, anticipated the turn away from positivism with these observations about the limitations of large-scale surveys of schooling:

> We have ignored not only attitudes and values but the internal life of schools. We have been preoccupied with the effects of schooling, especially those effects that might be expected to persist into adulthood. This has led us to adopt a "factory" metaphor, in which schools are seen primarily as places that alter the characteristics of their alumni. Our research has convinced us that this is the wrong way to think about schools. The long-term effects of schooling seem much less significant to us than when we began our work and the internal life of the schools seems correspondingly more important.

In the United Kingdom, one significant approach that developed as an alternative to the positivism of functionalism was the "new sociology of education" (Anyon 1980; Gorbutt 1972; Young 1971, 1988). In the United States, the "interpretive approach" (Erikson 1986; Karabel and Halsey 1977) emerged.

The two traditions have developed independently, with little cross-referencing (a point vividly demonstrated in the recent argument between Jacob [1987] and Atkinson, Delamont, and Hamersley [1988]). The new sociology of education in England attached itself to the tradition of the sociology of knowledge, focusing on the content of the school curriculum, both manifest and latent. The interpretive school in the United States, influenced by ethnomethodology, sociolinguistics, and symbolic interactionism, concentrated on the internal life of schools and home-school relations, often aided by the close analysis of videotapes taken in classroom, testing, and counseling settings.

These new developments did not meet with universal acclaim. In the most comprehensive review of the sociology of education at that time, Karabel and Halsey (1977, p. 54) complimented the new sociology of education for identifying "what counts as knowledge" as an interesting problem and suggesting a possible way of tackling it, but then took this group to task for not producing either close ethnographic description or a serious body of empirical literature based on its theoretical framework. Wexler (1987, p. 127) criticized the new sociology of education for looking backward historically and for promulgating reactionary ideology. Karabel and Halsey were especially harsh on American interpretive studies for "ultra-relativism" and "sentimental egalitarianism." Presaging a point later made by others (see, for example, Gage 1989; Gilmore and Smith 1982; Ogbu 1982), they said that the emphasis on the social construction of reality in the interpretive approach fails to take into account the social constraints on human actors in everyday life, a position that can lead to the conclusion that social structures exist only in the minds of human actors.

Karabel and Halsey wrote their review of the interpretive paradigm when only Cicourel et al. (1974) was available to them. Their critique underestimated the extent to which the Cicourel group contextualized its argument in institutional terms. Moreover, a number of studies in this tradition have appeared since that review. Although I am not a cheerleader for the interpretive paradigm, I think the time is right to reassess its status.

In what follows, I identify three interrelated contributions made by ethnographic studies in the interpretive tradition to theories that attempt to account for social inequality: (1) introducing cultural elements into highly deterministic macrotheories, (2) injecting human agency into theories accounting for social inequality, and (3) opening the black box of schooling to examine the reflexive relations between institutional practices and students' careers. These devel-

opments give us a more robust sense of social life. In the hands of interpretive theorists, culture is not merely a pale reflection of structural forces; it is a system of meaning that mediates social structure and human action. Social actors no longer function as passive role players, shaped exclusively by structural forces beyond their control; they become active sense makers, choosing among alternatives in often contradictory circumstances. Schools are not black boxes through which students pass on their way to predetermined slots in the capitalist order; they have a vibrant life, composed of processes and practices that respond to competing demands that often unwittingly contribute to inequality.

STRUCTURE, CULTURE, AND REPRODUCTION

By almost any criterion, and with few exceptions, students from working-class and ethnic-minority backgrounds do poorly in school. They drop out at a higher rate than do their middle-income and ethnic-majority contemporaries. They score lower on standardized and criterion-referenced tests than do their middle-income contemporaries. Their grades are lower (Coleman et al. 1966; Haycock and Navarro 1988; Jencks et al. 1972; National Center for Education Statistics 1986).

Why are students from working-class backgrounds not as successful in school as are their middle-class contemporaries? Why is there a strong tendency for working-class children to end up in working-class jobs? Two answers to this question have been carefully formulated at the macrolevel by Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b), and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). For these social scientists and the "reproduction theorists" who have followed them, the core of the matter is the capitalist mode of production. "The capitalist process of production . . . produces not only commodities, not only surplus value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation itself; on the one hand, the capitalist, on the other hand

the wage-laborer" (Marx 1867/1976, p. 724).

Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Wilcox (1982) built on Marx's basic point by explaining social inequality in economic terms. They posited a correspondence between the organization of work and the organization of schooling that trained elites to accept their place at the top of the class economy and trained workers to accept their lower places at the bottom of the class economy. The sons and daughters of workers, placed into ability groups or tracks that encourage docility and conformity to external rules and authority, learn the skills associated with manual work. In contrast, the sons and daughters of the elite are placed into tracks that encourage them to work at their own pace without supervision; to make intelligent choices among alternatives; and to internalize, rather than follow, externally constraining norms.

Many problems with Bowles and Gintis's position have been chronicled. The theory is (1) economically deterministic (Apple 1983; Cole 1988; Giroux 1983), (2) exaggerates the degree of integration between the demands of the capitalist elites and the organization of schooling (MacLaren 1980, 1989; MacLeod, 1987), and (3) reduces to the same kind of functionalist argument it presumably replaced (Karabel and Halsey 1977, p. 40n). When one considers macro-micro connections, two other criticisms are relevant: The theory does not examine the processes and practices of schooling that reproduce inequalities and it reduces human actors—students, teachers, parents, workers, and employers—to passive role players, shaped exclusively by the demands of capital.

Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) provided a more subtle account of inequality by proposing cultural elements that mediate the relationship between economic structures, schooling, and the lives of people. Distinctive cultural knowledge is transmitted by the families of each social class. As a consequence, children of the dominant class inherit substantially different cultural knowledge, skills, manners, norms, dress, style of interaction, and linguistic facility than do the

sons and daughters of the lower class. Students from the dominant class, by virtue of a certain linguistic and cultural competence acquired through family socialization, are provided the means of appropriating success in school. Children who read good books, visit museums, attend concerts, and go to the theater acquire an ease—a familiarity—with the dominant culture that the educational system implicitly requires of its students for academic attainment. Schools and other symbolic institutions contribute to the reproduction of inequality by devising a curriculum that rewards the "cultural capital" of the dominant classes and systematically devalues that of the lower classes. This more nuanced view overcomes the economic determinism of Bowles and Gintis's (1976) position. But still, two problems remain: One is not shown, in concrete social situations, how the school devalues the cultural capital of the lower classes while valorizing the cultural capital of the upper classes. Furthermore, Bourdieu has been criticized for obliterating social actors: Students are treated mainly as bearers of cultural capital—as a bundle of abilities, knowledge, and attitudes furnished by parents (Apple 1983; Giroux 1983; McLeod 1987).

Until we examine the mechanisms of cultural and social reproduction via a close interactional analysis of social practices, especially school practices, we will be left with only a highly suggestive structural view of the relations between social origins, schooling, and subsequent achievements. Fortunately, recent ethnographic work—some specifically influenced by Bourdieu's theoretical orientation and other work not directly influenced by it—gives us insight into how cultural capital works in particular contexts.

Home-School Relations

Lareau (1987, 1989) compared parent-school relations in a white working-class neighborhood with those in an upper middle-class neighborhood. The schools in both neighborhoods shared an ideal of family-school partnership and promoted parental involvement. Teachers in both

schools saw parental involvement as a reflection of the concerns parents had for their children's academic success. Despite equivalent formal policies, the quality of parental participation varied from school to school.

The levels and quality of parental involvement were linked to the social and cultural resources that were available to parents in different social-class positions. Working-class parents had limited time and disposable income to intervene in their children's schooling; middle-income parents, with occupational skills and occupational prestige that matched or surpassed those of teachers, had resources to manage child care and transportation and time to meet with teachers, hire tutors, and otherwise become involved in their children's schooling.

The difference in the deployment of social resources was evident in parents' responses to school policies. Teachers in both schools asked parents to get involved in their children's education—to read to their children and help with their homework, for example (which presumes that the parents had competent educational skills, cf. McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne 1984). Parents from low-income families thought that their educational skills were inadequate for this task, while parents from middle-income families felt comfortable helping their children in school. Teachers in both schools asked parents to share concerns with them, an action that presumes that parents view the task of educating children as divided between teachers and parents. The low-income parents were less likely to see that they had the right and responsibility to raise concerns and criticize teachers, while middle-income parents had confidence in their right to monitor teachers and even to criticize their behavior.

By asking low-income parents to attend school events (PTA, back-to-school night) and to help in the classroom, teachers were making demands on the time and disposable income of parents and, perhaps more important, challenging their conceptions of the teacher's role and parents' relation to it. Attending afternoon parent-teacher con-

ferences, for example, requires transportation, child care arrangements, and a flexible job. It also assumes that education is a cooperative venture between parents and teachers. The middle-income parents had more time and disposable income than did the working-class parents and defined education as a cooperative responsibility between them and the teacher. The time and income afforded by higher-class jobs, coupled with an attitude that matched the policies of the school, facilitated the middle-income parents' involvement in schooling, whereas the absence of these resources and definition of the educational situation deflated the low-income parents' participation.

Thus, social-class positions and class cultures become a form of cultural capital. Although both working-class and middle-class parents want their children to succeed in school, their "social location" leads them to deploy different strategies to achieve that goal. The strategy deployed by working-class parents—depending on teachers to educate their children—did not promote success. The strategy deployed by middle-income parents—active participation in supervising and monitoring their children—promoted success. Furthermore, the middle-income parents often challenged the school; if their children had problems, they assumed that the school was responsible. They employed the services of outside experts if the school did not respond to their satisfaction. These practices, interactional manifestations of the ephemeral notion of cultural capital, appear to give middle-class students advantages over their working-class counterparts.

Although Bourdieu is clear about the arbitrary nature of culture, his emphasis on the value of high culture can lead to misinterpretations. He seems to suggest that the culture of the elites is intrinsically more valuable than is the culture of the working class (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 1987). By showing that working-class and middle-class families each have a stock of knowledge, routines, rituals, and practices that are meaningful, coherent, and goal directed but that only one is picked up and

celebrated by the school, Lareau modulates the latent determinism in Bourdieu's position and softens some of the criticisms levied against Bourdieu.

Language at Home and at School

Comparisons of language use in middle-income and lower-income families suggest that there may be a discontinuity between the language of the home and the language of the school—especially for students from certain low-income and linguistic minority backgrounds (Cazden 1986; Delgado-Gaiton 1987; Heath 1982, 1986; Philips 1982; Schultz, Florio, and Erikson 1979; Trueba 1986). For example, Laosa (1973) complained that inquiry-based teaching methods in schools are compatible with the parental teaching styles in Anglo but not in Mexican American families. This discontinuity, in turn, may contribute to the lower achievement and higher dropout rate among minority students.

Heath (1982) compared the way White middle-income teachers talked to their Black low-income elementary school students in the classroom with the way they talked to their own children at home in a community she called "Trackton." Like Cazden (1979), she found that the teachers relied heavily on questions and language games like peekaboo and riddles when they talked to their children at home. The most frequent form of question was the "known-information" variety so often identified with classroom discourse (Mehan 1979; Shuy and Griffin 1978; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). Middle-income parents also talked to preverbal children often, supplying the surrounding context and hypothetical answers to questions they posed. These "quasi conversations" recapitulated the I-R-E sequence of traditional classroom lessons.

Heath reported that the middle-income teachers taught their own children to label and name objects and to talk about things out of context, which were just the skills demanded of students in school. They also talked to the students in their classrooms in similar ways; they instructed the students primarily through an interrogative format

using "known-information questions" and taught students to label objects and identify the features of things.

However, this mode of language use and language socialization was not prevalent in the homes of low-income students. Low-income adults seldom addressed questions to their children at home, and did so even less often to preverbal children. Whereas the teachers would ask questions, the low-income parents would use statements or imperatives. And, when the parents asked their children questions, the questions were much different from the types of questions asked by the teachers. Questions at home called for nonspecific comparisons or analogies as answers; they were not the known-information or information-seeking questions associated with the classroom. Heath concluded that the language used in Trackton homes did not prepare children to cope with the major characteristics of the language used in classrooms: utterances that were interrogative in form but directive in pragmatic function, known-information questions, and questions that asked for information from books.

Heath identified a mismatch between the language used in the home and the language demanded in the classroom. When the structure of discourse in the classroom corresponded to the pattern of discourse in the low-income home, students' academic performance improved. Piestrup (1973) documented this relationship in 14 predominantly Black first-grade classrooms in the Oakland public school system. When teachers employed a style that reflected the taken-for-granted speech patterns of the Black community, instruction was the most effective. Students in classrooms where teachers implicitly incorporated the taken-for-granted features of culturally familiar speech events in classrooms, including rhythmic language, rapid intonation, repetition, alliteration, call and response, variation in pace, and creative language play, scored significantly higher on standardized reading tests than did students in classrooms where teachers used other styles.

Native American children performed poorly in classroom contexts that demanded individualized performance and emphasized competition among peers, but they performed more effectively in those that minimized the obligation of individual students to perform in public contexts (Philips 1982). The classroom contexts in which Native American students operated best were similar in organization to local Native American community contexts, where *cooperation*, not *competition*, was valued and *sociality*, not *individuality*, was emphasized. Philips attributed the generally poor performance of Native American children to differences in the "structures of participation" that were normatively demanded in the home and in the school. It seems that the patterns of participation that are expected in conventional classrooms create conditions that are unfamiliar and threatening to Native American children.

According to Foster (1989), Marva Collins, the well-known teacher from Chicago's Westside Prep School, employed strategies similar to those of the successful teachers in Piestrup's (1973) study. Although Collins attributed her success to a phonics curriculum, Foster gave more credit to the congruence between Collins's interactional style and the children's cultural experience. Familiar language and participation structures, including rhythmic language, call and response, repetition, and deliberate body motions, constituted the interactional pattern.

Foster complimented her informal discussion of Collins's teaching with a more formal analysis of teachers in a predominantly Black community college. She found that classroom discussion increased in degree and intensity when teacher-student interaction was more symmetrical (teachers and students had an equivalent number of turns and cooperative learning groups were formed). This finding parallels a more general one about the value of cooperative learning for linguistic minority youths (Kagan 1986). Successful community college teachers also called for active vocal audience responses and descriptions of personal experiences, strategies that act in ways that are similar to performance patterns in the local Black community.

McCullum (1989) made a similar point about the cultural congruity of a Puerto Rican teacher's turn-allocation practices with that of her Puerto Rican students.

Although not cast in the terms of Bourdieu's theory, these comparisons of language at home and at school show the interactional operation of certain aspects of cultural capital. Because the language use of middle-income parents matches the often implicit and tacit demands of the classroom, middle-income children are being equipped with the very skills and techniques that are rewarded in the classroom. Likewise, because the language use of low-income parents does not match the discourse of the class-room, low-income children are not being provided with the cultural capital that is so requisite in the classroom.

There are important implications for educational practice here. One conclusion that could be drawn from this analysis would be this: Change the cultural capital of the low-income family. Increase bedtime reading, the density of known-information questions at home, and so forth. This would be the wrong inference, however, because it is based on the tacit assumption that the prevailing language use and socialization practices of linguistic and ethnic minority children are deficient. Sociolinguists (such as Au 1980; Barnhardt 1982; Cazden 1979, 1986, 1988; Cazden and Mehan 1989; Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Foster 1989; Heath 1986; Philips 1982; Piestrup 1973; Tharp and Gallimore 1988) draw a different inference: Work cooperatively with parents and educators to modify the classroom learning environment in ways that are mutually beneficial for students and society.

For example, to increase Trackton students' verbal skills in naming objects, identifying the characteristics of objects, providing descriptions out of context, and responding to known-information questions, Heath worked with the Trackton teachers on ways to adapt to the community's ways of asking questions. After reviewing tapes with researchers, teachers began social studies lessons with questions that asked for personal experiences and analogical responses, for example, "What's happening there?"

"Have you ever been there?" "What's this like?" These questions were similar to the questions that parents asked their children at home. The use of these questions in early stages of instruction were productive in generating active responses from previously passive and "nonverbal" Trackton students. Once the teachers increased the participation of the students in lessons using home questioning styles, they were able to move them through a zone of learning toward school-demanded questioning styles.

In an analogous fashion, teachers working with the Kamehameha Early Education Program in Hawaii spontaneously introduced narratives that were jointly produced by the children into the beginning of reading lessons—a fact later observed by researchers associated with the project (Au 1980; Tharp and Gallimore 1988). In addition, they shifted the focus of instruction from decoding to comprehension, implemented small-group instruction to encourage cooperation, and included children's experiences as part of the discussion of reading materials. All these modifications were consistent with Hawaiian cultural norms and had important consequences. The students' participation in lessons increased, as did their scores on standardized tests. Both these effects were important because of their antidote to the notoriously low school performance of native Hawaiians.

Instead of denying the coherence and personal significance of the language and culture of the home by trying to eradicate their expression within the school, ethnographically informed sociolinguistic researchers propose a model of mutual accommodation in which both teachers and students modify their behavior in the direction of a common goal. The implication of this line of research for the social production of inequality is clear. It shifts the source of school failure from the characteristics of the failing children, their families, and their cultures toward more general societal processes, including schooling (Bernstein, 1973; Gumperz, 1971, 1981). Sociolinguists have argued that school failure should not be blamed on the

child's linguistic code, family arrange-
ments, or cultural practices. The prob-
lems that lower-income and ethnic-
minority children face in school must be
viewed as a consequence of institutional
arrangements that do not recognize that
children can display skills differently in
different types of situations.

SOCIAL AGENCY, CULTURE, AND INEQUALITY

Bourdieu (1989) insisted that his the-
ory is not structurally deterministic.
Despite such disclaimers, he has been
criticized for not treating the cultural
sphere as an object of critical inquiry in
its own right, for depicting cultural
forms and practices as largely the reflec-
tion of structural forces conceptualized
at the societal level (Apple 1985; Giroux
1983; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977), and
for treating parents, teachers, and espe-
cially students as bearers of cultural
capital (Giroux 1983; MacLeod 1987).

As a result of studies that look more
closely at the everyday lives of high
school students (MacLaren 1980, 1989;
MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977), two other
significant additions have been made to
our understanding of inequality. First,
people actively make choices in life,
rather than passively respond to the
socioeconomic pressures that bear down
on them. Second, the cultural sphere
gains relative autonomy from structural
constraints.

Willis's (1977) interviews with disaf-
fected White working-class males in a
British secondary school are well known.
He found that the "lads," a group of high
school students who would soon drop
out, rejected the achievement ideology,
subverted the authority of teachers and
administrators, and disrupted classes.
Willis claimed that the lads' rejection of
the school was partly the result of their
deep insights into the economic condi-
tion of their social class under capital-
ism.

But their cultural outlook limited their
options; equating manual labor with
success and mental labor with failure
prevented them from seeing that their
actions led to a dead end: lower-paying
jobs. Blind to the connection between

schooling and mobility, they *chose* to
join their brothers and fathers on the
shop floor, a choice apparently made
happily and without coercion. Thus,
what begins as a potential insight into
the social relations of production is
transformed into a surprisingly uncriti-
cal affirmation of class domination. This
identification of manual labor with mas-
culinity ensures the lads' acceptance of
their subordinate economic fate and the
successful reproduction of the class
structure.

What distinguishes Willis's interpreta-
tion from that of either Bowles and
Gintis (1976) or Bourdieu and Passeron
(1977) is the agency Willis attributes to
the lads, who made real choices to
continue in working-class jobs (unlike
the students in Bowles and Gintis's
rendition, who simply internalized main-
stream values of individual achieve-
ment, or the students in Bourdieu and
Passeron's theory, who simply carried
cultural capital on their backs or in their
heads). The model of the actor is differ-
ent here: Students view, inhabit, and
help construct the social world (Willis,
1977, p. 172; see also, MacLaren, 1989,
pp. 186–190). The cultural attitudes and
practices of working-class groups do not
reflect and cannot be traced directly to
structural influences or dominant ideol-
ogies.

MacLeod's ethnography is not as well
known as is Willis's, but I think it makes
an even greater contribution to our
understanding of social inequality. Mac-
Leod (1987) studied two groups of high
school boys in depressed socioeconomic
circumstances. One group, "the Broth-
ers" (predominantly Black), the other
group, "the Hallway Hangers" (predom-
inantly White), lived in the same hous-
ing projects, attended the same school,
and experienced the same environment
in which success was not common.
Despite the similarity of their environ-
ment, they did not respond evenly to
their circumstances. The Hallway Hang-
ers reacted in ways that were reminis-
cent of the lads in Willis's account:
cutting classes, acting out in the few
classes they attended, dropping out,
smoking, drinking, using drugs, and
committing crimes. In short, they took

every opportunity to oppose the regimen of the school and to resist its achievement ideology. In contrast, the Brothers tried to fulfill societally approved roles: attending classes, conforming to rules, studying hard, rejecting drugs, playing basketball, and cultivating girlfriends.

The fact that two different groups of students reacted differently to objectively similar socioeconomic circumstances challenges economically and culturally deterministic reproduction theories. The reaction of the Hallway Hangers vindicates Bourdieu's theory. Confronting a closed opportunity structure, they lowered their aspirations and openly resisted the educational institution and its achievement ideology. But neither Bowles and Gintis nor Bourdieu and Passeron would do as well in explaining the Brothers. The Brothers experienced the same habitus and were exposed to the so-called hidden curriculum of the school in the same manner, but responded to it by eagerly adopting the achievement ideology and maintaining high aspirations for success.

These differences in aspiration pose a problem for MacLeod's analysis as well. We learn that the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers had different hopes and beliefs. But, were there differences in outcome? Did the Brothers actually get ahead—further than we would expect, further than they wished? MacLeod was not clear on the issue of academic achievement and occupational attainment (Powers 1989). Before we applaud the Brothers' new logic of mobility, we must know more about their actual performance. If they stuck it out at school, did they get diplomas? If they graduated, did they get the good jobs they wanted? Or, are we seeing just a more sophisticated version of "cooling out the mark," wherein a limited opportunity structure secured the self-selection of Black workers into the urban underclass?

What shaped the differential responses of the two groups of students? MacLeod identified mediating factors. The Brothers thought that racial inequality has been curbed in the past 20 years; they believed in the equality of educational opportunity. Although effort was not rewarded in their parents' generation, it would be rewarded in their lifetime. Why? Because of the civil rights movement and affirmative action. The United States may have been racist in their parents' lifetime, they thought, but it is more meritocratic in their lifetime. Family life also mediates. The parents of the Brothers wanted their children to have professional careers. Toward that goal, they exercised control over their sons, setting relatively early curfews and expecting them to perform to a certain level at school; violations of academic expectations were punished by restrictions, and the punishments stuck. The parents of the Hallway Hangers did not act in this manner. They gave their sons free rein and did not monitor their schoolwork. Thus, ethnicity and family life serve as mediators between social class and attainment, leading to an acceptance of the achievement ideology by the Brothers and a rejection of it by the Hallway Hangers. Acceptance of the achievement ideology, in turn, resulted in an affirmation of education and high aspirations for job possibilities, while rejection of it resulted in a negation of education and a begrudging anticipation of a life of unskilled manual labor.

What is the general lesson to be learned from MacLeod's study? Economically and culturally determined forces in the theories of Bowles and Gintis and Bourdieu and Passeron do not account adequately for different actions taken in similar socioeconomic circumstances. The Hallway Hangers and the Brothers demonstrate clearly that individuals and groups respond to structures of domination in diverse and unpredictable ways. If reproduction theory is to be rescued from its deterministic tendencies, then we must first, broaden the theory to include social agency and second, broaden the notion of social class to include cultural elements, such as ethnicity, educational histories, peer associations, and family life.

The actions of the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers have something to say to social theory more generally. There is a tendency in social science research to treat "the working class" or "Blacks" or "Asian Americans" as unitary, undiffer-

entiated groups (as MacLaren 1989 and Willis 1977 often slipped into doing). The Brothers and the Hallway Hangers remind us that we must be as sensitive to diversity and variability in subjugated groups in society as in elite groups. So, for example, Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) and Suarez-Orosco (1987) differentiated among a significant ethnic group, "Latinos," pointing out that immigrant minorities, such as Hispanics from Central and South America, experience different kinds of problems and perform better in U.S. schools than do mainland Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans, who are assigned to a castelike status in the United States.

OPENING THE BLACK BOX

The ethnographic work just reviewed adds culturally mediated action and a sense of agency to theories that attempt to explain social inequality, thereby reminding us that people—alone or in concert with others—make sense even out of dreary daily lives.

Students' actions, as described in resistance theory, are narrowly circumscribed, however; we are told that students resist and reject the expectations of schools and society—a definition that tends to romanticize students' nonconformity and opposition. Not every instance of students' misbehavior can be interpreted as evidence of resistance (Erickson 1984). Not all forms of nonconforming behavior stem from a critique, implicit or explicit, of school-constructed ideologies and relations of domination. A violation of a school rule is not, in itself, an act of resistance unless it is committed by a youth who sees through the school's achievement ideology and acts on that basis (Giroux 1983). As a result of the ambiguity inherent in students' actions and the many ways in which the actions may be interpreted by school officials, a more detailed analysis of students' actions and educators' interpretations of them is needed for resistance theory to become more persuasive.

Willis's and MacLeod's ethnographies develop a theory of resistance by analyzing how socioeconomic structures work through culture to shape students' lives.

But note that the one-directionality of the causal arrow found in reproduction theory is reproduced here: Structures of domination are transferred from structure through culture to actors. Because of its sense of cultural mediation, resistance theory is more subtle than is reproduction theory, in which there is a more direct connection between economic structure and human action. Although cultural mediation is a welcome addition to our arsenal of ideas for understanding social inequality, it is not enough. There is another important dimension of the connection between human action and social structure that is not covered by a "top-down" sense of cultural mediation.

Constitutive Action in the School

What I have in mind is constitutive action. Constitutive action defines the meaning of objects and events through elaborate enactments of cultural conventions, institutional practices, and constitutive rules. Constitutive rules, in turn, are those rules that create the very possibility of human activities and the rights and duties of the people associated with them (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Vendler 1972; Wittgenstein 1951). Some well-documented examples of cultural activities constituted in this way are marriage, property rights (D'Andrade 1987), mental illness, and crime (Pollner 1987).

For a simple example of constitutive action, consider a touchdown in the U.S. version of football. The rules of football are constitutive in that they establish the moves in the game and the rights and duties of the participants. They constitute the conditions under which certain players' behavior counts as a touchdown, a move in that game. Not just anyone can score a touchdown; only those people who are properly designated football players have this right. Even if a fan jumped out of the stands, grabbed a football, and crossed the goal line, it would not count as a touchdown. The fan does not have the right to perform that action under the rules of football.

Still other rules govern the timing and

conduct of actions in football. A player does not score a touchdown every time he crosses the goal line. The game must be in progress; crossing the goal line does not mean the same thing during a practice or a time-out as it does in a game. Instead, what Austin (1962) called the "felicity conditions" of actions must be in force for a player's crossing of the goal line to count as a touchdown. In short, constitutive action enables behavior to count as moves in a game, marriages, crimes, mental illness, and so on.

The institutional practices of schools parallel the constitutive rules of everyday life. Institutional practices are constitutive. Their application determines whether students' behavior counts as instances of certain educational categories. This constitutive work operates on a variety of occasions in and out of schools. Inside schools, its most notable appearance is moment to moment in educational testing sessions, when a psychologist decides whether a student's answer is correct or incorrect and tabulates a sum of such answers to count as the student's intelligence quotient (Cicourel et al. 1974; Marlaire and Maynard 1990; Mehan 1978; Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls 1985, pp. 88–108). A similar process unfolds in the flow of classroom lessons when teachers judge the correctness and appropriateness of students' answers, the accumulation of such judgments often resulting in the placement of students in ability groups (Allington 1983; Brophy and Good 1974; Cazden 1986; Cicourel et al. 1974; Cole and Griffin 1987; J. Collins 1986; Eder 1981; Gumperz and Herasmichuk 1975; Henry 1975; McDermott, Godspodinoff, and Aron 1978; Michaels 1981; Rist 1973; Wilcox 1982). Educators' constitutive action also determines whether students' behavior should result in their placement in different educational tracks (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Hollingshead 1949; Mehan et al. 1985; Oakes 1982, 1985; Rosenbaum 1976). It operates in counseling sessions when counselors meet with students' to design curricular choices (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; DiMaggio 1982; Erickson and Schultz 1982; Rosenbaum 1976). When

we examine the day-to-day educational practices in each of these settings, we learn that students are constituted in different ways. As a consequence, differential educational opportunities can be made available to them.

I am distinguishing between the view of human action in resistance theory and the view of human action in constitutive theory. Correctives of reproduction theory cast people as active by introducing human agency into explanations of inequality. Social actors in resistance theory make choices in the face of structurally provided possibilities. However, the practices and procedures by which people, acting together, assemble social structures that then stand independently of their means of production are not the same as those by which people make choices among predetermined options. Our understanding of the reproduction of social inequality will be more complete when we include in our theories the constitutive practices that structure students' educational careers. The importance of educators' constitutive action for our understanding of social inequality is shown when educators determine whether students' behavior counts for their placement in educational programs for the "mentally retarded" and "the educationally handicapped."

Placement of Students

Labeling the mentally retarded. Mercer (1974) studied the placement of students in special classrooms for the mentally retarded in California. Before the Education for All Handicapped Students Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) was implemented, school psychologists were crucial to the future educational and social careers of students, for they could decide to retain students in regular education, demote them, or place them in special education classrooms. Decisions about special placements were then, as they are now, informed by the results of IQ tests. The cutoff point on the IQ test for mental retardation at the time of Mercer's study was 80. A student who scored between 80 and 100 was defined by the test as normal, perhaps "slow," whereas a student who scored

less than 80 was defined as mentally retarded (MR).

Although these identification criteria seem cut and dried, Mercer found that placement in the MR category was not automatic. Of the 1,234 students in her study who were referred to the various psychological services committees in the schools, 865 were given the IQ test; of these 865, 134 scored below 80. However, only 64 percent of that group were recommended for placement in MR classrooms: 97 percent were boys, 75 percent were from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES), 32 percent were Anglo, 45 percent were Mexican American, and 22 percent were Black. These figures are disproportionate, given the overall school population, inasmuch as the distribution of boys and girls was virtually even and the majority-minority distribution was approximately 80 percent Anglo, 10 percent Black, and 10 percent Mexican American.

These data could be used to reinforce the view that the background of students, whether genetic (Jensen 1969) or socioeconomic (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Coleman et al. 1966; Jencks et al. 1972), accounts for differences in achievement in school. This was not, however, a simple instance of the poor, minority, and male students failing tests more often than their wealthy, majority, and female counterparts. Students who had similar results on an objective test were treated differently by school personnel. White, female, middle-class students who scored 80 or below were more likely to be retained in regular academic programs than were Black, male, lower-class students who scored the same on the IQ test. The disproportionate number of poor, minority, and male students in the MR category, even when they tested as well as their counterparts, suggests that mental retardation, as defined by the schools, did not identify an inherent characteristic or quality of the student. Instead, mental retardation was the consequence of the school turning on its sorting machine.

Mercer's findings about differences in the MR population in Catholic and public schools makes this point even more forcefully. Mercer found that there were no mentally retarded students in Catholic schools. After administering IQ tests to the Catholic students, she found that the IQ distribution was roughly equivalent to the distribution she found in the public schools. However, the students with the IQs that qualified them for MR classrooms were not educated separately, but in regular classrooms, along with other students. Mercer concluded that these students were not mentally retarded because the Catholic schools neither had this category nor the mechanisms (IQ tests, school psychologists, special education committees) for classifying students in this way. Without a socially constructed lens through which to see the students, the students' behavior was not viewed as retarded—unusual, to be sure, but not retarded.

Identifying the educationally handicapped. The reflexive relationship between institutional machinery and students' careers became even more evident in a study of special education placements conducted after the implementation of P.L. 94-142 (Mehan et al. 1985). To uncover the organizational arrangements and educators' work that accounts for the distribution of students in special education, I and my colleagues made field observations, analyzed federal laws and policies, reviewed school records, conducted interviews, and taped and analyzed face-to-face interactions in key decision-making events in a school district in southern California. Like Mercer, we found that the school's work of sorting special education students most frequently started in the classroom with a referral from the teacher; continued through psychological assessment; and culminated in an individual evaluation by a special committee, composed of educators and the parents of the referred students. Thus, a macrostructure—the aggregate number of students in various educational programs and the students' identities as "special" or "regular" students—is generated in a sequence of organizationally predictable "micro-events" (classroom, testing session, committee meetings) (cf. R. Collins 1981a, 1981b).

A number of forces impinged on the referral system and thereby influenced the identification, assessment, and placement of special education students. Some of these constraints were the direct result of federal legislation. Others were the consequence of the way in which a particular district chose to implement the law. We call these constraints "practical circumstances." They are practical in that, appearing day in and day out, they seem to be an inevitable part of the everyday routine of education in a bureaucratic institution. These constraints are "circumstances" in that they seem to be beyond the control of the people involved; they do not seem to be the responsibility of anyone. Thus, practical circumstances are the sedimentation from the actions of several individuals, some of which are taken in concert, some autonomously.

The courses of action that educators took in response to these practical circumstances often had significant consequences, contributing to the construction of different educational career paths; like placement in different ability groups or tracks, these educational career paths lead to different biographies and identities for students. This is not to say that the participants in this decision-making process necessarily planned to make educational services available to students differentially. Our daily observations, interviews, and discussions showed that educators were genuinely concerned for the welfare of the students in their charge; they were not overtly trying to discriminate against any children. Nevertheless, special education services were made available differentially to students in the district, which leads us to conclude that differential educational opportunity is, sometimes at least, an unintended consequence of bureaucratic organization, rather than a direct result of structural forces.

Administrative procedures that presumably were developed to facilitate bureaucratic operations often influenced the production of students' identities as special or regular students. The school psychologists concluded in the spring of the year that the referral system was "full." They had counted their case-loads, plotted them against the number of weeks remaining in the school year, and determined that it was not possible to process the number of students who had already been referred by the end of the year. On the basis of that information, the director of pupil personnel services circulated a memo discouraging principals and teachers from referring any more students. The result was an immediate and significant decline in the number of referrals throughout the district. Between August and March, the district average was 15; from the time the new directive was issued in late March until the end of the year, the district average was 6.

Changes in administrative policies such as these have consequences for the careers of students. If a teacher diagnosed that a student had a reading problem during September and October, that student could potentially become a special education student and receive assistance because the district had institutional arrangements to appraise, assess, and evaluate students during those months. If, however, the teacher did not evaluate the student until April or May, the student would not be eligible for special education assistance because of changes in administrative procedures. Like the situation in the Catholic schools in Riverside County studied by Mercer, it is not possible to have special education students without institutional practices for their recognition and treatment.

The vagaries of the school calendar influenced students' placements in other ways. The district operated on a staggered schedule that continued through the summer months. As a result, regular and special education teachers who were to participate in the educational program of a student often found themselves on incompatible track schedules, which automatically eliminated certain placement options from consideration. Thus, remediation options were chosen from the remaining options available on a given track, not necessarily the ones the educators thought was best for the student in principle.

Theoretically, the school district had a number of placement options available for consideration, including learning dis-

abilities, educationally handicapped, and multiple handicaps, retain in the regular classroom, and out-of-district placement. The actual number of outcomes did not match the theoretically possible outcomes, however, because a number of organizational practices operated to reduce the number of alternatives. Certain placement options, while theoretically possible, were, for all practical purposes, not available to decision makers when they made their final placements. The option to place students outside the district at the district's expense was eliminated from consideration by administrative fiat long before placement committees met because of the inordinate expense involved. The option of a separate program for the mentally retarded was likewise not available because of prior administrative decisions. The district did not establish separate classrooms for these students, but distributed them among other programs, such as "severe language handicapped."

Bilingual and special education programs are the most extensive of those designed to help students with special needs. Although they were intended to be complementary by helping students with different problems, we found they often competed with each other. The success of the bilingual program depended on a certain balance of students who spoke English as a first language and those who spoke Spanish as a first language. That policy had unintended consequences for the identification and assessment of special education students. Bilingual teachers reported that they met with resistance from their supervisors when they wished to refer Anglo students from their bilingual classrooms; they were told that the removal of Anglo students would disrupt the ethnic balance of the bilingual program.

Mexican American students in bilingual classrooms were less likely to be designated special education students, but for a different reason. When I and my colleagues observed bilingual classrooms, we found that the problems of the bilingual students who had not been referred were similar to or more severe than those of some of the students who

had been referred from monolingual classrooms. The teachers acknowledged the accuracy of our observations and explained that they did not refer Mexican American students to special education programs because they did not believe that the district had adequate resources to test and teach Spanish-speaking students outside the bilingual program. This belief led the teachers in the bilingual program to keep even potential special education students instead of referring them, a set of practices that Moore (1981, pp. 141–42) called "the better off judgment," that is, students are "better off with me" than in special education.

As a result of these local organizational practices, Anglo students in the bilingual program did not have the same opportunity to be identified as special students (and to receive the same assistance that presumably comes with that designation) as did students who were assigned to a monolingual classroom. Likewise a Mexican American child in a bilingual classroom had a different possibility of being referred than did a Mexican American child in a monolingual classroom. This difference in educational opportunity was not a function of genetically endowed intelligence, cognitive styles, or social-class backgrounds. It was, rather, an unintended consequence of institutional arrangements associated with students' assignments to classrooms.

Perhaps the best illustration of our claim that institutionalized practices for locating, assessing, and placing students must operate for students to be designated members of educational categories comes from the district's treatment of students with multiple physical handicaps. The laws governing special education require school districts to provide educational opportunity to all students by whatever means are necessary. If facilities to educate special students are not available within the district, then the district must supply the funds necessary to educate them outside the district. The district's policy in the year before we started our study was to educate students with multiple physical handicaps outside the district, at the district's

expense. Two such students were sent to a special school under this policy. A subsequent budgetary analysis determined that the amount of money being spent on the transportation and tuition of these children could purchase a teacher and a portable classroom for use in the district. Within a year, the number of students with multiple handicaps rose from two to eight. This increase did not come from new students entering the district; rather, students who were already in the district were now determined to fall under the provisions of this category, that is, to have multiple physical handicaps.

Certainly, one would argue that a student who is confined to a wheelchair is handicapped or has a handicap. However, such a student would not automatically be placed in a special education program for the physically handicapped. Institutional practices for identifying and placing students have to be put in motion for students to be so designated. From my point of view, then, a physical handicap is the product of institutional practices. A student cannot be physically handicapped, institutionally speaking, unless there are professional practices to make that determination.

According to much of the prevailing social science theory and special education law, designations like "educationally handicapped," "learning disabled," and "normal" student are reflections of the characteristics of students, including their SES, ethnicity, and talent. But my colleagues and I found that such designations were influenced by the calendar, educators' work loads, and available funds. These are practical circumstances, not individual characteristics. The influence of practical circumstances such as these suggests that the place to look for educational handicaps is in the institutional arrangements of the school — not in the characteristics of individual children.

CONCLUSIONS

So, what *do* interpretive studies tell us about inequality in schools? The emergence during the past 13 years of social agency, cultural mediation, and consti- tutive action as guiding concepts enables us to reassess Karabel and Halsey's (1977) judgment about the interpretive approach for understanding this fundamentally important problem.

From sociolinguistically influenced studies, one learns that school failure cannot be blamed on the characteristics associated with the culture of students who do not succeed in school, such as faulty socialization practices or deficient linguistic codes. Sociolinguistic research has helped shift attention from characterological accounts of individual achievement toward the institutional arrangements of schools that generate both success and failure.

The sociolinguistic argument about the structure and function of language avoids the "ultra-relativism" and "sentimental egalitarianism" attributed to the interpretive tradition by Karabel and Halsey and others (see, for example, Gage, 1989), who complained that the interpretive school wished away social structure and real-life constraints. But sociolinguists who are concerned with social inequality have not denied social structure; they have been describing the way in which it traps linguistic minority and low-income children. On the basis of their analysis of the role of language in social stratification, they argue for changes in that system of domination.

Analyses of gang life and home-school relations show that the economic and social demands of capitalism do not fully explain the reproduction of social inequality. By taking the everyday life of youth culture and family life as their starting point, interpretive studies have helped to modulate the economic deterministic tendencies in reproduction theory. At the same time, the cultural sphere gains relative autonomy. As a result of careful analyses of peer associations and family life, cultural forms and practices shed their status as passive reflections of structural forces and become active mediators between human action and the social structure. If we are to devise an adequate account of inequality, then the notion of social class must be expanded to accommodate cultural elements, such as ethnicity, educational

histories, family-school relations, and peer associations.

The mechanistic view of schooling that has pervaded reproduction theory has been tempered by careful examinations of life inside schools. The image of the school is transformed from a simple transmission belt, conveying the sons and daughters of the working class straight into working-class jobs or, worse yet, no jobs. In its place we gain an image of the school as an interactional device that shapes students' careers on the basis of an interplay between students' background characteristics and the institutional practices of the school. When the black box of schools is opened to careful observation, one finds that schools are relatively autonomous institutions, responding to community interests and practical circumstances that are not automatically related to the economic demands of capitalism.

One also finds the school's contribution to inequality when the internal life of schools has been examined closely. Educators are engaged in the routine and repetitive work of conducting lessons, administering tests, and attending meetings. Despite its mundane character, this routine work is important. Students' intelligence, their access to educational curricula, their scholastic achievement, steps on their career ladders, their school identities, and their opinions later in life are assembled from such practices.

The skills that students bring to school are subject to differential interpretation by teachers and other educators. Tokens of students' behavior are interpreted to count as instances of educationally relevant categories, from a correct or incorrect response in a lesson or test to designations, such as normal, gifted, or educationally handicapped student. This interpretive work sorts students into educational programs that provide differential educational opportunities. Socially constructed institutionalized practices for locating, assessing, and placing students must operate for students to be designated members of educational categories. If we are to understand the structure of inequality, then we must continue to examine the interactional

mechanisms by which that structure is generated.

A more general lesson to be learned from the constitutive approach that motivates these studies is this: The structural aspects of society are not pale reflections of large-scale institutional and historical forces; they are contingent outcomes of people's practical activity (cf. Cicourel 1973; Garfinkel 1967; Giddens 1984).[1] Therefore, if we are to understand the structure of inequality, we must continue to examine the interactional mechanisms by which that structure is generated. I certainly agree with "resistance theorists" who say it is productive to examine the oppositional practices generated by resistant youths in response to structures of constraint and domination. But we must not overlook the constitutive practices that are the foundation of inequality, which I have shown operate in two important contexts: the interaction between educators and students and the interaction between the home and the school. From the practices implemented in both settings, aspects of students' lives are generated.

A final comment on the "macromicro" issue in the sociology of education: For the most part, macro and micro, structure and agency, have been treated as separate realms in sociological studies of schooling and inequality. That separation certainly characterizes the work of Bowles and Gintis and Willis. Bowles and Gintis reduce human actors to passive role players, shaped exclusively by the demands of capital and with virtually no conception of culture. Willis swings the pendulum far in the other direction. His insistence that the lads choose working-class careers reaches such polemical proportions that his account is remarkably free of structurally embedded constraints.

I agree with Giroux (1983) and Mac-

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[1] Bowles and Gintis (1988) recently responded to their critics, admitting that practices are not totally determined by historical forces. This modification, which tacitly acknowledges the role of social agency and culture, brings them closer to the constitutive position described here.

Leod (1987) that showing the interface between the cultural and the structural is crucial to our understanding of social inequality, but I disagree with them that it is just a matter of achieving a "balance" between theories that emphasize structural determinants and those that focus on agency. To understand social inequality and the school's contribution to it, we must collapse the macro-micro, agency-structural dualism by showing how the social fact of inequality emerges from structuring activities to become external and constraining on social actors.

Casting the relationship between features of social structure and interactional process in reflexive terms offers the possibility of transcending the macro-micro or structure-agency dualism that has plagued the sociology of education. Doing so encourages us to demonstrate the situated relevance of social structures in the practical activities of people in social interaction, rather than to treat social structure as a reified abstraction and social processes in situated and historical isolation.

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