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The power of others: exploring a relational sociology of education

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Background

Educational choices, aspirations and outcomes are rightly identified as key indicators of social class differentials, the link between schooling and social class offering one of the strongest correlations in the social sciences. Much of the research on this topic is influenced by Bourdieu's relational sociology, from which the concept of habitus and various forms of capital have been utilised to explore class processes in education and how 'class gets done' in general.

Alongside this 'objective' or 'social location' approach to class and education, is a body of research which adopts a more inter-subjective or intra-psychic interpretation of educational choices and aspirations. This research is concerned with the impact of significant others on pupils' education and career aspirations, particularly the impact of parental expectations and pressure from peers. Although overlapping to some extent, these two approaches, while both concerned with 'relational' aspects of choice, tend to plough mostly separate intellectual furrows.

This disengagement between forms of relational analysis is a shame, as it precludes any effective engagement on the part of class analysis with research literature that specifically deals with the substance of social interaction. For example, there is an established body of literature that examines the role of parental expectations on children, whether it be related to career or educational choices. Likewise, a core concern in research on adolescents is the role of peer pressure as an impact factor on issues such as lifestyle, health, criminality, as well as education and work. Although the research may disagree over the positive and negative effects of such pressure, there is strong consensus regarding the significance of interpersonal relationships and their effects on the attitudes of the young.

Research Questions

The focus of the enquiry centres on the relationship between these two approaches - i.e., how do 'objective' class relations mediate and intersect with intersubjective relations when it comes to educational choices and aspirations. The purpose of the paper is to explore this relationship with the intention of fleshing out the parameters of a relational sociology of education, which in turn could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in attitudes towards education.

Methods

Given that the core concern of the paper is to develop and flesh out a relational sociology of education, the paper will draw on theoretical literature that explores the different relational dynamics, particularly the work of Bourdieu and Axel Honneth, and those who have used these theoretical approaches to examine intra-psychic and social location forms of relational sociology in various contexts. The paper will also draw heavily on more empirically-oriented research that explores the impact of parental expectations and peer pressure on the educational aspirations of young people.

Frame

Extending Bourdieu's contention that the 'real is relational', the paper attempts to develop Bourdieu's buried intersubjective analysis as a second and parallel strand to his more well-known and adopted 'social location' approach to relational sociology. The aim is to explore in more detailed ways the importance of relations and relationships to people's educational and class trajectories, and therefore to deliver on the promise of Bourdieu's avowed relational constructs. It is hoped that such a focus on

his intellectual 'blind spot' can help better understand the presentation of education in everyday life while also contributing to discussions about how class 'gets done'.

One way of expanding this relational sociology can be found in the work of Axel Honneth and his emphasis on intersubjective recognition as the basis of social interaction. The paper looks to explore the interplay between Honneth's 'recognition turn' and Bourdieu's emphasis on distinction, while also taking into account feminist concerns regarding the affective domain, power relations, and the formation of ambivalent identities.

Research findings

By shifting the emphasis away from the traditional structure/agency paradigm towards a more intersubjective relational approach, the paper hopes to contribute to a developing relational sociology, which takes seriously the interpersonal and affective contexts within which people are situated. This shift is not to deny the significance of social class as a material structure, nor is it designed to plead immunity from class on behalf of micro-relations. Rather, it is hoped that such a focus on the 'ties that bind' can help to sidestep the alleged reductionism of Bourdieu-inspired accounts of social class and education, something that has dogged these accounts in the past. The paper claims that the incorporation of an intra-psychic approach to social relations can help the debate shake off its residual cartesianism. By doing so, the discussion can then turn away from how social class mediates individual choices about education, to exploring the way class relations intersect with intersubjectively-shared understandings of education and its relative worth.