

Introduction

Education, Equity, and the Promise of Seeing Relationally

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Seemingly unending streams of books, news articles, and academic journals have sought solutions to persistent challenges of educational inequity, yet educational stratifications continue to harden. Over the past few decades, achievement inequities by class (Reardon 2011) and gaps in access to selective postsecondary institutions by race and ethnicity (Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo 2012) have widened. We make no claims to solving this puzzle, which has vexed decades of educational scholars. Educational inequity will persist long after this volume is published. We borrow from pragmatist sociological philosophy to offer new ways to analyze challenges in schools and colleges. For researchers digging for answers to entrenched problems in education, new tools can unearth insights that have remained stubbornly beyond their grasp. We suggest that relational sociology is an important theoretical and methodological innovation with wide-ranging applications to educational scholarship.

The mechanisms of educational stratification are only partially understood. For example, consider the persistent challenge of postsecondary education by race and class. The value of a good education is undisputed. Achievements like a high school diploma and a four-year degree provide increased access to well-paid jobs, insulation from economic downturns, improved health, and enhanced social connectedness (Bloom, Hartley, & Rosovsky 2007). However, many students, often

from marginalized communities, forgo the pursuit of these credentials. Rates of high school graduation and bachelor's degree attainment among Black, Latinx, and low-income students are troubling. The US Census Bureau (2015) reports that among the US population between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four, 32.8 percent of White people have attained a bachelor's degree, while only 22.5 percent of Black and 15.5 percent of Latinx people have attained one.

Researchers have adopted two primary ways of understanding these inequities (Perna 2006). First, they look to economic theories of individual choice and cost-benefit analyses of educational attainment. In these models, rational actors make educational decisions based on available information. Students who do not maximize individual gains from educational attainment likely presume themselves underprepared for subsequent academic pathways or are uninformed about future educational possibilities. Important research has uncovered the value of academic skill development (Adelman 2006) and enhanced information to students and parents (Dynarski, Libassi, Michelmore, & Owen 2018) to improving educational attainment outcomes.

Alternatively, sociologically inclined educational researchers argue that structural processes warrant more attention than does individual choice in understanding educational attainment gaps. Racial and socioeconomic oppressions constrain the choices available to marginalized students. Instead of seeing education inequities unfolding by way of individual decision making, schools are directly implicated in social reproduction. Bourdieu's (1986) influential theory of cultural capital suggests that schools reward the types of knowledge and dispositions cultivated in middle-class homes. High schools might tailor postsecondary opportunities to the class backgrounds of their students (McDonough 1998). Indeed, measures of cultural capital are closely associated with college degree attainment (DiMaggio & Mohr 1985). Critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell (1991) and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) argue that teachers and administrators use racist ideologies in schools that limit the educational opportunities of students of color. In particular, the theory of intersectionality has provided a useful lens for understanding how multiple identities along the lines of race, class, and gender affect social outcomes (Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1989). A robust line of scholarship has provided empirical support for the notion that schooling practices produce socioeconomic and racialized stratifications of educational attainment (Lewis 2003; Oakes 1985; Tyson 2011).

Rather than take sides in the debate over social structure or individual decision making, some have suggested that scholars investigate both

(Perna 2006). They reason that neither model is sufficient, and combining the frameworks allows for a fuller picture of inequities in college access. Information, choice, and prior preparation fail to explain all of the variance in educational attainment (Perna 2000). Approaches that assume the preeminence of structural oppressions, meanwhile, fail to explain the unique individual and cultural adaptations that allow some people from repressed groups to overcome their marginalization. Thus, Perna (2006) offers a conceptual model that understands college access by way of individual choices, economic contexts, school offerings, and student access to social and cultural capital. The solution to the inadequacies of college readiness research, therefore, is a “kitchen sink” approach, throwing an abundance of available theoretical constructs at a social problem to see its related social processes.

Relational sociologists attempt not to see more, but to see differently. They critique individualist and structural analyses for an overemphasis on essentialist attributes of individuals and institutions. The economic theories discussed above see individuals as static and atomistic. Structural theories grounded in critical and social reproduction theories see categorical groups—defined by class, gender, sexuality or other identities—as predetermined by inherent characteristics. Instead of looking first to categorical attributes, relational sociologists look to relationships. Individuals and groups certainly matter, but in a “bonds over essences” relational framework, social ties are given primacy. From a relational standpoint, equity-oriented researchers of college access might look beyond structural oppressions and individual attributes, instead investigating the dynamic social networks across primary, secondary, and postsecondary contexts that reify or undermine college-going inequities. As opposed to seeing the social world as defined by indelible traits of people or institutions, relational sociology looks to processes shaped by interactions among differently positioned actors whose realities are continually in flux. Thus, the social world is fiercely contested and frequently renegotiated among interconnected entities. The anti-essentialist approach, we suggest, can interrogate persistent challenges of educational inequity in ways that illuminate new avenues for sustained social change.

Anti-Essentialism and Educational Research

The critique we offer here centers on the matter of essentialism. In essentialist analyses, people and institutions are disconnected from one

another and are mere vessels for their prescribed attributes. They have little power to shape their own realities. Relational sociology has at its core an “anti-categorical imperative” (Emirbayer 1996; Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994). Relational sociologists highlight network configurations rather than categorical attributes as the principal drivers of social processes. Theoretically, essentialism is a foil for relational sociology.

Relational sociology certainly does not eliminate the importance of categories of identity. Race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities matter. Important work in sociology has articulated how these identities are defined by way of historical processes and dominant ideologies to shape opportunity structures for marginalized groups. What relational sociology adds is a more bottom-up framing of social reality. Social identities matter, but how they matter depends significantly on the shapes of the relational networks in which people are embedded—the social transactions they complete, the coalitions they assemble, and the power-laden fields of practice they engage. Identities are constructed not by way of inherent attributes or widely agreed-on “typifications” (Berger & Luckmann 1989), but in vigorous and multidirectional relational transactions within a social network. How one comes to understand the social meanings of identity markers like race and class occurs within bundles of social ties. Thus, identity matters, but it is not the starting point for a relational study. Rather, researchers must see social reality as the engagement of differently positioned actors in a social space whose transactions compel messy and uncertain educational processes. These dynamic engagements can reify or destabilize power dynamics and enhance or lessen the salience of established identity markers.

Rational actor models have been vigorously contested on the grounds that they neglect structural oppressions (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Teranishi & Briscoe 2008). Structural racism and economic inequities constrain the potential of people to behave in ways that maximize their utility. However, structural analyses are also hamstrung by essentialism. They often imply that people are not actors but are acted on by formalized processes aligned with their personal attributes, such as race and class.

In conversations on unequal educational attainment by race and class, essentialist analyses prevail. Class and racial backgrounds weigh on student aspirations and determine the college preparatory opportunities of their high schools. If individuals have agency, that agency is viewed in terms of rational decision making based on available information about postsecondary options. A relational approach first sees how differently positioned actors within and outside of schools interact in processes

related to educational attainment. These relational units are at the center of analyses and are presumed to be the drivers of social reality.

The central goal of this book is to help us rethink (and presumably redirect) educational conversations away from essentialist analyses. We offer relational sociology as a means by which to apply a new lens for viewing persistent challenges in the field of education. In what follows, we discuss the role of relationships in sociology, how “seeing relationally” reframes relationships to uncover a deeper understanding of educational processes, and how one might apply the tenets of relational sociology to the theory and practice of education.

Sociology and Relationships

Sociology is often defined in textbooks and course syllabi as the study of relationships. Thus the existence of a theory of relational sociology may seem redundant. What need is there for a discipline already about relationships to be revised to be more relational? In part, this book asserts the need for a better articulated vision for how relationships shape social life, a vision that has yet to be developed in educational scholarship.

Prominent theories of education have framed relationships in ways that actually disconnect people from one another as opposed to seeing them as they are—in continual processes of transactions with other social actors. Some sociologists elevate relationships by arguing that people’s social realities are related to the class contexts in which they are raised. Family background is thus a barrier that inevitably obstructs the forward progress of working-class youth. These youth lack intergenerational closure (Coleman 1987); they are exposed to fewer words (Hart & Risley 1995); or they are isolated in neighborhoods that compel maladaptive behaviors (Anderson 2000). Alternatively, critical theorists view people as inescapably intertwined with pervasive and all-consuming social structures. By their account, student hardships are related to their oppressed position in established social hierarchies. Our suggestion here is that relationships in sociology are defined in essentialist terms more often than not. People are locked into all-encompassing relationships with their background characteristics or oppressive social systems. Rarely are people’s relationships with other people viewed as the core driver of their social realities. Relational sociology’s conception of relationships seeks to redress this theoretical oversight.

As we suggest in chapter 1, relational sociologists see one's relational reality as more dynamic—less of an inexorable march toward predictable social outcomes and more of an uncertain stagger along contested terrain. Relational sociologists highlight relationships as embedded in sociohistorical and spatiotemporal contexts. These contexts shape the nature of the relationship and the social processes that unfold for the related parties. In particular, borrowing from Bourdieu's field theory, relational theorists understand people as differently positioned in social arenas rife with conflict over scarce resources. These processes are informed by social contexts related to class and race but are predominantly framed by the nature of interpersonal interactions within the field. Thus, relational sociology does more than assert that relationships matter. Rather, relationships are at the core of social reality and are connected to a larger structure of hierarchies and systems that define a social sphere.

Seeing Relationally

The goal of this book is not to posit the supremacy of relational approaches over all others. We argue that a relational lens has the potential to help us make insightful contributions to educational theory. We focus on two ways that this might occur. First, relational sociology compels innovative methodologies that uncover the intricate connectedness of individuals in social worlds. Second, the emphasis on relational processes may uncover how inequity unfolds in educational settings.

A relational approach necessitates lenses on relationship structures, interpersonal transactions, and positions in the field. Such a multifaceted theoretical grounding necessitates scholarly approaches capable of capturing complex relational realities. In chapter 2, Joseph Ferrare puts forth a theoretical and methodological framework capable of rendering a relational view of the social world. For Ferrare, seeing relationally necessitates theoretical and methodological pluralism that borrows from sociological tools like social network analysis and sociological concepts such as field theory to understand educational processes. Because social processes unfold amidst bundles of relationships in and out of schools, social network analysis and field theory provide useful direction for educational researchers.

In chapter 3, Julie Posselt demonstrates how relationally analyzed data can tease out local power dynamics and suggest strategies for

enhancing equitable access to higher education. She looks specifically at transcribed conversations among admissions officers at a prestigious university from constructivist, critical, and relational lenses. While each lens offers important insights, the relational lens merges structural and contextual analyses of data to elucidate how power is negotiated in situ. Seeing relationally can situate researchers amid the unfolding processes that direct social outcomes.

Researchers of race might also consider a relational approach. Race has often been seen as an essential category, and scholars of race often emphasize the inequitable characteristics of educational institutions as uniformly affecting racially minoritized youth. Thus, race scholarship often succumbs to structural essentialisms that suggest the inevitability of oppressive learning experiences. In a theoretical exploration of racial processes on college campuses, Antar Tichavakunda (chapter 4) asserts that relational sociology might allow for an understanding of race as shaped by a diverse cross-section of actors that coconstruct racial campus climates. Tichavakunda suggests that relational inquiries can problematize predominant framings of campus diversity and microaggressions. Seeing relationally may allow scholars to more holistically understand racial processes as they occur amid transactions between differently positioned actors on school campuses.

Relational Theory and Practice in Education

The foundations of this book are grounded in theory, which allows the advancement of scholarly knowledge by compounding the collective insights of centuries of researchers toward a deeper understanding of the social world. Kezar (2006) calls theories the “received wisdom” of earlier intellectuals. Theories can inspire particular sociological investigations (Burawoy 1998) as well as frame how research projects are designed and data are analyzed (Suppes 1974).

On one hand, theory is essential to educational research. On the other hand, education is a discipline with distinctly practical applications. However, approaches that elevate practical concerns devoid of theoretical considerations have the potential to produce ineffectual solutions to pressing challenges. For example, when educational research uncovered that digital inequities allowed some students more robust opportunities for

online learning than others, superintendents across the nation implemented multimillion-dollar “one-to-one” technology policies that assigned every student a personal computing device. The logic informing these decisions is reasonable. Working-class families lack the financial resources to provide their children with technology that facilitates learning. Providing that technology is a practical approach to closing the digital divide. However, many of these policies have failed to meaningfully affect achievement gaps. Neglecting prominent theories of social reproduction leads to policies like one-to-one digital devices that overlook persistent drivers of inequity that may be immune to adjusted resource allocations (Tierney & Kolluri 2018).

Thus, we highlight the centrality of theory to social understanding, and we aim to keep a foothold in the practical realities of educational institutions. In particular, the empirical work in the book suggests how the theory of relational sociology can be used to better conceptualize student learning experiences. Hoori Kalamkarian and colleagues note in chapter 5 that high school college access programs have primarily been designed and researched on essentialist foundations. College access programs, however, are primarily about relationships. As such, they present a mixed-method study design—social network analysis and interviews—to capture the specific contours of the college information sharing networks at two high schools. Their findings have important implications for developing college access programs in high schools.

A relational lens can also inform policies and practices in college and university settings. As Janice McCabe addresses in chapter 6, studying—typically envisioned as a solitary activity—can also be understood through a relational lens. By envisioning studying not just as an instrumental activity for higher test scores but an opportunity for students to connect with their peers, researchers and practitioners can relationally reconceptualize the college study session. Similarly, in chapter 7 Michael Lanford uses a relational analysis of a writing support program to reimagine writing development as a predominantly relational process. Centering relationships reveals important but underanalyzed components of the college experience.

Educational theorists as well as practitioners can benefit from the insights of relational sociology. Relational tenets enrich prominent theories in education and have the potential to allow educational leaders to design policies and interventions that leverage the relational embeddedness of their students. Thus, we conceptualize relational sociology as a useful tool for the advancement of theory and practice in educational research.

The Organization and Purpose of this Book

This book's structure follows the framework discussed above. Chapters 1 and 2 engage primarily with relational sociology as theory. Chapter 1 provides a general overview of relational sociology and its potential to make insightful contributions to education. Chapter 2 details the intricate methods that might be necessary to adequately capture its multilayered view of social reality. In chapter 3, the analysis provides a practical example of how relational analyses can illuminate unique insights, and chapter 4 engages significantly with sociological theories of race and begins making practical applications to college campuses and racial climates. The remaining chapters are empirical, applying relational methods to persistent challenges in educational institutions. They analyze data regarding specific components of high school and college through a relational lens. Although our book lacks an empirical focus on younger children, we intend that the theories and methods discussed here can be applicable in elementary and middle school contexts as well.

Our relational approach may be of particular value in a time where educational debates are centered on whether free-market strategies can be used to improve educational outcomes for marginalized populations. In current educational policy discourse, school choice, an idea borne out of 1980s conservatism, has fiercely reemerged. Numerous education advocates argue strongly for the ability of families to choose schools and for the expansion of attendance options beyond the traditional public school system. In so doing, they have brought essentialism to the forefront of educational discourse. A family's choices are assumed to only matter to them. Social networks are ignored. Scant attention is paid to the power dynamics that advantage some families over others in the competition for privileged access to schools.

Relational sociologists argue that social problems cannot be reduced to the effects of broken institutions or the constraints pertaining to individual choice. Entrenched social challenges—like those related to educational inequity—are more complex and interconnected. Students and families are situated in relational networks and clash with school officials in ways that shape learning. Schools also cannot be conceptualized as independent actors. A school's ability to improve is dependent on its relationship with families, neighborhood actors, and other educational institutions. Punishing a school by siphoning off its enrollment cannot compel educational growth. Educational change happens as students interact with schools

and schools interact with communities. The anti-essentialist mandate of relational sociology seeks a redirection of social analyses toward transactional processes among interconnected actors.

We do not intend for this book to sort out all the issues in the application of relational sociology to the study of education. Instead, our intent is for this text to be a primer for students and scholars intrigued by the possibilities of relational approaches in educational research. Our argument is that the field has much to gain from the theories and methods presented herein. Educational inquiries for too long have been grounded in essentialist frameworks that suggest an inevitability of social processes. Instead, we put forward a theoretical foundation on which to develop solutions to educational problems that are more attentive to the relationships and power dynamics in which educational actors are situated. By training a theoretical lens directly on the relational networks that permeate academic institutions, educational researchers have the ability to examine old problems with fresh eyes.

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