A Theory of Socially-Constructed Boundaries and its Implications for Educational Research

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A cursory survey of the recent scholarship on education, both institutionally sponsored and academic, will reveal a fairly intuitive, ostensibly unremarkable trend. When researchers, policy planners or government officials study education, the impetus is almost always a response to a specific, immediate problem. Issues of international competitiveness, nationwide performance, funding, marginalization, violence and apathy have historically sparked a flurry of discourse from all areas of the social sciences; hence the analyses and debates surrounding silencing, streaming, bullying, commercialization, credentialism etc. Researchers have traditionally constrained their fieldwork to very specific issues, occasionally generalizing their findings and even less commonly positing grand-theories of education. This is not necessarily problematic. However, this sort of research ignores a very real possibility: that these disparate educational concerns are actually symptoms that share one or two common causes.

I propose that many of the issues listed above (and others) indeed have something in common. Through my own observations and experiences, substantiated by long-standing research in the field, (Boocock: 1966) I have outlined below a grand-theory of crisis in education that takes the "socially constructed boundary" as its unit of analysis. What follows will outline the tenets of this theory and demonstrate its utility by deconstructing three seemingly disparate educational problems (poor student performance, alienation / apathy and reproduction of inequality) to reveal their common root. By way of conclusion, I hope to show the benefits of situating one's research within a grand theory of education, rather than always constructing a conceptual framework from the ground-up.

It is fitting to start with the central element in this grand-theory: the socially constructed boundary. Cleo Cherryholmes' appraisal of structural and poststructural thought in education (1988) has helped me greatly in situating this element theoretically. When I speak about the "socially constructed boundary", what I mean

is the internalization of perceived structural relationships within a socio-cultural milieu. In a sense, this notion bridges the theoretical gap between structuralism and symbolism (making it somewhat difficult to describe using idioms from either discourse community). But this contention needs to be unpacked. The structuralist element here is not the relatively recent North American structural-functionalism of Parsons, but rather the more established and frequently critiqued school of European structuralism founded by Levi-Strauss in the 19th century. "Structures", as they apply to the notion of a socially constructed boundary, are those discrete, abstract elements of a culture such as formal and informal institutions, social roles and groupings as well as the relationships of meaning conveyed among them. The difference in this case is that these meanings are not static and immutable, nor are they imputed onto passive social actors with no agency. Rather, these structures are socially constructed by society at large through the active projections of individuals from different vantage points within the society: this is the symbolic element. The "boundaries", then, are the lines that individuals demarcate between these perceived structures, which are then internalized by the society at large.

Some examples of socially constructed boundaries (SCBs) would be useful at this point. A formal, institutional SCB is that between the educational system and the rest of the state, or between the school and the community. A boundary – that may not necessarily actually exist – is constructed by popular discourse and internalized by mass society; the division between these structures, and the construction of these structures themselves, are contestable. There are, for example, less popular conceptions of the school as an extension of the community that frame and understand education differently. An informal institutional SCB can be said to exist between the school and the family, resulting in different conceptions and attitudes towards both.

SCBs that polarize social roles are particularly potent as units of analysis: for example, the artificial boundary between the teacher and student formalizes and cements the expected behaviours and characteristics of each in the popular mind. I can still recall my incredulity the first time I saw my Grade 2 teacher on a Saturday at the mall: the SCB I had internalized transformed Mrs. Brown into a woman who had no personal life outside the school and only existed on weekdays between nine and three o'clock. This sort of thing is done all the time; through acculturation, students are led to expect teachers to possess certain qualities. Furthermore, these same sorts of boundaries can exist among students due to class, race, religion or even academic performance. Peter McLaren's study of resistance among black female students in inner-city Toronto reveals a role-polarization between middle and lower class students (McLaren, 1998; in Wotherspoon, 2004: 116-7) ; these roles were socially constructed by both groups of actors and internalized by the lower-class girls, manifested through expected behaviour that accompanied the formalized role. Blye Frank's study of masculinity (2000) reveals a similar role internalization after boundaries were demarcated between heterosexual males, females and homosexuals in Nova Scotia high schools: the rigidity of these artificial boundaries and codes of behaviour are almost painfully alarming.

SCBs also exist within the individual school and the education system itself: students and parents internalize boundaries between grades, between elementary, middle and secondary schools, between academic and vocational streams and so on. The child in Grade 3 cannot imagine playing with Grade 6 kids. The high school senior taking academic courses might scoff at her peers in the vocational stream. With each boundary the actor throws up, entirely incommensurable worlds are created and expected behaviours are further formalized. I will explore the consequences of this internalization below.

The critical perspective of this grand-theory argues the following: the *status-quo* of the educational system has emerged due to the popular organization and management of SCBs. Problems in education cannot be fully understood without making reference to their orientation to SCBs, and their uncritical internalization is most often problematic. A critical theorist conducting research under this grand-theory would maintain that these SCBs must be deconstructed and reconstituted in the popular mind to resolve various crises in education. At this point, we can examine a few educational dilemmas that have been well-treated by researchers espousing diverse disciplines and analytic approaches.

Poor student performance has been tied to just about every social factor in existence; indeed, my purpose here is not to dispute the legitimacy of other theorists' claims. Rather, I merely seek to establish the legitimacy of the SCB grand-theory I have outlined. An SCB theorist would perhaps make a distinction between competence and performance of internalized roles, and argue that either a) the poor student has an understanding of the perceived behaviours of students but cannot 'act the part', or b) the internalized role itself has characteristics, attitudes and behaviours that hinder the learning process. The latter case may not in fact be the fault of the student, but rather with the popular perceived understanding of the 'student'; in which case, there is a much bigger problem that must be addressed.

Apathy and alienation can be closely related to each other and to institutional / role boundaries. Apathy is interpreted as the condition resulting when the roles get stale: a student who goes through the education system her whole life with certain expectations of the behaviours of others and the same perceived expectations for herself will, by the time she hits postsecondary studies, act out of habit. If she conceives of her role as a passive receptacle for the transmission of information, (an increasingly pervasive trend), it will come as no surprise when she does not engage in discussion. Similarly, the feeling of alienation would stem from the internalization

of the boundary between the student and the administration in a large high school, along with all the underpinnings of their relationships.

A more complex application of the unit of analysis can be used to rationalize the problem of social reproduction of inequality. John Ralston Saul has argued that developed democratic nations in the modern era place increasing agency on public interest groups (Saul: 1995). These interest groups increasingly come to bear upon educational policy and transmit their agendae through the curriculum. Through this process, the popular 'structure' of the society at large is reproduced in the school system: the social inequalities borne of the structures thus are reproduced through the boundaries between subjects, streams, socio-economic districts etc. The critical theorist might argue that the agency accorded to interest groups should be transferred back to the school and the community itself to avoid social reproduction on a large scale.

The kinds of issues raised above lend themselves well to particular disciplines or methodologies; thus we see Marxists more inclined to write about social reproduction, psychologists writing about performance, political economists writing about funding models etc. This has led to a pressing concern in the research community, articulated most concisely by David Hargreaves (1996). Hargreaves claims that educational research has failed to create a cumulative body of knowledge, and that researchers' findings are generally of little use to teachers and other researchers. This is largely because the areas of study for particular methodologies are so local and insular. The value and utility of a grand-theory, like the one above, is that theorists from any discipline using any methodology can conduct informed research grounded in a common set of principles and idioms. Findings that were once perceived as unrelated can thus have a common significance, leading to the 'cumulative body of knowledge' Hargreaves claims educational research lacks. I hope to have underscored the potency of the socially-

constructed boundary as a common unit of analysis across disciplines. We have seen only the most cursory application of this grand-theory above; I fully intend to explore its possibilities in the future, and invite other students of the social sciences to do the same.

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