DOES THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE OFFER A

USEFUL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

FOR ADULT EDUCATION?

A Paper for Michael Collins
Northern Illinois University
Fall, 1978

By Bruce Woll

DOES THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE OFFER A

USEFUL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

FOR ADULT EDUCATION?

In this paper I want to note some of the issues that are currently
a concern of some adult educators and then pose the question as to
whether the sociology of knowledge addresses these issues in a useful
way, or more accurately, provides a useful theoretical framework for
addressing such issues.

One of the most marked concerns of adult education currently is
to expand the scope of the field. This concern has many aspects. Adult
educators have popularized the phrase "lifelong learning" to express
the fact that learning continues throughout adult life even into old
age. This represents what one could call the vertical, or temporal,
dimension. Adult educators are also concerned that the field not be
restricted "horizontally," that is, along the social dimension. The field
(Cf. 20:636 "two axes").
is understood to embrace learning in whatever social context it occurs,
whether in the form of staff development and training within organizations,
community education within churches, community organizations, education
as it occurs within the family (the parent as educator),or education as it
occurs on an individual basis, as, for example, in the form of "individual
learning projects" described by Allen Tough (1). The citing of Tough
by adult educators is an indication of the concern with the scope of the
field. By citing Tough the adult educator makes the point that adult education
embraces informal learning, not just formal education.

Along with this expansion of the scope of adult education is a concern that is being voiced by some adult educators, notably John Ohliger, with the extension of compulsory continuing education into more and more areas of life (2). According to David Lisman and John Ohliger some form of continuing education is now required for fourteen professions in forty-five states (2:35). Lisman and Ohliger cite former Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz's recommendation that older citizens be required to go back to school "as a way of making their lives more rewarding" (2:36).

A contrasting concern being voiced by some adult educators is with voluntarism in adult education, a concern evidenced, for example, by the conference on voluntarism sponsored by Northern Illinois University in 1978 (3). There is some indication in the proceedings of that conference that voluntarism represents a counter-force to the compulsory education trend, though this insight is not as explicit as one might expect or wish. In his introductory address, "Voluntarism: An Action Proposal for Adult Educators," Paul Ilsley discusses voluntarism and citizen involvement and points out that "voluntary programs of every type may be seen . . . as an invigorating force to assure freedom and participation and to thwart possible oppressive trends" (3:8). Voluntarism represents one kind of individual and informal educational activity which Lisman and Ohliger cite as "the great counterforce" to the thrust toward a compulsory instructional society (2:37).

One more characteristic feature of adult education is the stress on self-directed learning. This phrase has been popularized above all by Malcolm knowles, who has written a manual for independent learners called Self-Directed Learning (4), and who has coined the term "andragogy" to emphasize,

among other things, the principle of self-direction as an essential

component of his philosophy of adult education (5;39).

According to Jerome Bruner every theory of instruction is a political

theory (6;53). There is a socio-political aspect to each of the four

issues or concerns that I have cited as characteristic of contemporary

adult education. This is very evident in the case of the second and

third, compulsory continuing education, and voluntarism. It is not as

evident, but just as true, in the case of the first and fourth features

cited. For instance, the extending of the scope of adult education to

include any and every form of educational or learning activity in society

inevitably means that it must accept any and every form of political

education as part of its domain. The political implications of the idea

of self-direction are not brought out by Malcolm Knowles, at least not in

The Modern Practice of Adult Education. He emphasizes the individual

psychological dimension of the concept. The individualistic orientation

of Knowles's understanding of adult education is explicit in his assertion

that "the primary and immediate mission of every adult educator is to help

individuals satisfy their needs and achieve their goals" (5;23). Yet

the political implications of the concept of self-direction are suggested

in Knowles's language as he discusses the phrase. He talks about the child's

state of "complete dependency," and the fact that the child "expects

the will of adults to be imposed on him." He points out that as the child

moves into adolescence "his need to take significant responsibility for

managing his own life becomes so strong that it often puts him in open

rebellion against control by the adult world." (5;39). This language of

dependency, control, imposition, rebellion is not carried over from the

discussion of the child to the discussion of the adult quite as
prominently, yet language with political implications is still to be
found. Knowles points out that the chief sources of self-fulfillment for
the adult are his performance "as a worker, a spouse, a parent, a _citizen_" (5:40).
He goes on to say that the adult sees himself as "being able to make his
own decisions and face their consequences, to manage his own life" (_Ibid._).

The political implications potentially present in the idea of self-
directed learning can be seen with vivid clarity in the history of one
remarkable adult education institution, the Highlander Folk School, as told
by Frank Adams (7). As understood and applied by Myles Horton, the idea of
self-directed learning meant "learn from the people; start their education
where they are" (7:206). It has meant helping the poor learn to act and
speak for themselves and gain control over decision affecting their daily
lives. It has meant going beyond _individual_ self-direction to the discovery
of shared problems, needs, values, and to the discovery of _group_ power for
self-determination.

The four concerns I have cited, somewhat at random, illustrate that
there are socio-political implications involved in current adult education,
issues of decision-making authority and control, issues of policy, issues
of legitimation (as in the case of compulsory continuing education). This
list could be added to. For example, one of the driving concerns of adult
education historically has been the _distribution_ of education, the unequal
distribution of education. Attempts to remedy this state of affairs, have
characterized a very large part of adult education. The political dimension
of adult education is inescapably prominent in Third World countries such as
Tanzania (8). The writings of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich have underscored
this aspect (9; 10). A recent issue of _Convergence_ was devoted to the theme
of adult education and political action (11). Budd Hall, in the introductory

essay to that issue, suggests that adult education has reached a critical

juncture in its history when political reflection is essential. It is

important, he says, for adult education to examine its roots,

> its continuity of commitment, its essential compact of
> solidarity with the dispossessed, the poor, the workers
> and all those engaged in the political struggle of social
> transformation. Such reflection is particularly appropriate
> when adult education in many industrialized countries has
> become relatively wealthy, when it has established for itself a
> role as provider of manpower for the state, when it has
> overcome its own power marginality and become as recognized and
> 'legitimatized' as the university or the professions (12:8).

I wish to turn now to the question of the sociology of knowledge as

a potential theoretical framework for addressing the issues described above.

The reader may wonder why, given the emphasis on the political aspect of the

issues cited, I do not turn instead to consider political theory as a

necessary framework for adult education. In answer, I think that political

theory is needed in adult education. However, in this paper I have taken

the political concerns of adult education as an instance of the social

dimension of the field. My primary concern is with sociology, and its usefulness

for the field, whether in relation to political, economic, ethnic, or class

issues.

Sociology of knowledge has been, until somewhat recently, a somewhat

esoteric branch of sociology, especially within the English-speaking world.

The term itself was coined in Germany in the 1920s by Max Scheler in an

essay entitled "Probleme einer Soziologie des Wissens" (13:4), and the

discipline has been viewed by American sociologists "as a marginal specialty

with a persistent European flavor" (Ibid.). Recently, however, there have

been developments which have brought it increasingly to the attention of

British sociologists of education in particular, and the British interest

is, in turn, beginning to receive the attention of some American scholars.

The most explicit linking of sociology of knowledge with education is to be found in the book edited by Michael F.D.Young, called <u>Knowledge and Control</u> (14). Young points out that for the sociologists represented in the book, the "<u>sociology of education is no longer conceived as an area of enquiry distinct from the sociology of knowledge</u>" (14:2). Young's book represents an approach to the sociology of education which some of its proponents regard as revolutionary. According to Madan Sarup, for example, Young's collection of readings is the "main expression and source of inspiration" for "a new approach" which "has revolutionized the sociology of education" (15:13).

Young's book is assuming importance as a point of reference for the new approach to sociology of education. In a useful review essay on the subject of the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of education, Richard D. Heyman cites Young's work as having "made the greatest impact on the sociology of education" of any book using a sociology of knowledge approach (16:149). Heyman, writing in 1976 for the Canadian <u>Journal of Educational Thought</u>, has extensive bibliographical references. Even more extensive, however, is the article by J. Karabel and A.H.Halsey, also published in 1976, entitled "The New Sociology of Education" (17). With Karabel and Halsey, too, the discussion has reached the United States, since their article was published in the U.S. journal, <u>Theory and Society</u>. Karabel and Halsey refer to Young's volume extensively. (See Appendix A for other references to Young's work).

The Young volume contains articles by French and British scholars, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Basil Bernstein, Alan Blum, Ioan Davies, Robin Horton, and Nell Keddie. Basil Bernstein is of importance in that he developed the first program to give higher degress in the sociology of education, in 1963, at the University of London Institute of Education (16:536).

Young is a Lecturer in Sociology at the same institution. Keddie and
Esland were graduate students of Young (16:549). Pierre Bourdieu teaches
at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes at the Sorbonne.

In England the collection of readings in Young's volume has received
official status within the Open University by being designated as a "Set
Book" and being made part of the curriculum for its course on "School and
Society" (16:549).

In my opinion the fundamental value of the sociology of knowledge is
that it provides a theoretical framework for thinking about knowledge
and knowing processes within society as a whole. It thus provides a
framework for reflection on, for example, Peter Drucker's observations about
the "knowledge worker" in modern organizations (18:3), and a way of bringing
his observations into relation to adult education.   Michael Young and his
students illustrate this function of the sociology of knowledge. They do
this by focusing attention primarily upon knowledge as an instrument of
social control. Adopting the central premise of the sociology of knowledge,
namely, that what is taken as "knowledge" in any given society is to be
viewed as socially constructed, they focus attention upon the "management
of knowledge" as the central problem of the sociology of education (19).
In particular, Young argues that the curriculum of the schools be studied
with a view to the social determinants of the selection of knowledge therein
represented (14:24).

I suggest, however, that despite the explicit "marriage" of sociology
of knowledge and sociology of education in the English movement represented
by Young, a fresh look at both sociological sub-disciplines is needed for
adult education, especially in the United States. For one thing, little
attention seems to have been paid to adult education by the English and

French scholars of the "new" sociology of education. One exception is an article by Tom Schuller and Jarl Bengtsson published in 1977 in Karabel and Halsey, Power and Ideology in Education (20).

There are a number of other limitations to the Young et al approach which suggest the need for a fresh start. Karabel and Halsey point up many of these in their critical yet sympathetic article (17). I will cite only one other, in addition to the neglect of adult education. Despite the emphasis on knowledge as a social construct the focus of attention in the new sociology of education is on the classroom and the school curriculum. Little attention has been paid to educational processes outside the formal educational institutions. Yet just here, it appears to me, is one of the potentially most useful contributions of a sociology of knowledge. An example of this potential is to be found in the short, excellent essay review by Val Burris of three books on advertising (21). Burris begins by summarizing in one paragraph the central tenet of the new sociology of education, the assertion of an intimate connection between knowledge and social control and the consequent attention to classification and categories of knowledge as mechanisms of social reproduction. He proceeds to argue for an enlargement of the scope of the sociology of education. "If one accepts the logic of this argument [i.e. the argument of the new sociology of education], then," he says,

> it follows that the sociology of education can neither accept
> as unproblematic the categories employed by educators in the
> identification of problem areas nor define the limits of its
> theoretical concern by the institutional boundaries of the system
> of formal education. Education, as a process involving the social
> organization and ttansmission of categories of knowledge, is not
> restricted to the school classroom but takes place at many levels
> in a variety of institutional contexts. The sociology of education
> must therefore address itself to a broader domain by seeking to
> situate the social functions of schooling in relation to the general
> process of cultural reproduction (21:401).

This understanding of the sociology of education (as equivalent to the sociology of knowledge) is the framework for Burris's subsequent discussion of Research on the Effects of Television Advertising on Children by the National Science Foundation (Washington, D.C.:U.S.Government Printing Office, 1977), How Children Learn to Buy, by Scott Ward, Daniel B. Wackman, and Ellen Wartella (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1977), and Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture, by Stuart Ewen (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

Another example of the way in which a sociology of knowledge can focus attention on issues which adult education needs to consider concerns obstacles and blocks to knowledge, social, institutional, structural boundaries to the dissemination of knowledge. This includes every form of censorship. It includes every form of "classified" knowledge. It also includes social psychological blocks to perception, insight, and memory. For instance, in any public education program having to do with the subject of child abuse, one must reckon with the distaste and revulsion which the subject arouses and which cause people to want to look the other way. David Bakan, in an unusual book on the subject of child abuse, a book containing a series of radio broadcast lectures, begins his discussion with an examination of this interior barrier to knowledge of the subject (22). In his first chapter, entitled "Looking the Other Way," he observes: "Child abuse thrives in the shadows of privacy and secrecy." (22:3).

The subject of blocks and obstacles to knowledge also must include attention to deliberate obfuscation, propaganda, lying and distortion. A sociology of education which has expanded its scope to include lifelong learning and knowledge processes throughout society finds itself involved in the struggle to see clearly, honestly, "objectively." From the

standpoint of educational institutions, which are devoted to the
dissemination of knowledge, and which are populated by people who,
presumably, believe the spread of knowledge is a mission, awareness of
the enormous extent to which society is characterized by barriers,
by hostility to the dissemination of certain pieces of information, may
be difficult to hold on to. Yet it is a fact that the adult education
enterprise needs to be understood within the context of a sociology of
ignorance, within the context of a politics of ignorance, legislated
ignorance, in many cases, the other side of which, frequently, is legislated
privacy.

In his play, The Chairs, Ionesco tells the story of a very old
couple who have invited a large crowd to the island on which they live
so that the husband may impart the wisdom he has accumulated during ninety-
five years. His plan for saving the world is to be communicated by a
professional orator. The guests, all invisible, keep arriving, until
finally the stage is filled with chairs. The old man announces that the
orator will present his messianic secret to the audience; then he and
his wife commit suicide by throwing themselves out of the window. As
soon as they are gone, the orator indicates that he is deaf and dumb!
According to one critic, Ionesco's point here is the impossibility of
communication between human beings (23:59). "Life, Ionesco is saying,
is a hell in which each person is imprisoned in his own separate soundproof
cubicle, invisible and inaudible to everyone else. All so-called
communication is illusory; the only person we really communicate with all
the time is ourself" (Ibid.).

While few would accept such a black picture of society, the social
and psychological forces at work to hinder, limit, distort, or block
learning must be understood and taken seriously. The capacity of an

individual or a society to forget, what I.F. Stone, referring to
the way in which the facts about Vietnam were well known but constantly
forgotten, called, our "happy amnesia," is impressive (24).

I think that one of the basic uses of the sociology of knowledge
can be to assist in the struggle to see clearly and to distinguish
reality from illusion. It can do this, paradoxically, by calling in
question precisely that "reality" which we accept and take most for
granted as objective and obvious.

I have done no more than hint at one or two ways in which a sociology
of knowledge can contribute to adult education. In conclusion I would
like to come back to the issues and concerns of adult education cited
in the beginning of this paper. I think that it is evident that the
first concern, the expansion of the boundaries of adult education's self-
definition is addressed in highly pertinent fashion by a sociology of
education which itself has expanded its own self-definition to become a
sociology of knowledge. The issues of compulsory education, on the one
hand, and voluntarism, on the other, are likewise addressed in systematic
fashion in that sociology of knowledge deals point blank with the
relationship between knowledge and social control. As for the idea of
self-directed learning, it appears to me that it would be useful to
subject this category to an exmination from the point of view of
"internalization" as discussed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in
The Social Construction of Reality (25:129-183). As for the political
dimension stressed in relation to all four issues, those writing on
education from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge are stressing,
almost above all, the ways in which knowledge is power. Witness the titles
of Young's book, Knowledge and Control, and Karabel and Halsey's 1977
collection of readings, Power and Ideology in Education.

APPENDIX A

Young's collection is cited in an excellent article by Val Burris (21). See also Philip Wexler, *The Sociology of Education: Beyond Equality*, The Bobbs-Merrill Studies in Sociology. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976, p. 52.

For an attack on Young see Antony Flew, Sociology, *Equality and Education: Philosophical Essays in Defense of a Variety of Differences*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., Barnes & Noble Import Division, 1976, pp. 10ff.

NOTES

1. Allen Tough, The Adult's Learning Projects. Research on Education,
   Series No. 1. Ontario: The Ontario Institute for Studies in
   Education, 1971.

2. David Lisman and John Ohliger, "Must we all go back to School? The
   Pitfalls of Compulsory Adult Education," The Progressive,
   October 1978, 35-37.

3. Proceedings of a Conference, Voluntarism at the Crossroads: A Challenge
   for Adult Educators, ed. by John A. Niemi and Eve M. Stone.
   February, 1978, Hillside, Illinois. Published by Northern Illinois
   University, 1978.

4. Malcolm S. Knowles, Self-Directed Learning. New York: Association
   Press, 1975.

5. Malcolm S. Knowles, The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy
   Versus Pedagogy. New York: Association Press, 1970.

6. Psychology Today, December 1970.

7. Frank Adams, with Myles Horton, Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea
   of Highlander. Winston Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, Publisher,
   1975.

8. Budd L. Hall, Adult Education and the Development of Socialism in
   Tanzania. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1975.

9. Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Herder and Herder,
   1970.

10. Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

11. Convergence, XI, 1 (1978).

12. Budd L. Hall, "Continuity in Adult Education and Political Struggle,"
    Convergence, XI,1 (1978), 8-15.

13. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., Anchor Books Edition, 1967.

14. Michael F.D.Young, ed., Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education. London: Collier-Macmillan, 1971.

15. Madan Sarup, Marxism and Education. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

16. Richard D. Heyman, "The Sociology of Knowledge/The Sociology of Education: A Review Essay," The Journal of Educational Thought, 10/2 (1976), 142-154.

17. Jerome Karabel and A.H.Halsey, "The New Sociology of Education," Theory and Society, 3/4 (1976), 529-552. This article is from the Introduction to Power and Ideology in Education, ed. by H. Karabel and A.H.Halsey, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

18. Peter F. Drucker, The Effective Executive. New York: Harper & Row, Publisher, 1966.

19. Ioan Davies, "The Management of Knowledge: A Critique of the Use of Typologies in Educational Sociology," in Earl Hopper, ed., Readings in the Sociology of Educational Systems, London, 1971.

20. Tom Schuller and Jarl Bengtsson, "A Strategy for Equity: Recurrent Education and Industrial Democracy," Jerome Karabel and A.H.Halsey, Power and Ideology in Education, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 635-647.

21. Val Burris, "Advertising and Cultural Reproduction," Harvard Educational Review, 48/3 (1978), 400-407.

22. David Bakan, Slaughter of the Innocents. San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 1971.

23. Wellwarth, The Modern Theatre of Protest and Paradox.

24. I.F.Stone, New York Review of Books, March 9, 1972.

25. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., Anchor Books edition, 1967.