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Thompson, Ron

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Understanding class-based inequalities in education: rational action theories of educational decision making (0140)

Ron Thompson

University of Huddersfield, UK

Abstract

This paper discusses the rational action perspective on social class differences in educational opportunity. In this context, rational action theories derive from the distinction between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification made by Raymond Boudon, seeking to understand educational inequality through the decisions made by individuals based on their perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with different educational routes. The paper aims to evaluate the ability of these theories to account for observed patterns of stability and change in educational inequalities, particularly in higher education, and to highlight some of the reasons why the rational action approach has received relatively little attention within the sociology of education. Methodologically, the paper presents a conceptual analysis based on critical appraisal of key theoretical literature and an evaluation of a range of empirical studies which aim to test rational action models of educational decision making.

Outline

This paper discusses rational action theories of social class differences in educational attainment, a perspective designed to answer questions about the persistence of educational inequality. How are these inequalities created, and why should they remain significant in spite of social and technological progress? Why do countries differ in levels of inequality and change over time? To answer such questions, rational action theories seek micro-level explanations based on the decisions made by individuals and their subjective evaluations of the costs and benefits associated with different educational routes. The paper aims to evaluate how effectively these theories account for observed patterns of stability and change, particularly in higher education, and to highlight some of the reasons why rational action has received relatively little attention within the sociology of education. Methodologically, the paper presents a conceptual analysis based on critical appraisal of key theoretical literature and an evaluation of a range of empirical studies which aim to test rational action models of educational decision making.

Rational action theories of educational inequality derive from the distinction between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification made by Raymond Boudon (1974). In

his formulation, *primary effects* are class differences in academic performance generated by ‘cultural inequalities’ – Boudon’s term for the explanatory framework developed by his contemporary Pierre Bourdieu; *secondary effects* are the impact of social class on educational attainment, after taking into account differences in performance. In Boudon’s development of this distinction, secondary effects are envisaged as largely driven by class differences in educational decisions made by students with similar attainment. A number of studies have suggested that secondary effects are a significant factor driving inequality, particularly in higher education (Erikson & Jonsson 1996a, Erikson et al. 2005, Jackson 2013).

Although impressive, Boudon’s model was less influential than might be thought, partly due to an entirely unsympathetic review of his work (Hauser 1976) but also to a lack of reliable data. Although the distinction between primary and secondary effects received serious attention from some researchers, for example Halsey, Heath & Ridge (1980), it was not until the mid-1990s that key empirical evidence (Shavit & Blossfeld 1993; Eriksson & Jonsson 1996b) prompted a re-examination of Boudon’s approach to educational inequality. In a seminal paper, Goldthorpe (1996) asked what *kind* of explanation could account simultaneously for the stability over time of class-based educational inequality in a range of countries, and the marked decline over time of gender inequalities. His proposal, formalised by Breen & Goldthorpe (1997), was to use a form of rational action theory very similar to Boudon’s.

In the Breen-Goldthorpe model of educational decision making, individuals choose between various options. Three factors are taken to be significant: the cost of the educational route, including opportunity costs such as lost income; the (subjective) likelihood of success; and the (subjective) benefits attaching to the various outcomes of the decision. As with Boudon, the principle that families from all social classes wish to avoid downward mobility for their children is a key element. Middle-class children settling for modest educational qualifications run a higher risk of downward mobility than working-class children gaining the same qualifications, hence the term *relative risk aversion* used to describe this principle. Furthermore, class differences in the subjective probability of success are assumed to exist, and differences in economic resources are assumed to place a cost burden – even when confined to foregone earnings – which weighs relatively more heavily on working-class families.

Constructing a mathematical model from these assumptions, Breen & Goldthorpe (1997) show that as participation expands, educational inequality remains roughly constant, as observed for most countries by Shavit & Blossfeld (1993). Although working-class participation increases, middle-class students also continue to take advantage of increased opportunities, until a so-called ‘saturation’ level of participation is reached – the phenomenon of *maximally maintained inequality* observed by Raftery & Hout (1993). Between-country variations are explained through variations in the class distribution of resources and the balance between costs and benefits. Decreasing gender differentials are explained according to changing gender patterns in the returns to education – an explanation partly, but not wholly, supported by recent empirical evidence (Breen et al. 2010).

In spite of its explanatory potential, the status of the Breen-Goldthorpe model is still uncertain. Nevertheless, several key elements are supported by a range of studies (Holm & Jaeger 2005, Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede 2007, Stocké 2007, Hansen 2008, Gabay-Egozi et al. 2010, Jaeger & Holm 2012). These include the principle of relative risk aversion, although some class variation in the desire to avoid downward mobility exists. It appears that the Breen-Goldthorpe model, and by implication other forms of rational action theory, can explain at least part of Boudon’s secondary effects. However, as the careful analysis by Stocké (2007) shows, secondary effects are not entirely accounted for. This may support the suggestion of Glaesser & Cooper (2014), that rational action and Bourdieusian theory can be fruitfully combined.

The explanations of educational inequality which have been most influential in the sociology of education, notably Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction, find it difficult to escape accusations of determinism, or essentialising working-class deficiency, or both. Rational action theories, which give agency a central place and emphasise that class differences in behaviour arise from the socially situated nature of the decisions behind them, offer significant advantages. However, rational action theories in general suffer from the serious problem of theoretical ambiguity: where they rely on macro-level behaviour for verification, it is impossible to exclude other explanations, and even when the individual motivations underlying behaviour are made empirically accessible, it can still be difficult to differentiate rational action explanations from other theories. Furthermore, rational action theories have been criticised for ignoring the richness and variety of educational careers, and the complexity of the motivations underlying them (Hatcher 1998; Nash 2005). Although largely distinct to date, it

is perhaps time for a dialogue between the concepts underlying rational action theory and those traditions, particularly stemming from a Bourdieusian perspective, which are currently more familiar to researchers in the field of education.

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