

The Effects of Education as an Institution¹

John W. Meyer
Stanford University

Education is usually seen as affecting society by socializing individuals. Recently this view has been attacked with the argument that education is a system of allocation, conferring success on some and failure on others. The polemic has obscured some of the interesting implications of allocation theory for socialization theory and for research on the effects of education. But allocation theory, too, focuses on educational effects on individuals being processed. It turns out to be a special case of a more general macrosociological theory of the effects of education as a system of legitimation. Education restructures whole populations, creating and expanding elites and redefining the rights and obligations of members. The institutional effects of education as a legitimation system are explored. Comparative and experimental studies are suggested.

How does education affect society? The dominant view has it that the schools process individuals. They are organized networks of socializing experiences which prepare individuals to act in society. More direct macrosociological effects have been given little attention. Yet in modern societies education is a highly developed institution. It has a network of rules creating public classifications of persons and knowledge. It defines which individuals belong to these categories and possess the appropriate knowledge. And it defines which persons have access to valued positions in society. Education is a central element in the public biography of individuals, greatly affecting their life chances. It is also a central element in the table of organization of society, constructing competencies and helping create professions and professionals. Such an institution clearly has an impact on society over and above the immediate socializing experiences it offers the young.

Recently, the traditional socialization view has been attacked with an argument which incorporates a more institutional conception of education, though in a very limited way. Education is seen as an allocating institution—operating under societal rules which allow the schools to directly

¹ This paper was prepared with funds from the National Institute of Education (contract NIE-C-74-0123 to Vasquez Associates, Ltd.). The views expressed here are those of the author, not of the NIE. Some ideas developed here are presented in more limited form in Meyer (1973) and Meyer and Rubinson (1975). I am indebted to the advice and help of many colleagues, among them William Bowers, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Michael Hannan, David Kamens, Patrick McDonnell, Francisco Ramirez, and Richard Rubinson.

confer success and failure in society quite apart from any socializing effects (e.g., Collins 1971; Bowles and Gintis 1976). Allocation theory leaves open the possibility that expanded educational systems have few net effects on society. The polemic controversy has obscured the fact that allocation theory (and institutional theory in general) has many unexplored implications for socialization theory and research; those implications are considered here. For instance, allocation theory suggests effects of expanded educational institutions both on those who attend and those who do not attend schools. It also can explain why completing a given level of schooling often matters much more in determining educational outcomes than do the features of the particular school attended.

But conventional allocation theory, while considering the institutional properties of educational systems, focuses mainly on the outcomes for individuals being processed. It tends to be assumed that education has no effect on the distribution of political, economic, and social positions in society. Allocation theory is thus a limited special case of a more general institutional theory—legitimation theory—which treats education as both constructing or altering roles in society and authoritatively allocating personnel to these roles. Modern educational systems involve large-scale public classification systems, defining new roles and statuses for both elites and members. These classifications are new constructions in that the newly defined persons are expected (and entitled) to behave, and to be treated by others, in new ways. Not only new types of persons but also new competencies are authoritatively created. Such legitimating effects of education transcend the effects education may have on individuals being processed by the schools. The former effects transform the behavior of people in society quite independent of their own educational experience.

In this paper, I develop the ideas of legitimation theory and propose comparative and experimental studies which could examine the effects of education on social structure, not simply on the individuals it processes. I move away from the contemporary view of educational organization as a production system constructing elaborated individuals. Modern education is seen instead as a system of institutionalized rites transforming social roles through powerful initiation ceremonies and as an agent transforming society by creating new classes of personnel with new types of authoritative knowledge.

THE TRADITIONAL SOCIALIZATION MODEL

Prevailing research on school effects is organized around a simple image of socialization in society: Schools provide experiences which instill knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in their students. These students then have a revised and expanded set of personal qualities enabling them to

Education as an Institution

demand more from, and achieve more in, the role structure of modern society. As the competence and orientation of the personnel of society are expanded and modernized, so society as a larger system is modernized and expanded.

Three general propositions are at issue here and make up a simple model, which is diagramed in figure 1:

Proposition 1 (*Socialization*). Schooled persons are socialized to expanded levels of knowledge and competence and expanded levels of modern values or orientations.

Proposition 2 (*Socialization and Adult Competence*). Early socialization to higher levels of knowledge, competence, and modern values or orientations creates higher levels of adult status and competence.

Proposition 3 (*Individual Competence and Social Progress*). The expansion of the number of skilled adults expands the complexity and wealth of society and social institutions.

Research on proposition 1 is rather clear-cut. Children and youth in schools learn a good deal more, and acquire more expanded social capacities than those not in school, even when background factors are controlled (see, e.g., Holsinger 1974; Plant 1965). The main problem in the research on this subject is the finding that the particular school students attend often seems to make little difference (see Jencks et al. [1972]; or the studies reviewed in Feldman and Newcomb [1969]). I return to this issue below; the point here is that something about participation in schools creates notable effects on all sorts of socialization—from knowledge to social values to status expectations.

Little direct empirical research has been done on proposition 3—the idea that changed people produce a changed social structure—though this kind of “demographic” explanation (Stinchcombe 1968) has been a main theme of sociological theories of social change. In recent decades some doubts have arisen, with a conservative fear that “overeducated” people create more social instability and breakdown than they do social development. There is no evidence of this, but the issue remains.

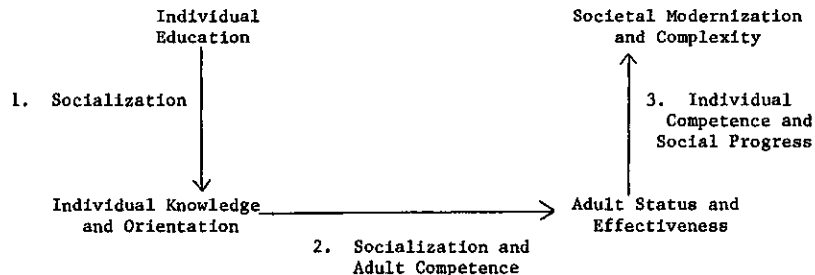


FIG. 1.—Traditional socialization theory

Proposition 2 has been one source of doubt about the whole model. Traditional socialization theory in sociology (and child development research) becomes an adequate account of social structure only if (a) socialized qualities remain with the person with some stability over long periods of time, and (b) such qualities predict adult effectiveness in roles. But current research on personal qualities often suggests low autocorrelations over time (see the review by Mischel [1971]). Many empirical studies suggest that the personal qualities schooling creates do not effectively determine occupational success, once occupational entry has been obtained (see the polemic review by Berg [1971]). Even if socialized qualities have fair stability and offer fair predictive power, it is unlikely that the product of these effects (which amounts to a very low overall effect) explains the high correlation of education with adult status.

Thus, socialization theory, as an account of educational effects on society, has one area of success and two of failure. On the positive side, schooling does predict, with other variables held constant, many of the outcomes of socialization. On the negative side, many of the measurable socialization outcomes of schooling have little long-run staying power or predictive power.² Also on the negative side, variations among schools in their socialization programs show small effects on outcomes—if schools socialize through the immediate experiences they provide, schools providing different experiences should produce very different effects. The research literature provides little encouragement on this subject.³

INSTITUTIONAL THEORIES: ALLOCATION THEORY AS A LIMITED CASE

Traditional socialization theory defines education as an organized set of socializing experiences. It treats as peripheral the fact that modern educational systems are society-wide and state-controlled institutions. In discussions of socialization theory this property of educational settings barely appears (e.g., Wheeler 1966).

Partly in reaction to this limitation, but more in reaction to the empirical weakness of socialization theory and in polemic reaction to the earlier optimism about the socially progressive effects of education, allocation theories have been developed. It is argued that people in modern

² Socialization researchers, of course, continue to pursue the grail, looking for new properties of individual socialization that are stable and that do effectively predict long-run success. The search has been going on for a long time.

³ A number of ideas have been suggested in defense of traditional theory: (1) we have not yet found or measured the relevant aspects of school structure; (2) schools tend to be random collections of teachers and thus to appear alike even though teaching is of great importance; (3) on the relevant properties—normative commitment and organization, or simply the time devoted to various topics—most schools in a country are very similar and thus have similar effects. I pursue a related, but more general, line below.

Education as an Institution

societies are allocated to adult roles on the basis of years and types of education, apart from anything they have learned in schools. Education is thus more a selector, sorter, and allocator than it is a socializer.

Education, in allocation theories, is a set of institutional rules which legitimately classify and authoritatively allocate individuals to positions in society. Allocation theories are limited in that they define only a few consequences of this system and consider effects mainly on the individuals being allocated, but they open up a broader range of institutional theories which are discussed below.

The power of the allocation idea arises from its obvious empirical validity. We all know that status positions in modern societies are assigned on the basis of education. Sometimes, as with civil service and professional positions (e.g., medicine, law, teaching), this is a matter of law. To teach in a high school one must have an educational credential. Whether one knows anything or not is less relevant. Often, rules about credentials are simply part of established organizational practice, as in the assignment of college and business-school graduates to managerial positions and of others to working-class jobs. Sometimes the whole process is informal, as in the inclination of juries and informal friendship groups to attend to the advice of their more educated members.

In any event, the relationship between education and social position—over and above socialization or learning—is quite direct. The line of research pursued by Blau and Duncan (1967) and Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan (1972) shows large direct effects of education on status attainment, sometimes with ability measures held constant. Education plays a direct causal role in occupational transition even late in the individual's career (Blau and Duncan 1967, chap. 5)—decades after any direct socialization effects must have decayed or become outmoded.

The basic idea is clear:

Proposition 4 (*Educational Allocation*). In modern societies, adult success is assigned to persons on the basis of duration and type of education, holding constant what they may have learned in school.

Educational allocation rules, that is, give to the schools social *charters* to define people as graduates and as therefore possessing distinctive rights and capacities in society (Meyer 1970a; see also Clark 1970). Thus the schools have power as an institutional system, not simply as a set of organizations processing individuals.

Impact of Allocation Rules on Socialization

The polemic contrast between socialization and allocation ideas—education as a socializing process versus education as a status competition—has concealed the fact that the two are not really inconsistent. Further,

allocation theory offers interesting and useful extensions of traditional socialization ideas.

Assume that educational allocation rules in fact hold in society. Students and members of their social networks (e.g., parents, peers, teachers, and counselors) are informed members of society—not simply passive objects of educational production—and know these rules with some accuracy. Graduates, of course, experience the rules through the distinctive experiences and treatments they receive in society. Now if we assume a most elementary idea of social psychology, that people adapt and are adapted by others to their actual and expected experiences, two major propositions follow:

Proposition 5 (*Chartering*). Students tend to adopt personal and social qualities appropriate to the positions to which their schools are chartered to assign them.

Proposition 6 (*Lagged Socialization*). Adults tend to adopt qualities appropriate to the roles and expectations to which their educational statuses have assigned them.

These propositions argue that education functions for individuals as a set of initiation ceremonies of great and society-wide significance (Ramirez 1975; Garfinkel 1956). These ceremonies transform the futures and pasts of individuals, greatly enhancing their value in all sorts of social situations. On the basis of their education, individuals are expected to treat themselves, and others are expected to treat them, as having expanded rights and competencies. Given allocation rules, educational labels are of the greatest significance for the social identity of individuals.

Proposition 1 and proposition 5 parallel each other and in many instances overlap in accounting for the same findings. It is often unclear to what extent given socialization effects are generated by the immediate socializing situation in a given school and to what extent they are produced by the institutional authority in which the school is embedded.

However, proposition 5, in contrast to proposition 1, offers a direct explanation of the most puzzling general research paradox in the sociology of American education. The level of schooling achieved has substantial effects on all sorts of personal qualities. But outcome variations among schools—even though these schools differ greatly in structure and resources—are very small. This finding shows up in studies of college effects (Feldman and Newcomb 1969), high school effects, and effects at the elementary school level. If schools have their socializing effects as ritually chartered organizations (Meyer 1970a; Kamens 1971, 1974) rather than as organized collections of immediate socializing experiences, then all schools of similar ritual status can be expected to have similar effects. Since for many personnel assignment purposes all American high schools (or colleges) have similar status rights, variations in their effects should be small.

But because all high schools are chartered to create "high school graduates"—a critical status in our society for college and occupational entry—all of them tend to produce marked effects on students. Proposition 5, in other words, argues that the most powerful socializing property of a school is its external institutional authority, derived from the rules of educational allocation, rather than its network of internal socializing experiences. Educators, who attend with great vigor to the accreditation of their schools, seem more aware of this process than do socialization researchers.

Thus, the educational contexts which vary substantially in the change and learning they produce in students do not usually include specific schools. They include contexts which are distinctively chartered:

1. Schooling per se. Life prospects (and hence changes in students) are vitally affected by being in an institution chartered as a school.

2. Type of school, when the types are differently chartered. Himmelweit and Swift (1969) and Kerckhoff (1975) show marked differences in outcomes for similar British students between grammar and secondary modern schools. American researchers have not looked for differences in expectations between initially similar students in general and vocational high schools. Some studies show distinct occupational effects of teachers, colleges, and engineering schools (Astin and Panos 1969).

3. Curriculum, when it is distinctively chartered. For instance, being in a college preparatory curriculum (in contrast to a vocational one) makes a considerable difference in the aspirations and expectations of American high school students (Alexander and Eckland 1975; see also Rosenbaum 1975).⁴

Proposition 6—the idea that education socializes adults by allocating them to expanded roles and role expectations—explains a second major paradoxical finding in the current sociology of education. The direct long-run effects of schools on graduates are thought to be rather moderate. But surveys of adults with regard to almost any dependent variable—attitudes, values, information, or participation—almost uniformly show that education plays a dominant role. For instance, Almond and Verba (1963) show with data on five countries that education is closely associated with political information, attitudes, and participation. Inkeles and Smith (1974) show the same result with data on six countries and are surprised to discover that the impact of education is much greater than that of work experience. Kohn's research (1969, and subsequently) shows exactly the same result, and again the author is surprised. But these findings make eminent sense. Educational allocation rules create a situation in which schooling is a fixed capital asset in the career of the indi-

⁴ Intervening variables in all these effects would include the expectations of the students and those of their parents, teachers, counselors, and peers.

vidual, more durable than work or income, more stable than family life and relations, and less subject to market fluctuations than "real" property. Is it surprising that the attitudes and orientations of educated individuals continue to reflect such enhanced life prospects over long periods of time? They perceive these prospects and are surrounded by others who see them too.

Proposition 6 suggests that in explaining such long-run effects of education we do not need to look back to the details of the experience of socialization. Correlations between education and personal qualities can be maintained and increased by a structure or subsequent allocation which provides distinctive life experiences and anticipations for the educated. For instance, education can affect a person's sense of political efficacy by making him politically influential as well as by socializing him to a civic culture.

Further Implications of Allocation Theory

If taken seriously, and not simply used as a cynical critique of education, allocation theory would completely reorganize current research styles in the sociology of education. Allocation rules, unlike simple socialization effects, reign over both the students and the nonstudents, the educated and the uneducated, the graduates and those who never attended.

Research implication 1: effects on nonstudents.—Let us examine the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. The creation of social rules allocating status and competence to graduates leads to the socialization of students for expanded social roles.

Hypothesis 2. But such rules *lower* the prospects of nonstudents, and in a sense desocialize them.

The more binding the allocation rules, the earlier and more convincingly are nonstudents committed to passive roles in society. This means that the society relying on credentials could well lower (below the previous floor) the modern competence of people of low education. Comparative contextual research is required to test this idea, since the independent variable is a property of the social system.

This argument has it that in a modern society education allocates its dropouts to failure. They (and their parents and friends) anticipate and adapt to this.

Hypothesis 3. Similarly, *subsequent* to the period of schooling, nongraduates are socialized through life experiences to the meaning of their failure just as graduates are socialized to the meaning of their success. The lagged differentials created by education should be greater the more firmly the principle of educational allocation is established.

Hypothesis 4. Those admitted to chartered educational organizations find

their prospects enhanced even before attendance, while those rejected find their prospects lowered. They adapt their personal qualities in anticipation, even prior to attendance. These differentials should be greater the stronger the allocative position of the school.

For example, Benitez (1973) finds that students admitted to a national elite high school in the Philippines seem to gain in self-esteem and "competence" even before their socialization begins. Wallace's (1966) data suggest a similar interpretation.

Comparative research on effects such as these should help distinguish allocation theory from traditional socialization ideas.

Research implication 2: aggregate effects.—A major implication of allocation theory is that inferences to the aggregate effects of education made from individual data on the basis of traditional socialization ideas are almost completely illegitimate. Researchers in the economics of education conventionally infer aggregate economic effects of education from income differentials between the educated and the less educated (see, e.g., the papers in Blaug 1968, 1969). It is assumed that these income differentials reflect real added value—the socialization gains of the educated. But if education is simply an allocation system, the gains of the educated may simply occur with equivalent losses for the uneducated. The expansion of education and educational allocation may have no effect on the aggregate product at all (Collins 1971).

Similarly, researchers on the political effects of education often infer that, because the educated occupy politically central positions, education must have helped create these positions (see the papers in Coleman 1965). But if education is simply a system of allocation, huge positional and attitudinal differences between the educated and the uneducated may exist with no aggregate effect at all. Igra (1976), in fact, shows (using Inkeles's data) that increases in the aggregate development of societies *lower* the political participation of individuals of given education (though the political information of individuals is found to be enhanced). Such "frog-pond effects" at lower levels of analysis are discussed by Davis (1966), Meyer (1970*b*), and Alexander and Eckland (1975).

The main arguments of allocation theory are added to those of socialization theory in figure 2. Allocation ideas are discussed with some frequency in the current literature, though their implications for research remain little explored.

The Limitations of Allocation Theory

Allocation theories, by conceiving of education as an institution, add a good deal to traditional socialization theory. But they do so in a very narrow way.

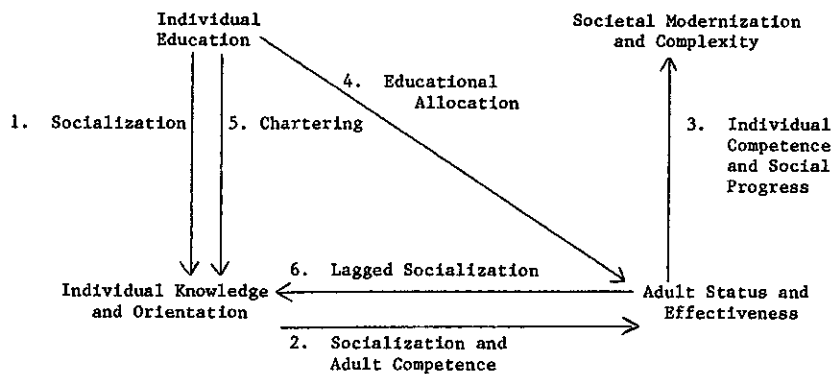


FIG. 2.—Allocation theory and its implications for socialization theory. (Pure allocation theory suggests that 3 is irrelevant. If a given set of adult competencies are simply allocated by education, no net societal gain in number of competent individuals need occur.)

Education is seen in these theories as possessing its power because it is built into the rules and understandings which guide all sorts of personnel allocation processes in society. But its impact is considered only for those individuals being processed by the system—the students and nonstudents who are being sorted. And even this impact is defined in a limited way: these people are understood to respond only to their own role prospects as they are affected by education. Does the fact that all the other individuals around him are being magically transformed by powerful initiation ceremonies have no effect on a given student? And has it no effect on other members of society?

The problem here is that allocation theories ordinarily see education as allocating individuals to a fixed set of positions in society: a distribution of positions determined by other economic and political forces. Bowles and Gintis (1976) propose slight additional effects—education is thought to socialize people to accept as legitimate the limited roles to which they are allocated. Spence (1973) and Thurow (1975) see some marginal gains to society through more efficient selection by education. But the main development of allocation theory defines the *structure* of society as little affected by education.

Allocation theory, then, can be seen as a special case of a more general argument according to which education constructs and alters the network of positions in society in addition to allocating individuals to these positions. We simply need to abandon the assumption that the positions to which education allocates people cannot be built, expanded, and altered by education itself.

It is becoming more common to speak of education as legitimating the structure of modern society (Bowles and Gintis 1976), or of modern so-

cieties as in some essential way "schooled" (Illich 1971). If we want to understand the societal impact of education, not just its effects on the careers of individuals, we need to understand what this means.

THE GENERAL CASE: LEGITIMATION THEORY

Allocation theory is a special case of institutional theories of educational effects: it considers the effects of education as an institution (*a*) only on the individuals being processed and (*b*) with the structure of society held constant. We now turn to the general case: theories of the institutional impact of education on social structure itself—on the behavior of people throughout society.

Modern extended and institutionalized systems of education build into society certain rules which actors take for granted, know others take for granted, and incorporate in their decisions and actions.⁵ For instance, institutionalized educational systems create a situation in which social gatekeepers (e.g., personnel officers)—even if they read and believe Ivar Berg's book—nevertheless know that they must hire people on the basis of educational credentials.

Two closely related aspects of modern educational systems are relevant here as independent variables: (1) they are extended as systems of classification, categorizing entire adult populations by level and specialty; and (2) they are institutionalized, with their classifications often controlled by the state and enforced in daily life by rules about credentials written into law and applied in organizational practice. Almost everywhere, education is made compulsory and universal by national law, often in the national constitution (Boli-Bennett 1976). In most countries its structure is closely regulated by the nation-state (Ramirez 1973; Rubinson 1973).

Why does this occur? Whatever the economic origins of the process, the fact that it is usually accomplished and regulated by the state—unlike many aspects of economic development, which are left to individuals and subunits—suggests that its immediate origins lie in the political system: society as corporate organization (Swanson 1971) rather than as a system of exchange. *Formalized educational systems are, in fact, theories of socialization institutionalized as rules at the collective level.* The three core propositions used above to summarize traditional socialization theory become the structural basis of the educational system. Proposition 1—the idea that the schools teach critical skills and values—becomes institutionalized as the basic educational classification system: Education pro-

⁵ Actors may also internalize these rules as personal commitments, but this is less important—the critical aspect is that they internalize them as social facts and social realities (institutions which rely on personal beliefs, or even permit the question of personal beliefs to be relevant in social action, are less highly legitimated in important senses than are those which operate as realities).

ceeds in a sequence (irreversible by ascriptive definition) from kindergarten through postdoctoral study and covers a defined series of valued substantive topics. The student is a "high school graduate" and has had compulsory units of history and English and mathematics. It is an institutionalized doctrine, since for many purposes one must treat the student as having acquired this knowledge by virtue of the units or credits completed, not by direct inspection. Proposition 2—the idea that schooled qualities are carried into adult effectiveness—is institutionalized in the basic rules for employing credentialed persons which dominate personnel allocation in modern society. If one hires an executive, a civil servant, or a teacher one must inspect educational credentials—it is optional whether one inspects the person's competence. A teacher or a doctor who graduated from school in 1930 is still frequently treated as a socially and legally valid teacher or doctor. Proposition 3—the idea that educational allocation creates social progress—is institutionally embedded in our doctrines of progress: it consists of modernity, professionalization, and rationalization. The possession of the best certified and educated people is a main index of the advanced status of a hospital, a school, often a business organization, and indeed a society itself.

Educational systems themselves are thus, in a sense, ideologies. They rationalize in modern terms and remove from sacred and primordial explanations the nature and organization of personnel and knowledge in modern society. They are, presumably, the effects of the reorganization of modern society around secular individualism which is a main theme of Marx and Weber. Our problem here, however, is to discuss their effects.⁶

Legitimizing Effects of Expanded and Institutionalized Education

Legitimizing effects of education can be discussed in four general categories created by the intersection of two dichotomies. First, education functions in society as a legitimating *theory of knowledge* defining certain types of knowledge as extant and as authoritative. It also functions as a *theory of personnel*, defining categories of persons who are to be treated as possessing these bodies of knowledge and forms of authority.

Second, education validates both *elites* and *citizens*. Discussions of the legitimating function of education often emphasize only its role in supporting elites and inequality (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carnoy 1972). But the overwhelmingly dominant kind of education in the modern world

⁶ The discussion which follows deals exclusively with the *effects* of institutionalized education on other aspects of society. Obviously, important causal effects also run the other way (see Meyer and Rubinson [1975] for a review). Empirically disentangling the reciprocal effects requires data on societies over time.

Education as an Institution

| | Elite Education | Mass Education |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Education as Theory of Knowledge | 1. The Authority of Specialized Com- petence | 3. The Universality of Collective Reality |
| Education as Theory of Personnel | 2. Elite Definition and Certification | 4. The Extension of Membership: Nation-building and Citizenship |

FIG. 3.—Types of legitimating effects of education

is mass education (Coombs 1968), closely tied to the modern state and notion of universal citizenship (Marshall 1948; Bendix 1964; Habermas 1962).

These two distinctions define four types of legitimating effects of education, as specified in figure 3. I discuss them in turn.

1. *The Authority of Specialized Competence.* Education does not simply allocate people to a fixed set of positions in society. It expands the authoritative culture and the set of specialized social positions entailed by this culture. Thus the creation of academic economics means that new types of knowledge must be taken into account by responsible actors. The creation of psychiatry means that former mysteries must now be dealt with in the social organization. The creation of academic programs in business management brings arenas of decision making from personal judgment, or luck, to the jurisdiction of rationalized knowledge. Social problems call for human-relations professionals (occasionally even sociologists). Safety or environmental problems call for industrial or environmental engineering.

The point here is that, quite apart from the immediate efficacy of these bodies of knowledge, they are authoritative and must be taken into account by actors at the risk of being judged negligent or irrational. The business manager who plans by the seat of his pants—unblessed by economic projections—has no excuse for ignoring the best advice. The political leader who sees social problems as beyond analysis or cure is reactionary and primeval. The emotionally disturbed person who rejects psychiatry is displaying irrationality.

Thus the knowledge categories of the educational system enter authoritatively into daily life. Mysteries are rationalized, brought under symbolic control, and incorporated into the social system. Society and its subunits are buffered from uncertainty (Thompson 1967):

Proposition 7. The expansion (and institutionalization) of education expands the number of functions that are brought under social control and that responsible actors must take into account.⁷

2. *Elite Definition and Certification.* Education as an institution creates and defines particular categories of elite personnel. This has two aspects. (a) Education consists of allocation rules and initiation ceremonies designating which persons possess the authority and competence for various elite roles. This is the core idea of allocation theory. (b) But institutionalized education also defines the nature and authority of the elite roles themselves—helping to create the categories of personnel as well as to designate the particular occupants of these categories. In this way, expanded modern educational systems function as a personnel theory in society, justifying in modern cultural terms the expansion and specialization of modern elites.

Education, that is, not only creates “economic knowledge” which must be taken into account by rational actors. It is also a structure helping to create the role of economist, to justify economists’ authority claims in society, and to define precisely who is an economist. Education thus creates, not only psychiatry, but psychiatrists; not only modern management ideology, but M.B.A.’s. The rational actor must take into account medical knowledge, and to do so he must consult a doctor. Thus, the modern organizational structure of society incorporates legitimated bodies of knowledge by incorporating the designated personnel.⁸

We take too narrow a view if we see this process as involving only a few specialized occupations. The most important rules concerning credentials are more general: the set of rules which connect the educational status of *college graduate* (and *high school graduate*) with all sorts of formal and informal elite positions. These rules define a generalized body of elite knowledge and specify its legitimate carriers.

It now becomes clear why views of educational allocation as “zero-sum”—allocating a fixed set of social statuses—are wrong. Education helps *create* new classes of knowledge and personnel which then come to be incorporated in society:

⁷ This assertion, incidentally, parallels an idea of Schumpeter (1950, chap. 12) about the way in which the intellectual optimism of modern capitalistic society generates its own institutionalization and destruction. The intellectuals rationalize more and more social functions, which are then brought under collective social and political control and removed from the market.

⁸ Imagine, for example, the consequences that would flow from the rise of routinely accredited university programs and degrees in astrology. Organizations would incorporate astrologers, the state would fund their programs and consult or incorporate them. Of course a justificatory literature would grow. The same basic processes have gone on with many occupational groups.

Proposition 8. The expansion (and institutionalization) of education expands the number of specialized and elite positions in society. It defines and justifies their occupancy by particular people.⁹

The point here is that institutionalized education does more than simply allocate some to success and others to failure. The educated learn to claim specialized functions and to legitimate the specialized functions of others. The less educated learn that they are part of a social world of rights and duties elaborated far beyond the traditional community. This is one of the core meanings of the modern social status *citizen*.

3. *The Universality of Collective Reality*. Mass education creates a whole series of social assumptions about the common culture of society and thus expands the social meaning of citizenship, personhood, and individuality (modern ideas, all). It establishes a whole series of common elements for everyone.¹⁰ (a) It creates the assumption of a national language or languages and defines universal literacy. (b) It reifies a given national history. (c) It constructs a common civic order—common heroes and villains, a common constitutional and political order with some shared cultural symbols and with legitimate national participation. (d) It validates the existence of a common natural reality through science and a common logical structure through mathematics and in this way constructs a myth of a common culture intimately linked to world society. (e) It constructs broad definitions of citizen and human rights as part of the modern world view.

Regardless of what people actually learn in school about their language and culture, nationally institutionalized mass education creates the assumptions of a national culture. For many purposes, both elite and citizen actors must take them into account:

Proposition 9. The expansion (and institutionalization) of education expands the content and jurisdiction of the elements taken for granted as part of collective reality.

4. *The Extension of Membership: Nation-Building and Citizenship*.

⁹ This proposition is impossible in conceptions of social status as simply a rank position and thus as fixed in sum. But there is no reason to assume that the total amount of status (or for that matter power) in society is fixed. Independent of their ranks, statuses (and whole status distributions) may vary in the expansion of their substantive rights and powers. I have argued above that education expands the status rights attached to many positions in society, without necessarily altering the rank structure. This conception of status reflects Weber's original formulation.

¹⁰ I provide here a conventional list of the putative effects of mass education. But my argument is that, actual effects aside, they enter into social life as taken for granted assumptions. Many Americans are not literate in the national language. But we treat each other, expect elites to treat us, and organize our public life as if we all were. According to proposition 5, the existence of these effects as social assumptions greatly increases the likelihood that the schools actually produce them.

Beyond defining and extending national culture, mass education defines almost the entire population as possessing this culture, as imbued with its meanings, and as having the rights implied by it. Mass education defines and builds the nation (Marshall 1948; Bendix 1964). It allocates persons to citizenship—establishing their membership in the nation over and above various subgroups. And it directly expands the definition of what citizenship and the nation mean and what obligations and rights are involved. Mass education helps create a public: as education expands, ideas about public opinion as a vital force in society rise (Habermas 1962; Bergesen 1977). Individuals come to be defined as possessing the competencies and the moral orientations to participate in an expanded collective life:

Proposition 10. Mass education expands the number of persons seen as possessing human and citizenship responsibilities, capacities, and rights. It also expands the prevailing definitions of these roles and their associated qualities.

In expanding both the meaning of citizenship and the set of persons who are seen as citizens, education plays a dual role. Certainly it opens up new possibilities for citizens—in particular, new claims for equality which can be made on society. It also, however, redefines individuals as responsible subordinate members (and agents) of the state organization, and opens them to new avenues of control and manipulation.

Research Designs in Legitimation Theory

Legitimation ideas propose societal effects of education. They can be studied in several ways.

1. Most directly, data comparing societies over time can be examined. For instance, is it true, in comparing societies, that those with expanded mass education tend to create sooner and more completely the welfare, policing, and participatory apparatuses of citizenship?

2. The same questions can be looked at with time-series data pertaining to a single society. For example, what has been the effect of the expansion of higher education in the United States, independent of other factors, on the number of types of professionals who have privileged status (as "expert witnesses") in the courts?

3. The same questions can be studied at the individual level as well. Legitimation theory argues for the effects of the extension and institutionalization of national educational systems on the judgments, perceived realities, and actions of *given* individuals—ordinary persons, rule makers, and critical social gatekeepers. Studies can therefore compare similar individuals in societies differing in educational structure. Do persons of given education, in more schooled societies, see personal and social problems as more likely to require educated expertise? Do they see, as I ar-

gued above, a larger number of social functions as requiring explicit (and undoubtedly educated) collective social management? Comparative survey research can help examine such questions.

4. It is also possible to approach these questions experimentally. Education, it is argued, restructures social reality for given individuals. To explore this, subjects can be confronted with hypothetical societies, similar in many respects but differing in the expansion and authority of education. Would subjects be more likely to propose to use economists and other social scientists to help with business or political planning if we describe for them a society in which elite education is highly developed and institutionalized? Subjects might even attribute authority to nonexistent professions if those are described as rooted in educational programs.

These research design approaches can all be used to deal with the following central empirical hypotheses of legitimation theory.

1. Basing a particular elite in the educational system helps create and expand its authority. One can study empirically the differential rise in societies of personnel workers, social scientists, physicians, or psychiatrists as these groups are affected by differential educational institutionalization. This can be done with comparative, survey, or experimental techniques.

2. More generally, expanded elite educational systems produce and support *more* and larger elites with jurisdiction over more social functions. We can test this hypothesis by seeing whether more problems requiring collective action are defined in societies with expanded elite education, and by seeing whether the management of such problems is more likely to be reserved to educated elites in such societies.

3. Mass education expands the national culture. Both elites and masses, in societies with more mass education, should be more likely to perceive widespread literacy, attention to public problems, information, and involvement. This should hold true even when the actual levels of these variables are held constant. Mass education is an institution, and like all institutions creates forms of pluralistic ignorance: it supports the widespread social assumption of an informed and attentive public. In expanding the national culture, mass education also creates and expands the assumption of homogeneity. In societies with more mass education, both masses and elites should be found to perceive more common interests and ideas in the population and less conflict and diversity. This should hold even when actual diversity is held constant.

4. Mass education, similarly, expands citizenship, both in size and content. Elites, in societies with more mass education, should be found to perceive masses as making more demands, having more rights, and posing more threats than in other societies. Elites planning new regimes in such societies should be found to employ more strategies of control through mobilization rather than through traditional authoritarianism. They should

American Journal of Sociology

also attend to the creation and manipulation of "public opinion." Mass education may be one of the elements supporting the modern "activist" version of the classic military coup and regime. Again, one can study such a process comparatively, with survey data, or experimentally (presenting subjects with hypothetical societies).

These research suggestions make clear the nature of legitimation effects: Modern educational systems formally reconstruct, reorganize, and expand the socially defined categories of personnel and of knowledge in society. They expand and rationalize the social realities that enter into the choices of the socialized and the unsocialized, the allocated and the unallocated. Education is, as has often been noted, a secular religion in modern societies: as religions do, it provides a legitimating account of the competence of citizens, the authority of elites, and the sources of the adequacy of the social system to maintain itself in the face of uncertainty.¹¹

The Impact of Educational Legitimation on Allocation and Socialization

The socializing impact of education as an institution is discussed above (propositions 5 and 6) in the review of the allocation theory version of the larger idea of legitimation. The intervening discussions make necessary two extensions in the arguments presented there:

1. It is now clear that rules of educational allocation are not simply arbitrary social constructions which happen to have power over people. These rules are part of the basic institutional ideology of modern society: they represent equity, progress, and technical sophistication. As part of a larger institutional system, that is, the rules of educational allocation are highly *legitimate*, not merely instances of the exercise of power. This legitimacy intensifies the operation of rules of educational allocation, and intensifies the effects of these rules on individuals being socialized and allocated:

Proposition 11. The more institutionalized the modern system of education, the more intensified the causal relationships of allocation and socialization.

¹¹ Modern education not only expands each society structurally; it also brings societies into closer organizational similarity with each other. Societies come to be made up of more and more similar elites—often in professional communication with each other—and masses with more and more shared social rights. This organizational homogeneity means that information—and exploitation—can proceed very rapidly. New ideas and techniques are not *alien*. They are the stock-in-trade of an already incorporated profession and can thus be adopted with less resistance. So, in the modern world, the presence of locally controlled, but organizationally similar, educational systems in almost all nation-states makes possible the rapid cultural penetration of techniques (and political revolution). And it makes possible new kinds of dependence (e.g., a "brain drain").

Educational allocation rules become more common, and their socializing consequences increase in intensity, under conditions of high educational institutionalization. The lagged socialization of the allocated (proposition 6) becomes, not simply an adaptation to their increased power, but an affirmation of their authority and an account of a legitimate moral biography. Similarly, the process by which students acquire chartered qualities (proposition 5) takes on additional meaning because of its legitimacy. Students and nonstudents are learning more than their own futures. They are also learning that the practical categories and topics of education give legitimate meaning to these futures (see also Bowles and Gintis 1976). For instance, the college student learns a little sociology because he is taught it (traditional socialization) and because he knows graduates may be expected to know a bit about it (chartering). Both processes are intensified by the legitimating reality of sociology: students (and nonstudents) learn that it *exists* as a body of knowledge and a personnel category, entirely over and above their personal acceptance of the utility of the field. Thus students acquire their sociology with a dutiful passivity which reflects the understanding that whether or not they accept this discipline their degrees—valid throughout society—will reflect so many units of sociology.

Thus the objectified moral authority of the schools—over and above their raw power—undoubtedly intensifies socialization over and above that found in routine *training* organizations (Bidwell and Vreeland 1963).

2. In broader versions of institutional theory than allocation ideas, the effects of education are no longer fixed in sum: education may expand and alter the role structure of society. This means that there is no reason to believe that the socializing effects of allocation rules would be fixed in sum as is implied by hypotheses 1–3 above, in “Further Implications of Allocation Theory.” If education expands the status order, anticipatory gains for students and their socialization consequences do not need to be balanced by losses for nonstudents. The new roles being created can simply be added to the status structure and to the socialization process. More commonly, the creation of a given new elite role also creates expanded rights and duties for others. Thus the expansion of medical authority in modern societies involves creating and expanding the role of doctor. But other people do not simply become nondoctors—they become patients. Education expands roles and sets them into proper relation with the rest of the society.

Once institutionalized education is seen as a legitimating system—not just a mechanism for allocating fixed opportunities—it can have many net consequences on both allocation and socialization of people being processed, just as on the rest of society.

The Impact of Educational Legitimation on Educational Organizations

The legitimating effect of educational organizations—but also much of their socializing and allocating power—is derived from their highly institutionalized status in society. Operating at the institutional level as an authoritative theory of personnel and knowledge in society, the schools constitute a crucial ritual system: a system of initiation ceremonies (personnel) and of classifications of information (knowledge).

This makes it clear why schools often seem to act as ritual organizations, sacrificing “effectiveness” for classificatory rigidity (Meyer and Rowan 1975; Kamens 1977). Their larger social effectiveness (and their claim to resources) inheres precisely in this ritual structure: the apparatus of classes and levels and degrees and subjects. By emphasizing their formal ritual structures, schools maximize their links to their main source of authority, their main resources, and quite possibly their main effectiveness. Dramatizing their structures as socially legitimated and legitimating initiation ceremonies informs students (and others) both about the payoffs to which they can adapt and about the fact that those payoffs are highly proper, deriving from the core meaning and values of society (Clark 1970). Ritualism, thus, by the process stated in proposition 11, reinforces the immediate effectiveness of schools in dealing with students.

Summary of legitimation theory.—Legitimation theory suggests two general ideas concerning the effects of schooling. First, institutionalized education, as a theory of personnel and knowledge, affects society directly, apart from the training and allocation of students. Second, institutionalized education creates and intensifies the individual effects of socialization and allocation. In figure 4 these two main themes are added to the explanatory structure presented earlier.

CONCLUSION

Schools may teach people useful skills and values. Whether they do or not in particular cases, they certainly *allocate* people to positions of higher social status, and this affects the anticipations and socialization of the students (and nonstudents) as well as the experience and later socialization of the graduates (and nongraduates).

The allocating power of the schools is one aspect of their status as social institutions creating and validating categories of personnel and knowledge. The schools increase the number and legitimacy of these categories—far beyond levels possible with more primordial myths of the origins of personnel and knowledge—and thus expand the whole rationalized

Education as an Institution

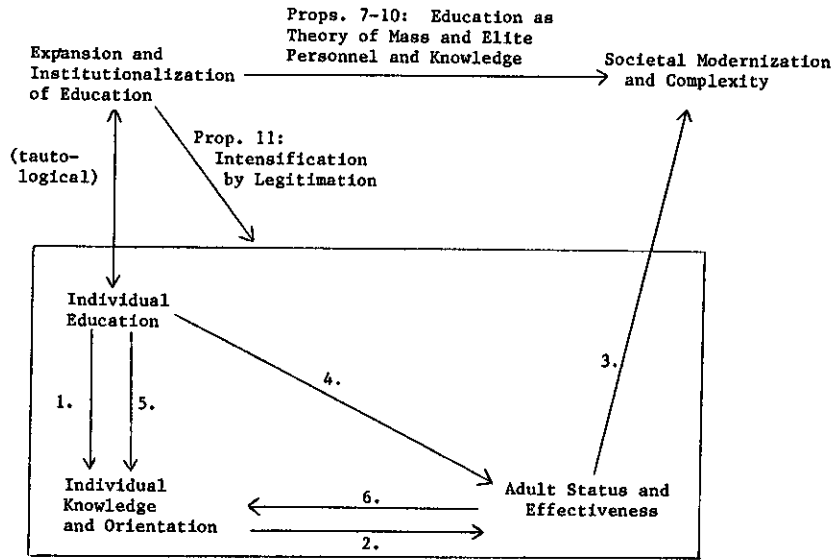


FIG. 4.—Legitimation effects of education

modern social structure. These legitimating effects of schools reconstruct reality for everyone—the schooled and the nonschooled alike. They also intensify the effects of allocating and socializing processes.

So a student is in a position of experiencing (*a*) the immediate socializing organization, (*b*) the fact that this organization has the allocating power to confer status on him, and (*c*) the broader fact that this allocation power has the highest level of legitimacy in society. The education he receives has a very special status and authority: its levels and content categories have the power to redefine him legitimately in the eyes of everyone around him and thus take on overwhelming ceremonial significance.

Research on such questions must examine the effects of education *as an institution*, considering effects of variables quite beyond the level of the classroom, the peer group, or the school as an organization. Either experimentally or with cross-societal (or time series) analyses, we need to consider the contextual effects of variations in the extension and institutionalization of education on the perspectives of students and nonstudents, graduates and nongraduates, citizens and elites. If education is a myth in modern society it is a powerful one. The effects of myths inhere, not in the fact that individuals believe them, but in the fact that they “know” everyone else does, and thus that “for all practical purposes” the myths are true. We may all gossip privately about the uselessness of education, but in hiring and promoting, in consulting the various magi of our time,

American Journal of Sociology

and in ordering our lives around contemporary rationality, we carry out our parts in a drama in which education is authority.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, K., and B. Eckland. 1975. "Contextual Effects in the High School Attainment Process." *American Sociological Review* 40 (June): 402-16.
- Almond, G., and S. Verba. 1963. *The Civic Culture*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Astin, A., and R. Panos. 1969. *The Educational and Vocational Development of College Students*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.
- Bendix, R. 1964. *Nation-Building and Citizenship*. New York: Wiley.
- Benitez, J. 1973. "The Effect of Elite Recruitment and Training on Diffuse Socialization Outcomes." Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University.
- Berg, I. 1971. *Education and Jobs*. Boston: Beacon.
- Bergesen, A. 1977. "Political Witch Hunts: The Sacred and the Subversive in Cross-National Perspective." *American Sociological Review* 42 (April): 220-33.
- Bidwell, C., and R. Vreeland. 1963. "College Education and Moral Orientations." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 8 (September): 166-91.
- Blau, P. M., and O. D. Duncan. 1967. *The American Occupational Structure*. New York: Wiley.
- Blaug, M., ed. 1968, 1969. *Economics of Education*. Baltimore: Penguin.
- Boli-Bennett, J. 1976. "The Expansion of Constitutional Authority in Nation-States, 1870-1970: A Quantitative Assessment." Paper read at the annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, San Diego, April. Mimeographed. Stanford, Calif.: Department of Sociology, Stanford University.
- Bowles, S., and H. Gintis. 1976. *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic.
- Carnoy, M., ed. 1972. *Schooling in a Corporate Society*. New York: McKay.
- Clark, B. 1970. "The College as Saga: Historical Inquiry in the Sociology of Education." Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Washington, D.C., August. Mimeographed. New Haven, Conn.: Department of Sociology, Yale University.
- Coleman, J., ed. 1965. *Education and Political Development*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Collins, R. 1971. "Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification." *American Sociological Review* 36 (December): 1002-18.
- Coombs, P. 1968. *The World Educational Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, J. A. 1966. "The Campus as a Frog Pond." *American Journal of Sociology* 72 (July): 17-31.
- Duncan, O. D., D. L. Featherman, and B. Duncan. 1972. *Socioeconomic Background and Achievement*. New York: Seminar.
- Feldman, K. A., and T. H. Newcomb. 1969. *The Impact of College on Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 1956. "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies." *American Journal of Sociology* 61 (March): 420-24.
- Habermas, J. 1962. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Koblenz: Neuwied.
- Himmelweit, H., and B. Swift. 1969. "A Model for the Understanding of School as a Socializing Agent." Pp. 154-81 in *Trends and Issues in Developmental Psychology*, edited by P. Mussen, J. Langer, and M. Covington. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Holsinger, D. 1974. "The Elementary School as Modernizer: A Brazilian Study." Pp. 24-46 in *Education and Individual Modernity in Developing Countries*, edited by A. Inkeles and D. Holsinger. Leiden: Brill.
- Igra, A. 1976. "Social Mobilization, National Context, and Political Participation." Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University.
- Illich, I. 1971. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row.

Education as an Institution

- Inkeles, A., and D. H. Smith. 1974. *Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Jencks, C., et al. 1972. *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. New York: Basic.
- Kamens, D. 1971. "The College 'Charter' and College Size: Effects on Occupational Choice and College Attrition." *Sociology of Education* 44 (Summer): 270-96.
- . 1974. "Colleges and Elite Formation: The Case of Prestigious American Colleges." *Sociology of Education* 47 (Summer), 354-78.
- . 1977. "Legitimizing Myths and Educational Organization: The Relationship between Organizational Ideology and Formal Structure." *American Sociological Review* 42 (April): 208-19.
- Kerckhoff, A. C. 1975. "Patterns of Educational Attainment in Great Britain." *American Journal of Sociology* 80 (May): 1428-37.
- Kohn, M. 1969. *Class and Conformity: A Study in Values*. Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey.
- Marshall, T. H. 1948. *Citizenship and Social Class*. New York: Doubleday.
- Meyer, J. 1970a. "The Charter: Conditions of Diffuse Socialization in Schools." Pp. 564-78 in *Social Processes and Social Structures*, edited by W. R. Scott. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- . 1970b. "High School Effects on College Intentions." *American Journal of Sociology* 76 (July): 59-70.
- . 1973. "Theories of the Effects of Education on Civic Participation in Developing Societies." *SEADAG Papers Series*. New York: Asia Society.
- Meyer, J., and B. Rowan. 1975. "Notes on the Structure of Educational Organizations." Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, August. Mimeographed. Stanford, Calif.: Department of Sociology, Stanford University.
- Meyer, J., and R. Rubinson. 1975. "Education and Political Development." *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 3, pp. 134-62.
- Mischel, W. 1971. *Introduction to Personality*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Plant, W. 1965. "Longitudinal Changes in Intolerance and Authoritarianism for Subjects Differing in Amount of College Education over Four Years." *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 72 (November): 247-87.
- Ramirez, F. 1973. "Societal Corporateness and the Nationalization and Expansion of Educational Systems." Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August. Mimeographed. Stanford, Calif.: Department of Sociology, Stanford University.
- . 1975. "Creating Members: A Longitudinal Cross-national Analysis." Paper read at the Comparative and International Education Society meeting, San Francisco, March. Mimeographed. San Francisco: Department of Sociology, San Francisco State University.
- Rosenbaum, J. 1975. "The Stratification of Socialization Processes." *American Sociological Review* 40 (February): 48-54.
- Rubinson, R. 1973. "The Political Construction of Education: Conditions for the Creation of Membership in Political Society." Paper read at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August. Mimeographed. Stanford, Calif.: Department of Sociology, Stanford University.
- Schumpeter, J. 1950. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Spence, M. 1973. "Job Market Signalling." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 87 (August): 355-75.
- Stinchcombe, A. 1968. *Constructing Social Theories*. New York: Harcourt.
- Swanson, G. 1971. "An Organizational Analysis of Collectivities." *American Sociological Review* 36 (August): 607-23.
- Thompson, J. D. 1967. *Organizations in Action*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Thurow, L. 1975. *Generating Inequality*. New York: Basic.
- Wallace, W. L. 1966. *Student Culture: Social Structure and Continuity in a Liberal Arts College*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Wheeler, S. 1966. "The Structure of Formally Organized Socialization Settings." In *Socialization after Childhood*, edited by O. G. Brian, Jr., and S. Wheeler. New York: Wiley.