The Collective Mind: A Reassessment

David B. Bills[1]

The spring 2009 issue of the newsletter of the Sociology of Education Section of the American Sociological Association featured a brief (about 4,000 words) essay by sociologist Steven Brint. In "The 'Collective Mind' at Work: A Decade in the Life of U.S. Sociology of Education," Brint offered a lucid and empirically informed appraisal of American sociology of education as reflected in its primary journal, *Sociology of Education*. Brint's essay is reprinted here as it appeared in the newsletter.[1]

Brint based his essay on a content analysis of all of the articles that appeared in *Sociology of Education* between 1999 and 2008. By carefully coding each of the 168 articles that were published during this period into a variety of categories (as explained in his article), Brint reached several conclusions about the collective mind of the sociology of education research community. American sociology of education, according to Brint, focused on "studies of educational achievement and educational attainment as conditioned by social inequality, family and student behaviors, and school organization." It did so in a way that Brint characterized as not exactly "abstract empiricism," but certainly only mildly interested in the development and testing of sociological theory. Finally, Brint saw the collective mind of American sociology of education as generally indifferent to "most of the rest of the world, the U.S. capitalist market economy, or state-based policy coalitions struggling over the forms and functions of schooling."

Since its publication, Brint's provocative but evenhanded criticisms of sociology of education have given members of the research community much to think about and talk about. His observations on where we succeed and where we fail as a subdiscipline are frequent topics of conversation at professional meetings, and (admittedly without looking at the data) the piece has been cited an unusual number of times for a non-peer-reviewed publication. Brint's essay was much on the minds of the current editorial team when we assumed responsibility for the journal four years ago. We have been struck over the years how many of our colleagues have read Brint's piece and were eager to discuss it.

The transition from one editorial team to the next provides an opportunity to revisit Brint's assessment of our shared enterprise as sociologists of education. We asked the incoming editorial team of Rob Warren, Amy Binder, Eric Grodsky, and Hyunjoon Park to prepare brief responses to Brint's essay,[2] and the current team of David Bills, Steve Morgan, and Stefanie DeLuca jointly prepared its own response. Steven Brint, graciously and on very short notice, has written a response to the responses. We thank everyone for their participation in this exchange.

NOTES

1. *Sociology of Education* has no formal relationship of any sort with the Sociology of Education Section of the American Sociological Association but is rather part of the publishing portfolio of the American Sociological Association. Still, many section members quite naturally informally identify with *Sociology of Education* as their primary journal.
2. Eric Grodsky, unfortunately, was unable to prepare an essay given our publication deadlines.

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What Shapes the "Collective Mind"? A Response to Brint

John Robert Warren[1]

Brint's notes on the "Collective Mind" of sociologists of education in the United States strike me as fundamentally fair and accurate—at least as far as one can discern the "Collective Mind" from articles submitted to and accepted by only one journal. I find the distribution of *Sociology of Education* (*SOE*) articles across his eight topical categories to be about what I would have guessed (although the distribution of articles *not* submitted to or accepted by *SOE* is probably quite different). I also largely agree with summary statements from his essay:

> . . . the collective mind . . . is highly quantitative.

> . . . the collective mind . . . is also highly oriented to primary and secondary education, rather than post-secondary education.

> A very large proportion of articles concerned variation in student achievement, as measured by access to educational opportunities, scores on tests of reading or mathematics achievement, or educational attainment in degrees or years.

> Articles studying the influence of school organization on achievement were nearly as common.

> The collective mind . . . has distinctive interests and biases, and these interests evidently do not include most of the rest of the world, the U.S. capitalist market economy, or state-based policy coalitions struggling over the forms and functions of schooling.

> U.S. sociologists of education have relatively little regard for theory. The vast majority of articles can be described as empirical examinations of relationships between variables measured in national surveys.

How did we get here? Nobody *chose* to orient the subfield (or, at least, *SOE*) in these directions. What explains these peculiar features of modern American sociology of education as reflected in what is perhaps its top journal? I see four broad structural factors—listed in no special order—that might partly account for the patterns that Brint describes.

1. The stated priorities of major funding agencies directly align with most of Brint's summary statements. Consider the mission statements of the Directorate for Education and Human Resources of the National Science Foundation (NSF; http://www.nsf.gov/ehr/about.jsp) or the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES; http://ies.ed.gov/aboutus/). The research funded by these and other organizations is disproportionately quantitative, focused on improving student achievement, and concerned with American primary and secondary schooling. In this era of tight university budgets, sociologists of education are understandably swayed by funding priorities. (I fully recognize the endogeneity of this process: Sociologists of education simultaneously help *establish* agencies' priorities and serve on their proposal review panels.)

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2. The number of publications required to secure a tenure-track job in the sociology department of a major university seems to have risen over time. Graduate students are seemingly expected to publish more than they used to in order to get good jobs. However, qualitative research often takes a very long time; so does getting access to a historical archive or learning the foreign language that facilitates good comparative research. Once young academics orient to particular methods and styles of research, they tend not to change.

3. In an era in which NSF's Political Science Program has been defunded, the National Institutes of Health's economic research programs have been the target of Congressional attacks, and eliminating the U.S. Department of Education has regularly been part of a major party's platform, sociologists of education may be rightly concerned about public relations. It is easier to explain to provosts, congressional representatives, and taxpayers why we need to study the ways in which American primary and secondary schools can be improved to raise test scores. It is notably harder to explain to these audiences why we need, for example, to enrich sociological theories of pedagogy or to study how countries' cultural systems shape educational processes and human development.

4. We are living in an era of big data and fast computers. As Brint notes, "statistical knowledge and data collection technology has advanced much faster than theory in the sociology of education." Given the professional, funding, and political pressures noted previously, it is not surprising that many sociologists of education have taken what seems to be a safer and more expedient path: a dissertation or a series of pre-tenure publications using incredibly rich and vast collections of secondary data, mainly on formal primary and secondary schooling, analyzed using increasingly sophisticated and powerful analytic techniques. Theoretical contributions and empirical research that is qualitative, comparative, or historical in nature are often less certain enterprises, frequently require more time, and get less funding.

These and other structural factors have created the American sociology of education that Brint describes—or at least the part of it that is submitted to and accepted by *SOE*. In two respects, however, American sociologists of education could take steps to change the direction of their subfield.

First, sociologists of education could more often ask questions that amount to: So what? Dissertation advisors, journal editors, proposal reviewers, conference organizers, and researchers themselves could more frequently ask "Is this important?" or "Will this substantially help people?" or "Does this have high potential to reorient our thinking about an important issue?" (Of course, they should still ask all the important conceptual and research design questions that they currently ask.) If they did so, American sociology of education may gradually evolve away from the portrait that Brint paints. We would be forced to move outside of our theoretical, methodological, topical, and even disciplinary comfort zones. We would be pressed to resist the structural pressures described previously.

Second, sociologists have more agency and influence than they usually realize. Funding agencies' priorities can be shifted by political pressure and by active engagement by sociologists (e.g., on review panels). Sociology departments' faculty recruitment committees can choose to look past the number (and even placement) of candidates' publications and focus more on the quality and impact of their scholarship. Sociologists and others can do the hard work of communicating the importance of their scholarship—even theoretical work or basic science research—to broad audiences; see *The Society Pages* (http://thesocietypages.org/) for a great example. We all (and perhaps especially journal editors) can do more to encourage and reward research that takes more risks and maybe takes more time.

(*Note*: My successful application to be the next Editor of *Sociology of Education* is available at http://www.asanet.org/journals/successful_proposals.cfm. In my application I touched on many of the same themes and issues outlined here. Readers looking for clues about how I might turn the aforementioned sentiments into editorial action might start there.)

Sociology of Education's Cultural, Organizational, and Societal Turn

Amy J. Binder[1]

How many trenchant observations can one essay contain? The answer is "enviably many" if the subject is the purview of contemporary American sociology of education and the author is Steven Brint, at the end of his term as chair of the American Sociological Association section of the same name. While other scholars have leveled similar charges that our field is diminished by its overriding concerns with educational achievement and access, studied quantitatively, Brint's piece is resonant because it covers so much ground in such short order, and he doesn't sound like he has a case of sour grapes. He just thinks that we can do better in the future.

Several of Brint's articulations are powerful: We are more a sociology of schooling than we are of education. We focus more on how society shapes education than how education shapes societal forces. We are drawn more to the study of K–12 than to the study of higher education. Because most of my own work is at odds with what Brint calls the "collective mind" of sociology of education, from content to methods, I'd like to offer a few observations in kind.

First, to Brint's call for more culture, more society, and more higher education (preferably in combination), I would argue that in the years since this essay was published, things have changed quite dramatically, if not in article form, then at least in books. Over the past five years, Mitchell Stevens, Ann Mullen, Jenny Stuber, Ruben Gatzambide-Fernández, Shamus Khan, Joseph Soares, Neil Gross, Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, Kate Wood, and I, among others, have turned our gaze to college campuses (or, in two of these cases, elite boarding schools) and, in varying ways, have studied how organizational and cultural features of campuses indelibly shape the people who study on them, with attendant larger social consequences.

Although inequality in access and outcomes is never far from the surface in these studies (I am quite certain that the concept of "reproduction of advantage" is used by all, to a greater or lesser extent), these authors come at stratification from unconventional directions and are centrally concerned with the mechanisms and processes by which education produces *multiple types of selves.* Conservatives become right in distinctive ways; affluent undergraduates become voracious partiers; prep students become meritocratically elite; large public university students go adrift. Authors in this group look at the multiple levels of meaning that inform students' understandings of themselves (from the most micro of their family background to the most macro of popular culture images of the "typical American college experience"), and they cast an especially probing eye to the distinctive organizational arrangements on campuses (what we might call the meso level) that enable and constrain possibilities for certain types of transformation or enhancement. They also look, for the most part, at how these understandings are shared culture, created in interaction with others.

In his book *Privilege*, for example, Khan (2010) tells us of the hierarchical chapel seating at St. Paul's School that helps students know their rightful place in the pecking order, no matter their humble or elite origins. In *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013) talk about the easy majors and housing options offered by Midwest U that enable upper-middle-

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class young women to dominate the social scene while also reproducing social inequality. Binder and Wood (2012), in *Becoming Right*, show that an atomized large campus, Western Public University, with its impersonal class registration policies, large lecture halls, and mostly off campus housing, creates the conditions for a more provocative style of conservatism, while at Eastern Elite University, a closely knit campus of eminently talented youth and faculty members obligates conservative students to more civilly engage peers in their "special bubble." Cultural understandings of "who we are on this campus" and the organizational features that structure students' daily lives bolster particular meanings shared by students. Graduates of these educational settings—organizationally produced selves intact—then graduate into society and shape it.

My second observation is that, clearly, these works are sociology of education, and some are celebrated as such (Stevens's book *Creating a Class*, for example, won the section's Pierre Bourdieu best book award). But the authors named above, with a few exceptions, do not frequently show up in the pages of *Sociology of Education*, and indeed, there is a sense among many in the group of being outside the mainstream. All of these authors, like most sociologists of education, would say that they study education *and* something else. The difference is that for this group, education might come after the "and," not before. For me, it is culture, political sociology, organizations, *and* education—a reflection of my sense that

sociology of education, *in the main*, is interested in other things.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is movement afoot, with Steve Brint's active participation, to conjure education more fully into the sociological enterprise among both those who self-identify as sociologists of education (Jal Mehta, Scott Davies, Pam Walters, Michael Olneck, Doug Downey, many of the authors named above) with those who traditionally have not but whose work clearly benefits educational studies (Michele Lamont, John Skrentny, Mike Sauder). As one of the incoming deputy editors of the journal for 2013 to 2016, and as the 2014–2015 chair-elect of the sociology of education section, I look forward to continued mobilization toward a more expansive and inclusive field of study.

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Integrating Comparative and Theoretical Sociology of Education: A Reflection on "The 'Collective Mind' at Work: A Decade in the Life of U.S. Sociology of Education" by Steven Brint

Hyunjoon Park[1]

Using a content analysis of 168 articles published in the journal *Sociology of Education* between 1999 and 2008, Steven Brint describes the current "contours" of the field, highlighting major focuses and gaps of U.S. sociology of education. Because I mostly agree with Brint's portrayal of the state of U.S. sociology of education, I will instead focus on the "notable truncations" he has identified. The reason I turn my attention to those gaps is that they have long been repeatedly and often loudly criticized by many others, but there has been no sign of significant change in the field. The persistent omission, therefore, may suggest a deeply structured and embedded, rather than temporal and easily modified, tendency within U.S. sociology of education.

As Brint correctly diagnoses, U.S. sociology of education has been largely a "nationalist" project. This inward-looking perspective is surprising given how intensively U.S. education institutions and research activities are connected to those in other parts of the world. It may be that the urgency of various policy issues in U.S. education provides an easy excuse for the persistence of our nationalist approach. A more optimistic view is that the increased number of publications by comparative and international scholars will eventually solve the problem, even if it may take a little while. Stated differently, comparative and international education is typically considered a subfield in the larger field of sociology of education, and thus quantitative expansion of the subfield should

be enough to supplement the main stream of U.S. sociology of education, which is a primarily nationalist sociology.

However, we often do not realize how this insensitivity to comparative sociology is actually tightly aligned with another profound deficit of U.S. sociology of education, especially its theoretical underdevelopment. Although this is another major "blind spot" identified by Brint, he fails to make a link with the lack of a comparative perspective. As Buchmann (2011) persuasively illustrated with several examples, comparative and international research is *essential*, not supplemental, to "refine and extend general theories" and to formulate "new global theories of education" by revealing how empirical and theoretical propositions are contingent on specific contexts. This appreciation of roles of contexts that modify and often contradict existing theories can be achieved only when variation in contexts is effectively used beyond a single-national context. Therefore, the lack of theories in sociology of education is one side of the coin, while the lack of

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a comparative perspective is the other side (the destiny of twins!).

It is worrisome that the often-heard diagnosis and critique of the nationalist focus of U.S. sociology of education is superficial, often amounting to lip service at best, and at worse misguiding us to a simple but inappropriate solution. The situation will not change even if we see more and more comparative and international education articles published in U.S. sociology journals, unless the increased volume of comparative and international research seriously challenges the fundamental presumptions of atheoretical, nationalist sociology of education. As Buchmann (2011) advocated, we need to figure out how nationalist sociology can engage with comparative and international sociology to improve existing theories and formulate new theories. The real problem is not that too many studies focus on U.S. education but that comparative and international studies remain to be inconsequential to the mainstream and merely result in filling in a marginalized and segregated subfield of sociology of education. Therefore, the solution is not simple: We should not feel comfort because "other journals and books examine educational systems from a comparative perspective." This is the task essential for sociology of education to be truly theoretical. We need

more profound change in sociological research and training that would facilitate deconstruction of hierarchy between comparative/international research and U.S. education-focused research, and appreciation of comparative perspective as imperative in enhancing our capacity of building new theories. Of course, I have no clear idea yet how we can transform the current practice of sociology of education to be more comparative and theoretical simultaneously. But I would suggest that the starting point is to seriously recognize the close connection between comparative and theoretical sociology of education and to use our "collective mind" to come up with new models of research and training that would help prevent separation between theory and empirical research as well as between nationalist and comparative sociology of education.

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Altered States of the Collective Mind: A Response to Brint

David B. Bills[1], Stefanie DeLuca[2], and Stephen L. Morgan[3]

We are grateful to Steven Brint for his cogent and spirited challenge to the collective mind of the sociology of education, based on his analysis of the journal that we have been editing, *Sociology of Education*. Brint's challenge is perhaps less to editors of *Sociology of Education* to strive to *publish* more of a different kind of work than it is to potential contributors to *Sociology of Education* to *produce* more of a different kind of work. Brint would like to see more work that, among other things, moves beyond the boundaries of the United States, moves away from a mechanical application of a limited set of statistical procedures, does more to produce theoretically generated knowledge, and looks beyond "schooling's dependence on social inequalities" and toward "the dependence of society on the production of the carriers of school socialization and knowledge."

Editors come and go, and most have far less capacity to reshape a subdiscipline than many authors might suppose.[1] What is ultimately published in a journal reflects both editorial decisions and what is submitted to that journal. So we write from the perspective of researchers, but researchers who have also had the benefit of observing both unpublished and published manuscripts submitted to *Sociology of Education* since 2009. In this brief response, we discuss our points of agreement and disagreement with Brint's effort to nudge the collective mind in a direction more likely to advance the scientific study of schooling and offer a few more thoughts of our own. Our discussion will be very selective.

Brint makes an important point about the kind of evidence that is offered up in *Sociology of Education*. He argues that the ready availability of high-quality, nationally representative data has a disproportionate influence on the shape of the field. He argues, if not quite this bluntly, that

sociologists of education are slaves to High School and Beyond, the National Longitudinal Study, the National Household Education Surveys, and (increasingly, and sadly from the perspective of his call for a more comparative sociology of education) the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the Program for International Student Assessment. Although Brint concedes that there have been important empirical pay-offs to our use of these data, he believes that their hegemony has impeded theoretical development and narrowed the range of questions that scholars are willing to pursue.

In large part, it is hard to disagree with this assessment. We have read too many manuscripts in which the questions of interest are trivial extensions of prior work, made possible by new waves of released data, modest alterations of the survey instruments designed by others, or the additions of new but underconceptualized variables to a garden-variety model predicting test scores. And many areas are underengaged. Perhaps most important, we agree with Brint that too little research is conducted on processes within classrooms and schools, and we suspect that the limitations of our national survey data are at least partly responsible for the current lack of attention. The sociology of education has been enriched by research on within-school processes, perhaps

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most notably by the careful examinations of instructional grouping in the 1980s and 1990s. We see too little of such work today. Given the intense public and policy interest in processes within new charter schools, "teaching to the test," pressures on teachers in our era of accountability, the development of employment-relevant skills while in school, and so forth, it is surprising that so few sociologists (although a substantial number of economists) have been writing on these topics, either engaging directly with policy questions or reframed versions of these questions designed to move the academic literature forward.

Although we agree with Brint on this point, we also see the problems as deeper than just the narrow range of questions that is asked. We have also read too many manuscripts in which conceptualization and measurement are decoupled, as researchers strive to "proxy" social capital, or parental influence, or oppositional culture, or whatever, with measures that are blatantly inappropriate and that oversimplify the social reality they are meant to represent. Perhaps worst of all, we have seen too many manuscripts in which authors believe that the operationalized measures *are* the concepts, as if survey questions are exact mappings of theoretical constructs and as if questions are interpreted in the same way by all respondents.

So we do worry that too often the data drive the questions and concepts. But we also feel that large-scale survey data are a genie that is unlikely to get stuffed back into its bottle. Nor would we wish to do any such stuffing. These data have served us well and have provided the bedrock for 40 years of research that has given the sociology of education more coherence than many other areas of inquiry. We are a far stronger subdiscipline because of these data than we could hope to be without them. We would, however, like to see more sociologists of education examine much more seriously the linkage between conceptualization and measurement and propose new techniques that more closely align concepts and measures. Our national surveys can be improved, but they will not be improved until we push them to and beyond their limits. We would favor some share of our collective effort devoted to proposals intended to design and conduct smaller scale innovative data collection efforts to improve these measures and better understand the processes that link them to educational outcomes. Data collection is expensive and time-consuming,

but we see potential for high returns in improving our science. Senior scholars in particular can afford the risks involved in this kind of innovation.

If our research questions need to be broadened and our measurement more attuned to our research questions, so too do our methods of analysis need to be improved. Consistent with the spirit of Brint's appraisal, we also see too many researchers using survey data and regression models to pursue research questions for which they are sometimes spectacularly unsuited. Although we often find the "quantitative versus qualitative" dichotomy unhelpful and confining, the fact is that because of the blunt nature of our surveys, many important questions in the sociology of education are currently best addressed with ethnographic, observational, or documentary evidence. Reflecting on our term as *Sociology of Education*'s editors, we are grateful that we were able to publish some work of this type, but we wish we had had more manuscripts to consider. And we wish that reviewers more frequently agreed on standards for evaluating this research. Although it may be more difficult to do justice to some qualitative work within article length constraints, many of our most pressing questions warrant it. For example, how do we explain the heterogeneity in charter school processes? How are new policies implemented in schools and by teachers? How do families interpret school choice options, and how does that affect their decisions and school participation? How does neighborhood violence affect children's cognitive ability? Why do promising education policies so often fail on the ground?

For quantitatively oriented research, we have read too many manuscripts constructed around regression models that are unfocused attempts to document all causes of an outcome of interest. The clear majority of regression models published in sociology (not just in the sociology of education) are overstuffed with adjustment variables and cannot sustain causal conclusions based on any of their coefficients. In our time as editors at *Sociology of Education*, we have seen too few high-quality descriptive modeling efforts, and we have been surprised that results that could be most powerfully presented in cross-tabulations and figures have often been buried within regression models and conveyed by contorted descriptions of patterns of estimated coefficients. Researchers often move too quickly by trying to document causal relationships before

demonstrating that basic covariance exists between explanatory and dependent variables and are not always conceptually thoughtful about why these relationships might exist in the first place. We would like to see sociology move into a new phase of more careful quantitative modeling, where the value of descriptive modeling is appreciated because the standards for models that warrant causal claims are more fully understood. The sociology of education has often been at the vanguard of methodological upgrading, and we hope for such leadership now too. The frontier is no longer new techniques, but rather better and more careful use.

In addition to more careful quantitative modeling and an extension of qualitative methodologies, we encourage sociologists of education to explicitly consider public policy as part of social structure and an object of sociological study. Brint's review turned up little if anything that directly explored education policy or other social policy. Generally, we think of education policy research as separate from the sociology of education and therefore outside of the purview of this journal. But social policy is as much a part of the structure of opportunity as race, class, gender, and institutions are: Policies can exacerbate inequality and can also contain the promise of eradicating it. Without good social science research that examines how families and practitioners interpret, implement, and use various programs, we have no good idea why some work and some fail.

Thirty years ago, Arthur Stinchcombe (1982) wondered, "Should Sociologists Forget Their Mothers and Fathers?" We don't think they should. Sociologists of education have an unusually rich and strong body of work on which to build as they plan the next generation of research. They can look back on research that has been genuinely cumulative (Campbell 1983; Pallas and Jennings 2009), while maintaining its willingness to challenge current models and assumptions. So we may not endorse abandoning our elders, but we need to continue to put them to the test. We appreciate Steven Brint's clearheaded vision of how to do this.

NOTE

1. Although Brint's analysis covers the years from 1999 to 2008, the profile of the articles published since our term began in 2009 is very similar.

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