

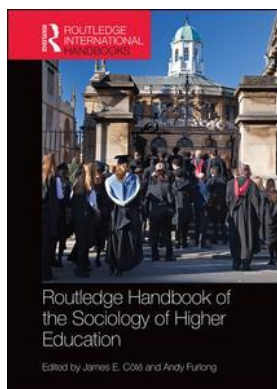
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### **Theories of the sociology of higher education access and participation**

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# Theories of the sociology of higher education access and participation

*Lesley Andres*

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The emergence of the sociology of higher education as a sub-discipline in the 1960s coincided with a rapidly changing society and concomitant massification of higher education. According to Burton Clark (1973), this disciplinary sub-field, whose roots were grounded in “established classics”, such as those written by Weber and Veblen, but “stood for decades in lonely isolation” (p. 4), developed in two directions: studies of inequality and what we would call today the sub-field of college impact studies. In subsequent years, lines of inquiry expanded to include two additional sub-fields: the profession of higher education and the occupations within it, and organizational theory from both single site and comparative perspectives. In the early 1970s, the sociology of higher education remained “relatively young and unformed” (p. 8). Since that time, it has expanded to include four emerging threads of investigation: “higher education as an institution, sociological studies of academic departments, the sociology of diversity, and sociological frameworks for higher education” (Gumport, 2007: v–vi).

In the interest of space, in this chapter I focus on those theories, and related criticisms, employed by sociologists of higher education, of access and participation with an emphasis on inequality. I provide an overview of the following theoretical approaches: structural functionalism, social conflict theory, stratification theory, status attainment theory, reproduction theory, rational choice theory, and feminist theory. I complement these descriptions with seminal and contemporary examples from the research literature for each theory, or combinations thereof.

## **Functionalism**

From a functional perspective, society is envisioned as an organic whole and is comprised of systems that are interconnected for the benefit of society. As Collins (1971) explains in his classical article entitled ‘Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification’, from a functionalist perspective constant technological advances demand that skills must be increasingly upgraded as the proportion of high-skill to low-skill jobs shifts in favour of the former. Highly skilled occupations require high-level skill acquisition – either in the form of generic or specific skills. These skills are obtained at formal educational, and particularly in North America, at post-secondary institutions. As a result, the number of years that individuals are required to remain in the formal educational system continues to increase. This functional perspective is

foundational in policy literature produced by organizations such as the OECD. As an example, the OECD states that a “5-year-old in an OECD country can expect to participate in education for more than 17 years, on average, before reaching the age of 40. More specifically, this person can expect to be enrolled in full-time studies for 16.5 years: 9.4 years in primary and lower secondary education, 3.4 years in upper secondary education, and 2.7 years in tertiary education” (2013: 262). Those who fail to complete advanced levels of education are considered to “lack the foundation skills needed to survive in a complex economy, often [find] themselves at the wrong end of the skills-based polarisation, stuck in a ‘low skills – low wage’ equilibrium or in long-term unemployment with very little prospects for improvement” (p. 15). Extension of the K-12 system in North America or a K-8 system in Europe to a K-16 system in many countries has resulted in a shift from “mass” to “universal” post-secondary participation, which can be interpreted through the lens of functional theory as beneficial and desirable.

Collins (1971) asserts that the technical-functional theory of educational stratification is a “particular application of a more general functional approach” (p. 1004). Occupational positions are stratified by the level of skills earned by individuals, again through formal training. As some occupations are more prestigious than others, and require more specialized training, the number of available positions is limited. The role of the educational system is to select and allocate individuals “for future status in society” (Parsons, 1959). Hence, society is functional in that those with the highest levels of skills are employed in positions with the highest level of occupational prestige, income, and power, whereas others who are deemed to be less able are slotted early into lower educational tracks and eventually less skilled, lower level positions. Bauman (2000) claims that in contemporary society those without high-level skills are tethered to geographical place and hence belong to the solid modernity of the past. Conversely, the highly skilled, flexible worker belonging to the world of liquid modernity “travels light” and is armed with “a briefcase, a cellular telephone and a portable computer” (p. 58). From a functionalist perspective (which is not Bauman’s argument), resulting social inequality is desirable as some members of society do not aspire to more highly skilled positions, and for those who do, inequality can serve as a motivating force.

### Social conflict theory

Critics of functional theory argue that evidence does not support many of its purported claims. According to Collins (1971, 2002), education for the most part is irrelevant, counterproductive, and inefficient at teaching the types of skills – in particular vocational skills and cutting-edge technical skills – that would enhance productivity in the workplace. Using evidence, for example, that class origins and occupational attainment in the USA have been constant throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, conflict theorists reject the premise that social change dictates how functional demand changes. Instead, they argue that ascriptive factors, rather than technical skills, play a major role in determining occupational success.

Building on Weber’s (1968) conceptualization of status groups, Collins (1971) argues that associational groups have “a sense of status equality” (p. 1009) through the possession of shared cultural understandings such as taste, manners, values, and cultivation, which, in turn, clashes with other associational groups who possess different sets of cultural understandings. Through group struggles for advantage for “various ‘goods’ – wealth, power, or prestige” (p. 1009), a dominant group emerges which in turn defines which cultural characteristics are legitimate. The primary role of educational institutions is to “teach particular status cultures, both in and outside the classroom” (p. 1010). As an example, Karabel (2005) elucidates how admission policies at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were distorted to focus on physical attributes, sociability, and

athletic ability with the goal of excluding certain groups (primarily Jews) who would otherwise be able to compete for admission places if ability were the sole criterion. Hence, from a social conflict theory perspective, education is used as a mechanism to select and socialize individuals either into the dominant elite culture or to indoctrinate individuals to have respect for it. Given one's place in relation to the dominant culture, the level of eventual occupational position would follow suit. According to Collins (1971), from a conflict perspective, "education should be most important where two conditions hold simultaneously: (1) the type of education most closely reflects membership in a particular status group, and (2) that group controls employment in particular organizational contexts" (p. 1012).

In relation to higher education, hierarchical institutional arrangements and related participation and completion rates lend themselves to a conflict theory argument. For example, it has been argued that, in North America, community colleges serve as institutions to "divert" minority and disadvantaged youngsters away from universities (Brint and Karabel, 1989) while offering them the false hope of transfer to universities. Instead, aspirations are "cooled out" (Clark, 1960) and students are steered toward a "terminal curriculum" which leads to dead-end degrees with little economic or social value. Through this lens, community colleges reproduce the existing structure of inequality by training and socializing individuals for work in capitalist enterprises (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Karabel, 1986). In Europe, different vocational tracks (e.g., the gymnasium in Germany or lycée in France vs. vocational education in both countries) serve the same purpose, just much more overtly. Turner's (1960) conceptual framework of "contest" and "sponsored" mobility illuminates different societal approaches to allocating elite status to its citizens.

Credentialism theory is another line of argument emerging from conflict theory. The functionalist view that increasing levels of education are necessary to contend with an increasingly complex society has generated substantial criticism. Collins (1979, 2002) asserts that there is little evidence to support the view that 1) the majority of jobs in modern society require more sophisticated knowledge and skills than in previous years and 2) that there is a positive relationship between formal education and productivity. He maintains that the "myth of technocracy" is perpetuated by employers and educational institutions which have vested interests in raising levels of educational qualifications.

According to Collins (1979), education has become a form of "cultural currency" (p. 60–62), which is used to purchase desirable occupations. Post-secondary education is perceived by students as a means to enter the power system, and it is the attainment of a credential rather than the acquisition of knowledge that is desired. Dore (1976) argues that credentials become inflated with rapid educational expansion; thus, the competition for desirable occupations then exerts pressure to increase the quantity of credentials required by employers. The resulting "credentialing society", according to Collins, is irrational and wasteful, and is detrimental to minority groups in their struggle for dominance and prestige. But as Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) point out, "credentials are the only game in town" (p.166) and have become a rite of passage, an indication that a process of educational socialization has occurred. More in line with a functionalist argument, Arrow (1973) suggests that higher education can be viewed as acting like a "double filter" for the purchasers of labour, first by selecting entrants, and second by passing or failing them. In this way, higher education serves as a screening device by sorting individuals of differing abilities. Dore counters by claiming that employers appear to be "unquestioning victims of the widespread myth that education 'improves' people" (p. 5) and by hiring someone with qualifications beyond the requirements of the position, employers believe that they are getting more for their money. Credentials are recognized by employers and by the larger society as constituting adequate preparation for occupational status; therefore, credentials rather than

knowledge ensure market survival (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985). However, for Collins (2002) “credential inflation is the dirty secret of modern education” (p. 234).

Ironically, new technological advances such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) are challenging the relationships among formal education, skill acquisition, and credentialing practices. Currently there is also a lively debate on the optimal balance of general versus specific skills and academic versus vocational education, fuelled by organizations such as the OECD (2012). From a sociological perspective, framing these arguments either from conflict or a functional lens will lead to vastly different policy directions.

## Stratification theory

Another prominent theoretical approach is the social stratification perspective (Clark, 1973). This approach seeks to explore “the degree to which individuals’ educational attainment is independent of ascriptive characteristics” (Bidwell and Friedkin, 1988: 453). These ascriptive characteristics, or structural inequalities, are identified as socioeconomic status (most commonly parents’ education, occupation, and income), gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. Studies have focused on a single characteristic as the independent variable, for example the relationship between gender and participation; or a combination of ascriptive characteristics, such as the relationship of gender and parental education on choice of institution and field of study participation trends among groups based on gender, socioeconomic background, and rural/urban residency, and the relationship between city size and region, family background, and ethnoreligious background on educational transition (e.g., Pineo and Goyder, 1988).

Several important findings have been revealed in these studies. First, those who enter the post-secondary system historically have come and continue to come from higher socioeconomic origins. Second, women are both “winners” and “losers” in the battle against ascription. That is, enrolment of women in undergraduate programs has now exceeded enrolment of men, but they continue to be underrepresented in certain disciplines (e.g., engineering) (Andres and Adamuti-Trache, 2007; OECD, 2013) and in graduate studies, and women with lower socioeconomic backgrounds are overrepresented in non-university institutions and underrepresented in universities.

Although studies such as these have contributed greatly to the understanding of participation in higher education of various groups in society by highlighting the existence, persistence, or diminishment of certain structural inequalities, they provide little insight into how individuals make decisions about participation in post-secondary education and the processes that underpin these decisions. This approach has two primary limitations. First, it is not possible to determine characteristics of the individual, institutional aspects of educational status allocation, and the internal organization and processes of educational institutions that affect participation and attainment (Bidwell and Friedkin, 1988) because this perspective only considers factors exogenous to post-secondary participation. Second, this perspective does not allow for a discussion of the processes behind these disparities (Boyd et al., 1981)

Observed phenomena, such as the correlation between socioeconomic status and participation in post-secondary education, are not wholly consistent and do not constitute an explanation (Giddens, 1984; Porter et al., 1982). Although it is not unusual to conclude that a measure such as socioeconomic status is related to the probability that an individual will continue on to post-secondary education, it remains unclear as to how these correlations come about and hence serves as an incomplete measure. Hännqvist (1978) asserts that research efforts of this type have likely provided more knowledge about stable and fairly resistant factors behind educational choice than about factors that influence change. Such criticism led to the development of a

status attainment research agenda, which addresses some of the limitations encountered by a social stratification approach. Yet, despite these criticisms, stratification theory remains a powerful heuristic, as exemplified, for example, by Shavit, Aurum, and Gamoran's (2007) edited edition comprised of 15 country accounts employing this perspective.

### Status attainment

The seminal work of Duncan and Hodge (1963) and Blau and Duncan (1967) generated a series of studies which now fall under the rubric of status attainment models. The original path model of occupational status attainment presented by Blau and Duncan (1967) was developed to address two questions: "How and to what degree do the circumstances of birth condition subsequent status?" and "How does status attained (whether by ascription or by achievement) at one stage of the life cycle affect the prospects for a subsequent stage?" (p.164). Using an analytical framework which consisted of two antecedent structural variables (father's education and father's occupation), two intervening behavioural variables (respondent's education and respondent's first job), and one dependent variable (respondent's occupational level), they attempted to model social mobility. As one part of this work, they demonstrated the existence of a strong correlation between father's occupational standing and son's completed years of schooling.

The model was subsequently modified by the addition of psychological and social-psychological variables that included mental ability, academic performance, the influence of significant others, and educational and occupational aspirations (Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf, 1970; Sewell, Haller, and Portes, 1969). This ameliorated version, known as the "Wisconsin" model of status transmission and status attainment, demonstrated that the effects of family social status on educational and occupational attainment were mediated substantially by social-psychological variables, such as influence of significant others and one's own educational and occupational aspirations (Jencks et al., 1983; Sewell and Hauser, 1975).

Since educational attainment was demonstrated to be a powerful predictor of subsequent occupational attainment, educational attainment became the dependent variable. This model was further modified by treating the level of educational aspirations, the level of occupational aspirations, and/or educational expectations as dependent variable(s) (Porter et al., 1982).

Similar to the findings of studies that employ occupational attainment as the dependent variable, studies of educational attainment have demonstrated not only the direct relationship between educational attainment and the status origins of students, but that these effects are mediated by the intervening variables contained in the model. These variables, in diminishing importance, include academic ability, prior academic performance, educational aspirations, parental and peer social support, and track placement (Bidwell and Friedkin, 1988).

The Wisconsin model of status attainment has been described as one of the most significant and influential advances in recent sociological research (Kerckhoff, 1976). Coser (1975) explains that because of the complexity of these models, it is possible to assess the contributions of social inheritance and individual effort in the status attainment process.

Yet, one major criticism of status attainment models persists. Although the range of variables included in various models is extensive, models are comprised almost exclusively of measures of individual characteristics, and thus are interpreted as "individual resources or liabilities" which contribute to the individual attainment process. Tinto's (1975) research on student departure is a prominent example of a model emphasizing individual characteristics. Extra-individual or structural constraints, such as class barriers or between-group differences in opportunity structures, have been given minimal attention. Coser (1975) remarks that "there is no concern here with the ways in which differential class power and social advantage operate in predictable and



routine ways, through specifiable social interactions between classes or interest groups, to give shape to determine social structures and to create differential life chances” (p. 694).

Kerckhoff (1976) explains that the theoretical approach used in the interpretation of status attainment models is that of social interactionism and the focus of such a socialization model is on the individual and her or his evolving characteristics. It is assumed that the agent travels unconstrained through the social system; thus, a person’s attainments are determined by what he or she chooses to do and how well he or she does it. This perspective, Coser (1975) adds, is rooted in the prevailing American ideology of individual achievement. Kerckhoff suggests an alternate view; an “allocation model” that shifts to an examination of the “mechanisms and criteria of control of the individual by social agencies”. The individual, in an allocation model, is viewed as relatively constrained by the social structure, and her or his attainments are determined by “what he [sic] is permitted to do” (p. 369).

Although structural constraints and selection criteria are absent from most status attainment models, they have not escaped investigation. These investigations include, for example, the relationship between student persistence and the nature of institutional environments (Tinto and Pusser, 2006) which addresses some of the shortcomings of Tinto’s early models. In general, these studies reveal how various components of post-secondary educational life, such as the social organization of education and the hidden curriculum, contribute to social reproduction.

## Reproduction theory

Reproduction theory, as originally advanced by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and specifically about the field of higher education (1979), provides a rich arsenal of theory that is directly relevant to the field of higher education. According to reproduction theory, in order to account for practices (action), the series of effects that underlie them can only be accounted for by illuminating them. Three concepts – capital, habitus, and field – are key to Bourdieu’s theoretical formulation.

Bourdieu (1984) defines capital as “the set of actually usable resources and powers” (p. 114) that exists as in the forms of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Capital can exist in objectified form, such as material properties, or in incorporated form as in cultural capital.

### *Cultural capital*

Unlike Parsons’ (1959) claim that schools are socially neutral institutions (see Functionalism and Parsons), Bourdieu posits that educational institutions are part of a larger universe of symbolic institutions that reproduce existing power relationships. Similar to Collins (1971), the culture of the dominant class is transmitted and rewarded by the educational system. Schools reinforce particular types of linguistic competence, authority patterns, and types of curricula. However, Bourdieu provides a clear theoretical connection between families and the educational system. Children from privileged social backgrounds acquire cultural resources of the dominant class in the form of habits, good taste, and attitudes within the home environment. Upon entry into the educational system, students who are familiar with the dominant culture are able to receive and decode it. Conversely, children who do not possess such experiences are disadvantaged and are less likely than their privileged classmates to be able to convert cultural capital into academic qualifications – specifically higher education credentials – which, according to Bourdieu (1986) are “academically sanctioned” (p. 248) and eventually converted into occupational status.

### *Social capital*

Social capital is comprised of social obligations or “connections”. The volume of the social capital possessed by an individual is determined by the size of the network of connections that can be mustered and the volume of the various forms of capital possessed by each member within a given network (Bourdieu, 1986). Social networks transmit information. From a higher education perspective, the most valuable is practical or theoretical knowledge of current and future worth of academic qualifications. Informed individuals make wise educational investments (e.g., choosing elite post-secondary institutions and valued programs such as MBAs and engineering) whereas those who lack such information lack the social capital to discriminate among educational options.

### *Habitus*

Habitus, in brief, is a system of dispositions in which “history turned into nature”. According to Bourdieu (1977) disposition has three intersecting dimensions. First, it is the outcome of an organizing action, and hence has a structuring component. Second, it implies a way of being, a habitual state. Third, the idea of predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination is embedded in the definition.

Cultural capital, social capital, and habitus are the active properties of the multi-dimensional space comprised of intersecting “fields” of the social world (Bourdieu, 1991) and by which individuals or groups are “defined by their relative positions in this space” (p.230). Each individual is confined to one, and only one, position and this position is defined by (1) the positions that she or he occupies in the different fields, including the field of higher education institutions and (2) the distribution of powers that are active in each field.

Because direct mechanisms of reproduction, such as discrimination based on ascriptive characteristics including gender, race, or sexual orientation, are no longer considered to be legitimate, dominant groups will continue to invent new indirect mechanisms of reproduction in order to circumvent the levelling hand of meritocratic criteria. A plethora of studies in the realm of higher education employing reproduction theory has emerged over the last thirty years. For example, Reay et al. (2005) employed the concepts of social and cultural capital, habitus, and field to explore post-secondary choices and experiences of primarily working-class and minority students, and Karabel (2005) exposed how legacy parents, elite secondary schools, and university presidents, faculty, and staff at three Ivy League universities colluded to ensure that these institutions remained the preserve of the élites.

### **Rational choice theory**

Although rational choice theory originates from the discipline of economics, it is firmly embedded – either implicitly or explicitly – in sociology of higher education research (Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997) and particularly in studies of post-secondary participation and attainment.

According to rational choice theory, when an individual is confronted with several courses of action, the action taken is the one that she or he believes is most likely to have the best outcome. That is, rational choice involves choosing the best means available for achieving a given end. In this sense, rational choice is instrumental, and actions are chosen as efficient means to a further end. Those endorsing this perspective argue that it is a form of optimal adaptation to existing circumstances (Elster, 1986; Harsanyi, 1986).



Aiming to explain human behaviour, rational choice theory proceeds in two steps. The first step is normative – to determine what a rational person would do in a given circumstance. The normative or prescriptive component prescribes how individuals should act in a given situation, and emphasis is placed on guidelines, procedures, and analytical tools for optimizing decisions. It also predicts that individuals will act in the prescribed way. This is followed by the second step, descriptive in nature, which sets out to ascertain whether the action outlined in the first step is what the individual actually did. In contrast to the normative model, the descriptive model describes the way that decisions are actually made in the real world. The focus of the descriptive model is to provide an account of decision-making behaviour, including each step in the process.

Various rational choice theorists emphasize different dimensions. From a *practical rationality perspective*, reasoning is undertaken to determine what to do (Audi, 1982). This is contrasted with theoretical or epistemic reasoning which is undertaken to determine what is the case or what to believe (Audi, 1982; Benn and Mortimore, 1976). Practical reasoning focuses on three components: beliefs, wants or desires, and evidence (Elster, 1989). A technical rationality perspective is often used to explain behaviour regarding educational choice. From this perspective, the type of decision is important to consider. Decisions can be of three types: decisions under certainty, decisions under risk, and decisions under uncertainty. Choice regarding post-high school destination is generally assumed to be a decision under risk. For example, Härnqvist (1978) points out that participation in post-secondary education requires not only the actions of the deciding individual, but also acceptance by the selecting agency (p. 18).

From a higher education perspective, rational choice theory has been used to attempt to explain the means that individuals use to pursue certain goals. For example, Brint and Karabel (1989) point out the “consumer-choice” model is an application of rational choice theory within the field of higher education. From this perspective, students are viewed as “highly rational economic maximizers ... [who] wish to obtain the highest possible rates of return for the lowest cost in time, effort, and expense” (p. 13). However, they challenge the explanatory power of such an interpretation. Also, rational choice theory is not useful in explaining the different preferences, desires, and beliefs that individuals hold and reasons offered, amounts of information used, or costs and benefits considered.

## Feminist theory

A unique feminist theory of the sociology of higher education does not exist. However, consistent with the principles of feminist theory in general, feminist research in higher education could be said to adopt the definition by Chafetz, which she describes as

a label that minimally includes four tenets: (1) gender is a system of inequality between males and females as sex categories by which things feminine are socially and culturally devalued and men enjoy greater access to scarce and valued resources; (2) gender inequality is produced socioculturally and is not immutable; (3) gender inequality is evaluated negatively as unjust, unfair, etc; (4) therefore, feminists should strive to eliminate gender inequality.

(2004: 965–966)

However, according to Hart (2006), feminist theory continues to be underutilized in the sociology of higher education. Based on a recent analysis of published articles in three key American journals of higher education, Hart concludes that although 27 per cent of the articles analysed included the word “gender” in the title or abstract, only six (0.66 per cent) of the 1065 articles

were identified as feminist. Of these, liberal feminism was the dominant perspective, which is described as the least radical and controversial type of feminism as it strives to work within – rather than reject or revolutionize – current educational structures. Her findings are consistent with those of Townsend (1993) in that “women and, particularly feminism, are not prevalent themes in recent higher education scholarship, a reality that has not changed dramatically since 1969” (p. 57).

A considerable proportion of research on women in higher education is conducted from the perspective of gender stratification theory which focuses on gender differences, often along with other variables defining one’s social location (e.g., class, race, gender orientation) (Chafetz, 2004) in educational attainment (see stratification theory in this chapter).

## Conclusion

Even when delimited to the sociology of higher education in relation to access and participation, the body of literature since the 1970s has expanded considerably. Also, it is evident that higher education researchers who identify primarily with the discipline of sociology draw on other disciplinary perspectives, including economics, history, philosophy, and psychology, often in a complementary rather than a competing fashion. Conceptual frameworks such as welfare regime theory and production regime theory from the discipline of political science are also beginning to be used in conjunction with sociological theory. Comparative higher education research, whose roots were and continue to be in sociology, has blossomed since Clark (1973) documented the development of the sociology of higher education.

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