

TOWARDS A COHERENT THEORY OF STUDENT PERSONNEL

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Despite the paper shortage there is an abundance of literature in college student personnel administration. Sadly the bulk of the research literature suffers from serious flaws of conceptualization and orientation. Research in the field lacks a clear theoretical framework thereby limiting the fruitfulness of inquiry. Information about the student and the college environment may be useful to practitioners but such knowledge fails to advance our understanding of the actual activity of student personnel administration. Conversely productive research tendency would have a well articulated theoretical perspective to provide a shared matrix of meaning. It would take as its topic the ways in which student personnel workers create particular social structures and thereby contribute to the total college environment. An appropriate theoretical orientation is available as will be shown in this paper.

The total student development or student personnel point of view rests on the most basic formulation of social psychology and adolescent development. In short, people change and mature during their college years and this process is influenced by, or sensitive to, the social context. (Brown, 1972, Penny, 1972) The validity of this position is almost unchallengeable. But then what does it illuminate in the college environment or in the area of student personnel praxis? No doubt the person working on a job can use this notion as a basic orientation; however it hardly helps researchers formulate theories, assess the relevance of hypothesis and data, or resolve epistemic questions.

By encouraging borrowing across fields the absence of a well developed scientific paradigm or theory leads to a naive view of the embeddedness of paradigm, theory and methodology. (Kuhn, 1972) Clearly findings of any scientific endeavor must be interpreted in terms of some paradigm which provides the fundamental assumptions necessary to carry on science. Paradigms provide concepts, criterion of relevancy of topics, suggest appropriate theoretical commitments, and can even provide a context for the determination of which facts are relevant to the question at hand. In a similar way theory and methodology are linked by certain basic tenants of scientific inquiry. As theory establishes a domain of inquiry and a range of important questions, methodologies generate data which describes a certain sort of reality. Different forms of data are relevant to different forms of theoretic and substantive questions. A psychologist would have a great deal of trouble using data generated by the use of a cyclotron just as a nuclear physicist would be hard-pressed to test hypotheses with data from rat running experiments. By virtue of rampant borrowing from several disciplines and the absence of a clear theory the research in student personnel produces diffuse findings and precludes the development of a consistent and coherent fact-theoretic knowledge.

A danger of the total student development-student personnel point of view is that it encourages studies of the student and the interaction of the student and the college setting. Such studies may be well done but they do little to build a fact-theoretic knowledge of student personnel work. Several prominent

studies illustrate this problem. In Beyond the Open Door Pat Cross described the "new student". (Cross, 1971) She also sketched out some orientations for dealing with these students. Her quantitative approach glossed most of the social process she was referring to and she could only conjecture as to how the student personnel worker actually deals with these students. In Astin's The College Environment student attitudes were related to broad differentiations of college settings. He did not use a process orientation and had little to say about the doing of personnel work. (Astin, 1968) Chickering concentrated on the development of the college student in his Education and Identity. His is a primarily psychological study and overlooks real settings and interactions between student and personnel administrator. (Chickering, 1969) While these works are not a statistically valid sample of the research in the field they are held up as exemplars in terms of quality and concern. It appears that these works document the failure to carefully formulate studies which contribute to our knowledge of how student personnel work is actually done and how that work creates at least one aspect of the college environment. Additionally it neglects the careful study of the impact of personnel workers upon students.

The glossing of paradigm, theory and methods can be ameliorated by developing a theoretic orientation which is distinctive to, or particularly well suited to, the study of everyday student personnel work. Such inquiry would have as its topic the activity of student personnel workers as they create and sustain the college environment. As a movement within sociology, ethnomethodology could provide the necessary theoretic and analytic framework as well as concentrating research upon the proper object. The use of an ethnomethodological perspective would assist efforts to give student personnel a coherent fact-theoretic corpus of knowledge.

While ethnomethodological studies take several forms, the central theoretic position directs inquiry towards the creative activity which produces and sustains social structures. By emphasizing the meaning of social action to the actor and the ways in which members of a setting use their knowledge of the setting to move within that setting ethnomethodologists pay particular attention to common-sense rationality, rule interpretation and usage and the acquisition of language. (Garfinkel, 1967, Weber, 1947, Mehan, 1972) Additionally ethnomethodologists view behavior as rule following and not as rule governed which is the more standard sociological perspective. Consequently the situated interpretation of behavioral constraints, models and expectancies and the actual response to such things take on profound significance. (Wilson, 1970) Therefore ethnomethodological studies of the college environment and of student personnel work would consider what practitioners do, how they come to understand the setting, how they use that knowledge to operate within the setting, how and what they communicate with each other and how all of this activity produces a particular social structure.

Like all social sciences ethnomethodology has to confront the problem of seeking universals in the face of pervasive variation. Harold Garfinkel handles this problem by using two accepted sociological notions and then adding two more fundamental notions which tend to characterize ethnomethodological theory. Garfinkel characterizes social structures as to their reproduceability, cohort independence, availability to member's rationality, and the fact that these three elements are all the accomplishments of member's

practices. As argued by Durkheim in The Rules of Sociological Method social structures are not interlocked with particular individuals or any single and particular interaction. (Durkheim, 1938) To have social reality social structure must be repeatable, that is, it must exist through time and from one interaction or setting to the next. Though Durkheim tended to reify social structure, the whole notion would collapse without the quality of invariance which is derived from cohort independence and reproduceability. Georg Simmel pointed out that there is something greater than the sum of individual social acts and requiring conceptualization which frees it from being totally setting specific. This allows analysis across groups and through time. (Simmel, 1950) The features of reproduceability and cohort independence can be illustrated by looking at a class such as we find associated with instructor, syllabus, students, and the interaction of these elements. We conceptualize a class as having an existence which carries over from one session to the next, is characterized in part by the nature of the interaction, but can still be defined as having the essential features, belonging to the category class.

Noting that we are speaking of the conceptualization of an interactional setting as a 'class' we can see the importance of conceptualization process to the class participants. Garfinkel called this 'availability' and asserted that the basic elements of reproduceability and cohort independence are known or knowable by members. As he takes behavior to be rule-following it is important that members be given the ability to know those rules which are used in constituting the social order. Members judgementally use their rules in producing acceptable behavior. This behavior literally defines the social structure. We can say that it produces the social structure. Garfinkel called this the quality of accomplishment. Reproduceability, cohort independence, and the availability of these to member's common-sense rationality are all the accomplishment of member's activity. For instance, students know what the social structure 'class' is. They know which behaviors produce something we term a class and which behaviors will disrupt that form and produce something other than a class. This does not exclude trouble making as a constituent of any class as such behavior is frequently typical of school classes. In short, people know the rules of the game in terms of stated and tacit rules, constraining rules and performative rules. Naturally there are things about a setting that people do not know but they are aware of the essentials of a setting, e.g. the behavioral patterns which produce the structure. (Shumsky, 1974) Without this knowledge the setting or structure would collapse as there would be no competent members to create and sustain it as anything more than people existing in the same space and time. Within settings members are constantly making these 'rules' available to each other. They tutor each other as to what it means behaviorally to be a member (e.g. to play the game properly). Thus ethnomethodological studies emphasize member's practices for making social structures accountable to other members. Consequently linguistic behavior and the development of a situated corpus of knowledge is given a central part. If we were to use ethnomethodology to study student personnel work we would look at Astin, Chickering, Cross, and so on as resources for members. For the analyst such materials would be of interest to the extent they are used by workers as they do whatever it is that student personnel administrators do. (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970, Pollner, 1974)

It is tantamount that we keep in mind that reproduceability, cohort independence and availability as features of social structures are through and through the accomplishment of member's activity. The creative activity of people produces the structures which people make known to each other. The social order is man made and maintained. What we do, what we think of our doings, and what we communicate to others via talk and action are essential elements of any setting. It is fallacious to locate social structure in some nebulous region apart from the real acts of people. It is the praxis of living people which creates the structure, makes the structure known or knowable, and maintains or changes the structure.

An ethnomethodological study of student personnel work would attempt a full description of how workers do their work and then a description of how that work produces a particular social structure or setting. This would include an examination of member's knowledge as it is used within the setting. The analyst would consider the ways in which practitioners come to grasp what their work is, how and what they communicate with each other, and how they use their knowledge of the setting to move within the setting and thereby inbed their understandings into the setting. (Garfinkel, 1967) For instance, the student development-student personnel point of view could be examined as to the extent it is used to make sense of the work and to do the work. As an explanation of the work this perspective is inadequate as it could only gloss over what people are actually doing. Yet as part of the member's corpus of knowledge the student personnel point of view could become an integral feature of the setting as long as people rely on it to guide their activity.

In a study which anticipated many ethnomethodological orientations, Cicourel and Kitsuse looked at the educational futures and plans of high school students in terms of the routine activity of high school counselors. (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963) They found that the key variable in plans for attending college was enrollment in college preparatory programs. Counselors worked closely with these students to make sure that college applications were in order. It was found that counselors relied heavily on measures of social class in determining who they would encourage into college preparatory classes and then work with them in assuring proper college applications. Thus the ostensible finding that social class explains plans for post-secondary education is partially attributable to the ways in which counselors attend to such attributes. What matters is not social class per se but the way counselors build that attribute into social structure. Surely socio-economic background affects plans but just as important is the fact that this information is used in a certain way by counselors. It is the routine interpretive work of counselors which explains part of the finding that those of higher socio-economic class are more likely to attend college. Counselors build social class into the social variable description of those going to college. We could gloss this entire process by calling it another example of stereotyping but such a move would retard our understanding of social order.

During observation in an elementary school Shumsky and Mehan studied placement decisions. (Shumsky and Mehan, 1974) A committee decided which students would enter a special reading class for slow learners. A transcript of the committee meeting was analyzed to see how the decision was accomplished.

All placements were done within 22 lines of conversation. During that conversation the teachers and school principal relied on teachers previous knowledge of the students as they filled the special class. The common-sense rationality presumed that the teachers already knew which students qualified for the class. Formal criterion were never specified and the students were only named, not described beyond a simple statement that that student had reading problems or was a slow learner. We need not criticize this method of placement but should only note that in that setting the teacher was considered as having the necessary expertise to already know the student, the criterion of the class, and the ability to properly place students.

We could conduct the same sort of study in a context where student personnel administrators make decisions about the educational careers of students. We could look at decisions regarding financial aids, discipline, evaluation or whatever. As with the elementary school committee we could see if decisions were made in terms of formal guidelines or personal knowledge of the person(s) in question. A committee working on financial aids might use formal guidelines thereby using a situated rule which said in effect; the social structure of this setting is produced in terms of formal models of decision making and by the use of articulated guidelines of nature x, y, z. Such a committee would surely be producing a different setting than one that placed more emphasis on previous personal knowledge as was done in the elementary school. Consequently we would note that these contrasting committees are in effect producing different educational environments with different consequences to students and workers alike.

We cannot begin to talk about the student and the college environment without a careful and thorough inquiry into how educational settings are created and sustained by members, including student personnel administrators. The intent of this discussion has been to articulate a theoretical framework for carrying out such a study. While many approaches are possible, an ethnomethodological mode of study would have two distinct payoffs. By using a coherent theoretic perspective, studies into student personnel would produce a corpus of knowledge with greater unity and consistency of focus and theoretical grounding. This would help alleviate the diffusiveness so prevalent in the current literature. Secondly, a description of how student personnel workers are creating a particular sort of college environment could open up new possibilities for change.

While information about the student and the student in the environment may interest us and point to problems, it has little to offer in terms of relating behavior to outcomes. It is at this level that student personnel needs development. We cannot generate recipes for making the good environment but we can surely increase our knowledge about how that environment comes to be. Innovation becomes possible as we recognize how our mundane, routine and everyday activity helps create the social order of educational settings. While some things are beyond our control we have to keep in mind that many things are within our control. Heightened self-awareness never changes anything but it is a necessary first step.

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