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Published version

COLDRON, John (2011). Available educational identities: an exploration of kinds of pupils, parents and teachers constituted through classification in the educational field. In: European Conference of Educational Researchers, Berlin, 13-16 September 2011.

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Available educational identities: an exploration of kinds of pupils, parents and teachers constituted through classification in the educational field

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Paper presented at European Conference of Educational Researchers

Berlin

September 2011

Introduction

By categorisation we identify the kinds of things that we take to exist. I want to park the question as to how far we discover kinds that subsist in nature and how far we constitute those kinds through our practices of classification. Whether one adopts a radical nominalistic ontology or one that gives a pre-linguistic role to mind independent physical reality, *social* reality is clearly of our making. It is more readily recognised that it is in some way constructed, could have been built differently and, if we accept something like John Searle's social ontology, is language dependent in very interesting and fundamental ways. Sometimes our descriptions, being declarations of certain kinds, constitute the things in the world e.g. *I now declare you man and wife. or We are friends.* Further, classification is fundamental to social life. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas observed (Douglas and Hull 1992) the proper allocation to categories is essential to the orderly conduct of everyday life because it provides the basis for correct prediction of other people's actions and attitudes, explains common difficulties and weaves a coherent narrative as to how people (and things) should relate to one another. Charles Tilly says something similar:

... A category consists of a set of actors who share a boundary distinguishing all of them from and relating all of them to at least one set of actors visibly excluded by the boundary. A category simultaneously lumps together actors deemed similar, splits sets of actors considered dissimilar, and defines relations between the two sets...solidary-competitive interactions form fault lines between network clusters. They also generate stories that participants subsequently use to explain and justify their interactions. The stories embody shared understandings of who we are, who they are, what divides us, and what connects us. (Tilly 1998 pps 62-63)

Categories and categorisation are powerful. We do things with categories. Classification is far more than a passive description – it is a declaration that the world is, or should be, the way we describe it. This applies to all social kinds – institutions as well as people – but the latter is particularly sensitive.

Ian Hacking has, in a number of studies, explored ways in which kinds or categories of people come about. He argues that the identities available to (or imposed) on us vary over time – new kinds of people emerge and some disappear. Sustained categories are part of a wider classificatory practice – it is only possible to be a certain kind of person when the social resources (structures, discourses, institutions) that affirm those identities are in place i.e. when the naming is part of a wider practice. When those practices change, previously established kinds and associated identities can change and even disappear. Hacking has illustrated his argument through explorations of how the categories of 'child abuser', 'people with multiple personality disorder' and 'autistic children' emerged (Hacking 2007). He offers conceptual/analytical tools to distinguish important aspects of the constitutive processes of classification, notably seven engines of discovery - the practices of counting; quantifying; creating norms; correlating; medicalising; biologising and geneticising. To these he added three other processes: normalising, which he describes as an 'engine of organisation and control; bureaucratising – an engine of administration; and reclaiming identity which is the 'resistance of the known to the knowers' (p22 Hacking 2007). This last is an instance of the

looping effect which is central to Hacking's analysis and is what he signals in the title of his British Academy lecture *Kinds of People: Moving Targets*.

To be categorised is to be under a certain description. This description is an available resource for members to think about themselves and for them and others to place them in relation to members of other categories. They may resist such an identity, or accept it, elaborate on it, or use it in some other way, but they act in relation to it and this looping effect has consequences for the category. We need only think of the many examples in the history of identity politics where resistance takes the form of inverting the negativity of a categorisation – black, queer, woman.

This paper considers some of the classifications and available identities of pupils, of parents and of teachers that are salient in current debates on social justice and education. Hacking is careful to restrict his assertions of making up people to his scrupulously researched and argued cases often of a medical kind. Such formal and semi-formal categories are significant of course, but the process of classifying people, seeing them under a certain description, is the stuff of everyday life. It is a commonplace experience to find oneself classified in ordinary conversation and to respond to, or try to affect, or manipulate, such descriptions be they negative or positive. This is the drama of ordinary life that Goffman so effectively analysed.

An important feature of Tilly's work is the way the process of grouping and collective action focuses on boundaries. Elective membership of a category does not imply any more homogeneity between individual members of the category than a perception of shared interest in maintaining the boundary although empirically some further homogeneity will be generated. He contrasts essences with bonds. Individualistic explanations of social phenomena rely, he argues, on unchanging essences or attributes of various kinds and tenacity, whereas bonds are constructed ad hoc and are mutable. The processes of categorisation and boundary work occur at all levels of social interaction – at the micro level as part of individuals' and small groups' meaning making; at the meso-level in the management of small institutions such as schools, factories and universities; and at the macro-level of governance and structural formations such as the legal system. Self-categorisation implies personal identity and, because we are simultaneously members of many categories, we have multiple identities that intersect in the embodied self. And we each struggle to achieve a tolerable level of personal and public consistency between these identities and we experience this as more or less coherence of the self and self-respect. In so far as classifications constitute relations between different categories of people they constitute, or create, or enact recognition and mal-recognition.

Tilly (1998; 2004) emphasises the importance of borrowing. Once an instance of categorisation is embedded in one part of society it stands as a form, a logical set of possible relations, that can be transposed to another setting e.g. from a factory to a school, a prison to a hospital. Such borrowings reduce the time and effort it takes to conceptualise, communicate and gain acceptance for new forms of relations but it also reproduces the power relations and inequalities of the original form – this in part is the way inequalities become durable. Existing categorisations, the kinds of things we think there are (our social ontology), and the relations they instantiate, not only constitute the social world but they are to hand as resources to organise other parts of our lives. More than this the *forms* can be used syntactically; they can be taken as signs and labels that denote or stand for other

things and can take their place in complex chains of reference that gives them expressive and representative powers beyond their initial use (Goodman 1968; 1978).

In sum, through our categories we create the social world, constitute relations of obligations and rights between people, make identities available, sustain durable inequalities and enact recognition and mal-recognition. Even those that are scientifically authoritative, as the product of Hacking's engines of discovery, are essentially defeasible, and this is even more true of the many everyday pragmatic descriptions we put people under and those implicated in governance of institutions and nations.

In Hacking's account (Hacking 1995) of the history of multiple personality disorder (MPD) he shows how, alongside cautious professional definitions of MPD expressed in publications and regulatory documents, there came to be in circulation what he called a prototype of an MPD person. This prototype was articulated and elaborated by authoritative figures within the field, drawing on their experience of particular cases, to capture the set of predominant features of a person with multiple personality disorder. It tended to be presented in the form of an individual case history but was meant to typify, to stand as a special kind of example. Hacking (1995) describes how this prototype was often used in semi-formal professional dialogue and as a heuristic device in lectures. It was relatively immune to falsification because there was no claim that all and every person with MPD would have all of the features of the prototype but it was assumed that they would always have some. Importantly these prototypes served not only to describe but also to explain. They exemplified a typical aetiology, a common medically significant causal sequence – a meaningful narrative. And they underpinned, gave a rationale for, action – in this case therapeutic practice.

It is a short step from prototype to stereotype. Both are (or shortly become) persistent, preconceived and oversimplified ideas about a category of people. If prototypes endure and become entrenched they become stereotypes. It is the argument of this paper that significant stereotypes are circulating in educational debate and particularly in the debate about admissions, segregation and educational inequality. They too offer descriptions, and imply explanations and recommendations. They simultaneously characterise the problems to be tackled and imply the kinds of action needed to redress them. In what follows I offer characterisations of some currently circulating stereotypes of children, parents and schools. They vary from nation to nation and these are taken from the English context.

I begin with some of the kinds of children constituted within the discourse and practices of attainment and assessment. The two following stereotypes arise, and have considerable consequences, at least partly as a result of the practices of accountability in England. We have first the More Educable Child.

A More Educable Child (an MEC) is able, high attaining, aspirational, well behaved, hard working, and engaged with, and positive towards, schooling. He or she is personally well organised and any special needs tend to arise from dyslexia or physical impairments rather than emotional or behavioural problems. They are well mannered and cultured. They have these characteristics because they have been parented well from an early age, through which they have learnt self-discipline. They have been exposed to stimulating learning experiences, including a richer more elaborate linguistic environment, within their families and continue to be well supported in their education from home. They are usually middle class.

And the Less Educable Child.

A Less Educable Child (LEC) is less able, low attaining, with limited educational and social aspirations. He or she is badly behaved in and out of school, lazy and disengaged from schooling. S/he is personally disorganised and has more emotional and behavioural special needs. These problems often arise as a result of poor pre-natal health, poor parenting from birth (including diet) and a chaotic family life where self-discipline and good work habits are not inculcated and education is not valued. They are rough, ill mannered, uncultured, unsupported in their education from home and rebellious or disrespectful towards authority. They are usually working class.

There are accompanying and mutually reinforcing stereotypes of parents. While these stereotypes can apply to both fathers and mothers there is a strong gender theme. Mothers as the main carers of school aged children are the focus of implicit blame or praise. Here is the stereotype of Working Class Parents:

The working class mother (WCM) did not take adequate care during pregnancy to avoid drink or to stop smoking and did not provide adequately stimulating early learning experiences. Her emotional life is chaotic and her children are likely to be fathered by different men. Both father and mother are poorly educated and probably of low intelligence. The family environment is culturally, linguistically and educationally impoverished. The parents either do not value education and therefore do not care which school their child goes to and do not engage with the choice process and so opt for that which is most convenient (usually the closest), or they do value education and wish to choose the best school but lack the ability to discriminate between the good and bad schools and the competence to manage the complex admissions process.

This stereotype supports the conclusion that the parenting practices of the least advantaged are to blame for their children's lack of attainment, educational credentials and, ultimately, their weaker command of status and wealth.

The attributes described above tend to be negative and one stereotype of the middle class parent (MCP) is the same set inverted to produce a positive model – the archetypal 'good parent'. However there is an influential negative stereotype of middle class parents.

Middle class parents (MCPs) are pushy, selfish and sharp elbowed. Middle class mothers help in the primary classroom to check out the quality of the teacher, talk up their indignation at the poor quality of teaching in the playground or at coffee mornings, give sometimes intensive support in reading and arithmetic, engage forcefully with school staff to ensure their child's needs (as judged by the mother) are adequately met, and obsess about gaining their choice of school (Coldron 1999). They strategically seek advantage at the expense of working class parents and children by gaining access to high performing schools and in the process enhance those schools' reputations (Ball 2003; Lynch and Hodge 2002). Some are hypocritical in that they profess liberal views but act in their children's own interests (Brantlinger et al 1996). Even those relatively affluent parents who actively choose low performing schools for ostensibly altruistic reasons (e.g. affirming socially mixed intakes) find their children

attract extra resources and attention (James et al 2009; James et al 2010). Their children do not lose out relative to their middle class peers in other schools and do better than their working class peers in the same school. They too are effectively hypocritical.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the engines of discovery that have created these categories. In England reports have been produced (e.g. Gill 2010; Strand 2010; Gutman, L. M., Brown, J. and Akerman, R. 2009; DCSF 2009; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003) to quantify and offer explanations for the attainment gap between social groups and (replete with counting; quantifying; norm-making; and correlating) they reinforce the association of categories of parents differentiated in terms of social characteristics with categories of children defined in terms of their attainment (e.g. low attaining or high attaining). Other practices further entrench these associations. For example, the attempt to acknowledge the effect of intake on a school's performance uses proxy variables such as pupils on free school meals, number of children whose first language is other than English and so on. Scholars seeking to explain segregation of schools have discovered 'skilled choosers' and 'disconnected choosers' (Gewirtz et al 1995) 'alert' and 'inert' clients of (Echols and Willms 1992) more and less strategic parents. Surveys have confirmed the correlation of choice behaviours with social characteristics (Flatley et al 2001; Coldron et al 2008). These engines of discovery have entrenched the stereotypes that I have presented. They are fluid, informal and are often propagated orally.

Schools too are subject to significant practices of categorisation. Inspectors are required to classify schools as either Grade 1 Outstanding; Grade 2 Good; Grade 3 Satisfactory or Grade 4 Inadequate. Where a school is graded as satisfactory or inadequate inspectors are also required to make a judgement as to whether the school should be categorised as requiring a 'Notice to Improve' or, at the extreme, to be put into 'Special Measures'. These categorisations activate explicit duties of the Local Authority to intervene to effect improvement. That is they are highly consequential, and again the attainment agenda, and its associated monitoring practices, are powerfully implicated.

Associated stereotypes of teachers also circulate and are sustained by these and other classifying practices.

Teachers in low performing schools are less well qualified, do not have sufficient skill or energy to compensate for the greater educational challenges facing them and their children (Thrupp 1999; Lupton 2004a and 2004b) and are consequently in danger of being burned out and less effective. They were, or have become, not good enough to get a job in a high performing school (Brook 2008; Brighouse 2007). They culpably develop pastoral values rather than attainment values (van Zanten et al 2009; Power and Frandji 2010) leading to low aspirations for and low expectations of their pupils. They are both a cause and effect of the school's poor performance.

To conclude. I hope to have said enough to show the usefulness of looking at the practices of categorisation in this way. We should look not only at the formal systems but also the semi-formal and informal practices propagated in everyday interaction as stereotypes. A philosophical account beginning from the fundamental role of language as constitutive of the

social is helpful for understanding social practice. But we need to extend our conception of language beyond speech acts to all forms of meaning making through a range of symbol systems. Such an approach provides a secure foundation for constructing a robust and sustainable critique of power and social justice. Stereotypes, or conceptual and ontological narratives, pervade our practices as academics, as practitioners, as policy makers and understanding how they guide those practices is a necessary part of a reflexive practice.

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