Notes on the Social Organization of High Schools

CRAIG JACKSON CALHOUN and FRANCIS A. J. IANNI

Editors' Note: This paper is a preliminary organization of material from a large comparative study of high school social organization. The authors present a scheme for the analysis of interaction in institutional settings of which high schools are an example. There is also discussion of the role of various informal associations or "quasi-groups" in the organization of complex societies in general and educational institutions in particular. The authors assume that the social organization of a high school will greatly affect the learning process of the students and that an approach to this organization as a whole, rather than as a fragment — such as a formal curriculum — will be the most productive way to find out what, in fact, does go on in schools.

In any social institution there is a formal system which describes for members what is supposed to occur. While this system serves as the backdrop against which most of the formal rules of the institution are cast, no one believes that it describes reality. There is also an informal system within any institution which, while it is not fully apparent to participants, can often be discovered by observation of actual behavior. While they appear in juxtaposition, it is impossible to understand either of these systems without recourse to the other. Moreover, the social organization of any institution is the amalgam of the two, for it is the interface between the institutional rules of the formal system and the individual and group manipulation of those rules in the informal system which constitute the social organization of the institution.[1]

[1] This is analogous in some ways to the argument between those culturalists who, like some followers of Lévi-Strauss, argue for the primacy of rules and those social anthropologists who argue for the primacy of actual behavior. Primacy is not a relevant

This paper is a discussion of the social organization of three high schools — one rural, one suburban, and one urban — in the eastern section of the United States. In particular, we are concerned with some of the constants in social organization which emerge from an examination of these three cases. In addition, we delineate a scheme of analysis which has proven useful in looking at these three cases comparatively and which we suggest may have some utility for similar comparative studies.

The analysis focuses around three constants of human behavior which are immediately apparent to the observer in the high school. These are the sorting of actors into categories, territoriality, and the making and breaking of rules. We suggest that these three domains provide keys to understanding the statements, actions, and explanations of the members of the high school institution.

The research on which this paper is based in part has taken place over the past year and is still in progress. Three field teams have been studying the three high schools using a method of intensive participant observation. The high schools in question vary on a number of criteria. One is in a small town and draws from a catchment area including several rural townships. It has a student population of approximately 700. The second is in an upper middle-class suburb of a major city. The suburb is composed chiefly of single family dwellings occupied by commuting executives and their families. It has approximately 600 students. The students of both these schools are primarily white Protestants with some Roman Catholics. The third high school is situated in the "inner-city" area of a major metropolitan center roughly divided equally among black, Puerto Rican, Chinese, and white ethnic groupings. There are further subdivisions within these categories such as those of the speakers of various Chinese dialects and that between Italian Catholics and Jews.

We shall here give examples of the functioning of each of the three high schools seen through the three analytic foci. The intent of this procedure is not to explicate thoroughly the functioning of the schools, but rather to demonstrate the salience of the three domains — sorting, territoriality, and the making and breaking of rules.

It is a universal operation for human beings to distinguish classes among those with whom they interact. These classes are at any time capable of more or less general application. That is, a class established in any one situation may, but need not, be applied to any other. Further, the classes may, but need not, be abstracted. For example, it is common

distinction. Neither the cultural (formal rule) nor social (individual and group manipulation) reality is complete without the other, as most experienced field workers have known all along.

for high school teachers to have abstract conceptualizations of "good students" and "bad students" and to sort certain of the students of whom they have knowledge into either of these categories. On the other hand, while it is less common for teachers to use other, more abstract, conceptions such as students who "threaten" or "support" them, these are still salient categories for many of the teachers we have observed.

Sorting of students into categories or classes takes place among students, by other students, by teachers, and by administrators. Similarly, teachers and administrators are sorted by members of each category, including their own. It is interesting to note that these very categories, along with those of ancilliary personnel such as teachers and custodians, form one of the most basic examples of sorting in the school situation. These are probably among the most ascriptive of the school statuses, and yet they still contain an element of manageable ambiguity. Teachers who "act like students" or who "make friends with the principal" are common figures of disparagement by their fellows. It would seem that creating ambiguous situations at the borders of these classifications is a threatening activity. One of the reasons "teachers' pets" are so disliked is their symbolic violation of their basic classification.[2]

The distinction between ascribed and achieved status in the sorting procedure is an important one. As the two terms are normally used in the sociological literature, they leave an important facet of their potential meaning unresolved. A status may be traditionally termed ascribed when it is given to an individual regardless of his personal effort. Note that this is not simply effort to gain the status which we exclude, but all effort. This does not take into account the processes of decision and recognition involved in the establishment of ascribed status. A status based on kinship is generally considered ascribed. It is by no means inviolable, however. As Moore has shown for the Chagga (1971), a process exists whereby a middle (as opposed to eldest or youngest) sibling may be edged from his family identification in a situation of land shortage. This is a situation of "ascribed" status being manipulated, not, as it happens, by the "ascribee" but the "ascriber." Sometimes it occurs that the ascriber can be manipulated by the ascribee. This is, of course, a large part of Goffman's statement in regard to stigma and other situations where "passing" becomes an appropriate operation (1963). Further, we

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[2]   Colin Lacey, in his reports (in this volume and elsewhere [esp. 1970]) on his study of Hightown Grammar, describes the particular importance of certain ways in which a classroom pet can manage his relations with peers by behaving as a ruffian outside the classroom. Lacey's subject seems clearly to recognize the importance of maintaining symbolic membership.

suggest that a certain amount of active participation is frequently needed to maintain an ascribed status.

The further point should be made that statuses are ascribed *vis-à-vis* a certain social field. This field may be large or small. The ascription process is that in which persons are given statuses outside of their immediate control. Since control is in large part a skill, and variable, it must be emphasized that ascription/achievement is a continuum, and one may only productively talk about the extent of ascription.

In many school situations certain characteristics of sorting are established outside the school and carried over into it in greater or lesser degrees. The distinctions on ethnic lines in our urban school and on town of residence in our rural school serve as examples of this. Other characteristics are more clearly established within the school system itself. Of these, some, such as many good student/poor student distinctions, are established quite early in the student's school career. Reports are passed in writing or by word of mouth from elementary to junior high to high schools. Perhaps in some ways more important, this classification is often internalized and/or transferred into the student social field. Thus, a cohort of students will have accepted a certain amount of self-sorting by the time they reach high school. New students often will have an internalized image of where they belong on such a stratification continuum and will place themselves accordingly.

Other criteria for classification are particular to the high school institution. These may be influenced by reputation or other outside information, but are not primarily determined by external sources. Examples include much sorting of students as supportive or disruptive, of teachers as friends of the administration or as proponents of teacher solidarity. The ability of a principal to win battles with the higher levels of administration, or to bring in funds may make of him a "leader" or a "nuisance."

Frequently, these various sorting procedures result in the establishment of important social boundaries. Networks, at certain levels, are found to have many more links within certain classifications than without. This is of course predictable. Two related functions of this are more directly interesting. These are: one, the implications of the development of socially functioning classificatory units for the analysis of small groups generally in complex societies; and two, the importance of individuals who are able to function for one classificatory unit *vis-à-vis* others, or who are able to exist on the perimeters. Let us examine these two points more closely.

Discussions of social ties in complex societies often follow an implicit

argument of degeneration from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*. This is apparent whether one follows Redfield's folk society (1947) into the cities or Gluckman's multiplex ties (1955) from Africa to the monoplex West. We do not wish to disagree fundamentally with these observations. Rather, we would point out, as these social theorists have sometimes themselves, that there is a gap left in the picture. Observations of complex societies by anthropologists have yet to produce so thorough a picture as we have gained for smaller-scale societies. Thus, we do not know whether or not there are emergent or even established social forms replacing some of the functions fulfilled by small-group ties in other societies. Classificatory affiliations may form such a unit. We are not suggesting that these aggregates are functionally similar to tribal kin groups, for example.[3] They are not, inasmuch as schools are not tribal societies. Neither are schools segments of tribal societies. They are a different form of social organization and, as such, have different social properties and processes. However, it is perhaps more a point of similarity to suggest that intervening units of the sort we have described do exist. The point is simple: there is not a complete transition from group to individual. What is at one level an increased social independence still requires its collectivities. Individualization may then mean, on a social level, classification. Classification is a different thing from membership in a corporate group, but the absence (hardly complete) of group[4] does not make it possible to treat large numbers of people as individuals. There must be an organization.

To the extent that classificatory affiliations become important, there is a need for individuals who can mediate their boundaries. One classification voiced by students in the suburban high school and observed to be broadly relevant was that between "jocks" and "freaks." The distinction appears to be chiefly one of life-style and appearance, the former category being composed of relatively traditional youths, athletes, and

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[3] Adrian Mayer has cogently discussed "The significance of quasi-groups in the study of complex societies" (1966). The classificatory affiliations we describe do not seem to have solidified to the extent Mayer requires for definition of a quasi-group. They are, however, a construct attempting to cope with a similar analytic weak point. See also Note 4 on "groups."

[4] It should be questioned to what extent there is, in fact, a disappearance of group. Rather, there may be a disappearance of ASCRIBED groups. One must form affiliations without such strict social parameters. Some affiliations may still be corporate groups — unions, political parties, social groups, and the like. It is possible that the classificatory affiliations described are not conceptually separate, but are on their way toward eventual incorporation. This incorporation may be upcoming, or it may be permanently blocked by the nature of the institution. The trend could exist independently of its completion.

their hangers-on, the latter of youths with more counter-culture aspirations, longer hair, and the like. Most other characteristics did not vary with classification. Neither group showed significantly different academic performance, social-class background, etc. Still, there was little network overlap between "jocks" and "freaks," although both displayed a primary identification with the community/school as a unit. That is, freaks from Sheffield identified themselves as Sheffieldites in opposition to residents of other communities, even where those persons could be considered fellow "freaks."

Where two large categories in a relatively small social field have little overlap, it may be expected that those individuals who can function in both groups and/or between groups will occupy a special place in the system. Just as crosscutting ties such as age-sets link members of different subsocietal units in tribal situations, there are crosscutting networks in those situations where sociologists find networks the more valuable analytic schema.[5]

In some ways, the effort the individual expends to control the process of his being sorted by himself and others may be seen as his effort to manage his identity. The way in which someone works into a classificatory system is a very large part of his social identity. The desire to create and maintain a favorable identity may be safely postulated as a human universal. Indeed, a more basic universal would be the previous sentence with the word favorable deleted. Demarcations of all sorts are the stuff of identity; those demarcations which add autonomy are the opportunities for the management of identity. Some territorial demarcations are such opportunities.

The division of the school from the "outside world" is the primary territorial demarcation of the institution, and a number of others follow from and within it. There are faculty lounges, "senior courtyards," administrative offices and other territories which are formally distinguished and ruled "off bounds" to those who are not members of certain classifications. There are also less formal territories, which are still fairly clearly in the possession of some broad classes; student restrooms, for example, are seldom entered by the adults in the school and produce an area of significant autonomy.[6] When territories of this kind are infringed upon, people feel an outrage, a classificatory violation. The idea of one-way mirrors is strongly offensive (for a variety of reasons, perhaps

[5]   The concept of figure-8 networks may be mentioned here. Networks are frequently schematically represented by circles. Where there is a single focus of contact between two networks the diagram may look like a figure-8.
[6]   See Lopate (1973). This study is based on observations in our rural high school.

including modesty), but in at least one school a reversed window serves this purpose. The fact that this should be deemed important demonstrates the threat felt by administrators with regard to a territorial autonomy for students.

There are a number of other territories established within the school for smaller categories, usually more by convention than rule. These range from a particular bench usually occupied during a break by a particular group of students, to an area behind the gym or in a copse of trees used for smoking, to hallways in large part controlled by black students in our urban school. The violation of one of these territories not bound by formal rule would produce conflict of a different process and result than, say, the violation of a teacher's control over the territory of his or her classroom. In any such dispute over territorial control a battle for power is in progress. However, the violation of a formal rule produces a major difference. In the former case individuals are competing for power within the system. In the latter case the order of the system is being challenged.[7]

The definition of territory, then, is a symbolic demarcation in a structural system and as such is not unlike sorting. Instead of dividing people into categories, territory is divided into units. In the case of territory, however, there is the added dimension of competition over territory. The competition must be carried in aggregates or among classes. For example, challenges to a teacher's territorial right over a classroom are not simply between individuals but on one level are between the two classes, teacher and student. On another level it may be seen that the conflict draws in administrators on the side of "the rules" and thus of the teacher. Certain students may support the teacher's claim over that of the challenging student. Where the lines of demarcation are drawn becomes an interesting and revealing area for observation.

A great many rules relate to the definition of territories. The enforcement of the rules differs among a variety of sorting categories, however.

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[7] Leach has discussed this distinction succinctly, if less originally than he may suggest, in the introduction to his *Political systems of highland Burma* (1965): "Every real society is a process in time. The changes that result from this process may usefully be thought of under two heads. Firstly, there are those which are consistent with a continuity of the existing formal order. For example, when a chief dies and is replaced by his son, or when a lineage segments and we have two lineages where formally there was only one, the changes are part of the process of continuity. There is no change in the formal structure. Secondly, there are changes which do reflect alterations in the formal structure. If, for example, it can be shown that in a particular locality, over a period of time, a political system composed of equalitarian lineage segments is replaced by a ranked hierarchy of feudal type, we can speak of a change in the formal structure."

For example, a student considered "good" may be able to wander down a hall during class time, while a "bad" student would be stopped, even though the formal rule simply makes the halls "off limits" to students during class. In this way, the domains of sorting and territoriality overlap in the context of the making, breaking, and enforcing of rules.

Rules are always set up in bureaucratic situations. Their meaning, however, only becomes clear with consideration of the patterns of enforcement followed. This does not mean that the structure of the formal rules system is irrelevant, only that it is insufficient to explain the social behavior involved. The proliferation of rules has two interesting aspects. First, the particular rules which are chosen have particular causes, reasons, and motivations behind their selection. Second, a range of rules is provided which can then be drawn into action to support virtually any stand of a person of higher rank (greater interpretive authority) versus a subordinate individual.

One question which becomes interesting is "to what extent can a person of low relative rank demand enforcement of a rule against a person of higher structural position?" On some occasions examination of a situation in which this has occurred will reveal either particular strength in the position of the lower ranked individual or weakness in that of the higher-ranked person. A student, for example, may be able to prove a point to a teacher of marginal status, or to one who has recently had a dispute with the principal. Another question is to what extent an invocation of a rule can be undone. Can (or will) a principal always override a utilization of a rule with which he disagrees, or does the invocation of the formal rule carry a weight of its own, sometimes comparable to the authority of the principal. This varies from situation to situation even where the same actors are involved. It is difficult for a principal to continually override teachers' judgements on the rules, even where he has both the authority and power to do so. If he does, he may both alienate the teachers and reduce whatever ideological significance or respect the rule system may have. On the other hand, one aspect of rank in a social structure may be seen as the degree of interpretative authority an individual has *vis-à-vis* the system of rules. What individual or collective interpretations can he overrule, and which can overrule him?

It may be deemed to be a function of any institution to protect the integrity of the system of rules which, to an extent, defines its existence and boundaries.[8] For example, in one high school we studied, students

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[8]   A school, for example, is less a building or a set of individuals, than it is a series of situations in which a common set of rules are seen to apply. Whether or not the rules

were granted the use of a space called the senior lounge. Periodically the school administration would announce a suspension of the students' privilege of using the lounge, stating that the unauthorized prevalence of eating in the lounge was the cause. This was against the rules. There was always eating in the lounge, however, and there was no continuing attempt to police it. Apparently, the administration's actions centered more directly around a symbolic issue. The issue in this case seemed to be the periodic demonstration of administrative authority and its corollary, the prevention of an assumption of student autonomy.

Briefly, then, the organization of the school seems set up around the demarcation of identity and the subsidiary identification of power. This power may be within or without the authority structure. To an extent the school is an organization lacking in significant autonomy for its members. This reinforces the tendency to spend a great deal of effort and power enforcing boundaries. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the adolescents who form the major constituency of the school are marginal characters *vis-à-vis* society. The idea of autonomy for these marginal characters — people who are inevitably engaged in crossing boundaries — is anathema. These are people against whom one must be protected. Since there is a limited amount of power and autonomy in the school, much of the protection must be symbolic. That is, one cannot successfully prevent students from violating the symbolic boundaries, so emphasis falls on occasional enforcement and punishment rather than prevention.

In some instances administrators see teachers as posing similar threat to their autonomy and identity. The organization of teachers' associations and unions particularly produces this fear. Again, we interpret the root condition as being the lack of significant autonomy in the operation of the school. The three processes through which we find it easiest to see the mediation between formal structures and informal systems highlight the identity question well. From different perspectives, sorting, territoriality, and the making and breaking of rules are all identifying procedures.

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are actually found to be uniformly applicable is not as relevant as the extent to which they are perceived as applicable, and thus a part of the framework of negotiation in the situation.

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