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Mary Taylor Huber

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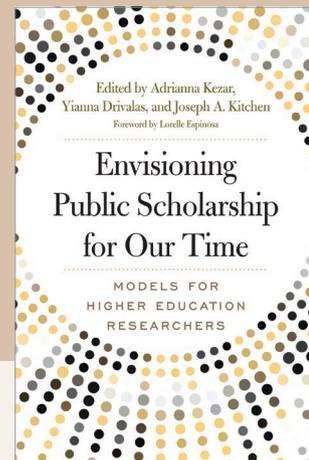
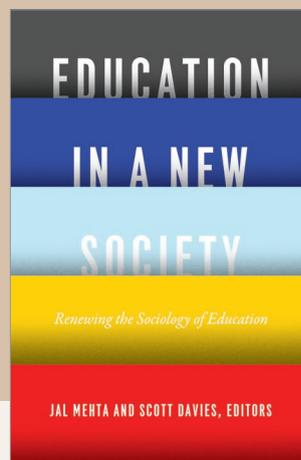


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# Books Worth Reading

By Mary Taylor Huber

## What Is the Sociology of Higher Education For?



*Education in a New Society: Renewing the Sociology of Education*, edited by Jal Mehta and Scott Davies. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. 464 pages. Paper, \$35.00. E-book, \$10.00 to \$35.00; Cloth also available.

*Envisioning Public Scholarship for Our Time: Models for Higher Education Researchers*, edited by Adrianna Kezar, Yianna Drivalas, and Joseph A. Kitchen. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers, 2018. 256 pages. Paper, \$32.50; E-book, \$25.99; Hardback also available.



Mary Taylor Huber ([huber@carnegiefoundation.org](mailto:huber@carnegiefoundation.org)) is Senior Scholar Emerita at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Senior Scholar with the Bay View Alliance. She has written extensively about changing faculty cultures in U.S.

higher education, focusing especially on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Her books include *Balancing Acts: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Academic Careers*; *The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons*; and *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact*

**W**hat is the sociology of higher education for? Is its purpose to produce knowledge that will help colleges and universities function more effectively and efficiently? Is it to shed light on the larger social worlds that colleges and universities serve? What do social studies of higher education offer practitioners and the larger public interested in making higher education a more equitable and enlightening enterprise?

These, of course, are the kinds of questions that can be asked about any branch of academic knowledge. What has it contributed to our knowledge of the inner workings of a particular domain or to our understanding of the contexts and systems in which that domain operates? And can that field's findings help us better enact our larger values or reach our higher goals?

In asking what the sociology of higher education is for, we are not referring to old debates about the possibilities of a science of society (in comparison with the natural sciences), but rather to why the field matters. As Bent

Flyvbjerg suggested long ago in his influential (but controversial) book *Making Social Science Matter* (2001), these fields matter not because they “produce cumulative and predictive theory” (which, in his view, they do not) or play an important role in “social engineering” (which, in his view, they often do; pp. 166–167).

Instead, the social sciences matter when they “take up problems that matter to the local, national, and global communities in which we live” and “effectively communicate the results of our research to fellow citizens” (p. 166). In other words, a social science matters when conducted as a form of public scholarship, “sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives, and always to serve as eyes and ears in our ongoing efforts at understanding the present and deliberating about the future” (p. 166).

Two new books explore different facets of a sociology of higher education that might matter. Neither one is oriented to propounding grand theory or to solving the practical problems of higher education administration. *Education in a New Society*, edited by Jal Mehta and Scott Davies, tilts more toward the contributions that the sociology of education (higher education especially) can make to understanding the dynamics of contemporary social life. *Envisioning Public Scholarship for Our Time*, edited by Adrianna Kezar, Yianna Drivalas, and Joseph A. Kitchen, focuses on the contributions that sociologists of higher education can make to the public good. Although intended for fellow specialists, these books are mostly well written and likely accessible to the broad readership of *Change*.

What can the rest of us learn by tuning in? One lesson from *Education in a New Society* is that the sociology of education writ large is still dominated by “ideas, concepts and theories ... created by a few well-known theorists in a highly generative period between 1966 and 1979, and that much of the work since has followed the tracks laid down by these giants” (p. 1). Times have changed since then, of course, and this volume—with 16 chapters, foreword, and epilogue—is dedicated to rethinking old themes and developing new approaches. The 20 contributors include both established and newer scholars, some with appointments in schools of education and others in the liberal arts and sciences, mirroring at least one of the major splits in the field.

Editors Mehta (Harvard) and Davies (University of Toronto) identify five major strands of work in the sociology of education, each having their own “intellectual community, organizational resources, prominent scholars, a core technology for doing the work, and a constituency that is interested in what is being produced” (p. 17). These include work on status attainment and social reproduction, school improvement, higher education, critical sociology (how education often serves power by deepening social inequalities), and “new institutionalism” (how organizations like schools and colleges privilege “the external

appearance of legitimacy rather than apply technical rationality” in their efforts to produce the best results; p. 32).

While higher education is just one of these strands, it figures prominently in this volume’s vision of a renewed sociology of education. This may be in part because of the growth of higher education over the past 50 years, both in the numbers of people it serves and in its role as a gateway to middle-class, not to mention elite, employment. In fact, one of the most interesting perspectives offered in this book places colleges and universities in the broader context of how education in all its forms and levels is “becoming a more omnipresent force in modern social life” (p. 45).

Two eye-opening chapters develop this theme in the opening section of this book. The “schooled society,” according to David P. Baker, is a worldwide phenomenon in which “formal education commands a significant share of cultural understandings that influence life globally, deeply permeating many noneducational dimensions” (p. 62). It has elevated “a particular set of cognitive skills ... to a heightened status. Increasingly, academic skills, particularly higher-order thinking capabilities, are equated with intelligence as a generalizable skill assumed useful for all types of human activity” (p. 68). The schooled society has also given rise to a “culture of science as the main truth claim, which extends into ever more domains of knowledge” (p. 68), and resulted in a trend “towards greater universalism of knowledge,” downgrading the value of “the particular, the local, and the time-bounded qualities of knowledge” (p. 69).

In the process, Baker argues, there’s been a “narrowing educational road to status,” with education “superseding and delegitimizing all noneducational forms of status attainment” (p. 72); a move away from “sources of traditional authority” (p. 75); and an “educational transformation of jobs and work,” which are increasingly characterized by “rising cognitive complexity” (pp. 76–77). Instead of being a “secondary” social institution, Baker writes, education has become a social force in its own right, bringing along its own oppressions rather than simply being a “conveyor of other institutions’ oppressive power” (p. 77). Today academic skills rather than “physical labor, acuity in warfare, religious charisma, craftsmanship, and sexual prowess” are the “dominant sources of power” (p. 77).

Davies and Mehta’s chapter also examines “the deepening interpenetration of education in modern life” but with special attention to how education itself has been changed by its spread (p. 83). Yes, there’s an “intensifying logic” through which “schooling increasingly structures other realms of life,” such as raising children, choosing where to live, and whom to marry (p. 84). But there’s also an “accommodating logic” through which schooling becomes “more responsive to the characteristics of the new

populations” it affects and “less cloistered” from “non-school realms” (p. 84). This in turn has led to a “logic of resistance” from (a) those skeptical of schooled elites as well as (b) educators concerned about increasingly porous boundaries “between their jurisdiction and populists and alternative practitioners” (p. 84).

Bringing this argument about schooling and society closer to the ground, Steven Brint looks at knowledge exchanges that cross boundaries between higher education institutions and other sectors of society. The academy imports study topics (clinical trials, for example, or business management strategies) and exports test results, refinements of practice (like scenario-planning in the military and industry), critique (such as the concept of “unconscious bias” in hiring and promotion), and new practices (such as the use of positive psychology in military planning).

Of course, these exchanges are not always straightforward due to the tendency of other kinds of institutions to “selectively appropriate,” refuse, or even “blockade” (as with climate change) ideas developed in the academy (pp. 133–135). But the terms of trade favor the academy, in Brint’s view. The academy remains “home of the ultimate cultural authority (and the privileged work space) that permits knowledge generated both in universities and elsewhere to be examined, proven, deepened, revised, or rejected on the basis of evidence” (p. 137). A case in point is explored by Tim Hallett and Matt Gougherty, who look at the education of professionals as another way in which “scientized knowledge” moves out into other domains, contributing to “the diffusion” of rationalized (if not necessarily functional) “organizational forms” (169–170).

More specific concerns relevant to higher education provide foci for the chapters in the second section of *Education in a New Society*. These include elite families’ embrace of meritocracy as a rationale for their privilege (Shamus Khan); the rise of standardized testing in K–12 but its limited role in higher education (Richard Arum and Amanda Cook); campuses as sites for different styles of conservative political formation (Amy Binder); the potential disruption of higher education through the rise of digital badges (Michael Olneck); and efforts by colleges and universities to attract international students (John D. Skrentny and Natalie M. Novick).

A final set of chapters take a new look at inequality in the larger educational field. Has the spread of school forms (special courses, coaching, etc.) into new areas of social life acted as a substitute for “services that the government neglects, or which the community can no longer provide” (David Karen, p. 304)? Are educational gaps widening among social classes due in part to the fact that “any additional investments made by lower-class parents are surpassed by the considerable increase in time, money, and compensatory investments now made by middle- and

higher-class parents” (Janice Aurini and Cathlene Hillier, p. 315)? Is too much attention being given to the role of schools as drivers of inequality? Might schools, in fact, be more compensatory in their effects than is generally believed? Of course, there’s always room for improvement, but “continuing to focus the majority of our attention toward school-based solutions is a distraction from the more central sources of inequality” (Douglas B. Downey, p. 340).

Racial disparities get special attention in three chapters critical of mainstream approaches in the sociology of education. While we have learned a lot about “patterns of racial inequality (e.g. income and wealth disparities, residential and schools segregation, ability grouping/tracking),” John B. Diamond argues, the challenge now is to understand “how structural and symbolic inequality become embedded in routine organizational practices” (p. 357). Race should be treated, in the author’s view, “as a category that is meaningful because it shapes how people are treated and the opportunities to which they have access, rather than as a characteristic that individuals carry with them into educational contexts” (p. 358).

Sociologists who wish to dig deeply into the routines of organizational life will need to use methods that go beyond the quantitative analyses of large data sets, according to Diamond and other authors in this volume. To answer the most pressing questions about how race operates in education, Natasha Kumar Warikoo writes, sociologists should place “greater emphasis on studies that employ the tools of the sociology of culture—developing theoretical arguments through in-depth, qualitative empirical research” (p. 364). Charles M. Payne urges fellow sociologists to step back from their search for causation: “[I]t would not be easy, based on the record, to demonstrate that research in that tradition has done very much to help children” (p. 397). While it’s inarguably true that “out-of-school factors are ordinarily very powerful,” Payne argues, “that doesn’t tell us what more intentionally organized schools might do to counter them” (p. 398).

*Education in a New Society* is a work of advocacy for the sociology of education as much as it is a window on new directions in the field. Michèle Lamont’s foreword makes this point well: “While the sociology of education has been viewed as being a bit inward-looking or even insular at times, it may now be in a position to act as a point of reference for researchers who are working far afield” (p. ix). Or, as Warikoo puts it: If understanding what happens in educational institutions requires looking “beyond academic outcomes to broader social processes” (p. 363), schools can return the favor by serving “as labs for observing social dynamics, race relations, and status hierarchies ... [that] showcase important social and cultural processes that sociologists of education can mine for a deeper understanding of social life” (pp. 363–364).

Yet there is something missing from this book. As Mitchell L. Stevens notes in the afterword, “[H]ow social scientists study education, what components of its complexity we attend to, and which of its many outcomes we measure say a great deal about what we ourselves value” (p. 410). It is clear from these essays that the authors value the contributions to social justice that education promises and are troubled by gaps that continue to elude educators’ best attempts to close them. Here and there a voice calls for “activism” as a “central part of the work of scholars” (Warikoo, p. 381). Yet there is little discussion of what that might look like or under what circumstances activism might be considered a legitimate form of scholarship.

Fortunately, we can turn to *Envisioning Public Scholarship for Our Time: Models for Higher Education Researchers* to learn about actively engaged scholarship in social studies of higher education. Edited by Adrianna Kezar, Yianna Drivalas, and Joseph A. Kitchen, this volume includes 16 essays by 31 authors, a third of whom, including the editors, are affiliated with the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education. Divided into three parts, the essays discuss contexts, approaches, and preparation for doing this kind of work. Vision and voice are not entirely consistent across these essays, but that is probably to be expected in as new an area of public scholarship as this.

To the familiar lament that higher education research has had little impact, the editors respond that public scholarship in support of “an equitable, diverse democracy and to promote social justice” should actually be the researcher’s goal (p. 4). This kind of work differs from older views that distanced research from practice in order to ensure objectivity, and it also differs from a “narrower vision of translational research, primarily expecting elites to shape and frame practice and policy from the top down” (p. 3). Instead, the editors want to recognize “possibilities for more bottom-up change when other groups are armed with our research” (p. 3). This means more than simply “reaching out” (p. 4). Although specific projects may vary on a continuum of more to less mutual engagement between researchers and the people they hope to help, the authors believe that scholars of higher education should “connect to and involve the public with our research in its creation, dissemination, and application” (p. 9).

Kezar uses her own development as a public scholar as a way to illustrate the variety of approaches that one can use, publics one can engage, and challenges one can face. Her path led her from work at the Education Resources Information Center (a national digital database), where she prepared a highly successful public guide to choosing a college. She subsequently “committed to writing a practitioner article for every journal article” she wrote (p. 22), became active on her own campus “on critical issues like supporting diverse students or adjunct faculty” (p. 25), worked with media, led workshops, consulted, took on

national leadership roles, and led participatory research, like her well-known Delphi project on non-tenure-track faculty.

Each of these activities, Kezar notes, presents its own challenges—for example, weighing the integrity of one’s message vis à vis the requirements of specific outlets, “taking a position” when the research findings are nuanced or unclear (p. 34), or reckoning with potential risks to one’s own career. Indeed, Cecile H. Sam and Jarrett T. Gupton’s essay on the moral landscape one enters in doing public scholarship examines the need for “ethical mindfulness” throughout the whole process, including decisions about the methods, resources, and relationships the work involves. “To do what is right—engaging with the community through different forums, providing transparency, and giving voice to research participants—is a costly process in terms of time and money,” the authors write, but to just study and publish would be “to acknowledge that we prioritized expediency and efficiency over justice and care” (p. 48).

A fuller picture of public scholarship in higher education emerges from the next set of chapters. Sylvia Hurtado presents a powerful personal account of her work on the educational benefits of diversity and its development in legal cases concerning access and the use of race in admissions decisions. Charles H. F. Davis III, Shaun R. Harper, and Wilmon A. Christian III emphasize the importance of timeliness and accessibility in connecting their education research to the Movement for Black Lives; they highlight occasions where the public purposes took precedence over academic ones in their modes of presentation through infographics and film. Action research is central to Estela Mara Bensimon’s scholarship—here she talks about creating tools and facilitation techniques for campus teams to uncover differences in educational opportunity among students of different races and ethnic groups.

Other examples include engaging education faculty at the University of Nevada Las Vegas in producing white papers for the biennial sessions of the Nevada State Legislature (Kim Nehls, Oscar Epinoza-Parra, Holly Schneider, Travis Tyler, and Elena Nourrie), bringing lessons from engaging in Black Lives Matter protests back into teaching and research (Amalia Dache-Gerbino), and the mutually informing work between cooperative extension educators and the communities they serve (Casey D. Mull, Jenna B. Daniel, and Jenny Jordan).

Two essays focus on media. Constance Iloh argues that making research results public through social media may be particularly valuable for underrepresented scholars, while Drivalas and Kezar argue the case for the arts. Theater, for example, has been used effectively to involve students and faculty with research on difficult topics (like roommate relationships, classroom climate, and graduate student/advisor relationships).

How could people be better prepared to make public scholarship part of their practice? A final set of essays address the writing skills needed (Michael Lanford and William G. Tierney); the importance of faculty models, spaces for peer mentoring, and courses that provide community engagement experiences (Angela Clark-Taylor, Molly Sarubbi, Judy Marquez Kiyama, and Stephanie J. Waterman); opportunities and challenges for public scholarship in different stages of a faculty career (Jaime Lester and David Horton Jr.); and the nature of public scholarship in higher education associations (Lesley McBain); and activism within the university itself (Kezar, Zoë Corwin, Kitchen, and Drivalas).

This concluding essay sums up three main principles for public scholarship that the authors have distilled from the book's contributions (Kezar, Corwin, Kitchen, and Drivalas). The first is to "identify, understand, and engage audiences and stakeholders," recognizing that "different research questions and methodologies lend themselves to varying modes of public scholarship as do access to communities and sites, the vulnerability of certain populations, and so on" (p. 222). Second, when considering how best to engage in public scholarship, "capitalize on strengths," building on one's own past experience and skills, and taking advantage of opportunities that come one's way (p. 224). And finally, be aware of the "multitude of accessible research products," including genres that can be co-produced with people the work aims to serve (p. 225).

Of course, there are challenges—the academic reward system, for example, and occasional wariness or mistrust from the target community. However, these risks can be outweighed by the value of public scholarship to the beneficiaries, scholars themselves, and the larger society. This is because, the book's editors write, "[W]e are the ones who examine the issues in methodologically rigorous and ethical ways, we therefore have the responsibility to bring our findings to those forums wherein the public good is debated" (p. 9).

What is one to make of two such different views of education scholarship presented in these books? For those who are not already card-carrying members in the sociology of education, *Education in a New Society* opens a window onto how the field is tackling new themes or critically appraising older ones. It is sociology that matters by virtue of its capacity to bring clarity and new perspectives to problems that matter to the larger community. *Envisioning Public Scholarship for our Time* shows how researchers themselves can more actively engage with a range of publics and work together on problems that matter and can benefit from the insights and methods of social science.

If indeed the sociologists of higher education are right and schooling continues to expand and interpenetrate other realms of social life, there will no doubt be an ever greater need for a sociology of higher education that matters and for collaboration between academic researchers and the communities they can serve.

## REFERENCE

- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.