

Review

A critique of the Sociology of Knowledge Paradigm and its Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

In this conceptual paper I present an analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT analysis) of a school of thought called the Sociology of knowledge-a brainchild of Karl Mannheim (1893 – 1947) and one of the youngest branches of sociology. The analysis unfolds with a brief focus on its (sociology of knowledge) genesis and development, premise, fundamental tenets and its educational promise. Theoretical frameworks - Marxist, functionalist, phenomenological, interactionist and feminist approaches are employed in this discourse. Since the paper adopts a swot approach to the analysis of this subject, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (swot) of the sociology of knowledge paradigm are explored and brought to the lime light with a view to clarifying and justifying “doing a sociology of knowledge” in schools, colleges and universities

Keywords: SWOT analysis, sociology, educational promise, Marxist, functionalist, phenomenological, interactionist and feminist approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Perceptions on the sociology of knowledge

Karl Mannheim, the founding father of this discipline (sociology of knowledge) conceived of it as the study of the existential determination of knowledge (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004). This means that for Mannheim knowledge is determined by social existence with the individual actor standing between or mediating the relationship between the social world and knowledge. This implies that the ideas of a social group relate to that group's position in the social structure. Karl Marx related ideas to social class in his analysis of a capitalist society and this probably explains why it is often argued that in developing the sociology of knowledge paradigm Mannheim built on the work of many predecessors, most notably Marx and Scheler. However, it must be noted that Mannheim himself was far from being a Marxist (although he is said to have drawn his inspiration from the likes of Lukacs, Simmel, Weber and Marx). According to Merton (1957), the sociology of knowledge involves the systematic study of ideas or intellectual phenomena in general. Writing in the early 1970s, Michael Young

viewed sociology of knowledge as a distinct body of writing concerned with the social character of knowledge.

The Paradigm Concept of the Sociology of Knowledge

Henslin (1998) views a paradigm as a conceptual framework against which other theories are compared. This view together with Young's (1971) perception that within the sociology of knowledge are several loosely conceived traditions distinguishable by the way they characterize knowledge and the implications of perceiving it as social are some of the factors which qualify the sociology of knowledge as a paradigm.

Mannheim himself sometimes described his field (the sociology of knowledge) as a theory and at other times as a method, but argued that it is certainly empirical because of its orientation towards the study, description and theoretical analysis of the ways in which social

relationships influence thought (Mannheim, 1936). Mannheim employs the phrase “doing a sociology of knowledge “ to imply a process of undertaking a critical assessment of the social roots of knowledge or that which is considered worthwhile knowledge by a given social group (Turner, 1995; Mannheim, 1971). By focusing on the empirical study of the effects of the social world on knowledge itself, or more generally the relationship between being and thought, Mannheim distinguishes the sociology of knowledge from other, more philosophical fields that are interested in the way in which the development of knowledge is affected by factors internal to knowledge itself. It must perhaps be underscored that for Mannheim, among those aspects social groups deal with as knowledge are ethical convictions, epistemological postulates, material predictions, synthetic judgments, political beliefs, the categories of thought, eschatological doxies, moral norms, ontological assumptions of existence of all things and observations of empirical facts (Merton, 1957). This means that Mannheim’s concept of knowledge transcends the general meaning and covers every type of assertion and every mode of thought- from folkloristic maxims to rigorous positive science. Coser and Rosenberg (1981) share this view when they say that the sociology of knowledge branch, studies the relationship between thought and society, but the term is not restricted to the sociological analysis of scientific and certified knowledge alone but is also extended to the entire range of intellectual activities such as ideologies, doctrines, dogmas, theological thoughts among other things. In all these fields, the main concern of the sociology of knowledge is examining the relationship of ideas/knowledge to the sociological and historical settings in which such ideas are produced and received.

From its inception, the sociology of knowledge has been concerned with the epistemological consequences of some of its assertions especially with regard to questions of the truths and validity of certain ideas under study. It operates under the concept that there are functional relationships between social structures and knowledge or ideas that are operative within such structures (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004). It has also been noted that Mannheim uses other terms to describe his field of concern. For example, he writes about the *sociology of the mind*, defined as the study of mental functions in the context of social action. At other times, Mannheim writes about the *sociology of thought* and the *sociology of cognition* as if they were coterminous with the sociology of knowledge (and mind) (Mannheim, 1953).

A critical analysis of Mannheim’s definition of sociology of knowledge shows a serious level of ambiguity in his conception of knowledge and a somehow vague view of his assumed relationship of knowledge and society. It is in view of this ambiguity and vagueness that his critics such as Merton (1957) allege that Mannheim’s

sociology of knowledge is riddled with gaping holes. They wonder why his discipline caught on as it did or why it has had staying power and why Mannheim, the brains behind it, continues to occupy such a dominant place in the history of that sub field of sociology. Part of the answer to the above questions lies, perhaps, in Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) notion of a paradigm- that a successful new paradigm must both offer a new way of looking at the world and leave open many questions to be answered by those who are later to become attracted to working on the paradigm. Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge fits very well the paradigm concept, at least in these senses of the term. It did and continues to offer an attractive new way of looking at a part of the social world (knowledge). It left and continues to leave open many issues for those who are to follow in Mannheim’s footsteps.

The Promise of Sociology of Knowledge

Writing in the early 1970s, Young discussed the way in which the sociology of Knowledge can be used to pose questions to challenge certain assumptions about the educational curricular. For example, what counts as educational knowledge or the curriculum? Who defines what is suitable knowledge for teaching and learning in educational institutions? And why knowledge is stratified? These are some of the questions whose answers are provided by the sociology of knowledge. Simonds (1978) argues that sociology of knowledge promises its “disciples” a careful unmasking of the distortions associated with what counts as knowledge in any given society. This means that Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge is more academic and scientific in its approach. It seeks not to become a means for discrediting, undermining, or devaluing knowledge, but to become a tool of understanding the social roots of knowledge, its stratification, and social distribution in any given society.

Mannheim (1936) avers that the most important task for the sociology of knowledge is to demonstrate its capacity in actual research in the historical- sociological realm. In this realm, it must work out criteria for exactness for establishing empirical truths and for assuming their control. It must emerge from a stage where people engage in armchair philosophy- casual intuitions and gross generalizations.

Theoretical perspectives on the sociology of knowledge

Sociological perspectives, Marxist, functionalist, phenomenological, interactionist and feminist approaches concur that knowledge or what counts as valuable

knowledge is socially constructed, socially stratified and socially distributed. Knowledge in this sense is seen as having a social character. Mannheim (1971) observes that his field enables society to look at how the various intellectual standpoints and styles of thought are rooted in an underlying historico-social reality. Focusing on the different theoretical viewpoints about knowledge is part and parcel of doing a sociology of knowledge analysis and to do this it is important to start with a brief focus on the genesis of the sociology of knowledge before examining the various epistemological assertions behind the concept of social knowledge.

Sociological writers such as Kobiowu (1998), Young (1971), Meena (1998), Millet (1989), Goodman and Ritzer (2004) are agreed that systematic sociology of knowledge originated in the 19th century European thought, although its antecedents date further than this. It was made manifest in the works of such writers and philosophers as Francis Bacon and other European thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries. Systematic sociology of knowledge, Kobiowu (1998) observes, received its impetus from two trends in the 19th century European sociological thought, the Marxist tradition in Germany and the Durkheimian tradition in France. Whilst these two traditions form the mainstream of the sociology of knowledge, American pragmatism and social behaviourism also form its tributary. In America, the sociology of knowledge has antecedents in American pragmatism, front liners of which include Pierce, James, and Dewey. Pragmatism stresses the organic process by which every act of thought or knowledge is linked to human conduct, thus preparing the group for consideration of sociological links between the social process and the thought process (Kobiowu, 1998). Pragmatism itself is defined as the philosophical views laying emphasis on the practical ramifications involved in theory (Makinde, Uba, Adejumo and Aladejana, 1998). Pragmatists stress that thought is in its very nature bound to the social situation in which it arises. They set the stage for efforts to inquire into the relations between the thinker and his audience. The philosophy of pragmatism is not the only intellectual trend that influenced the development of the sociology of knowledge. American critical scholarship in history, especially such works as Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* and Vernon Parington's *Main Currents in American Thought* attempted to trace the relationship between the thought / knowledge of the founding fathers of America's economic interests, providing a model for later sociological interpretations of systems of political ideas. Other American contributors to the sociology of Knowledge include AB. Wolfe who in his work, *Conservatism, Radicalism, and Scientific Method* developed themes concerning the social roots of knowledge and ideas. It also includes the works of Thotstein Verblen. Among the most persistent themes

that run through Verblen's work, *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization*, is the attempt to show how thought ways can be traced to the institutional framework in which they function. Not content with simply asserting the dependence of thought patterns on the community in which they are prevalent, Verblen went on to develop a theory of linking such styles of thought to specific structural positions and roles within the community. He proposed a theory of the dependence of thought styles on the occupational positions of their proponents.

It must be noted that while for Marxist sociological theorists knowledge is ruling class ideas and values in society, phenomenological theorists posit that knowledge is inter-subjective in three senses and chief among these senses is that there is a social distribution of knowledge. Interactionist theorists, the likes of Becker (1961), Keddie (1973), Rist (1970) and Hargreaves (1975) concur that the social stratification and distribution of classroom knowledge is manifested through such practices as streaming in the classroom, which results in pupils receiving different knowledge forms. Feminist standpoint epistemology, on the other hand, asserts that men want to enjoy a control and monopoly over the production and use of social knowledge. They allege that gender biases in all social institutions favour men, promote, and perpetuate patriarchal interests. From this standpoint, Meena (1998) observes that women have been for example, questioning the episteme, which makes their experiences an irrelevant field of study, and render them invisible in mainstream knowledge. The ensuing discourse details these theoretical views.

A Marxist analysis of the sociology of knowledge

The main exponent of the sociology of knowledge in Germany was Karl Marx who tried in his early writings to establish a connection between philosophies and concrete social structures in which they emerged. In doing this, Marx attempted to dissociate himself from the pan-logical system of his former master, Hegel as well as the critical philosophy of his former Young Hegelian friends. He sought to inquire into the connections of German philosophy with German reality, that is, the relation of criticisms to their own material surroundings. In doing this, he moved away from his earlier concern with intrinsic problems of philosophy towards a consideration of relationships between philosophy and society. More specifically, he was now concerned with analyzing the ways in which ideas are dependent on the social position or class of their proponents. Marx thus attempted to functionalize ideas systematically – to relate ideas of individuals to their roles and to the class positions they occupy in society. This idea certainly affects social institutions the world over in that the ideas of the powerful, be it in schools, colleges, universities, families,

religions, and mass media prevail over those of their subordinates. Although Marx's analysis deals with ruling class ideas to ruling class interests and ways of life, it can be argued that the situation permeates all classes of people. According to him (Marx), when changes occur in people's modes of life, in their social relations or social system, there will also be changes in their ideas, outlook, and conceptions. The Zimbabwean economic experience between the years 2000 and 2007 stands testimony to this assertion. Changes in the economic and political settings have tremendously influenced life in social institutions (school, families, religions, mass media and the law have become active ideological state apparatuses). Ideologies and utopias are being revisited to serve the interest of the power elite. Ideology in this context refers to an idea system that seeks to conceal and conserve the present state of affairs by interpreting it from the point of view of the past (Mannheim, 1971). A good example is the interpretation of the Zimbabwe Land Reform Programme (which is viewed as a means to reclaim the land that was appropriated and or expropriated from Zimbabweans by the colonial settlers and this interpretation justifies and legitimates land / farm seizures by the power elite). A utopia, in contrast is a system of ideas that seeks to transcend the present by focusing on the future (ibid). Zimbabwe's Look East policy and its premise or promise presents a perfect example of a utopian view meant to pacify the generality of Zimbabweans, presenting a "pie in the sky". It must also be noted that according to Marx, the history of ideas or knowledge has proved that mental production changes concomitantly with material production. The ideas cherished by a people at any given time are in tandem with the material culture of the day.

Neo-Marxist sociological theorists such as Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis did a sociology of knowledge by examining how the school curriculum as a value-laden aspect promotes the propagation of ruling class values or ideologies disguised as knowledge (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Burges (1985) observes that school knowledge or what counts as knowledge in educational institutions is ruling class ideology meant to create a false perception of reality among members of the subject class, in a bid to perpetuate the status quo of social class inequality. Seen in this light, therefore what counts as educational knowledge is ruling class ideas, the beliefs and values that express the interests of a particular powerful social group, the ruling or power elite. Mannheim uses the term ideology in a similar way implying that what is considered knowledge or valuable knowledge is not neutral phenomena but the beliefs and values of a particular social category meant to obscure the real condition of the marginalized - that they are poor and miserable because they are exploited, alienated, and pauperized by the dominant power elite. Althusser (1971), Bowles and

Gintis (1976) further note that all the values cherished in educational institutions are pro-capitalist in that in the final analysis they benefit the power elite. For instance, the ideologies that hard work and obedience to authority pay are said to favour the capitalist employer who ultimately benefits from employees with such attributes when they join the world of work. It is against this background that Bowles and Gintis (1976) aver that there is a correspondence between school and the world of work and this explains why their theory has been termed the correspondence principle. Because the ideologies of rule following, hard work, obedience to authority, motivation by external rewards and punctuality are rampantly disseminated by significant others (educationists in this case) in educational institutions through the hidden curriculum (tacit learning), Althusser regards education as an ideological state apparatus transmitting ruling class values disguised as knowledge.

Functionalist view of the sociology of knowledge

Some of the most vital functionalist contributions and pioneering work on the sociology of knowledge was by Emile Durkheim, the father of the functionalist sociological paradigm. Durkheim attempted to establish the social origin/ genesis and function of morals, values, and religion. He also attempted to develop an explanation of all the fundamental thought or human knowledge, inspired by Auguste Comte's law of the three stages of knowledge. He claimed that these fundamental categories of thought are a social construct and transmitted by society through its interdependent components (social institutions). Each of these components has a function (contribution) towards the maintenance of society or society's equilibrium. Merton (1957) argues that each of the social institutions - family, education, religion, mass media, polity, law can have both manifest and latent functions for the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge, according to functionalist theorists is functional for society. It only becomes dysfunctional if the level of critique of social knowledge becomes so excessive that it disturbs society's equilibrium and causes social pathology or dysfunctional consequences for society.

Phenomenological and interactionist analysis of the sociology of knowledge

Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) the founding father of the phenomenological perspective posits that knowledge is inter-subjective. The study of inter- subjectivity seeks to answer questions such as these: How do we know other people's motives, interests, and meanings? How is reciprocity of perspectives possible? And how is mutual

understanding and communication possible?

The philosophy of phenomenology, with its focus on consciousness, has a long history, but the effort to develop a sociological variant of phenomenology (Ferguson, 2001) can be traced to the publication of Alfred Schutz's *The Phenomenology of the Social world* in Germany in 1932 (Rogers, 2000). Schutz was focally concerned with the way in which people grasp the consciousness of others while they live within their own stream of consciousness. Schutz also uses inter-subjectivity in a larger sense to mean a concern with the social world, especially the social nature of knowledge (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004). Much of Schutz's work focuses on an aspect of the social world called the life-world, or the world of everyday life. This is an inter-subjective world in which people both create social reality and are constrained by the pre-existing social and cultural structures created by their predecessors (Schutz, 1973).

Doing sociology of knowledge, Schutz views knowledge as inter-subjective or social in three senses. Firstly, there is reciprocity of perspectives in which people assume that other people exist and objects are known or knowable by all. In spite of this reciprocity, it is clear that the same object may mean somewhat different things to different people. This difficulty is overcome in the social world of existence of two idealizations: the idealization of inter-changeability of standpoints, which assumes that if we stood in the place of others, we would see things as they do. The second one is the idealization of the congruency of the system of relevance, which assumes that objects are sufficiently defined alike to allow us to proceed on practical basis as if the definitions were identical. Schutz calls these two generalizations- the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004).

The second sense in which knowledge is inter-subjective is in its social origin where individuals are said to create a portion of their own knowledge, most of which is shared in stocks and is acquired through social interaction with peers, parents and teachers. Thirdly, knowledge is inter-subjective in that there is a social distribution of knowledge. This means that the knowledge people possess varies according to their positions in the social structure. In a classroom set up highly valued knowledge is accorded to students from affluent social class backgrounds who usually populate top streams in schools where streaming is practised. Low status knowledge is given to those children from non-affluent social class backgrounds that usually populate the bottom streams. This is the basis of the symbolic interactionist perspective, particularly its subset called the labeling theory. This perspective posits that classroom interaction between teachers and pupils produces different or stratified forms of knowledge and leads ultimately to differential achievement. Studies by Nell

Keddie, which seem to combine the symbolic interactionist and phenomenological approaches have proved that although teachers claim that they recognize ability in streaming students into homogeneous groups, when they get into the classrooms, their judgments are related to their perception of the students' social class background.

The symbolic interactionist perspective and the social construction, stratification and distribution of classroom knowledge

Interactionist sociologists such as Rist (1970), Hargreaves (1973), Becker (1961), Rosenthal and Jacobson (1963) found out that streaming is tantamount to labeling. Its effect is a self-fulfilling prophecy, a confirmation of the significance of the label. Henslin (1998) defines symbolic interactionism as a perspective that focuses on small – scale face to face interaction. It is the brainchild of George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931) but the term symbolic interactionism itself is said to have been coined by Herbert Blumer. The perspective was brought into sociology by sociologists such as Charles Horton Cooley, William. Thomas and Mead himself. In examining classroom life, symbolic interactionists have found out that labelling and self-fulfilling prophecy affects the students' mastery of knowledge. Those students to whom low status knowledge is taught often develop a low self esteem while their counterparts to whom high status knowledge is taught often strive to self-actualize. It is against this notion that Thomas' theorem - if men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences is founded. Following classroom observations in secondary and kindergarten schools, Becker, Keddie, Hargreaves and Rist discovered that streaming and labelling have an enormous effect, the self-fulfilling prophecy. Rist for instance, conducted a classic study by participant observation in an African American kindergarten school and found that after only 8 days in the classroom the Kindergarten teacher had streamed the pupils well enough to assign them to three separate work tables with table one reserved for the fast learners, who sat at the front in the classroom, closest to the teacher. Those whom the teacher saw as slow learners were assigned to table three- located at the back of the classroom. She placed those perceived as average pupils at table two in between the so-called fast and slow learners. This seemed strange to Rist who knew that the pupils had not been tested for ability, yet the teacher was certain she could differentiate between bright and dull or slow learners among them.

Investigating further, Rist found that social class was the underlying basis for assigning the pupils to different tables. Middle class pupils were separated out for table 1, pupils from poorer homes to table 2 and 3. The teacher

paid the most attention to the pupils at table 1, who were closet to her, less to table 2 and the least to table 3. As the year went on, pupils from table 1 perceived that they were treated better and came to see themselves as 'smarter'. They became the leaders in classroom activities and even ridiculed pupils from the other tables, calling them 'dumb'. Eventually, the pupils at table 3 disengaged themselves from many classroom activities. Not surprisingly, at the end of the year only the pupils at table 1 had completed the lessons that prepared them for reading. This early tracking struck (Henslin, 1998). When the pupils entered the first grade, their new teacher looked at the work they had accomplished and placed pupils from table 1 at her table 1. She treated the tables much as the kindergarten teacher had, and the children at table 1 again led the class. In the second grade, the teacher reviewed the pupils' scores. She assigned the highest performing pupils to a group called the Tigers. Befitting their name, she gave them challenging reading books. Not surprisingly, the tigers came from the original table 1 in Kindergarten. The second group, called the cardinals came from the original tables 2 and 3. Her third group consisted of pupils she called the clowns. The cardinals and the clowns were given less advanced reading books. Rist then concluded that the pupils' journey through school is pre-ordained from the eighth day of Kindergarten. Rist's findings along with those by Becker, Keddie, and Hargreaves confirmed the social construction, stratification, and distribution of classroom knowledge. Discussing the effects of streaming on the different status of the knowledge taught to the different streams in schools, Young (1971) observes that high status knowledge tends to be given to pupils from the affluent social class backgrounds that are usually found in the top streams. On the contrary, low status knowledge is given to pupils from non-affluent social class backgrounds that are often found in the bottom streams. Bernstein (1971) discussing the social stratification and distribution of classroom knowledge observes that high status knowledge tends to be abstract, literary, and unrelated to practical everyday experiences. He further notes that some subjects are given more prestige than others. It is against this background that Young concluded that the powerful in society define what is to be taken as school knowledge. They also control the distribution and ownership of what counts as Knowledge through classroom practices such as banding, tracking, and streaming. Bernstein (1971) concludes by saying that, how a society classifies, distributes, transmits, and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers private and public reflects the distribution of power and the principles of social control.

A feminist sociology of knowledge

Meena (1998: 32) views feminism as "the set of theories

which focus on gender and have been developed primarily by women, in order to abolish women's oppression and exploitation and create new transformative gender relations". Bryson (1992) observes that there are a variety of feminist approaches-radical, liberal, Marxist-socialist, black feminists and post-modern feminists but for purposes of this discussion the first three will be the focal point. Mannathoko in Meena (1998) argues that radical feminism is based on two central beliefs- that women are of absolute positive value as women, a belief asserted against what they claim to be the universal devaluing of women. The second belief is that women are everywhere oppressed – violently oppressed by the system of patriarchy. Mackinnon (1996), Douglas (1990), Dworkin (1989), Richardson (1996) are of the opinion that radical feminists see in every institution and in society's most basic structures-heterosexuality, class, caste, race, ethnicity, age and gender – systems of oppression in which some people dominate others. Of all these systems of domination and subordination, the most fundamental structure of oppression is gender, the system of patriarchy. Not only is patriarchy historically the first structure of domination and submission, but also it continues as the most pervasive and enduring system of inequality, the basic societal model of domination (Lerner, 1986). Through participation in patriarchy, men learn how to hold other human beings in contempt, to see them as nonhuman, and to control them. Within patriarchy, men see and women learn what subordination looks like. Patriarchy creates guilt and repression, sadism and masochism, manipulation and deception - all of which drive men and women to other forms of tyranny (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004). To radical feminists, patriarchy is the least noticed and yet the most significant structure of social inequality. Central to this analysis is the image of patriarchy as violence practised by men and by male-dominated organizations against women.

Liberal feminism

Liberal feminists maintain that the education system is unfair to females because it limits their access and retention to certain fields of knowledge. They argue that the failure to educate or avail knowledge or certain knowledge areas to girls can have far-reaching effects on the development of a country, especially in production and health sectors where knowledge of various forms is needed (Meena, 1998). Education for girls and women is thus considered as an investment with probably higher economic returns than that of boys and men. The feminist sociology of knowledge is therefore premised on the following aspects, women have as much a right to participate in the production of knowledge as they have a right to be part of that knowledge (McFadden, 1991). The power to know and the power to have one's knowledge

influence the mainstream knowledge should be considered as part of human rights. Liberal feminists, doing sociology of knowledge thus denounce a male sexist definition of knowledge and advocate for legislative reforms towards a gender-sensitive perception of knowledge.

Marxist – socialist feminist’s sociology of knowledge

Marxist – socialist feminists view capitalism rather than patriarchy as the principal source of women’s oppression. Capitalists are seen as the main beneficiaries of women’s exploitation.

Bardo (1990) observes that for Marxist feminists the major question on the sociology of knowledge is whose knowledge? And this question has proved to be transformative, opening debates not only about the relation of power to knowledge but also about the basis of men’s claims to know.

Doing a feminist sociology of knowledge, feminist writers such as Millet (1989), Meena (1998), Mannathoko (1998) and Tong (1998) are of the opinion that feminism regards everything that people label “knowledge of the world” as having four characteristics- (i) It is always created from the standpoint of embodied actors situated in groups that are differentially located in social structure, (ii) It is thus, always partial and interested, never total and objective, (iii) It is produced in and varies among groups and, to some degree, among actors within groups, and (iv) It is always affected by power relations – whether it is formulated from the standpoint of dominant or subordinate groups. This understanding of knowledge has been termed feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1986). A feminist sociological theory begins with a sociology of knowledge because feminists attempt to describe, analyze and change the world from the standpoint of women, and because working from women’s subordinated position in social relations, feminist sociological theorists see that knowledge production is part of the system of power governing all production in society. Feminist sociological theory attempts to alter the balance of power within sociological discourse – and within social theory – by establishing the standpoint of women as one of the standpoints from which social knowledge is constructed (Mannathoko in Meena, 1998)

In attempting to do sociology of knowledge from the standpoint of women, feminist sociological theorists have to first consider what constitutes a standpoint of women. A standpoint is the product of a social collectivity within a sufficient history and commonality of circumstances to develop a shared knowledge of social relations (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004). This understanding of knowledge as the product of different standpoint groups presents feminist sociological theory with the problem of

how to produce a feminist sociological account acceptable to sociologists and useful to feminism’s emancipatory project.

Meena (1998) further notes that women have been, for example, questioning the episteme, which makes their experiences an irrelevant field of study and renders them invisible in mainstream knowledge. This feminist standpoint epistemology is the central notion of all feminist approaches. Epistemology concerns itself with the different theories about knowledge and specifically about how knowledge is produced, stratified, distributed, and consumed (Foucault, 1973). The term epistemology originates from the word episteme that is used to define the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in practice, Foucault further notes. Epistemology seeks to answer questions such as who can be a knower or agent of knowledge. Can women be? What tests are used in the determination of knowledge? What beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge? What kind of things can be known? Can subjective truths count as knowledge? In analyzing these questions and attempting to find answers, feminists have discovered that there is a tendency for men’s experience and observations to be regarded as knowledge while women’s experiences and observations are marginalized in many, if not all societies of the world (Duncan, 1989).

By way of summarizing, it is apparent that all feminist approaches query men’s control and monopoly over the production and use of knowledge. They allege gender biases (in favour of men) are perpetuated because of male dominance in social institutions such as the media, radio, TV and newspapers, school curriculum, production of text books, journals and curriculum material. The school environment, it is further argued, also contributes towards gender inequalities and biases, which impact negatively on female academic achievement. Duncan (1989) observes that boys from well-educated and high status families are more likely to do well at school. With girls, it is not the family’s social class and status, that necessarily contribute to performance, but other more basic factors such as career aspirations. He further observes that careers such as nursing, clerical, and secretarial work and teaching at lower levels have been considered as female professions. Male professions are listed as scientific, technical and production related occupations. Men are seen as more knowledgeable, suited to politics, law, and company management among other more prestigious occupations.

Strengths of the sociology of knowledge paradigm

The major area of credit that Mannheim should enjoy is that of being the founding father and major figure in the invention of this field, the sociology of knowledge, that

has been, and is of great interest to sociologists in general and sociological theorists in particular (McCarthy, 1996 and Pels, 1996). Furthermore, it was Mannheim's intellectual efforts over a period of many years that played the key role in institutionalizing this field. Few individual thinkers can be credited with the central role in the invention of a field, as well as with successfully nurturing it into becoming an established sub field within sociology. Today the sociology of knowledge is such a field, and those who work within it owe a great debt to the ideas of Mannheim. In spite of his critical orientation toward Mannheim's work, Merton (1957: 508) makes the strengths of the sociology of knowledge paradigm clearer when he argues,

"Mannheim has sketched the broad contours of the sociology of knowledge with remarkable skill and insight ... Mannheim's procedures and substantive findings clarify relations between knowledge and the social structure which have hitherto remained obscure ... We may await considerable enlightenment from further explorations of the territory in which he pioneered."

Another strength of the sociology of knowledge is that although its work is divided on the issue of politics and science, there is no ambiguity over the fact that it is sociological in orientation. This idea is well echoed when Mannheim for example, describes it as one of the youngest branches of sociology that is empirical in orientation (Mannheim, 1936).

Mannheim managed to institutionalize the sociology of knowledge as a sub-field within sociology. This strength he echoes when he says "The sociological analysis of thought, undertaken thus far only in a fragmentary and casual fashion, now becomes the object of a comprehensive scientific programme" (Mannheim 1971:105). This means that the sociology of knowledge is more academic and scientific in its approach. Simonds (1978) supports this idea by saying that throughout its work, the sociology of knowledge is recommended not as a means of discrediting, undermining, or devaluing knowledge, but as a tool of understanding and unmasking the distortions about the social roots, stratification and distribution of knowledge. There is an interesting parallel between the work of Mannheim and that of Comte. In both cases, their early work is seriously scholarly and constitutes their lasting contribution to sociology (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004). In addition, later in life both men turned to more practical and political writings that remain viable to this day. In fact, Mannheim is said to have come closer to elevating sociology to a Comtian vision of the "queen of the sciences" by defining sociology of knowledge as the basic discipline of the social sciences (Mannheim, 1953). Mannheim has also been credited for successfully developing a synthetic theory - a "sociological psychology and synthesizing insights from the disciplines of psychology and sociology, as well as other social sciences. Both disciplines examine

the same phenomena, but the sociologist looks at attitudes and behaviours with reference to the social context, whereas the psychologist tends to concentrate on the individual. What Mannheim did was a sociological psychology that fuses the insights provided by these two disciplines and in the process provides a kind of integrated perspective. This aspect gives much credit to Mannheim because it is argued that the effort to synthesize various theories is one major characteristic of modern sociological theory, and one that was pioneered by Mannheim in his idea on sociological psychology (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004; Merton, 1957 and Mannheim, 1953).

Simonds (1978) observes that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is about more than just knowledge, but is relevant to all socio-cultural phenomena. That is, all cultural products can, indeed be analyzed in the same way that knowledge is analyzed by Mannheim. In fact, Mannheim (1982: 55) defines cultural sociology as the "science of the embeddedness of cultural formations within social life". In other words, as Simonds puts it, the sciences of men are themselves hermeneutical. The strength is that there is increasing support these days in many quarters of sociological theory for the idea that some sort of hermeneutic approach is preferable to one inspired by positivism. It is in this sense where Mannheim is seen as a pioneer of the hermeneutic approach in sociology and his work on knowledge can be seen as an exemplar for similar work (hermeneutic approach) on the full panoply of cultural phenomena.

Weaknesses of the sociology of Knowledge paradigm

Merton (1957) got to the heart of the matter with two devastating criticisms of Mannheim's work, the first is that in a body of work designed to create and legitimize the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim never offered a clear-cut definition of what he meant by "knowledge." As Merton (1957) puts it, knowledge is at times regarded as broadly as to include every type of assertion and every mode of thought- from folkloristic maxims to rigorous positive science. Among those things dealt with as knowledge in Mannheim's work are "ethical convictions, epistemological postulates, material predictions, synthetic judgments, political beliefs, the categories of thought, eschatological doxies, moral norms, ontological assumptions and observations of empirical facts" (Merton, 1957: 497). Mannheim has also been criticized for using other terms to describe his field of concern. For example, he writes about the sociology of the mind- defined as the study of mental functions in the context of action. The mind and knowledge are hardly coterminous. We can conceive of the mind in a micro sense as belonging to an individual actor or in a macro sense as a

collective mind. In either case, the mind is a process and one of the results of that process is the creation of knowledge. Further complicating matters, at other times, Mannheim writes about the sociology of thought and the sociology of cognition as if they were coterminous with the sociology of knowledge (and mind).

Unclear about knowledge, Mannheim was also obscure on the relationship between knowledge and society. According to Merton, Mannheim is guilty of a failure to specify the type or mode of relations between social structure and knowledge. Merton reviewed Mannheim's work on this relationship (between knowledge and the social structure) and finds in it arguments that knowledge is in accordance with industrial society or with the time that social structures are the causal determinants of ideological errors, that ideas are bound up with the time, that social structures are the causal determinants of ideological errors that ideas are bound up with a given social setting, that ideas grow out of such a setting, that ideas change in harmony with social changes, that changes in ideas are closely connected to structural realities, that ideas change concomitantly with social forces, and so on. The point here is that a wide range of relationships between knowledge and society are discussed in Mannheim's work. He does not clearly differentiate one from others, nor does he show how all of these diverse relationships might be combined under a single broad heading. Because of its ambiguity about what knowledge is and its vagueness about the relationship between knowledge and society, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is riddled with gaping holes. Given these holes, one wonders why the sociology of knowledge has become so popular and why Mannheim continues to occupy a dominant place in the history of the sociology of knowledge. Merton offers another criticism, one that most critics of Mannheim's work make. The criticism is that, in spite of various efforts, Mannheim never did solve the problem of relativism (Goldman, 1994). It does not appear that a consequence of Mannheim's approach is that it is impossible to believe in anything fully, including Mannheim's own views, because all ideas emanate from inherently limited positions in society. Mannheim's later, political work is even easier to criticize. In that work, Mannheim was writing for a more general audience, not other academics as had been the case in his earlier writings in Hungary and Germany.

Mannheim's contributions, it must be underscored, have been restricted largely to the sociology of knowledge and did not involve a grand theory of society. Although there is much truth in this assertion Goodman and Ritzer (2004) argue that the sociology of knowledge is about more than just knowledge, but is relevant to all socio-cultural phenomena that is, all cultural products can, indeed be analyzed in the same way that knowledge is analyzed by Mannheim.

Opportunities and Threats of the sociology of knowledge

Owing to the ambiguity of Mannheim's definition of knowledge and the vagueness of his explanation of the relationship between knowledge and society, one can say that the sociology of knowledge paradigm is not exhaustive in its quest to bring the social roots of knowledge to the limelight and this suggests a need or opportunity for more research in the area. The gaping holes that riddle the discipline (sociology of knowledge) provide an opportunity for researchers keen on "digging" deeper into this discipline to carefully examine the epistemological assumptions and unmask the unconscious motivations, presuppositions, and roots of social knowledge. The observations by critics of the sociology of knowledge such as Merton (1957) and Simonds (1978) stand testimony to the need for sociologists to demonstrate the capacity of the sociology of knowledge in actual research in the historical – sociological realm – a realm in which it must work out the best criteria for the exactness of establishing empirical truths and for assuming their control. A realm that must emerge from the stage of armchair philosophy - casual intuitions and or gross generalizations. Mannheim (1936) sums up the issue of the opportunities available by saying the crisis that results from the inadequacies of this discipline should lead dialectically to the development of an advanced field of study-a new sociology of knowledge offering potential solutions to the crisis. Mannheim believes that there is some urgency for those interested in doing a further sociology of knowledge in order to help society to cope with the crisis because the opportunities may be lost and the world will once again present a static, uniform and inflexible countenance.

Merton (1957) observes that in spite of various efforts, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge never solved the problem of relativism, crisis in his time – in which all ideas / knowledge seem to be equal and there appears to be nothing to believe in. This shortcoming appears to threaten the forcefulness of the sociology of knowledge as a discipline because a field of study that does not provide solutions to problems it unearths in society is threatened by other more superior disciplines capable of offering better solutions to problems observed.

Mannheim himself did sociology of knowledge analysis of the rise of the sociology of knowledge. For example, he observes that the sociology of knowledge itself could not have arisen during a historical period such as the Middle Ages when there was social stability and substantial agreement, (value consensus) even unity, over worldviews. However, in more recent years this belief in unity has been destroyed, largely by the increase in social mobility. What increased mobility has done is to reveal the multiplicity of styles of thought (Mannheim, 1936). He distinguishes between horizontal and vertical

mobility. The former leads people to see that other people think differently, but it does not lead them to question their own group's knowledge system. Because people are moving horizontally, no group is better than any other. As a result, no thought system (knowledge) is seen as preferable to any other. However, vertical mobility leads people not to see that others think differently but also to be uncertain, even skeptical of their own groups' mode of thought. This uncertainty is especially likely to occur when one encounters different thought systems in-groups that stand higher in the stratification system than one's own. Vertical mobility also tends to lead to a "democratization" of thought whereby ideas of the lower strata can come to confront those of the upper strata on an equal footing. More generally, all of this leads to the following questions;

How is it possible that identical human thought processes concerned with the same world produce different conceptions of that world? And from this point it is only a step further to ask: Is it not possible that the thought processes which are involved here are not all identical? May it not be found ... that there are numerous alternative paths, which can be followed? (Mannheim, 1936: 9)

These questions lead to a crisis in society in which there seems to be nothing to believe in since all ideas appear equal and everything seems to be up for grabs.

Pedagogical implications of the sociology of knowledge

Mannheim placed much importance on education as a way of coping with the cultural crisis. However, the education of his day suffered from the problem of specification and compartmentalization that plagued intellectual life in general. Thus, as with knowledge in general, Mannheim (1971) made the case for more integrated education. For one thing, he wanted to see an end to the separation between education and the rest of life. For another, he wanted to end the overspecialization of educational subjects. Mannheim argues that to be effective, teachers must know the social world from which pupils come and for which they are to be prepared. To prepare students better, schools and universities are urged to introduce sociology as a basic social science (Mannheim, 1953). For both students and teachers a fundamental problem was a lack of social awareness, an awareness that is necessary if democracy is to survive. "That lack of awareness on social affairs ... is nothing but the lack of a comprehensive sociological orientation" (Mannheim, 1971: 374). An integrative educational system would lead to more integrative behaviours, which Mannheim saw as the archetype of democratic behaviour. Integrative behaviour involves an unwillingness to impose one's views on others, but

tolerance and willingness to absorb the views of others into one's own worldview. Integrative behaviour involves being amenable to change, to compromise, and to co-operation in a common way of life. In other words, it is a prerequisite to the kind of new democratic society Mannheim was intent on seeing constructed.

The implications and importance of the sociology of knowledge can certainly not be overemphasized in all educational endeavors. There is need to realize the gargantuan impact of society on the human mind, behaviour and thought processes because society, they say maketh man. (Kobiowu, 1998). In classroom situations the natural appeal and interest of learners, their choice of career and academic performance are conditioned by such factors as the social status, socio-economic position of the family, the social setting under which a learner is brought up or socialized, previous life experiences gender, race, ethnicity. All these factors condition the thoughts and actions of learners. Effective pedagogy may therefore, take place when a teacher has ample information about his students. The sociology of knowledge paradigm may also provide insights into the behavior and misbehavior of pupils and students in educational institutions. The solution to students crisis, secret cult activities and other acts of terrorism on the path of students may not be in punitive measures, but in a sociological or psychological study of the life of such social misfits or deviants. What they need may be a kind of psychotherapy. Since thought is inextricably linked to social realities of society, it may be necessary to study those remote and immediate factors in society in order to heighten the quality of man's life. From the discussions above it is obvious that Sociology of knowledge is a very important subject that needs to be considered from time to time, as educational policies are being formulated for schools. Policies and programmes should be geared towards making all knowledge useful to man in society. The whole world benefits today from all the varied knowledge inventions and aspirations or efforts of researchers, scientists, explorers and inventors who have invented one thing or the other for the uplifting of human kind.

The sociology of knowledge needs to be made a compulsory subject in all institutions that are mandated with the training of teachers –Teachers' Colleges, polytechnics, and universities. This will go a long way in minimizing the problems associated with the social construction, stratification, and social distribution of classroom knowledge by classroom practitioners. The training of classroom practitioners needs to take full cognizance of perspectives on the sociology of knowledge. A multi-paradigmatic approach to the teaching of sociology of knowledge would help beneficiaries to unmask the distortions associated with the social roots and social stratification of what counts as knowledge in the classroom. Through doing a feminist

sociology of knowledge for example, classroom practitioners may be made aware that there are patriarchal biases in the social construction and distribution of classroom knowledge. As a result, the social processes of classroom life may be better informed. Practices such as streaming and labelling which often have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect in the classroom, can be approached from a conscientious and informed standpoint. Knowledge of the conflict perspective on what counts as knowledge may also assist classroom practitioners realize that the educational institution is not a neutral one, but that it is value-laden, containing ruling class vested interests. Possession of such insights may go a long way in making classroom practitioners sympathetic to certain students in their classrooms especially those who start schooling with a cultural capital considered irrelevant to school (Bourdieu, 1977).

A thorough analysis of such ideas as the feminist standpoint epistemology may help unmask the biases such as gender stereotypes (which impact negatively on the female students' academic and career aspirations) that some classroom practitioners transmit to students through the hidden curriculum. It may also help challenge the basis of men and boys' desire to control and monopolize the production, distribution, and use of social knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above deliberations it can be seen that although the sociology of knowledge paradigm endured some setbacks at the hands of its critics, the facts remain, that this paradigm continues to be viable to this day, as an academic and scientific body of writing or work capable of unmasking the distortions associated with the social character of knowledge. It continues to promise effectiveness as an epistemological tool, helping society to establish empirical truths and assume their control. Educationists need to be well-versed in this discipline as it helps enormously in classroom practices.

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