

Title: *Ethnography's capacity to contribute to the cumulation of theory: a case study of differentiation-polarisation theory.*

Author: Sam Hillyard, Durham University

Contact address: School of Education
Durham University
Leazes Road
Durham DH1 1TA
United Kingdom

Abstract: The paper sets out to examine the role that ethnographic work can and should play in the development of sociological theory, focusing on the case study of differentiation-polarisation theory. It provides a detailed discussion of the work of Hargreaves (1967), Lacey (1970) and Ball (1981) and assesses the degree to which their work was ethnographic in contemporary terms. It argues that the model of theory development they offer does not need to be understood in the manner adopted by Hammersley in his account of their work as a model for theory development and testing in the sociology of education. Rather it requires the ethnographer to be more attuned towards setting and maintaining a theoretical agenda, by (a) being more preoccupied with refining existing or established theoretical ideas and concepts and (c) retaining the capacity for the fieldwork setting to inform and direct the study.

Biographical information:

Sam Hillyard is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Durham University.

As time goes by, theories do not become better, by which I mean broader in scope and more economical in content, either as a result of careful testing or as a result of subsuming earlier theories. Theories simply ‘lie around’ in the field, relatively vague and relatively untested. (Hargreaves 1981:10)

Introduction The sociology of education has had an important impact upon the development and establishment of qualitative research and interactionist ideas in the UK (Atkinson and Housley 2003). Indeed, educational research has pioneered the use of qualitative methods to the degree that it now constitutes the dominant research paradigm in some sub-disciplines (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). However, whilst the use of qualitative methods in education since the late 1960s has exploded (Agar 1996), there had not been a corresponding increase in theory development, cumulation or refinement and “interactionism *per se* has not flourished as a strand of British sociological thought” (Atkinson and Housley 2003:x, Manning 2005).¹ In the quarter of a century since interactionist Erving Goffman² noted the apathy greeting his attempt to establish the interaction order as a legitimate field of sociological investigation, all that *has* changed is Goffman’s removal from the taken-for-granted canon of sociological authors in introductory textbooks (Atkinson and Housley 2003).

This paper addresses lack of *theoretical* development or testing of the basic assumptions of interactionism, without suggesting that an interactionist approach be the only legitimate theoretical approach available to qualitative researchers. It uses

1 In terms of symbolic interactionism establishment within British sociology, it remains marginal as evidenced by a lack of a singularly focused study group within its professional association and a lack of a dedicated journal. The use of an interactionist approach, whilst established within the Sociology of Education, is marginal within other sub-disciplines such as rural studies (Hillyard 2007).

2 Admittedly, there are question marks over whether Goffman can be considered to be a symbolic interactionist. In the interests of brevity, I appeal to the many introductory textbooks which label him as such.

one example to demonstrate the possibilities that specifically ethnographic research can bring to theory development.

The case study: differentiation-polarisation theory. Agar (1996) over a decade ago noted that sociologists work in a “day of [methodological] literature of truly unmanageable proportions” (Agar 1996:x). In this light, it would be easy to assume that the secondary literature has identified several examples of theoretical qualitative research development work, yet such research is rare.³ (Labelling theory (Becker 1963, 1973) and Strong’s (1988) work on Goffman are other explicit attempts to further develop and refine interactionist ideas.) Differentiation-polarisation theory is an example of theory generated through ethnographic research (cf. Hammersley 1985). The theory holds that if a school differentiated its pupils on the basis of ability, this will in turn polarise their attitudes towards schooling (for example, as pro- or anti) and further reinforce the original differentiation. It is an interactionist theory as it is process consisting of interactional exchanges and relationships (informed by wider structural considerations).

Differentiation-polarisation theory was developed across three research monographs (Hargreaves 1967, Lacey 1970 and Ball 1981) and has been subsequently developed through new empirical research by Abraham (1989, 1995), Boaler (1997), Quine (1974), Sieber (1973) and doubtlessly others. However, these latter contributions are not of the same type. Boaler (1997) was a more partial application of the theory in a mathematics department. Quine (1974) conducted a questionnaire survey of two schools and contrasted his findings with the theory. Sieber (1973) focused upon the

³ By ‘theory’ I mean an attempt to offer a general statement on a social process/ interaction (cf. Craib 1992). By ‘development,’ I mean an express concern with adding to the theoretic canon.

theory's methodological approach. As such, these are outside the original differentiation-polarisation theory research programme. Abraham (1995) is the exception, offering a whole school study, and is therefore also included here.

The connection across the monographs is not coincidental. Hargreaves, Lacey and Lambart were researchers on a Manchester University's project in the Department of Social Anthropology and Sociology between 1962-6, directed by Professors Gluckman and Worsley. Ball and Abraham's doctoral research formed the basis of their monographs and both were supervised by Lacey (when the latter was at Sussex University). Lambart did not publish a monograph nor comment on the theory. The resulting monographs have been cited as landmark studies (Abraham 1989, Burgess 1984, Hammersley 1985, 1992, Delamont 1984, 1992) and are now discussed in turn.

Lacey (1970). Lacey's fieldwork commenced first (1962-6). He described the Manchester Project's task had been to address the Sociology of Education's failure to see "the school itself as a social system" (Lacey 1970:xiii). His case study was a boys' grammar in the northern industrial town of 'Hightown.' The Manchester Project's central premise followed the Sociology of Education's concern "to explain the disappointing performance of working-class boys in grammar schools since the 1944 Education Act" (Lacey 1970:xi-xii). The 1944 Act had introduced the tripartite system (of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools) in the UK. This preoccupation with social class reflected mainstream social anthropology and sociology's overriding interest in class relations. As Lacey later analogised, like chips, class came with everything (Lacey and Ball 1979).

Lacey's fieldwork explored class inequalities by accessing and exploring interactional behaviour within the system of the school. His techniques included participant observation, unstructured interviews, self-administered questionnaires and school and local education authority (LEA) office records. The most central of these, Lacey argued, was his active participation inside the school. He observed all teaching staff and his teaching timetable was deliberately designed to involve contact with 1st, 4th and 6th year groups alongside his fieldwork investigations.

Advocates of the 'new' sociology of childhood would point to the incompatibility between assuming a teaching role and the achievement of symmetry between child and adult in the research process (Christensen and Prout 2002, Pole et al 1999, Pole 2007). Leaving aside whether ethical symmetry is little more than aspirational, rather than achievable, in research practice Lacey's initial teaching role (later discarded, although acknowledging that this did not overcome his adult status) facilitated access throughout the school. His commitment to the research permeated both his working and leisure hours:

During the field work period I attempted to immerse myself in the school and its activities. I helped to run a cricket team and went on several school trips. I also lived within 300 yards of the school during (and since) the research. (Lacey 1970:xiv-v)

Lacey conducted two 'questionnaire studies' in the first term of the school year, the first a 'panel study' of the 1st Year (which included "questions on sociometric choice, value orientations and career aspirations") and the second

on the 5th Year after their GCE 'O' level exams, which collected information on family background, school career and peer group affiliation (Lacey 1970:xiv). At the community level, Lacey found Hightown Grammar as a key site of class competition as "parents and their children become centrally concerned with examination success as the key to life chance allocation" (Lacey 1982:171). Pupils and teachers at Hightown Grammar therefore had come to represent the most able within the community and the pupils coming into Hightown Grammar were relatively homogenous in terms of their experience of academic success and their attitudes. Ultimately, this was reflected in a school system dominated by academic social values and this underpinned the invention of differentiation-polarisation theory, for exposure to Hightown Grammar's academic ethos:

entails the differentiation of the student body in terms of the dominant school values and the subsequent formation of two distinct student sub-cultures: one pro-school and the other, called the anti-group sub-culture, reacting against the dominant school values (and the pro-school groupings). The development of these opposed sub-cultures is termed 'polarisation' and the process is studied over a four-year period, as the cohort under investigation moves through the school (Lacey 1970:xv).

Lacey's data underpinned his conclusion. The "model constructed [...] provides an explanation of the case study material. In the process of developing the model, some fifty or sixty detailed case histories were examined" (Lacey 1970:190). The school

processes that were central to the differentiation and polarisation of pupils are; the inter-personal pupil relationships within one stream; the twinned but opposed pressures towards academic achievement and anti-academic activity; and the career of teaching staff (as experienced or newly-qualified, or as he terms, 'hard' and 'soft'). The organisation of the school sets a restricted context that defines and moulds social relations – and for both pupils and teaching staff.

Lacey argued that teachers ranked pupils on the latter's academic work *and* their behaviour (and that that behaviour was consistent):

The effect was for different pupils to receive very different selections of rewards, qualifications, punishments and rebukes. Over time these treatments *became part of the expectations of the classroom* [...] teacher behaviour, conditioned by the reputation of the pupil, is one of the central factors producing differentiation (Lacey 1982:172, 178, emphasis added).

The denial of the expected flow of rewards had a profound impact upon pupils' self image and future school career – a form of self-fulfilling prophesy. Outside of school, Lacey perceived the distribution of "cultural resources" influenced "parents' ability to understand and manipulate an 'academic' or 'school' culture" (Lacey 1970:149, 126):

There is nothing in the 'failure' cases discussed [here] [...] to suggest that inability to realise the importance of education was the cause of 'defeat'. I use the term *defeat* advisedly, because in a very real sense the families described here played for high stakes and lost. They were defeated by the system and the

achievement of their competitors. [...] we have seen in detail the process by which this comes about, and it is clear that pious hopes about a relative improvement in working-class achievement are dangerous as well as wrong (Lacey 1970:152, original emphasis).

Lacey's study places social class as central in understanding the impact of the schooling experience of Hightown Grammar upon pupils. Rather than a flawless meritocratic model, the interactional process of schooling reproduced social class inequalities. This process was neither inevitable nor deterministic, as there were instances where some working-class pupils succeeded and middle-class ones failed. The illuminating element to Lacey's work is the manner in which the social processes were explicated through case studies profiles. Ultimately, the changes introduced by the 1944 Education Act were insufficient, as "schools could not compensate for society," rather the "old constraints re-emerged in new forms" (Lacey 1982:179, 185).

Lacey's work served to position the school centrally in this process of stratification and as a site worthy of sociological attention on an interactional level. In terms of differentiation-polarisation theory, Lacey remained cautious – it constituted a particular conclusion from a particular organisation and context. Therefore the strength of the theory, at that point, was limited.

Hargreaves (1967). The Manchester Project was conceived to examine the different structures of the tripartite system: Lacey studied boys passing the eleven-plus examination and proceeding to a grammar school and Hargreaves studied boys who failed and who then moved to a secondary modern school. (The third type of school,

the technical school, was rare in comparison). A point of gender comparison is introduced with Abraham's (1989, 1995) later work on the theory. Hargreaves examined Lumley boys' Secondary Modern School.

Hargreaves, like Lacey, understood the school as a social system and his study was both exploratory (the interactional processes of a secondary modern school) and critical (to discover what had generated the lack of working class pupils' lack of educational success). He also assumed a teaching role in the school (teaching for one year). He focused upon the 14 and 15 year old final year cohort (Year Four) (later raised to the current leaving age of 16) on the "assumption [...] that these fourth year boys represent a crystallization of the values inculcated by the school and an end-product of the educative process" (Hargreaves 1967:x-xi). The Lumley schooling experience would therefore be epitomised by this cohort.

Hargreaves maximised his contact with this group. He taught the whole cohort (in addition to other year groups); observed at least one lesson given by Lumley's teaching staff; conducted questionnaires and interviews and; generally used "every available opportunity for informal discussion" with pupils (Hargreaves 1967:ix). He later perceived his teaching role to be a barrier to brokering informal relationships with pupils and took a "radical step" and minimised his teaching to two lessons a week (Hargreaves 1967:203). This recognised that "I could never assume a pupil-role [but] [...] I had to abandon the teacher-role as far as this was possible" (Hargreaves 1967:204-5).

The strong conceptual and methodological parallels between Hargreaves and Lacey's studies extend to their findings. Hargreaves' (1967) found Lumley's academic ethos permeated its social relations. For example, "membership of a high stream is a function not simply of ability but *of positive orientation to academic values*, the reverse being true of low streams" (Hargreaves 1967:191, emphasis added). Hargreaves' (1967) found that the experience of schooling at Lumley formed pupils into two oppositional sub-cultures: conformist (pro-school) and non-conformist (anti-school). The streaming organisation of the school then exacerbated pupils' segregation and further promoted a polarisation of attitudes. For example, Hargreaves (1967) described how the top two sets were timetabled together for games, woodwork and metalwork. The bottom two sets were paired for the same periods, the point being that "never upper and lower streams together [...] All these mutually reinforcing factors thus lead, by the fourth year, to a polarisation of values" (Hargreaves 1967:170). It was in the processes *within* Lumley, that Hargreaves found pupils' school careers were structurally divided. The most marked division was entrance for examination and Hargreaves made a powerful argument as to the implications for pupils' school careers, for "the children are in fact divided into sheep and goats: those who take the examinations and those who do not" (Hargreaves 1967:184):

Lumley could not achieve a high rank in the 'league table' unless boys whose chances of success in the examination were small were excluded from entry. In this way the school could maintain an apparently good academic record by depriving low stream pupils of the opportunity to enter for an external examination (Hargreaves 1967:185).

Whilst not all secondary modern schools entered children for GCE examinations and certainly, at the time of Hargreaves' fieldwork, there was no system of nationally published league tables as there is currently. Yet parallels can be struck between Lumley's circumstances and the contemporary context of Ofsted and school league tables in England and Wales. Indeed, debates now include the importance of gender as well as social class in terms of attainment and the formation of anti-school attitudes (Delamont 2000, Abrahams 2001).

Hargreaves also explicated how classroom relations spilled into informal activities. Hargreaves described the case of one pupil and an instance where their anti-school attitude prevented his participation in extra-curricula sporting activities. For example, one pupil (Derek), was a keen swimmer and when Hargreaves suggested Derek might join the school's swim team, Derek's categorical response was "I wouldn't swim for this bloody school" (Hargreaves 1967:188). Derek's example showed participation required disposition as well as ability across both sporting and academic contexts.

Hargreaves shared Lacey's conclusion that the meritocratic objectives of the 1944 Education Act had not been met. At Lumley, the process of differentiation was not immediately obvious. It was only through his case study approach and the micro-level comparison of the streams inside one year cohort that these social processes became visible.

Hargreaves' and Lacey's mutual identification of a differentiation-polarisation process inside two different school systems highlighted the importance of the school in shaping the educational experience and achievement of pupils. Whilst we do not know whether the streaming system produced greater social class inequalities in educational outcome than would have resulted had there been no streaming, both authors nevertheless emphasised that differentiation-polarisation occurred as result of *internal* school processes. They may be credited with the invention of the theory at Manchester.

Hargreaves and Lacey further predicted that comprehensives (involving school allocation on the basis of geographical proximity, rather than the outcome of the eleven-plus examination) would be subject to the same tensions that their studies had identified. This provided the focus of Ball (1981) and Abraham's (1995) studies.

Ball (1981). Ball shared Lacey and Hargreaves' scepticism about the challenge comprehensives faced, but wanted to "do more than merely repeat their work on grammar and secondary modern schools in the new context of comprehensive education" (Ball 1981:xvi). Notably, he focused "upon the emergent nature of social interaction as well as the playing out of social structural and cultural forces in the school" (Ball 1981:xv). This made him the most explicitly interactionist of the initial three studies, as neither Lacey nor Hargreaves formally adopted an interactionist approach (Hargreaves labelling himself more a social psychologist than a sociologist).

Ball examined the school system on various analytic levels; to see if the differentiation-polarisation thesis held; the impact of the internal organisation of the school upon pupils' school careers and; the capacity of social actors' to manage (Ball's term) their everyday life in school. Here, Ball defined the pupil as a social actor in their own right (able to not only to define the situation, but also influence it, cf. Thomas 1928).

Ball's fieldwork commenced, like Lacey's, with a period of general observation, guided by the classic interactionist question, 'what is going on here?' (Silverman 1970). The focus then narrowed, from a generic school acquaintance onto specific cohorts, forms and pupils and teachers. His fieldwork (1973-6) included; observation; teaching; interviews; small-scale questionnaires (including sociomatrices) and; official school records and registers analysis.

Ball decided to teach only as a supply teacher and, like his supervisor, decreased this role during the fieldwork. Later research has noted the marginal status accorded to supply teachers inside school (Galloway and Morrison 1994) and whilst Ball made no claim to have avoided the authoritative status that is accorded a teacher in school, his supply teacher status will inevitably have influenced the relationships he was able to form with the pupils at Beachside (contrasting with Lacey and Hargreaves' more prescribed teaching roles). In seeking to become a critical insider, Ball also attended a school trip, invigilated exams, took registration periods for absent teachers and played in a staff versus pupils cricket match. It is perhaps the latter that clarified his role – he played on the staff side.

The policy context of comprehensivisation was significant and Ball caught Beachside School in transition. The school had become a comprehensive in name, but the definition of comprehensive education is key here and Ball revealed the school retained many characteristics of the previous system. Beachside took pupils from all abilities, but did not universally teach in mixed-ability groups. Whilst mixed-ability teaching is only one version of comprehensive education, Ball (1981) was critical of Beachside's internal system. The intake (1st) year contained ten parallel, mixed-ability forms plus two remedial forms whilst Years 2 and 3 were divided into three 'bands' on the basis of academic ability and Ball later claimed on the basis of his evidence that this banding system re-created the self same inequalities Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1970) had explicated at Hightown and Lumley:

There is little evidence of the aims and objectives of any of the ideological models of comprehensive education [...] being achieved to any significant degree at Beachside [...] [banding] entailed a separation of school-career experiences for pupils; differences in the pupils' experiences of schooling began at once in the first year, and may be viewed in the long term as being related directly to the distribution of occupational opportunity and future life chances (Ball 1981:280, 281).

The banding system at Beachside Comprehensive recreated the "subtle modes of ascription" and hence the differentiation-polarisation process (Sharp and Green 1976, quoted in Ball 1981:285):

the streamed comprehensive school does produce an unstable, polarised social structure amongst its pupils [...] the form and principles of the previous bipartite system of education remain embedded within the comprehensive school (Ball 1981:283, 284).

Ball recognised that Beachside was in a process of change between two organisational systems and, as such, the culture of the school (and its impact on pupils' school careers) could not change overnight. Hence he introduced a comparative element into his study, between banded pupils (Years 2 and 3) and the first cohort organised into mixed-ability groups (Year 1). The comparison led him to the same conclusion – simply placing mixed-ability pupils in environment and classroom did not equate with equal opportunity. Competition for classroom status *inside* form-groups was sufficient to create a hierarchy that reflects social class difference – without the stigma of banding, setting or streaming:

The mixed-ability form-group appears to reproduce a microcosm of the banding system, with the processes of differentiation and polarization taking place *within* each form-group [...] as the distribution of middle-class pupils across the whole cohort creates a situation where it is possible for them to dominate (Ball 1981:273, 274, original emphasis).

Ball positioned the teacher in a central role in pupils' differentiation. For example, 'cueing' was one mechanism through which pupils are made aware of their relative status in the classroom, through the reading out of exams results, teachers' comments when returning homework, or when the form is divided up or in the choice of people

to answer questions. Informal “cueing may also occur in the flippant remark that is intended to embarrass or rebuke” (Ball 1981:271). Such teacher cueing structured pupils’ self-images and pupils came to define their ability in response and Ball describes one instance in a lesson he observed (Ball 1981:271). The teacher asked for a volunteer to read the part of Green in the novel they were studying. The teacher stressed Green was a large part, requiring a good reader who would not hold the class back. This brought into play pupils’ own self-image, the pupils’ knowledge of the teacher’s perception of them and the pupils’ own relative ability among peers in the form in terms of which pupils felt able to volunteer. The teacher had organised the request in such a way to stratify the class. Those who volunteered to read the part of Green, as well as those who did not, demonstrated how the school effected the “socialization of appropriate aspirations” for pupils (Ball 1981:278).

The conclusion for Beachside was that comprehensivisation in academic and disciplinary terms (i.e. exam success) had been successful, but had not brought groups of differing abilities together in an educational experience as the “Beachside innovation was one of mixed-ability grouping rather than mixed-ability teaching” (Ball 1981:267). This had produced the differentiation of pupils in terms of ability and a subsequent polarisation between those groups. Ball’s conclusion therefore supported Hargreaves and Lacey’s differentiation-polarisation thesis.

Abraham (1995).

Ball’s conclusion and the issue of mixed-ability classes vis-à-vis mixed-ability teaching has informed subsequent debates within the Sociology of Education (cf. Hallam and Ireson 2006, 2007, Abraham 2008b). A further research monograph

(Abraham 1995) also considered setting within comprehensive secondary schools and considerably developed the theory.

A consensus had emerged following the rejection in the nineteen seventies of the tripartite system and the eleven plus examination. This, combined with the then Thatcher government's critique of mixed-ability classes and teaching, led to comprehensive schools remaining in place, but streamed by setting according to ability in each subject. This consensus remains largely intact in policy terms today. Therefore, Abraham's (1995) study retains the most contemporary relevance. However, the concern here is more expressly with the development of theory. Abraham (1995) described his multi-strategy research approach:

The research takes an ethnographic approach, but is not confined to quantitative or qualitative methods; both are applied according to the nature of the research questions asked and the data collected. Moreover, the ethnographic approach taken does not imply that the research eschews hypothesis-testing; exploratory and hypothesis-testing methods are utilized depending on the demands of the research enquiry. (Abraham 1995:xiii)

Abraham (1989, 1995) adapted differentiation-polarisation theory for use in further fieldwork. His research took place in a comprehensive in a conurbation in the south of England and his approach followed the three original studies. Abraham (1995) conducted the fieldwork himself; included a variety of ethnographically orientated techniques (classroom observation, school records, pupil and teacher interviews and

participation in informal settings in everyday school life) and; a series of administered questionnaires.

The most fundamental contrast between Abraham (1989) and Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball's work is the duration of the fieldwork. Abraham's (1989) fieldwork lasted only for a matter of months (May-June 1986) and hence lacked the time-scale to chart a single cohorts' progress. Abraham's (1989) therefore deployed differentiation-polarisation theory to chart pupils' careers, centrally, the relationship between academic performance and behaviour. The school was organised internally into sets, as opposed to the banded system in place at Beachside. Sets differentiate pupils in relation to their ability for their timetabled *subjects* as opposed to bands, which use the *unit of the form-group* to structure the year cohort. Abraham's school kept sets together across the timetable, and hence this gave more formal coherence to the setting groups. Abraham used differentiation-polarisation theory deductively, in the sense of a hypothesis to be tested, rather than an inductive exploration of how it potentially manifested in the school. For example, he sought to combat a short period of fieldwork by devising a range of indicators to explore potential differentiation-polarisation across the year groups. He used indicators such as the number of 'tickings off' given by staff to pupils, pupils' social class (Registrar General's categorisation system I-V), staff reflections on pupil behaviour and performance (on the scales 1-10 and 1-5), friendship patterns (pupils' listings of their closest friends), m.a.s. (reported missed assignments), b.b.s. ('bad behaviour' notes documented in pupils' school records) and cognitive ability tests (CATs). He then examined these datasets for possible correlations.

Abraham's (1989) conclusion supported the differentiation-polarisation thesis and added previously unconsidered sources of differentiation. Abraham (1989) found sub-cultural friendship patterns between different pro- and anti- school value systems related to formal achievement (i.e. exam results) and also that these reached across the school's organisation system. Abraham (1989) used the term "intra-set differentiation" to describe how differentiation-polarisation occurred as a result of the school system *and* the pupils' own formation of independent networks outside of the groups the school organised pupils into (Abraham 1989:50):

Committed pro-school pupils in the middle sets tended to choose their friends from the higher sets and committed anti-school pupils tended to choose theirs from the lower sets. Consequently, each value orientation is reinforced and polarisation accentuated (Abraham 1989:75).

Abraham's findings therefore developed the importance of the set-group within the theory.

Lacey, Hargreaves, Ball and Abraham were similar in their fieldwork and findings. Each supports the differentiation-polarisation thesis – that pupils once differentiated on the basis of ability become further polarised through the social system and process of their school environ. The first three studies contain differences, some of which reflect the different situations and contexts surrounding different case study schools. They each provide convincing evidence in support of the thesis, the backbone of which is longitudinal observational data alongside substantial quantitative material.

Differentiation-polarisation theory and the ethnographic research process through which it was produced has attracted debate (cf. Hammersley 1995, Abraham 1995, Boaler 1997). A focus has been upon whether they offer a model for others to follow. If so (and as some have argued), whether can be considered ethnographies becomes an important question to address.

Hargreaves, Lacey, Ball and Abrahams as ethnographies. One of the problems with ethnography is that it is often held to be synonymous with qualitative research (Hammersley 1992). Yet differentiation-polarisation theory demonstrated that ethnography can effectively employ qualitative and quantitative techniques and all four studies made extensive use of both. Ball (1981) argued participant observation was the leading method inside his study (although observation does not dominate the monograph as a whole). Lacey (1970) also argued his participation within the school was the key to his approach, but it is upon the written accounts (questionnaires) and official documents (school records) that his account of Hightown Grammar primarily rests (whilst informed by his observational fieldwork role.) Other commentators noted, in relation to Hargreaves and Lacey, that both:

contain far more data derived from written questionnaires than actual accounts of the observation [which] means that both their books tell us more about social relations expressed in writing than they do about what the fieldworker actually saw (Delamont 1984:22-3, 23).

Applying Delamont's definition of ethnography (and one perhaps which dominates today) in which participation observation is the core element, Hargreaves and

Lacey fall short in terms of the presentation of their data and results. Hargreaves' study included participant observation, but subjected that data to statistical analysis, as "the research is exploratory in nature and focuses broadly on the structure of the informal groups of pupils and the influence of such groups on the educative process. At the same time an attempt has been made to find ways in which these observed processes can be measured and subjected to statistical analysis" (Hargreaves 1967:x). Quantitative data was prominent within Hargreaves study, used less and to build a model than to provide a form of quantitative grounded theorising in which the data would (statistically) speak for itself. This sits uneasily with the extended discussion of participant observation and the ambitions Hargreaves outlined in his appendix.

Lacey's is a more complex case. Whilst he does offer a series of detailed pupil profiles (in a dedicated chapter), the monograph's overall statistical emphasis risks overshadowing the richness and illuminating impact of these profiles. That is, the individuals are positioned merely as a means to complement a wider model or explanation. However, his theoretical position (whilst not expressly interactionist) is nevertheless closely focused upon agency, rather than structure. For instance, on a teacher, "His control rests on bluff and his skill at manipulating the awesome mask of authority" (Lacey 1970:175). There is a real danger here of falling into the trap of evaluating studies conducted several decades ago according to contemporary mores. That is, to fail to position the studies in the research climate in which they were conducted. Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball's emphasis on secondary sources (the analysis of questionnaires, socio-matrix data and school records) does contrast with the type of data collected and emphasised within more

recent ethnographies in the Sociology of Education (cf. Thorne 1993, Hey 1997).

However, in the late 1960s this literature was only beginning to emerge to challenge the dominance of functionalism. It would therefore be difficult for Lacey to explicitly have embedded his study within this body of literature. On that basis quantitative and qualitative data worked in synergy together within Lacey's study:

The model constructed [...] provides an explanation of the case study material. [...] *the successful management of the internal factors (classroom situation, choice of friends, etc.) could be of critical importance in the competition.* (Lacey 1970:190, 190-1, my emphasis)

Thus, understanding the *role* played by quantitative data inside each study offers a more sophisticated reading than simply comparing their proportion of each monograph. Therefore, participant observation (whilst a core element of ethnography) can also be used as a vehicle to enable the deployment of other research methods whilst remaining a dominant method itself. This is perhaps one of the initial three authors' core methodological contributions and it explains the apparent contradiction between the emphasis upon participant observation made by the authors, but then the presentation of data and results on the basis of other methods. What is, perhaps, a shame is that considering the vast amount of time they spent in classrooms writing notes, that data this is not showcased more prominently.

Differentiation-polarisation theory is a theory of interaction, based on both qualitative and quantitative databases. Modern ethnography does not *preclude* the use of

quantitative techniques (Pole and Morrison 2003, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), but this is a climate to have emerged only following some perceived clashes between the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods – which of course Hargreaves and Lacey would not have been aware. Qualitative researchers offered a variety of responses to the attacks made on their work by the previously dominant research forms, variously claiming the same generality as quantitative research (cf. Yin 1984) to a totally opposed and incompatible ontology (Oakley 1981). The use of quantitative alongside qualitative which Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball enjoyed was rendered problematic – in a way not perceived by the studies themselves. Hargreaves' and Lacey's approach not only *preceded* the bi-polarisation between both quantitative and qualitative researchers that rendered their combination problematic but also to a certain degree maintained its own agenda through this trend in Abraham's (1995) work, through supervision by Lacey in the late 1980s. An understanding of the context in which the studies were conducted is therefore vital to their evaluation.

The Manchester School, in the history of the development of qualitative research, was an early champion of the approach, stemming from the anthropological tradition of Max Gluckman who co-ordinated the original Manchester Project (Atkinson *et al* 1993, Burgess 1984, Atkinson and Housley 2003) and Manchester sociologists connected to Hargreaves and Lacey's project also went on to further establish qualitative research within other British universities, for example, Ronald Frankenberg (at Keele) and Valdo Pons (at Warwick).⁴ The Manchester School can also be located in a wider trend developing on both sides of the Atlantic to apply

⁴ Valdo Pons is the connection between Burgess' (1983) monograph, based on Burgess' doctoral thesis, and the Manchester Project. Pons moved from Manchester to Warwick University where he supervised the early stages of Burgess' doctoral research.

observational methods to the study of sociologists' own society (Burgess 1984). American sociology of deviancy moved to study poolroom cultures (Polsky 1969) and homosexual communities (Humphreys 1970). British studies included drug use (Young 1971), moral panics (Cohen 1972) and the male, adolescent gang (Patrick 1973). Manchester's contribution was therefore two-fold; a conceptual challenge to the established canons of positivism of earlier Sociology of Education (cf. Shipman 1968), which was actualised through a commitment to anthropological research (complete with its unproblematic perception of the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods). The first two studies at Manchester, in particular, were trail-blazers for the establishment of the ethnographic approach to social research and served to make what was then radical, mainstream now.

The differentiation-polarisation thesis as theory. The acceptance of the four studies as ethnographies allows for the more challenging question of theory generation and cumulation to be raised. Hammersley proposes that differentiation-polarisation theory constitutes a model for the development of theory through ethnography because of the research process through which their theory was initially formulated. This is a different way of perceiving differentiation-polarisation theory, namely as a model for theory generation.

Hammersley views differentiation-polarisation theory as an example of a theory whose "validity is reasonably well-established" (Hammersley 1985:250). He holds that differentiation-polarisation theory (a) is not a readily obvious explanation and (b) that has alternatives (cf. Willis 1977 on resistance theory; Abraham 2008a, b, Delamont 2000 on anti-school boys and Hammersley 1995 and Abraham 1996 on

positivism). For Hammersley, differentiation-polarisation's attraction is that it "shows the feasibility of the positivist model of theory" which is based upon a fieldwork-derived theory and then seeks to "test a wide range of specific hypotheses deriving from it" (Hammersley 1985:250, 251).

Hammersley's (1985) model involves the testing of the "validity of a theory through the study of cases selected on strategic grounds" (Hammersley 1992:20).

Communication across studies is crucial and the preceding discussion has established that all four studies were closely linked in that they focus "on the same set of theoretical ideas, developing and testing these ideas in different settings" (Hammersley 1985:246). Additionally, their multi-strategy research approach (including quantitative and qualitative methods) is appropriate, as "one should use any data that are available, of whatever type, if they allow one to develop and test one's theory effectively" (Hammersley 1985:255).

We can see that Hammersley looked favourably upon differentiation-polarisation theory and used it as a case to clarify what 'theory' means and how it could be developed and tested. His interest was in developing a methodological theory about empirical theory development (i.e. not an empirical theory). However, there are problems with his reading. Hammersley applies his model to Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball's work retrospectively. If he had himself constructed a model for the cumulation of knowledge through ethnography, this would constitute a model to test in later research. However, as he applies, or imposes, a model *upon* Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball's work. That is, the basis of his argument is that theory is formed through the process of ethnographic research and he looks to construct a model from studies

whose conclusions have not been formed through a concern with theory that Hammersley later imputes to them. This is a far stronger programme than Lacey's own intent to illuminate the universalistic. The form of analytic approach they used sits somewhere between the ideal types of analytic induction and grounded theorising. Each contained differing opening concerns and remained relatively autonomous in terms of the means by which they pursued their analysis. The fieldwork contingencies and improvisations present in all sit uneasily with the argument that they adhered to an analytic model. Whilst they do constitute a series of closely connected monographs, each stands alone in terms of fieldwork approach and authorship and are also far less concerned with an interconnected theoretical programme of development than Hammersley assumes (Ball's stronger emphasis upon pupil agency demonstrates this). Indeed, their basic opening theoretical standpoints also varied.

In Hammersley's defence, it should not be assumed that methodological theories must be developed in the same way as empirical theories. In addition, Hammersley has acknowledged that his reconstruction and the first three authors' own aims differ. Neither is it essential to his model that the research should be conducted in entirely the same way nor that he claimed the authors were the same. None of these are of intrinsic importance to his proposed model.

Whilst Hammersley's model can be criticised for imposing a model onto the studies beyond their original intent, nevertheless, there are empirical lessons for future research to be drawn from the case of differentiation-polarisation theory as a model for developing theory. These incorporate innovations in the

field following Hammersley (1985) – centrally the notion of reflexivity – and share his view that argument that interactionists’ claims to be developing and testing theories are weak. Rather than advocate a formal model, the paper now emphasises ethnographic research’s inherent messy and unpredictable character and that this acknowledgement can permit some benefits to be gained.

Reflexivity holds that researchers are as much involved in constructing an account of the social world they are studying than representing what was actually there (Atkinson 1990, Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). This has led to many aspects of the research process being laid open to scrutiny; from analysis (Burgess and Bryman 1993, Coffey and Atkinson 1996) to the individual researcher’s role within field research (Coffey 1999) and forms of representation (Bagley 2008). This is not to imply that ethnographers are no longer concerned with the Rankian notion of simply ‘showing what is there’ (representing reality), rather they acknowledge that there are multiple realities and that their account will inevitably be a partial representation of that reality.

Reflexivity acknowledges that the less tangible features of the research process nevertheless can have an important influence upon the ethnography produced; both in process (internally) and following publication (externally). In the case of differentiation-polarisation theory, the internal features were that Ball happened to capture Beachside School in the process of comprehensivisation and hence studied the first and senior year groups as a means to compensate. Abraham (1995) similarly improvised in the field, using ‘secondary’ indicators (such as ‘tickings off’) to study differentiation-polarisation across pupils’ school careers. Lacey, Hargreaves and Ball

also amended their teaching roles, in response to the relationships they were able (or not) to forge during their fieldwork. Hargreaves, at the outset, had not intended to concentrate entirely upon the streaming system, yet when he found its importance; it became essential to the study. These circumstances surrounding each study reveal a model of theory development in which improvised decisions and unique responses to the fieldwork circumstances in which they found themselves were essential. Many were made in response to the individual circumstances in which they found themselves and the contingences of fieldwork.

In terms of externally, Hammersley's comment on the shortage of well-developed and systematically tested theory in sociology is important, but there has nevertheless been *some* development of differentiation-polarisation theory elsewhere. Lacey refers to a dozen or so studies which have used the idea of differentiation-polarisation in new studies (Lacey and Ball 1979). Woods (1979) developed an interactionist model of classroom relations stemming from the differentiation-polarisation thesis (which Hammersley (1987) himself discusses). Delamont (1984) and Burgess (1983) also argue their own doctoral research developed concerns relating to the thesis. Hallam and Ireson (2006, 2007) used surveys and not ethnography to test the theory, but used Ball's (1981) ethnographic framework. Research on the core themes of class and gender continued and developed from the original research and Abraham's (1995) later contribution.

These are all instances of theoretical development that continue to influence and inform new research (cf. Allan 2006). This is fruitful theoretical cumulation, but not via as coherent internal processes such as Hammersley perceived within the original

three studies. In respect to Hammersley's model, his call for theory is not generic – he has a particular kind of theoretical development and model in mind (Hammersley 1995, 2000). This is not to suggest that Hammersley's reconstruction of the work of Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball was an incorrect reading, rather that more surrounded the process than his model could accommodate. Whilst admittedly messy in contrast to Hammersley's model, surely this form of (modest) theory development is too valuable to lose?

Conclusion. Differentiation-polarisation theory and the four studies underpinning it stand out in the history of qualitative research, British Sociology of Education and theory development. Whilst ethnography remains a contested term today, theirs was an inclusive and informed form of ethnography which recognised that “the choice of ethnography carries with it implications about theory, epistemology, and ontology” (Ball 1993:32).

The argument has been that there were improvised elements in the field that were essential to the theory's further development. It is a form of theory development that acknowledges (even celebrates) the inherently messy and unpredictable nature of fieldwork and how subsequent scholars may use it, rather than advocating a formal model.

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