

Sociological Background of Adult and Lifelong Learning

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Structure



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Learning Objectives



After reading Unit 5, it is expected that you would be able to

- ❖ Perceive the process of gradual shifts in understanding adult learning processes
- ❖ Learn about some of the main sociological approaches that are useful in making adult learning more effective
- ❖ Form your own idea of the relationship between adult learning and sociological perspectives.

5.1 Introduction

Unit 3 and Unit 4 have clearly explained that education covers all that we experience from formal schooling to the construction of understanding through day-to-day life. You may say that one's education begins at birth and continues throughout life. Everybody receives education from various sources. It is well known that family members and society influence one's education and so it makes sense to discuss sociological background of adult and lifelong learning as the theme of Unit 5.

We find that globally widening access and participation in adult and lifelong

learning and social inclusion are high on current policy agendas. With rapid technological, economic and social changes in society initial education is now regarded as being inadequate in terms of preparing individuals with the skills and knowledge required for life in a knowledge society. As a result it is necessary to widen access to adult learning opportunities in order to address the changing needs of society. However, who gets access to what type of adult education is a key issue as there is still a learning divide within most societies between different social groups and the

study of sociology provides us an understanding of the nature of this divide.

Assumptions and perceptions which characterize the development of adult and lifelong learning as a distinct field of study have influenced the nature of practice, followed in the actual work situation of adult educators. We find

that often over concern with practical aspects of adult and lifelong learning brings about amongst adult educators a general lack of interest in broader social issues. For example they hardly reflect on the link between social structure, social change and adult learning. This state of affairs is however fast changing and Unit 5 deals with the changed scenario.

5.2 Shift from Psychology-oriented Approach to Sociological Understanding

As you already know that adult education has made a significant shift from earlier individual psychology-oriented approach (see Box 5.1) to the approach that emphasizes participation in adult learning programs from a social perspective. This approach explores how broad social processes affect adults' perceptions of reality. Adult educators are now interested in understanding philosophical foundations of adult learning and lifelong education. Unit 3 and Unit 4 have already covered this dimension of adult educators' quest.

Adult educators are also deeply interested in acquiring an ability to understand and direct the basic processes of education. In other words

they are involved in the refinement of objectives, the selection and application of methods and content of adult learning and in this sense they seek effectiveness in working with one another, with other individuals and groups and with the general public. For this purpose, many adult educators have turned to discovering how structuring of knowledge is linked to both theory and practice of social and cultural patterns of control in society. This is why Unit 5 focuses on this trend among adult educators and discusses the use of sociological theory and method in analysis of education with particular reference to adult and lifelong learning systems and processes.

Box 5.1 Psychology-oriented Approach to Adult Education

If you were to assume that learning derives in a linear manner from research, there arises a great deal of faith in psychology-oriented process-product perspective because it claims to provide results that become prescriptions for practice. Some of you may believe that motivation determines participation of adults in learning and then you may like to explain the concept of motivation in terms of psychological constructs. You may then talk about the general nature of motives and needs and deal with people in abstract and there will be hardly any analysis of psychological processes taking place in concrete specific situations. Such perspectives focus the individual person and stress on motivation and attitudes per se.

5.3 Participation from a Social Perspective

You can on the other hand look at participation in learning from a social perspective and try to find out how the objective world influences our perception of reality. Comparing participants with non-participants in adult learning is only one aspect of inquiry. You may also analyze participation and non-participation in relation to broad social and economic movements. You have already learnt in Unit 4 that Paulo Freire considered education as a political process with political outcomes.

There is, of course, no single comprehensive theory on participation in adult and lifelong learning. Taking a more sociological approach to understanding the issue of participation, you may like to integrate theoretical models in order to arrive at a more balanced perspective and view adult learning as a societal process and at the same time not neglect the individual's psychological conceptual apparatus by looking at the links between the two levels. This will create a balance between aspects of practicability based on assumptions about the characteristics of the learners and broader social processes.

Keeping in mind this holistic approach and re-orientation from psychology-dominated perspective to a more sociological view of adult learning, we will now discuss some of the main currents of thought in sociology that have led to better grasp of issues and concerns of adult education.

Early in the twentieth century, Emile Durkheim (1922) wrote *Education and Sociology* and this was perhaps the earliest attempt to apply sociology to the practice of education, including adult education. For one early example of such application you can cite Waller's (1932) classical study, *Sociology of Teaching*. Another example is the work of Brookover (1949), namely, *Sociology of Education*. In the field of application of sociology in education, including adult education, you can study i) the relation of education to different aspects of society and to the society as a whole. You can also analyze ii) education as a social system as well as iii) the consequences of education for learners.

Let us now discuss some of the main sociological approaches in relation to the above three areas of application of sociological theories and methods in the study of education, including adult education.

Activity 5.1

What is in your opinion a balanced approach to understanding the structure and processes of adult learning? Write a short note of 300 words and compare your note with the notes of fellow PALDIN learners?

5.4 Sociological Approaches

Sociology as a structured social science discipline emerged in the nineteenth century. Now in the first decade of twenty-first century it has branched out

in many sub-disciplines and subjects like education and adult learning have extensively used sociological paradigms to evolve their theory and practice. Let

us discuss some of those sociological approaches which have at one time or other dominated adult learning discourse.

5.4.1 Structural Functionalism

During the early days of adult education structural functionalism was one of its main sociological perspectives. As Dahrendorf (1959: 161) summed up, the assumptions of structural functionalism included that every society is a relatively persistent, well-integrated and stable structure of elements and every element in a society has a function that renders a contribution to its maintenance as a system. Functioning social structure is based on a consensus of values among its members.

Taking the functional dimension of educational institutions, such scholars as Barton and Walker (1978: 271) considered education 'as a mechanism constructed by society to meet the manpower needs appropriate to an expanded economy'. You may consider the variant of functionalism used for finding out social correlates of manpower allocation as 'technological functionalism'. It will suffice to cite one example of the extensive use of functionalist paradigm. Heath (1978: 96) said, 'Indeed it would not be far fetched to suggest that much of (British) Labour Party's policy on education right upto the present day has been influenced if not dominated by technological functionalism'. Ball (1981) indicated in his review of sociology of education in developing countries the impact of functionalism on educational policy.

In the U S A the mainstream sociology of adult education focussed on quantification and positivism. The emphasis on empiricism (The view that

knowledge of the world is limited to what can be observed or experienced. For instance, concepts apply to or derive from an experience - the concept of dizziness applies to the experience of dizziness. The experience must have evoked the concept, or the person must recognize that the concept applies to the experience. Also, beliefs about the world have truth merit only when they are related to someone's experience.) paved the way for building adult education a field of study. There was an increase in the application of statistical methods. Growing empiricism and more advanced statistical methods saw a steady growth of quantitative data based on different kinds of survey. Cropland and Grabowski (1971) observed that the quality of the empirical studies in adult education improved from rather loose case reports to being more analytical and multivariate.

Domination of survey-based studies did not last forever. In search of better alternatives adult education moved away from a focus on quantitative methods to qualitative methods, especially life history and biography. This does not imply that the need for quantitative data diminished. In fact, application of both the quantitative and qualitative methods ensured a better balance in findings of researches in adult education.

Both actor-network theories (see Box 5.2) and the new literacy studies are examples of empirical research. There are in them useful lessons for adult education research that might be derived from approaches developed in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. The goals of such research are to enhance our understanding of educational policy and practice as effects of power circulating in networks of human and non-human entities. There

is a critical discussion of some of the concepts and assumptions underpinning both actor-network theories and the new literacy studies. Of course, in this approach some of the problems are not resolved initially, but only identified as issues to be worked through in practice.

You may say that as an example of this approach would be that we map the current government strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills in India onto a framework designed for researching by adult educators.

Box 5.2 Actor Network Theory

Bruno Latour (1993), one of the main exponents of Action Network Theory (ANT), proposed that all objects are hybrid. You can find their ordering in space and time. It is this ordering that comprise the networks through which it becomes possible to say certain things while other things are not said. This position poses major challenges to how you may theoretically conceive the various practices of adult education because ANT asks you to examine the complex relations that constitute practice rather than focus on select factors. As ANT has its roots in the sociology of science and technology, you would find that it has emerged most strongly among those who use notions of cyborg as a metaphor to indicate the hybrid forms of human/ technology actors through which learning takes place.

The tradition in sociology of describing empirically the social, economic and political conditions of society became a hallmark of the work of those engaged in exposing the inequalities of society so that it was possible to change them (see Dennis 1980 and Hammersley

1981). Adult educators found useful the ethnographic tools employed in qualitative research for studying learning processes and the transmission of culture in the home, the adult learning setup and the community (see Box 5.3).

Box 5.3 The Ethnographic Method

Ethnography seeks to understand and represent the points of view of the members of a particular culture. It is primarily an approach to collect and analyze data and as in other types of qualitative research, the data collected are rich in their descriptions of people, places, languages, and events. Ethnographers generally carry out extensive fieldwork during which they listen to, observe and record carefully what people say and do. Their main aim is to make records of their observations of behavior and avoid distortion and ethnocentric bias. In education scholars like Cazden, Hyes and John (1972) have used this classical approach to data collection to examine the social functions of language use in the classroom.

The hallmark of ethnographic method is participant observation. The observer becomes part of the community under study and tries to understand the points of view of its members. For example Michael Armstrong's (1980) book is an account of what he observed among children during one school year to study intellectual growth and its enabling conditions.

Along with participant observation, ethnographers take extensive notes and engage in audio- or videotaping, interview informants and compile biographical data on them, collecting genealogies and life histories, take photographs or make films, administer questionnaires or surveys, and elicit ratings and rankings. All these and other forms of data collection help the ethnographer in obtaining a holistic view of the culture studied. It is interesting to note that ethnographers do not set out to test pre-established

hypotheses. Rather they describe all aspects of the community under study in the greatest detail possible. In this sense they structure and refine their research as they proceed. In other words, their collection and analysis of data influence the design of their study. Adult educators use only some of the ethnographic tools described here to learn about the home, adult learning setup and community contexts of their target groups. For instance, Kirsch and Guthrie (1982) in their study of the on-the-job reading practices of 42 service and clerical workers of the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company in Washington, DC, discovered that the amount of time workers spent engaged in various types of reading activities significantly predicted their performance on related tasks.

As in mainstream sociology, so also in adult education many scholars became aware of severe limitations of structural functionalist perspective. Archer (1981: 272) argued that functionalist model of social structure had two major drawbacks and in her words, 'as a model of social reality it was often inapplicable. As a means of investigating institutional operations it was supremely unhelpful because the notion of mutual determinism made it impossible to question which other parts of society influenced education most, when, where and under what conditions'. Another critic, Silverman (1970: 67) observed, 'Functionalists direct our attention to the consequences rather than to the causes of social phenomena'.

Keeping in line with the general trends

of positivistic paradigm facing serious criticisms in the social sciences, adult education too endeavored to look in other directions. One such direction was the revival of Marxist theory (discussed later in sub-section 5.4.3) that emphasized the study of conflict, power, control and the impact of social structure on adult education processes. Another more popular approach was in the direction of 'new sociology' or interpretative perspective that focussed on structuring of knowledge and symbols in institutions of adult learning and their relationship with principles and practices of bio-cultural control in society (see Beck et al. 1976, Barton and Lawn 1980-81). The streams of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology influenced the works of interpretativists.

Activity 5.2

Take one example of quantitative work in adult education and describe its usefulness for your understanding of the field of adult education. Then, consider its limitations. After this short exercise, take one example of qualitative work in adult education. After viewing its explanatory usefulness and limitations, work out how both examples serve to enrich your ability to comprehend the dynamics of processes in adult education. Apart from going through the two examples, you need to write at least 500 words to discuss strengths and weaknesses of both works and to state their ability to enhance your understanding of your profession.

5.4.2 Interpretative Sociology

The focus of interpretative sociology is on the subjective meaning as basic for obtaining an understanding of the social world. In opposition to structural functionalism, all varieties of

interpretative sociology view individuals as creators of meanings and emphasize the assumptions underlying social order. By and large, they suspect quantitative approach and avoid like bad virus the use of objective categories. There is a

predominant stress on the transmission and acquisition of interpretative procedures.

Believing with Heidegger (1962) some in adult education found it logical to consider all human experience to be interpretative and it became clear that it was not possible, for example, to go further without making some assumptions about what comprises a learning experience. Instead of suspending the activity of making preliminary assumptions, it was then considered better to continuously share them. This exercise of sharing the

assumptions made more transparent the biases and also helped in identifying the points of agreement and disagreement. Instead of trying to uncover and describe the pure and objective essence, the interpretativist approach made it easier to become more open to challenges arising from new data and to construct a plausible understanding of the adult learning phenomenon.

You would find that phenomenological orientation (see Box 5.4) is hand in glove with the general emphasis on individual learner in adult education.

Box 5.4 Phenomenology

Phenomenology involves our understanding all phenomena (appearances, usually objects of sense experiences) from the point of view of those who have experienced them. Phenomenologists hold that a rich and fuller grasp of any human phenomenon requires that you examine people's lived experiences (see Gadamer, 1990; Heidegger, 1962, 1972; Husserl, 1931, 1970, 1973; Moustakas, 1994, Van Maanen, 1990). Since the purpose of adult and lifelong learning is to gain a full understanding of the phenomenon of adult learning, phenomenological inquiry appears to be very appropriate.

In North America and Europe, the *Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss (1968) influenced some educators to abandon the logico-deductive procedure of verifying theory and prefer the method of generating theory from data. Thus they opted for inductive approach and by and large used the concept of grounded theory as a synonym of qualitative approach (though Glaser and Strauss had made it clear that both quantitative and qualitative types of data were equally useful for verifying and generating theory). It was firmly held that using the strategy of grounded theory adult education could arrive at generalizations from experiences in practice (this approach fitted well the usual practice-based orientation of adult educators). According to Rubenson (1980) there was, however, little effort

on the part of adult educators to actually generate theories from data collected from experiences in practice.

Several interpretative orientations involve the study of interactions. The 'new' sociological orientation in adult education made it possible to draw concepts also from symbolic interactionism (see Box 5.5). Harre and Secord (1972: 151) held that social behavior is an outcome of individuals' monitoring of their activities. Monitoring individuals evaluate the meanings of social situations in which they find themselves. They make choices among various ways available for behaving and also improve upon their choices as per new situations. Invariably individuals possess a plurality of social identities and present an appropriate identity as per their self-monitoring of their performances.

Box 5.5 Symbolic Interactionism

Based on Crotty (1998: 72-78), the following introduction to Symbolic Interactionism will give you an idea of its origin and salient features.

Symbolic interactionism originated in the work of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). Herbert Blumer (1900-1987) translated and disseminated the ideas of G. H. Mead. These ideas bear testimony to North American philosophy of pragmatism. In this philosophy there is the exploration of the authentic meaning of ideas and values in relation to their practical outcomes and context.

In Symbolic interactionism, you view society or the exchange of significant gestures as that makes individualism, consciousness and self-consciousness possible. Self-consciousness becomes possible via an internalization of significant gestures. You would have noticed that children internalize social attitudes and institutions through role play. In role play (for example, children play 'doctor-doctor' or 'mummy-daddy' etc) children act out the roles of 'generalized others' and relate them to broader social institutions. Symbolic interactionism makes a case for understanding experience and social phenomenon from the perspective of the role of the actor(s) in the situation.

Symbolic interactionism represents a research methodology that has developed within the larger field of ethnography and shares with it the idea that you cannot reduce each culture to some general pattern and compare it with other cultures. This means that each culture is irreducible and incomparable and we can only understand each culture from within. In order to view culture from within, we need to step in the shoes of the other or 'get inside' how the culture views the world.

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the study of roles, cultural scripts, interaction between roles or actors, social rules or games, players and rituals. This research methodology has also inspired the dramaturgical approach (especially of Erving Goffman), game theory, negotiated order theory and labeling theory. It has also given impetus to grounded theory (see Glaser and Strauss 1968).

Some of interpretative sociologists emphasize the ethnomethodological perspective (see Box 5.6), which examines the methods we use to find out how people define a situation.

Ethnomethodologists assume that people use interpretative structures to construct meaning and it is possible to generalize such structures.

Box 5.6 Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology investigates the reality of everyday social life. In this sense, ethnomethodology does good ethnography and shows how it is done. Garfinkel (1967) argued that social structure is what members perceive it to be and it changes according to interpretations actors provide. Garfinkel bared and unmasked 'the invisible commonplace by violating it in some manner until it betrays its presence' (Gouldner 1971: 392).

In a critique of ethnomethodology Gidlow (1972: 402) said that depiction of the reality of everyday life does not by itself ensure its realistic picture because it is quite possible that the ethnomethodologist has not correctly understood the interpretation of the world by the actors or the actors have misinformed the ethnomethodologist.

5.4.3 Theories of Reproduction

Althusser (1972: 245-246) held that in modern societies the educational system is the dominant ideological state apparatus and each group coming out of educational institutions carries the burden of ideology that is appropriate to the role it is supposed to play in society. The ruling class inculcates its ideology through a variety of know-how so that the relations between exploited and exploiters are reproduced. Though we may generally believe that educational institutions are mostly devoid of ideology, according to Althusser ((1972: 260-261) the mechanisms of ideological domination by capitalist regime are hidden behind the supposedly neutral position of educational setups. Giroux (1981: 5) has pointed out Althusser's failure of giving recognition to the possibility of human struggle and resistance. Both Sharp (1980) and Willis (1981) have criticized Althusser for not exploring the autonomy and struggle of educational setups. Gintis (1972) made a case for examining the social relations of education that produce and reinforce the attitudes, values and capacities which enable individuals to move in class-stratified society. Gintis (1972: 131) claimed that 'the educational system helps to integrate youth into the economic system through a structural correspondence between its social relations and those of production'. Apple (1980-1981) has on the other hand pointed out that it is important to examine the dynamic interplay between education and economy and we should not reduce the complexity of this relationship to the level of practice alone. He draws our attention to learners' creativity to control their learning environment. Arnot and Whitty

(1982) have shown that the principle of correspondence between education and capitalist economy has not been able to explain the conflicts and contradictions between education and economy. Of course in classical Marxian theory of superstructure contradictions in the economic system influence other areas of social world but education system can hardly influence the reproduction system as a whole. So we are not surprized that Gintis and Bowles (1980: 55) failed to discover a key contradiction in the relationship between education and economy. All the same theories of social reproduction did influence the study of understanding the relationship between education and economy, even if the perspective was quite limited and it did not explain the complex role of education in reproducing prevailing social formations.

Some of the limitations of reproduction perspectives were overcome by theories of cultural reproduction. Making persistent efforts to integrate micro-and macro-cosmic levels of analysis, Bernstein (1977) emphasized the study of both the structural and interactional aspects of social life. But Bernstein confined his analysis to class only and did not pay attention to how ideological forms of patriarchal and race domination interact with class (see Willis 1981: 57). Bourdieu (1973) has on the other hand brought out clearly the specific role of sociology of education in the study of the relations between cultural reproduction and social reproduction. You can discern this in the contribution of the educational system to the reproduction of the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships between classes.

According to Swartz (1977), theoretical framework of Bourdieu deals with i)

cultural background or academic background, ii) educational system as the basis for controlled and limited social mobility and iii) social class background as mediated through influences of educational environment. As Swartz (1977: 554) has argued Bourdieu has put forward basically a functionalist

perspective, though at a deeper level.

Critics of social and cultural theories of reproduction moved sociologists of education to another level of discourse, namely, critical theory of education. We will discuss this development in the next sub-section.

Activity 5.3

Write in about 200 words your understanding of interpretative sociology. What are the various streams of interpretative sociology? Answer this question with suitable examples.

5.4.4 Critical Theory of Education

Attempts to study and analyze structural features of education and the relationship between education and economy have led to persistent focus on social inequalities. Many of us have looked at educational setups as places where we learn norms, attitudes and values related to economic order. Apple (1981: 34) has pointed out that this view fails to recognize that educational setups contribute also to the production of technical/ administrative knowledge that we need to expand markets, control production, labour and people and to create consumerism-driven needs among the population. In other words, processing of knowledge involves more than its distribution among different types of people. It includes production, control and accumulation of knowledge by those in power.

Following neo-Marxist perspectives Giroux (1981: 22) has made a case for studying how educational setups sustain and produce ideologies and how hegemony in any of the processes is not indicative of a solidary force. Contradictions and tensions of hegemonic forces generate counter-hegemonic struggle and that is how we witness the distinction between ideology and hegemony. Both hegemony and

ideology reflect the political nature of educational setups. Generally we end up studying one or the other aspect of the hegemonic process, whereas Giroux (1981: 27) argues that we need to focus on the dynamic nature of the antagonistic relationships that you can find in the daily running of educational setups. Adult educators may find themselves somewhere in between the two positions, namely, i) a desire to participate in social reform type of efforts to bring about just social order without trying for structural changes in its nature and ii) to join in revolution for total social change.

Weber (1948), in his analysis of the structure of social groups, showed that the dominant social group universalizes its cultural ideals through establishment of such pedagogical system that would cultivate among the people those ideals. In other words Weberian thesis is that dominant social groups hold the power to decide the nature of values of the educational system and therefore those in subordinated groups are mostly in the position of disadvantage if they do not subscribe or cannot access the standards set by dominant groups. Inspired by Weberian ideas, Collins (1977: 127) held that insofar as a status group has control over an educational setup, it would

attempt to decide the educational requirements for employment of its learners. In this sense, on the basis of differences among the series of competing interests it is possible to explain the differences among the main types of educational structures in the modern times. In the spirit of a neo-Weberian perspective, Archer (1981) has argued that as Weber always emphasized exploration of larger events, those of us subscribing to Weberian ideas need

to study the interplay between the roots and processes of educational system and also examine the relationship between the micro- and macro-levels of those systems. Combining the functionalist and Marxian ideas of structural constraints on social action with phenomenological stress on the subjective meaning of social action, King (1980: 7) has made a case for adopting Weberian perspective to explain educational processes.

Activity 5.4

Do you think that there is a link between education and economy? Would adult education in India be better organized and its programmes better implemented if we appreciate the dynamics of relationships between these two domains of society? Where will you place the importance of cultural aspects of both the educational system and economic structures? Write your answers after reading and critically considering all sub-sections of the section 5.4 of Unit 5.

5.5 Conclusion

In their search for evolving a theoretical orientation of integrating micro- and macro-cosmic levels of education, adult educators have yet to build upon the various sociological advances discussed above and arrive at a refinement of quantitative and qualitative methodology of adult education. The tension between policy/ practice-oriented studies and fundamental research-oriented works continues and efforts to build a theoretically firm

sociological base have not yet yielded substantial results. Adult education is still considered as a means of taking urgent socio-economic measures for giving boost to development. This is particularly so in developing countries like India where despite substantial progress adult learning and lifelong education have to give priority to solving the problems of illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and hunger.

5.6 Apply What You Have Learnt

Our account of sociological background of adult and lifelong learning has included several briefs on different sociological perspectives which have been put to use in examining social aspects of education system. You may like to select one of the perspectives and apply it to the study

of current status of adult learning in your particular region. It is true that in India, despite some great experiences in its literacy and vocational programmes, not all regions have had similar growth in setting up adult learning centers and then sustaining

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them for generating innovative methods of creating knowledge and skills in the field of adult learning. In this sense, it will be very useful to learn in detail about developments in adult and lifelong

learning in your region. Write an essay of about 1,000 words on this theme and try and incorporate at least one of the sociological perspectives discussed in Unit 5.

