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Conceptualising the Sociology of Education: an analysis of contested intellectual trajectories

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Abstract

*This paper presents an account of the development of the sociology of education in the UK, by means of an analysis of papers published in the field's flagship journal, the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* and its US equivalent, *Sociology of Education*. In particular, we examine the representation of two contrasting traditions in addressing social inequalities: 'political arithmetic'; and the more recent 'cultural turn'. We find that in the UK, the cultural turn dominates; whilst in the US, it is political arithmetic which does so. In accounting for these contrasting national profiles, we argue that they are underpinned by divergent social infrastructure and organisation. We also discuss some of the implications of the dominance of the cultural turn in the UK, specifically in terms of the relationship between the fields of academic research and policy and the development of a cumulative evidence base to address social inequalities in education.*

Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the recent development of the sociology of education in the UK. It provides a contribution to what may be termed the 'sociology of the sociology of education' (cf. Ball, 2008; Banks, 1982). In what follows, we do not attempt an overview of theoretical or substantive trends, in the manner of most of the previous contributions to this field (initiated by Floud and Halsey, 1958). Rather, our approach is more modestly empirical, focusing on an examination of the contents of key journals in the field (cf. Szreter, 1983). More specifically, our principal focus is on the field's flagship journal in the UK, the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (BJSE), whose first publication in 1980 marked a key landmark in the institutionalisation and legitimisation of the sociology of education as a field of study within the British academic system. For comparative purposes, we provide a parallel analysis of the equivalent journal in the United States, *Sociology of Education* (SoE) (Szreter, 1980). Clearly, there are alternative empirical sources on which to base an analysis of the 'state of a (sub-)discipline' (monographs, research grants awarded and so forth) (Binder, 2013). However, it is in the key journals that scholars seek to present their latest and, arguably, most innovative research. Accordingly, the contents of key journals both reflect the current state of a research field and shape its future development (Schwemmer and Wieczorek, 2020).

In an empirical analysis of this kind, there are a number of ways in which one might seek to characterise change and continuity in the sociology of education. For example, one might explore the substantive focus of research papers, the rise and fall of different theorists, or the languages of description. However, in what follows, we have chosen to focus on the extent to which the articles that have been published in the journals are underpinned by two contrasting analytical traditions in addressing social inequalities in education: that of 'political arithmetic'; and the more recent 'cultural turn'. The former

can be defined as an approach that seeks to describe, in largely quantitative terms, the current state of society, with a view to exposing its characteristic inequalities and thereby providing a basis for ameliorating them (Heath, 2000). The latter, in contrast, focuses not so much on the unequal distribution of life chances, but on the construction of unequal identities, thereby exposing the processes through which dominance and subjugation are developed and sustained (Ball, 2008).

We begin by briefly outlining the history and characteristics of these two traditions, before undertaking an analysis of the extent to which they are represented in the pages of the BJSE. We find that, from its early years until today, articles taking the cultural turn dominate. One explanation for the dominance of the cultural turn might focus on its more sophisticated theoretical foundations that have exposed the limits of the old-fashioned political arithmetic tradition. However, we argue that the explanation is much more likely to reside in the social development and organisation of the field, rather than in the respective 'scientific merit' (however defined) of the two traditions. In other countries, the cultural turn has not prevailed. A parallel analysis of the last forty years of the output of SoE reveals a very different picture. Here, the political arithmetic tradition dominates. Furthermore, analysis of the diversity of output types within the two journals indicates different preoccupations. Put somewhat simplistically, articles in the BJSE are concerned with theory, while those in SoE are concerned with methodological development. It is clear that the explanation for these very different landscapes must reside in the social organisation of the discipline.

We go on to argue that the dominance of the cultural turn within the sociology of education in the UK has a number of implications both for the intellectual development of the field and, more specifically, for the complex relationships between sociological research and education policy. Drawing on Bernstein's (1999) characterisation of knowledge discourses and Collins and Evans's (2002) analysis of 'waves' in science studies, we suggest that the dominance of the cultural turn has implications for the development of expertise within the field. The political arithmetic tradition can be characterised as the 'first wave' in the sociology of education with a strong internal grammar; while the cultural turn constitutes the 'second wave' and has a weak internal grammar. While the second wave points to the problematic assumptions on which the first wave is built, it does not replace these foundations with an alternative source of expertise. Indeed, its role is to expose the social construction of expertise. This renders a cumulative evidence base within the sociology of education extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Two intellectual trajectories in the sociology of education

A long view of the discipline of sociology reveals a field that has been marked by a deep and enduring division between research which can be characterised as political arithmetic and research which follows a more cultural turn (for example Halsey, 2004). In the following paragraphs, we provide a very brief account of these two traditions, as they are exemplified within the sociology of education.

Halsey *et al.* (1980: 1) argue that political arithmetic is an ‘...indigenous style of social science. It has a long and distinguished history. Its origins can be traced back at least as far as Booth and the Webbs, and perhaps earlier to Mayhew in the nineteenth century and William Petty in the seventeenth century.’ (p.1) As we have seen, political arithmetic is an approach that seeks to provide an analytical description of key features of contemporary society, in largely quantitative terms. Characteristically, this sort of description is seen as providing the basis on which social inequalities are exposed to public scrutiny. Moreover, this form of analysis has a clear moral purpose in seeking to ameliorate the social problems which are defined in terms of these inequalities. During the second half of the twentieth century, the approach has become particularly focused on issues of ‘meritocracy’ and social mobility, which are investigated through increasingly sophisticated statistical analyses of quantitative data on origins, pathways and destinations (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019; Heath, 2000). Given the close - albeit complex - relationships between education and social mobility, it is not surprising that political arithmetic dominated the sociology of education in the UK during the decades following the Second World War. The fundamental reforms of the post-war education system which introduced, for the first time, universal free secondary education, required a sociology that could monitor system level change and measure the impacts of policy. In some ways, then, political arithmetic can be considered an early contribution to *evidence-informed* policymaking (Banks, 1982).

However, even by the time Halsey *et al.* (1980) published their comprehensive account of the relatively limited impact of systemic school reform in England and Wales, political arithmetic was already deeply unfashionable. The sociology of education had changed direction and took what can be characterised as a cultural turn (Hammersley, 1981). Perhaps because of the limitations of systemic reform, the focus of empirical research shifted from measuring to deconstructing. The very intractability of educational inequalities forced attention away from issues of access and on to cultural processes. Hence, the education system came to be implicated in the ways in which unequal identities are constructed. Moreover, the investigation of these processes required a very different methodology; one which privileged exposing the processes of dominance and subjugation, revealing how identities are created

and unravelling the tyrannies of discourse. Indeed, the quantitative measurement that underpinned political arithmetic was sometimes itself identified as a form of oppression (Ball, 2008).

We are not, of course, claiming that the *only* way of characterising the sociology of education is in terms of these two traditions. Parallel distinctions within the field have been made by other commentators. For example, Bernstein (1977) contrasts the 'macro-structural' with the 'knowledge properties' approach. Similarly, Young (1971) offered 'new directions for the sociology of education', signalling, some have argued, the beginnings of the cultural turn (for example, Banks, 1982). Rather, we are suggesting that a characterisation in these terms is meaningful and captures key distinctions in theoretical perspective and methodological approach, especially in relation to the treatment of social inequalities in education.

Neither do we suggest that there is thoroughgoing consensus within each tradition. Both have seen significant methodological and theoretical change and diversification. For example, within political arithmetic there have been many arguments about the classificatory systems adopted. In addition, as Savage and Burrows (2007) indicate, the huge increase in the availability of administrative, transactional and social media data has challenged and changed the role of the 'political arithmetician'. Similarly, the cultural turn has diverged along different theoretical paths. The earlier interpretative paradigms of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, as well as 'soft' neo-Marxist approaches (Whitty, 1985) have been joined by feminist, post-feminist, queer and other post-structuralist perspectives. Nevertheless, we suggest that our two traditions exhibit sufficient internal coherence to enable meaningful boundaries to be drawn around them, thereby enabling effective operationalization in the empirical analysis that follows.

An analysis of journal articles

In order to help us understand how these contrasting traditions have shaped the contemporary landscape of the sociology of education in general, and the sociological explanation of educational inequalities in particular, we have classified and analysed journal articles that have appeared in BJSE and SoE over the last forty years. In what follows, we explain our methodological approach in terms of the BJSE. However, exactly the same methodology was adopted in respect of the analysis of SoE as well.

Criteria for classification

From the very first issue in 1980 until 2019, just over 1300 articles (excluding editorials, book reviews, responses and rejoinders) have been published in the BJSE. The method of analysing these articles

involved successive coding exercises. Initially, the articles were classified into two broad groups: papers that report the findings of new empirical research and those which did not. Each of these broad groups were then successively coded. For the purposes of brevity, we describe the latter group as 'non-empirical'. Although these papers have empirical reference points and relevance – and many cover extensive empirical ground – they do not 'break' new empirical data. These papers account for over one quarter (369/1302) of the articles. They were classified into four different groups: reviews of the field (or sub-field), papers that focus on methodological developments, papers that focus on theoretical developments, and discursive (rather than empirical) critiques of policy.

The 'empirical' papers were then classified according to whether they belonged to the political arithmetic tradition or to the cultural turn. Over 100 of the empirical papers did not fall into either category and were catalogued as 'unclassifiable'. Articles that were deemed 'unclassifiable' were largely those that did not seek to explore or explain social inequalities in education, the particular focus of our analysis. For example, a significant number of these papers dealt with issues of teacher education, professional development or leadership within schools. Others addressed particular historical developments, crises facing young people or policy conflicts. Examples of the subject matter of 'unclassified' papers include: the changing priorities of education publishing (Nixon, 1999); the changing role of the school trade union representative (Stevenson, 2005); teacher perceptions of sex education (Iyer and Aggleton, 2014); and children's experience in the face of industrial disasters (Preston, 2016). While all of these topics may have *implications* for inequalities, the explication of these inequalities is not the central focus.

The classification of the remaining 819 papers in the BJSE into either political arithmetic or the cultural turn depended on making a series of evaluations that are related to, but not defined by, method and purpose. In terms of method, research studies in the political arithmetic tradition tend, necessarily, to have a quantitative dimension, but this does not mean that they invariably involve the statistical analysis of large datasets. They do often use the secondary analysis of cohort data, but they may also entail interviews and even systematic observations. And while some form of 'counting' will be involved, this does not mean that 'political arithmeticians' are blind to qualitative aspects of education. Indeed, political arithmetic depends on qualitative assessments about the validity of particular forms of measurement or categorisation. It is also not the case that cultural aspects are overlooked. The distribution of cultural resources may be seen as a crucial factor in charting educational outcomes. Similarly, papers that exemplify the cultural turn are more likely to rest on qualitative data, and

especially ethnography or discourse analysis. But almost every qualitative piece of research makes some kind of quantitative claim about the size, prevalence or importance of a social phenomenon’.

Similarly, it is difficult to distinguish the papers solely on the basis of their purpose. It might be assumed that the political arithmetic tradition is concerned with patterns, while research reflecting the cultural turn is concerned with process. To some extent, this is the case. However, issues of process are present within all political arithmetic, even if implicitly. And the unequal patterning of educational outcomes is often the context which justifies the processes that require investigation through a more cultural lens.

What we think does mark off research undertaken within the political arithmetic tradition from that of the cultural turn is *the stability of the categories of analysis*. In order to illustrate this, we provide three examples of how the same topic is approached in a quite different way from the political arithmetic tradition and the cultural turn.

Example 1: Gender

Within the political arithmetic tradition, there are many papers about gender (or, in the earlier articles, ‘sex’) inequalities, such as the unequal participation of girls in various contexts or the differential rates of return from higher education. The category of sex/gender is not seen as problematic. However, within the cultural turn, researchers show how gendered identities are produced and negotiated within the school. Gender is not only seen as socially constructed, but fluid and contingent. The contrast in approach can be illustrated through comparing Helbig’s (2012) analysis of PISA data from 21 countries to evaluate whether boys benefit from having male teachers with Renold’s (2001) ethnographic exploration of how the discourses of hegemonic masculinity operate to shape and form boys’ learner identities.

Example 2: Literacy

Within the political arithmetic tradition, researchers chart how a number of factors (poverty, gender, parental education) contribute to differential levels of literacy. They may also examine how these differences then become manifest in unequal outcomes within examinations and the labour market. Within the cultural turn, literacy is something that is performed. It is not something that can be measured or compared in any kind of purportedly neutral way. Compare, for example, Wells’s (1981: 181) longitudinal study establishing the ‘strong association between literacy and class’ as one of the antecedents of attainment, with Scherer’s (2015: 389) ethnography of the ‘meanings children make of reading identities’ and how they ‘negotiate and repair narratives of their-selves-as-readers’.

Example 3: School performance

Within the political arithmetic tradition, school performance is measured according to a range of 'objective' indicators. These may be qualified through contextual variables in order to assess how much of the performance can be attributed to the institution rather than the social background characteristics of the pupils or students. An example of this is Willms and Cuttance's (1985) analysis of school effects in Scotland. Within the cultural turn, the measurement of performance is not a neutral or even useful tool for evaluating educational attainment. Indeed, the concept of 'performance' is problematised. It can, for example, be seen as an indicator of a cultural regime that selectively and arbitrarily rewards particular cultural displays. An illustration of this is Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes' (2017) account of how primary schools 'create' Ofsted stories entailing 'narratives of progress'.

Before we embark on the findings of the analysis, it is important to point out the limits of this kind of approach, some of which have been documented elsewhere (see, for example, Halsey 2004). Of particular importance for the argument presented here is the acknowledgement that while the BJSE is the flagship sociology of education journal in the UK, it is only one of a number of journals that publish research papers in the sociology of education (Szreter, 1983). It may also be the case that the selection of articles to be published reflects the intellectual preferences of the editorial team rather than representing the field as a whole. Finally, and this is important for the international comparison that we come to later, a significant proportion of papers are authored or co-authored by researchers from outside the UK. Nevertheless, we believe that, in spite of these *caveats*, the analysis provides a useful way of exploring the characteristics of research submitted and selected for publication.

The two traditions in the BJSE

Articles from both the political arithmetic tradition and the cultural turn can be found in the pages of the BJSE. The 150 papers identified in the political arithmetic tradition focus on a wide range of topics, analysing inequalities in every sector of the education system, from early years to entry to the labour market and learning through the life course. These papers are often based on the statistical analysis of large-scale datasets, such as those developed in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency. Some are based on longitudinal data, although not as many as one might expect, given the strength of the various British birth cohort studies. There are also others based on data derived from questionnaires, structured interviews and systematic observations using pre-coded schedules.

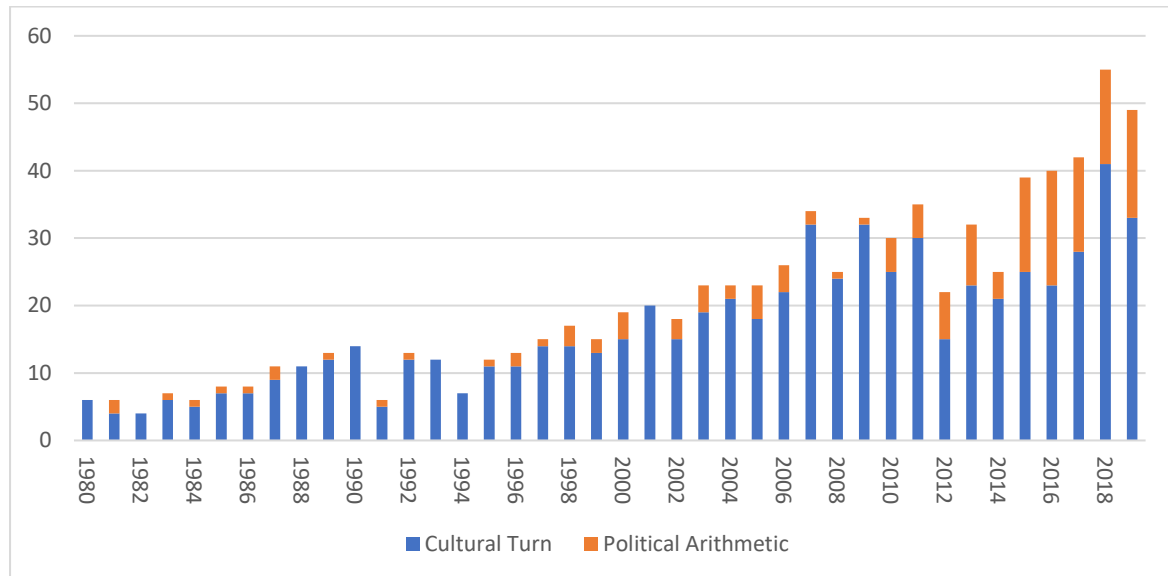
Papers within the cultural turn are similarly diverse, addressing the development of gendered identities, and, more recently, sexualities and LGBTQ experiences; as well as the processes by which young people are 'classed' and 'raced'. There are also many articles on the socially constructed nature of knowledge within education and the curriculum, in particular. Data sources here include interviews, ethnography (though that often means *in situ* interviews rather than more immersive methods), auto-ethnography, participant observation, focus groups and a wide range of documentary data, such as textbooks and curriculum guides. Rather than statistics, modes of analysis tend to be 'grounded' and 'thematic'. More recently, 'genealogical' and 'rhizomatic' approaches can be found.

While both the political arithmetic tradition and the cultural turn are substantially represented in the BJSE, it is the cultural turn which underpins the overwhelming majority of papers. As is to be expected, there is some year-on-year variation, but it is apparent from Figure 1 that the cultural turn dominates. It is important to note, of course, that the overall number of papers published has increased significantly (an issue to which we return later). Nevertheless, in each year, the proportion representing the cultural turn significantly outweighs those in the political arithmetic tradition. This distribution may be argued to reflect the wider field of sociology in the UK; certainly, writing some 15 years ago, Halsey (2004) remarks on the preponderance of qualitative approaches in British sociology journals generally. However, it is noteworthy that – again as Figure 1 shows – there has been an appreciable increase in the number of papers published in the BJSE from the political arithmetic tradition, especially over the past decade or so. This too is consistent with recent trends in sociology more widely (Schwemmer and Wieczorek, 2020).

What accounts for this increase is difficult to specify on the basis of the evidence available here. It may reflect changes internal to the journal itself; for example, there may simply have been shifts in the preferences of the editorial team. However, in light of the trend in sociology as a whole, it seems likely that external developments have also had an important influence. Hence, the increase may reflect, for instance, the effects of the systematisation of training in research methods for sociology postgraduates in British universities, under the auspices of the UK Economic and Social Research Council. However, it is also worth noting that many of these papers from the political arithmetic tradition were authored by non-UK based academics. For example, in 2019, one third (16 of 49) of the 'empirical' papers were classified as political arithmetic. However, over two thirds of these (11 of the 16) were contributions from outside the UK (from Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Luxemburg and the USA). A further two were jointly authored by UK and overseas researchers. Only three were entirely indigenous contributions. Hence, it may be that the increase in political arithmetic papers may

indicate more about international publishing strategies than the character of the sociology of education in the UK.

Figure 1: The two traditions in the BJSE 1980-2019: annual numbers of papers



Turning now to the dominance of the cultural turn throughout the period under consideration, one explanatory approach might be to focus on its more explicit and – its proponents would argue – more sophisticated theoretical foundations. The cultural turn in the sociology of education developed in response to the perceived limitations of the old-fashioned political arithmetic; and, in particular, the lack of recognition of the socio-cultural underpinnings of educational knowledge, of what counts as being ‘educated’ and how the very processes of measurement create winners and losers (Whitty, 1985). Indeed, from this perspective, ‘political arithmeticians’ were complicit in the production of fundamentally flawed analyses that served only to reproduce the very structures and processes that created social and educational inequalities (Ball, 2008).

While there may be some validity in this explanation, it can surely only be a partial one. The explanation for the dominance of the cultural turn is much more likely to reside in the social development and organisation of the field, rather than simply in some notion of ‘scientific merit’ (however defined) alone. One way of demonstrating this is by means of cross-national comparison. Quite simply, the cultural turn has not attained the same predominance in other national systems as it has in the UK. In order to illustrate this, we have repeated our BJSE analysis for the papers published during the last 40 years of SoE, the flagship journal of the sociology of education in the USA. The comparison reveals some startling

differences in terms of the character of the papers published and the analytical traditions on which they draw.

A comparison of the BJSE and SoE

There are clear differences in the outputs of the two journals. At the most basic level, the overall outputs of the two journals follow very different trajectories. The volume of papers published by SoE has remained relatively constant over the last 40 years, with an average annual output of 18 papers per year. In contrast, the volume of published papers in the BJSE has increased rapidly, with an average output of 33 papers per year. Hence, in recent years, the BJSE has published many times more papers than SoE. For example, in 2018, SoE published 16 papers, while the BJSE published 71, more than four times as many. Whilst it is difficult to pinpoint the precise reasons for these disparities, they are suggestive of significant differences in the social organisation of the sociology of education in the two societies.

Table 1: Distribution of ‘empirical’ and ‘non-empirical’ papers 1980-2019

	BJSE (n= 1302)		SoE (n=698)	
Empirical	925	71.6%	646	92.6%
Non-empirical	369	28.4%	52	7.5%

Moreover, in addition to the different volumes of output, there is a notable difference in the proportion of ‘empirical’ and ‘non-empirical’ papers that are published (see Table 1). It is not only that the percentage of ‘non-empirical’ papers published in the BJSE is almost four times that published in SoE, but also that there are differences in the overall substance of the two sets of papers. We have broadly categorised the papers in terms of whether their primary aim was to advance methodology, advance theory, critique policy or review the field (or a sub-field).¹

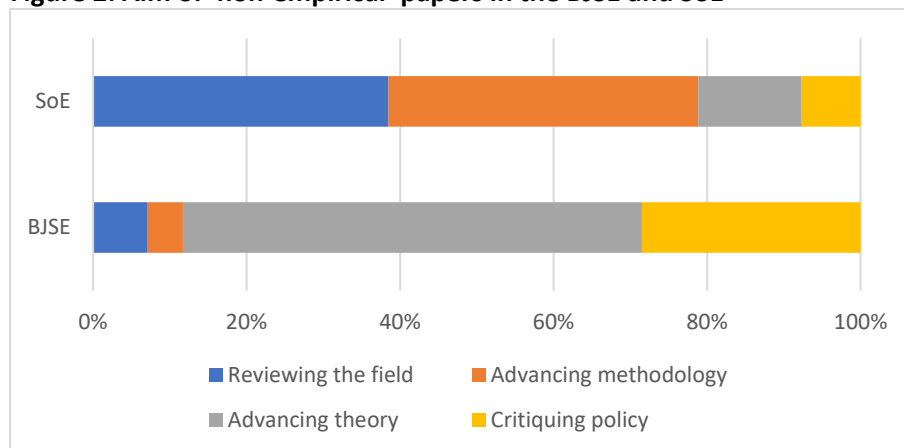
Within the BJSE, the overwhelming majority of the non-empirical papers aim to advance theory or critique policy. There are many papers – even special issues – devoted to key theorists in education, such as Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu. There are papers extolling the potential of a wide range of sociologists, from Mannheim (Whitty, 1997) to Gramsci (Arora, 2015) to Foucault (for example, Dwyer, 1995) to Bauman (Best, 2017) and Bhaskar (Corson, 1991). There are papers on the importance of key

¹ We acknowledge that there is an element of arbitrariness here. For example, some papers pursued more than one primary aim. In these cases, we have made judgements about which aim is prioritised.

concepts such as structurationism (Abraham, 1994), governmentality (Kivinen and Rinne, 1998) and accelerationism (Sellar and Cole, 2017), as well as critiques and further refinement of these approaches.

By contrast, most of the non-empirical papers in SoE tend to be proposing the refinement of method or analysis. For example, articles by Pascarella (1983), Hauser *et al.* (1983) and Raudenbush *et al.* (1986) aim to build on existing models to develop more powerful explanatory outcomes. Kilgore and Pendleton (1993) propose a new analytical framework for the statistical analysis of data. Shudde and Brown (2019) provide insights into how researchers should understand variations in their findings. There are also papers that seek to replicate earlier analyses to test continuing robustness and validity (for example, Heyns and Hilton, 1982; Noell, 1982).

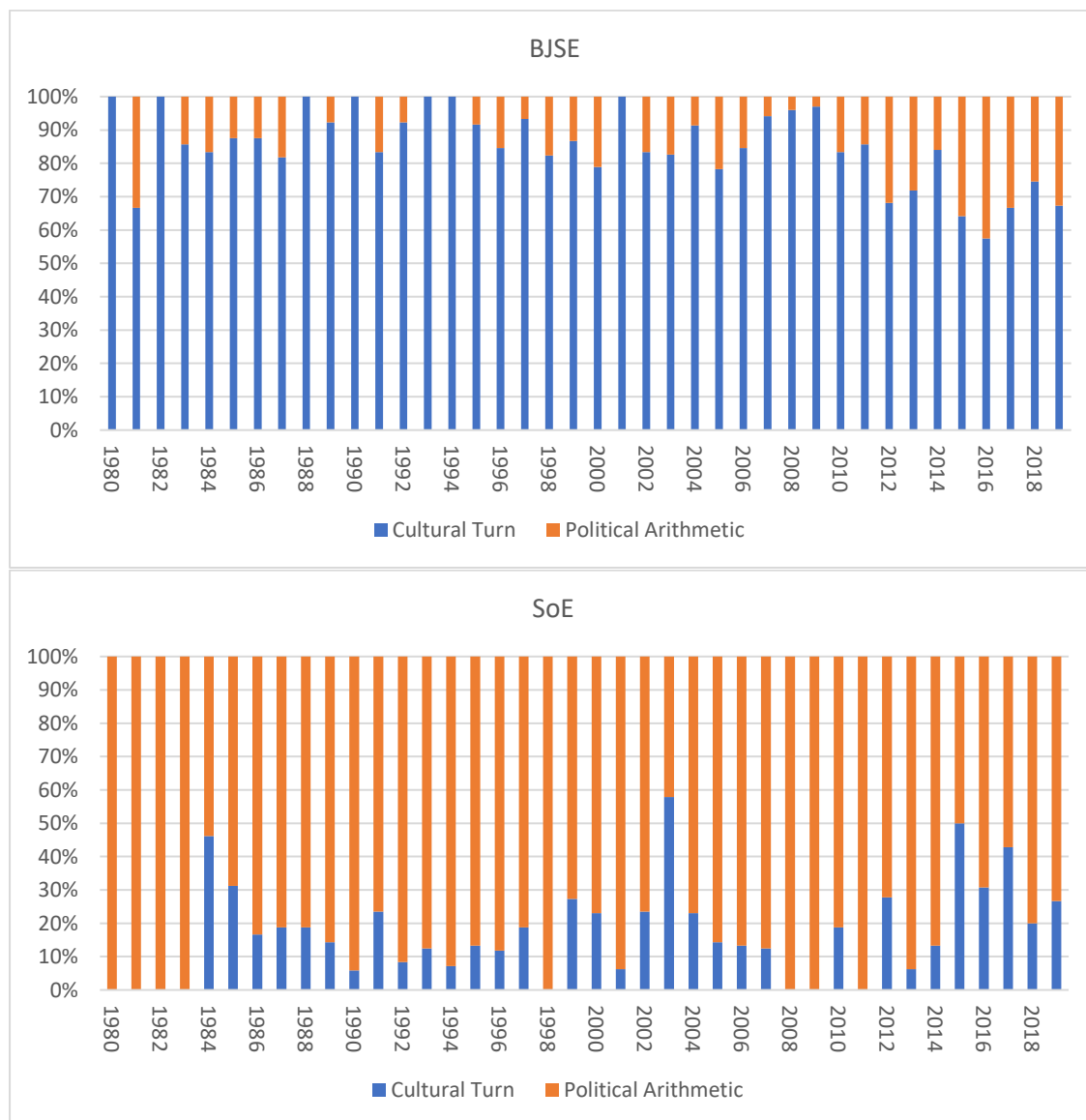
Figure 2: Aim of 'non-empirical' papers in the BJSE and SoE



Hence, it is possible to conclude that, in general, authors publishing in SoE are concerned with the development of empirical method, while those publishing in the BJSE are more likely to be concerned with theoretical developments and critique.

Within the 'empirical' output, there is no significant difference between the two journals in the proportion that could not be classified into either of the two traditions: 12 per cent in the BJSE and 9 per cent in SoE. However, as we can see in Figure 3, what is most striking is the marked difference in the percentage of papers that fall within the political arithmetic tradition and those taking a cultural turn. While articles from both traditions can be found in the pages of both journals, the cultural turn clearly dominates in the UK journal; whilst the political arithmetic tradition is equally dominant in the USA journal.

Figure 3: Proportion of papers published in the two traditions in the BJSE and SoE 1980-2019



On this basis, it is clear that the sociology of education in the UK is substantially different from the sociology of education in the USA. Here, it is worth reflecting on Bernstein's (1999) analysis of the characteristics of hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures. Very briefly, hierarchical knowledge structures are characterised by increasing internal and vertical specialisation, 'motivated towards greater and greater integrating propositions, operating at more and more abstract levels' (1999: 162). Physics might be seen as the archetypical hierarchical knowledge structure. Horizontal knowledge structures, on the other hand, consist of 'a series of socialised languages with specialised modes of

interrogation' (1999: 162). Bernstein (1999) identifies sociology (and, by implication at least, the sociology of education) as an example of a horizontal knowledge structure. It is characterised, he argues, by many different specialist languages; and the privileging of one specialist language is not based on its greater capacity for veracity but on *social* bases:

... choice here is not rational in the sense that it is based on the 'truth' of one of the specialised languages. For each language reveals some 'truth'.... The dominant perspective within any transmission may be a function of the power relations among the teachers, or of pressure from groups of acquirers. (Bernstein 1999: 164)

Applying Bernstein's frame of reference, therefore, both the political arithmetic tradition and the cultural turn can be said to reveal some 'truth' about – in specific terms – forms of social inequalities in education. Accordingly, there is little profit in trying to adjudicate between them on the basis of some notion of purported 'scientific merit' (however defined). Rather, this analysis implies (although this implication is not significantly developed by Bernstein himself) that accounting for the stark contrast revealed in our analysis of the BJSE and SoE requires a thoroughgoing exploration of the substantial differences in the *social infrastructure* underpinning the production of research in the sociology of education in the two societies; and the divergent occupational socialisation experienced by researchers within the two national systems (Rees *et al.*, 2007).

Of course, conducting an analysis in these sorts of empirical terms rapidly exposes greater complexities than are acknowledged in Bernstein's (1999) account. Hence, even archetypal knowledge structures are not *wholly* vertical or horizontal in character. Within physics or sociology, for example, there can be significant variations between different segments of the discipline in the extent to which their knowledge structures can be characterised as vertical or horizontal, even where their overall nature remains clear.

Some implications of the dominance of the cultural turn within the UK

The dominance of the cultural turn within the sociology of education in the UK has a number of implications for how we understand the development of the field and, more specifically, the relationships between sociological research and education policy.

The cultural turn, expertise and education policy

As we have seen, the field of sociology (of education) can be characterised, in Bernstein's (1999) terms, as a predominantly 'horizontal knowledge structure'. As we have also seen, however, the sociology of education is internally differentiated; and the two different approaches within it that we are considering here can be said to have relatively 'strong' or 'weak' grammars in their languages of description. The sociology of education in the political arithmetic tradition has a stronger grammar than that following the cultural turn. Political arithmetic has '...an explicit conceptual syntax capable of "relatively" precise empirical descriptions and/or of generating formal modelling of empirical relations' (Bernstein 1999: 164). The development of this grammar, and the refining of the models, can be clearly seen, for instance, in those papers in SoE that sought to advance methodology. This stronger internal grammar enables researchers to build on previous studies and increases the potential for developing a cumulative evidence base.

The cultural turn, on the other hand, has a much weaker internal grammar. While there is, as we have seen, much development and elaboration of different languages of description, these are not hierarchically organised and there is no attempt at formal modelling. They tend not to build on each other, but co-exist alongside and even compete with each other. Bernstein (1999: 167) argues that:

... horizontal knowledge structures with weak grammars, as a consequence of their acquisition, would generate speakers obsessed with issues of language, which in turn would serve to construct, destruct, affirm and so reproduce the positional structure of a particular intellectual field.

Development within the field is achieved not through the accumulation of evidence, nor greater levels of abstraction, but through the development of a new language, which, in turn, opens up the possibility of a new set of questions and characteristic concerns. Indeed, Bernstein (1999: 166) argues that these horizontal knowledge structures, particularly within the social sciences, have 'inbuilt redundancy' arising from 'an internal obsolescence of the languages'. To some extent, therefore, it might be argued that the cultural turn has diminished the potential of the sociology of education to accumulate a stable evidence base.

Further insights into the implications of the dominance of the cultural turn in the sociology of education in the UK can be drawn here from Collins and Evans's (2002) analysis of the development of the sociology of science. The stronger grammar of political arithmetic can be seen to parallel the 'first wave' of science studies that they identify, where social scientists' claim to expertise was based on their

capacity to explain and reinforce the processes of the production of science, with a view to extending its reach. The weaker grammar of the cultural turn corresponds to a 'second wave' of studies, which, Collins and Evans (2002) argue, deconstructed and undermined claims that science (and, indeed, social science itself) can provide a robust basis for knowledge claims. While this second wave points to the problematic assumptions on which the first wave is built, it does not replace these foundations with an alternative basis of expertise. Indeed, its role is precisely to expose the social construction of expertise. This renders a cumulative evidence base within the sociology of education extremely difficult; and problematises the relationships between research in the field and the development of educational praxis and the policies within which it is framed.

Clearly, the relationships between the sociology of education and policy are highly complex. As Colley (2014) – amongst others – has pointed out, it is necessary to consider the conditions under which research is *received* by policy-makers (and professional practitioners), as well as how research is *produced*, in order to comprehend these relationships adequately. Certainly, the political arithmetic approach provides no guarantee of a favourable reception by those with responsibility for education policy, as, for example, the tortured history of education reform during the decades following the Second World War demonstrates (for instance, Halsey *et al.*, 1980). Nevertheless, we do wish to argue that the dominance of the cultural turn within the sociology of education in the UK has consequences for the research-policy relationship. More specifically, as a result of the form of analysis the cultural turn sustains and its implications for expertise, the terms on which research and policy development engage have been rendered significantly more complex to negotiate.²

At one level, this greater complexity may be understood simply in terms of capacity to communicate effectively. Hence, it has been suggested that the theoretical orientations of the cultural turn are less accessible to potential users of research. As Savage and Burrows (2007: 40-41) point out, efforts to engage a range of organisations with their own research met with limited success:

For the most part, the kind of academic research carried out in the name of culture is largely irrelevant; the ideas of Bourdieu and Foucault, indeed all the glorious flourishes of the cultural turn, do not – with a few exceptions – speak to the workaday needs and interests of such institutions.

² We should emphasise that we do not intend this as a criticism of work reflecting the cultural turn. Along with many other sociologists of education, we recognize that the value of research should not be defined simply in terms of its influence on policy or even its potential to do so (cf. Biesta, 2007).

More fundamentally, however, the greater distance between sociologists of education and the field of policy can be seen to reflect divergent interests (cf. Colley, 2014). As we have seen, an integral element of the cultural turn is the deconstruction of the discourse of policy. As we saw in Figure 2 (above), almost a quarter of the BJSE's published papers comprise critiques of policies. These critiques are generally not based on evaluations of the actual consequences of policies, but on their underpinning assumptions and discursive origin. The implications of these policies are then predicted – in most cases – to have deleterious effects. Moreover, as Collins and Evans's (2002) analysis suggests, whilst the analytical approach embodied in the cultural turn may be viewed as legitimate in terms of rigorous research, simultaneously it has the perverse consequence of undermining the researcher's claim to a privileged perspective on educational praxis, based on an accepted expertise.

Concluding Comments

This paper has sought to explore the current landscape of the sociology of education in the UK, based on an analysis of the research papers that have appeared in its flagship journal, the BJSE, and its US equivalent, SoE, over the last forty years. We have compared the two journals in terms of the extent to which the articles they have published are underpinned by the political arithmetic approach or the cultural turn. While we need to be cautious about the claims that can be made from such an analysis, it would appear that there are marked differences. While political arithmetic dominates the field in the US, it is the cultural turn that does so in the UK. We have also outlined a number of implications of the dominance of the cultural turn within the sociology of education in the UK, specifically in terms of the development of expertise with the field and what this means for the field's relationships with policy.

These arguments do not imply, however, that the UK should emulate the US and try to restore the political arithmetic tradition of the post-war years (in fact, there has in any case been a significant growth of papers from this tradition published in recent years). Many (though not all) of the criticisms of the political arithmetic approach are valid. Hence, it would be tempting to conclude this paper with a renewed call for a 'new political arithmetic', an approach proposed by Brown *et al.* (1997; Lauder *et al.*, 2004). A new political arithmetic, they argue, could end the current balkanisation of the field and link system and subjectivity to provide a more sophisticated understanding of the relationships between changing times, changing places and changing lives. While this is a compelling prospectus, our experience leads us to suggest that there are fundamental questions about the nature of explanation within such a new political arithmetic, especially with respect to the commensurability of different analytical approaches, the forms of data that they characteristically generate and the nature of the problem they are trying to illuminate.

Another strategy might be to take Savage and Burrows's (2007: 896) advice in the face of the 'coming crisis in empirical sociology' and abandon the focus on causality, which, as they point out, 'we are very bad at' anyway. Instead, they argue, we should put aside theoretical debates and develop a 'descriptive sociology that seeks to link narrative, numbers, and images in ways that engage with, and critique, the kinds of routine transactional analyses that now proliferate' (896). Or perhaps, sociology of education might seek to apply the characteristics of Collins and Evans's (2002) potential 'third wave' of science studies to the sociology of education. They propose to rebuild a normative theory of expertise, but one which will disentangle expertise from political rights in technical decision-making. However, it is not clear to us how feasible this is for education, where the nature of what counts as expertise is even more fluid than it is for science, and where it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle technical from values-driven decision-making (Biesta, 2007).

Accordingly, we are not able to close our discussion with clear recommendations, other than to argue that it is important and timely to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the current state of sociology of education. Our analysis of the BJSE indicates that the last 40 years have seen a remarkable growth in activity. The cultural turn has opened up new avenues of exploration and provided new theoretical pathways. However, there are other dimensions that are less well developed. Our capacity to develop a cumulative evidence base to address enduring socio-economic inequalities in education has not made as much progress as our capacity to identify and theorise cultural injustices. We should, in particular, be mindful of Bernstein's warning about 'inbuilt redundancy' and ensure that we are clear about the purposes of our research, the nature of the problem under investigation and, importantly, the limits of our analyses.

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