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Attitude Change or Cognitive-Moral Development?

How to Conceive of Socialization at the University

Georg Lind

There is a gap between the expectations concerning the socialization effects of the university and the empirical findings. On the basis of common sense, many people would expect education at a university or college (these terms are interchangeable in this essay) to "make a difference," not only in regard to specialized vocational skills but also generally, in regard to such supra-vocational "skills" as critical thinking, judgment ability, and social responsibility. Contrary to this normatively charged expectation, however, some researchers have concluded that university socialization has *no* effect on such skills, or at least no general and lasting effect.¹

Two basically different explanations for this gap are suggested: Either university education actually fails to reach its proclaimed aims, or the "university-makes-no-difference" finding is due to our inability to actually "see" those supra-vocational effects, i.e., it results from shortcomings of the concepts and instruments employed in the studies on which that finding is based. The first explanation can be contested only indirectly, e.g., by providing a measurement methodology which improves our ability to assess the effects of socialization. If the results remain the same, we would then have to accept as a matter of fact that university education fails to achieve its aims. However, if we could demonstrate a general democratizing effect of university education by using better methods, we could refute the implicit assumptions of the research methods which have produced these "no-difference" findings.

In this paper I shall try to show that it is indeed the case that the concepts of *attitude* and *attitude change*, which were the core concepts of the impact-of-college research, have been defined too narrowly to permit an adequate assessment of such effects of university education. To be sure, the development of classical attitude tests represented a major step forward in social research (see, for example,

Feldman and Newcomb, 1970; Cloetta, 1975), primarily because, in comparison to case study methods, such tests are more transparent and more applicable to large scale surveys. This implies that they are objective and can easily be criticized and improved. However, the classical concepts of attitude and attitude change limit the possible outcomes of socialization in two ways: (1) in regard to the evaluative aspect of attitudes, and (2) in regard to those attitudes which differentiate among persons. In doing so, classical attitude research ignores a central aspect of educational outcomes, namely, the cognitive aspect of attitudes and its structural transformation. Consequently, this approach reduces the process of socialization to *changes* in affective magnitudes. This self-confinement also seems responsible for the fact that the process of socialization is often perceived only under the narrow categories of "adaptation" and "deviation."

The cognitive-developmental approach (cf. Kohlberg, 1973a; Perry, 1970) offers a conceptual and methodological alternative for higher education research. From this point of view, the general democratizing effect of university education is conceived of, and assessed as, the development of both affective *and* cognitive aspects of personality. Accordingly, the effects of socialization are not reduced to changes in affective magnitudes but are construed as more complex processes of integration and differentiation. By viewing the process of socialization through the wider conceptual lens of cognitive developmental theory, we are able to see effects of university education which have hitherto been invisible to the researcher. From this point of view, even using classical attitude research techniques, we have obtained indications of a sequential, irreversible development of supra-vocational competences in university students. These show that, contrary to the findings of most classical attitude research, university education in fact facilitates, or even stimulates, the development of moral and democratic competences among students in general.

SOCIALIZATION AS ATTITUDE CHANGE

Attitudes in Impact-of-College Research

Until recently, the concept of attitude has predominated in research on the effects of university socialization (cf. Jacob, 1957; Newcomb, 1957; Sanford, 1962; Feldman & Newcomb, 1970; Dressel &

Mayhew, 1971; Lenning et al., 1974; Cloetta, 1975; Dann et al., 1978; Huber & Vogel, 1984). This proposition is not invalidated by the fact that only a few studies contain an explicit definition of their research subject. The theoretical assumptions of these studies can be perceived in their concrete research methods, which define in operational terms the constructs being employed. There are many variants in research methods. However, there are some core features of attitude testing which are common to nearly all studies and which are based on classical testing theory. This makes it possible to speak of a unique paradigm: the "classical attitude concept" (cf. Scott, 1968; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). As we will see below, the concept and its measurement contain certain psychological assumptions about the nature of the human mind. Thus, the central question is whether these assumptions are compatible with the research hypotheses which they are being used to test.

Hypotheses of Attitude Research

One major focus of research into university socialization deals with its hypothesized democratizing effect, i.e., with the democratic personality it is supposed to shape. This includes attributes such as innovative competence (liberalism), critical judgment ability, moral autonomy, willingness to assume social responsibility, and general liberal attitudes. Of particular interest in research has been the dimension of "conservatism," which is considered a kind of antipode to the democratic attitudes (liberalism) expected of university and college graduates (cf. Newcomb, 1957; Cloetta, 1975). The hypothesis to be tested is: Is the university capable of instilling democratic attitudes in the student? Or is it appropriate to resign ourselves to the conclusion that the university has no, or no lasting, influence on attitude change?

Results of Attitude Research

Until now the research results have seemed surprisingly clear—and negative. When asked what college does for the individual, the college researcher Theodore Newcomb (1974) answered: "Frankly, very little that is demonstrable" (p. 73). The findings of impact-of-college research confirm this conclusion in that they are concerned with the prediction of the non-vocational effects of college education. With only a few exceptions, research either does not show any of the anticipated attitude changes, or it shows that such changes are

revised at the end of college or in the initial phase of the individual's professional life. Even Jacob (1957), in his highly regarded summary of a quarter-century of attitude research, ascertained that college had *no* significant impact on attitude change. Feldman and Newcomb (1970), after studying extensive research, concluded that college effects very little change in attitudes and values, or if there is a change, it occurs in a very specific manner. They reported varying outcomes, depending on the college attended, subject of study, and student characteristics, but one can hardly speak of a general, encompassing effect produced by college education.

If one considers in particular the democratizing effect, some consistent changes were observed in the first years of study. According to Feldman and Newcomb (1970) and other surveys in this field, there is a slight but general turning away from conservative, authoritarian, nondemocratic attitudes during the college years.² This trend could also be shown in a longitudinal study carried out by the research project "Teachers' Attitudes" (Cloetta, 1975; Dann et al., 1978). In this excellently designed research, many new insights into the process and conditions of socialization could be gained, demonstrating that, at least in regard to profession-related attitudes, higher education has some general and stable effects. But in regard to more general conservative attitudes, the initial trend in the liberal direction is reversed. The democratizing effect abates again at the end of college and in the initial phase of work. The authors refer to a "practice shock," which cancels the effect of college.³ This seems to prove that students' attitudes do not, as Newcomb (1974) had expected, stabilize, but instead adapt to the particular climate of opinion in the environment: that is, attitudes appear to be ephemeral, fleeting phenomena in the course of development.

Problems of Interpretation

Must we therefore repudiate the idea that college graduates gain supra-vocational abilities? Are the findings so evident that one can consider colleges and universities ineffective in fostering democratic competences? We will see that these questions cannot be answered with an unambiguous "yes." First of all, these findings are influenced by the methods used and hence are theory-impregnated interpretations which are debatable. Of course, these findings are not produced completely independent of reality, but are constrained by the methods of assessment and data evaluation. Therefore, the fact