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## Teaching with Melvin Kohn\*

*Abstract:* Melvin L. Kohn is the author of well-known theory on the relationship between social class, work and personality, supported by sophisticated cross-national research. Kohn's theory and research make a good example for the sociologists of how sociology should be done and cultivated. Here they are evaluated from the educational perspective.

*Keywords:* Melvin L. Kohn, social class and self-direction, cross-national research.

For many years I have been teaching sociological methodology at the University of Warsaw and for many years I have been doing it with the help of Professor Melvin Kohn. Not himself of course, but his studies, works and ideas. His and his collaborators. Melvin Kohn is the author of an intellectually stimulating theory on the relationship between social class, work and personality (Kohn 1969). This theory has been supported by sophisticated cross-national research (Kohn 2006). Kohn's theory and research make a good example for the sociologists of how sociology should be done and cultivated. In my speech I would like to demonstrate the value of Kohn's theory and research from the educational perspective.

### I

Great theories have modest beginnings. It is certain that Melvin Kohn's article 'Social class and parental values' published in *American Journal of Sociology* in 1959 (Kohn 1959), fifty years ago did not contain a promise of theories and research which would develop from it. Scientific theories do not develop by themselves. They are the fruit of a creative mind. Findings may remain what they are but they can also become a source of inspiration. We can replicate them, formulate interpretations, test those interpretations and re-formulate them at a more general theoretical level.

Studying Kohn's works we can show our students how the theory about the relationship between job conditions and personality in industrial society assimilates a new

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range of issues: functioning of bureaucratic organizations, agricultural work, women's housework and students' efforts at school. Moreover, this theory includes reciprocal effects of work and personality and it reaches beyond capitalist society. Kohn also takes advantage of the rapid historical changes in East Europe after 1989 to study how they influence occupational self-direction and personality. He formulates his theory in more and more general terms—starting from parental values and ending up with intellectual flexibility and self-directedness of orientation.

This process of theory development and its verification is never to be stopped since Kohn's theory reached the status of 'progressive research program' (in Lakatos's sense), and it generates new research problems. As we know, those kinds of theories cannot be directly verified. With the passing of time, however, they may stop generating new research programs and degenerate. However, there is no reason to assume that in not distant future this could happen to Kohn's theory.

More or less, this is the way we show our students how a relatively simple research on the differences in parental values between working class and middle class in America can develop into complex and dynamic trans-national theory.

## II

We also use Melvin Kohn's works and studies as a prime example of operationalization of sociological terms and hypotheses testing. I'm now referring to his article "Occupational structure and alienation" (Kohn 1976).

Kohn starts from Marx's idea of the connection between alienation and loss of control over labor. He first specifies the independent variable and he distinguishes between loss of control over the product of one's labor, and loss of control over the work process. Then, he formulates two hypotheses:

1. Loss of control over the work process increases alienation.
2. Loss of control over the product of one's labor increases alienation.

In the language of his theory, Kohn refers to the control over the work process as to occupational self-direction, which includes three dimensions: substantive complexity of work, closeness of supervision and routinization of work. Next, he presents scales to study each of those three dimensions. He does similarly when dealing with the second independent variable—specifying it as ownership, and hierarchical position.

Next, Kohn specifies (following Melvin Seeman) the notion of alienation, which includes powerlessness, self-estrangement, anomia and cultural estrangement. He demonstrates his scales to measure each of those kinds of alienation. This specification is followed by an analysis, which demonstrates that '[i]n this large-scale capitalist economy, the type of control that is the most important for alienation is control, not over the product, but over the process of one's work'.

This way a student is shown, step by step, how sociology can progress from the level of philosophical ideas through theoretical work and concept analysis, measurement and choice of indicators, to empirically well-grounded theoretical statements.

### III

We also use the research of Melvin Kohn's and his collaborators to show how inventive tests of sociological hypotheses can become. Carmi Schooler in an article 'Serfdom's legacy: an ethnic continuum' (Schooler 1976) managed to prove that the country of origin of contemporary Americans has influence on their self-direction and conformity. The longer the serfdom and enforced labor of peasants were maintained in the country, the less those peasants' descendants, living hundreds years afterwards on a different continent, would be intellectually flexible. Being parents, in their children's behavior they value more obedience than self-control. The traces of serfdom are preserved in their souls.

It was thought that the psychological effects of serfdom can be researched only through historical sources. However, it has turned out that those effects still exist. In the social realm nothing disappears without traces, and therefore one should search for those traces—this is the lesson we can draw from this study. The next lesson is: do not search for the traces in the dark, because you will never find them. You should look for them with the wonderful lamp of a theory.

### IV

Melvin Kohn specializes in comparative research and multicultural tests, which make his theory particularly appealing. The logic of those studies was formulated by Kohn himself in a brilliant paper 'Cross-national research as an analytic strategy' (Kohn 1987) and it can also be read out from his works and the works of his collaborators. This logic is easily grasped by students.

Kohn's strategy is 'the deliberate choice of a small number of nations that provide maximum leverage for testing theoretical issues'. 'Which countries to compare?' asks Kohn. And he answers: 'Cross national research is maximally useful when it can resolve a disputed question of interpretation'. Again it is not about chance but theory. We use consecutive cross-national replications as theoretically steered attempts to proof the universality of his theory. Research conducted in Poland was to verify if the relationships between work and personality are not limited to the U.S.A. and Western Europe. Research conducted in Japan and China was to verify if Kohn's findings are not limited to the western world. Schooler's research was to check if they are not limited to modern society and industrial economy.

Research conducted by Melvin Kohn and Kazmimierz Slomczyński (Kohn and Slomczynski 1990) contributed to making us aware of the problem of equivalence of concepts and indices in cross-national research. There is educational value of Slomczyński's difficulties in translating a survey question, which was to assess intellectual flexibility: 'Suppose you wanted to open a hamburger stand and there were two locations available. What questions do you consider, in deciding which of the two locations offers a better business opportunity?' At that time (the survey was con-

ducted in 1978) there where no hamburgers in Poland and, what is more important, practically no opportunities for private business.

## V

Melvin Kohn's works contain a lot of important ideas for social scientists and students of sociology —future social scientists. My favorite thought is: 'one can learn a great deal about social and psychological phenomena by examining the problems one encounters in trying to study them' (Kohn 1993). Not only does this idea require us to gather what we now (following Mike Couper) call 'paradata', data referring to the conditions of data gathering process. Kohn also requires us to become researchers of our own research, and by doing so, researchers of ourselves.

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