

A Sociological Perspective on Hierarchies in Educational Institutions

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A Sociological Perspective on Hierarchies in Educational Institutions

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To
My family
With love*

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About the Author

Dr. **Einav Argaman** studies institutional discourse, focusing on talk, text, embodied practices, spatial arrangements, and architecture as mediating different aspects of educational institutions (e.g., hierarchical and collegial relationships; disagreement; center-periphery dynamics; positioning; individualism; institutional roles). She has published in leading journals, including *Discourse Studies*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Semiotica*, and *Applied Linguistics*. *A Sociological Perspective on Hierarchies in Educational Institutions* is her first book. She is a Senior Lecturer, Head of the Language Education in a Multicultural Society M.Ed. program at The Levinsky-Wingate Academic Center, and a Board Member of the Israeli Association for the Study of Language and Society.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The term “hierarchy” is not new. Some have sought its origin in Dionysius, *The Areopagite*, i.e., in the sixth century AD. Hierarchy continues to be relevant today. A Google Scholar search (conducted on January 7, 2022) yielded 4,890,000 publications on the topic, and this is merely a single database attesting to its presence. As Zitek and Tiedens (2012, p. 98) argue “hierarchies are omnipresent, existing in almost all cultures, organizations, and groups,” despite the fact that they were found to be “inhumane, immoral, and undemocratic.” They are “the dinosaur that wouldn’t die” (Leavitt, 2003).

If hierarchy is researched in multiple disciplines and has been widely discussed for such a prolonged period, one may question the justification for writing yet another book on the subject. Despite the fact that hierarchy enjoys an array of interpretations, the term is generally examined through the lens of each discipline *separately*, or from the perspective of a specific academic group/cluster.¹ See, for example the following quotation:

This book is based on the *interdisciplinary* symposium “Hierarchical Structures in Nature and Artifacts,” held in November 1968 at Huntington Beach, California. [...] Through placing in juxtaposition *specific* hierarchical systems from inorganic, organic, conceptual and artifact worlds, it was hoped to gain insights into the problems of levels, parts and wholes and the origins of the various species of hierarchical structures. (Whyte, Wilson, & Wilson, 1969; my emphases)

As stated in the above-mentioned paragraph, the editors’ intention was to regard hierarchical structures by adopting an interdisciplinary approach. Nonetheless, they instantly follow by stating that the book presents a specific view. And, indeed, when scrutinizing the book chapters, it is obvious that they only cover the physical and life sciences.

¹Becher (1994) classifies academic groups into disciplinary fields/“tribes”: pure sciences, humanities, technologies, applied social sciences.

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A more recent book, *Hierarchy in Natural and Social Sciences* (Pumain, 2006), expands the scope of discussion, shifting from the field of hard/pure sciences (biology, physics, and mathematics) to their representations in social systems (specifically, natural languages and urban planning). In Pumain's words:

We think that the widespread occurrence of hierarchical structures in nature and in human society invites a *pluri*-disciplinary inquiry, to explore the dynamic or evolutionary processes that could explain them. (Pumain, 2006, p. 2; my emphasis)

As argued by Pumain (2006), a *pluri*-disciplinary inquiry on hierarchy exists. However, I find that it is scant in the literature. Along the same lines, in his concluding remarks, Pumain (2006, p. 239) invites "further collaboration between sciences," and states that his research "could perhaps be considered a *first step*" in building an interconnected and interwoven view on the matter (my emphasis). Add this to his observation that "contemporary sociologists *do not often* refer to social hierarchies [...], even if the principle remains very often as an implicit or commonplace fact in their analyses" (Pumain, 2006, p. 225; my emphasis), and we may conclude that a book which concerns hierarchies from a multilayered and multidimensional perspective, while adopting a sociological stance (as I seek to do), is greatly needed.

A Sociological Perspective on Hierarchies in Educational Institutions seeks to relate to hierarchy in its far-reaching meaning, while focusing on educational institutions. On the one hand, this setting serves as a case which is sufficiently distinct for a "dramatically different conceptualization" to be realized (Yin, 1981, p. 61), while on the other, educational institutions resemble other formal bureaucracies in specific characteristics. Despite their uniqueness, they offer the possibility to reach additional implications and "thin generalizations" (Miles, 1979, p. 599), i.e., the elicitation of an accurate (albeit concise) theory. Hence, *A Sociological Perspective on Hierarchies in Educational Institutions* draws parallels and contrasts between educational institutions and other formal and informal institutions (e.g., factories, hospitals, prisons, Internet companies), seeking to ascertain if educational institutions have hierarchies of their own.

The primary focus of attention is on educational institutions. I intend to discuss these institutions by relating to several dimensions. I will show how hierarchy is manifested and constructed in talk, body practices, texts, spatial and architectural arrangements, hence the multidimensionality of the book. The fact that the book integrates theory with empirics (the latter provide vivid demonstrations of the ways by which concepts, models, and scientific explanations are realized in practice) is multidimensional as well.

The book is multilayered. Within the field of institutional studies, it proposes an understanding of hierarchy in institutions in general, *and* in educational institutions in particular, i.e., a "both-and" approach, not "either-or." Hierarchy, as discussed in this book, is also of wide-ranging relevance to a variety of fields, including sociology, curriculum studies, management, linguistics, architecture, philosophy, religion, psychology, and cognitive science. Each of these disciplines

provides alternative or additional angles for the interpretation and understanding of hierarchy in educational institutions. The juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal hierarchy in the book (as predominant types of hierarchy) also contributes to the multilayered approach embodied in the book. The distinction between the two is not necessarily binary (as in an “X versus Y” situation). Vertical and horizontal hierarchies may overlap or have blurry boundaries. The same empirical example may illustrate both of them or indicate a fluid process in which vertical relations change into horizontal ones, and vice versa.

Due to the centrality and constancy of hierarchies in institutions, they are often taken for granted. Being multidimensional and multilayered, the present book challenges this ostensible inevitability, by rethinking hierarchies in educational institutions and addressing questions regarding their origins, related terms, manifestations, alternatives, and the circumstances under which such hierarchies flourish or diminish.

1.1. The Underlying Research

A Sociological Perspective on Hierarchies in Educational Institutions stems from various studies which were conducted in educational institutions (from the elementary school level through higher education) and were previously published as articles. Drawing on a qualitative paradigm, my corpus includes texts (e.g., minutes of meetings, invitations, schedules, photographs), interviews with key informants (principals, teachers in middle management positions, experienced and beginner teachers, college academic and administrative staff, students), and observations.

The book, however, is not a collection of the above-mentioned articles, but rather an original and comprehensive monograph which seeks to cover the topic of hierarchy in educational institutions. The chapters add significantly to the articles. The latter were merely the initial steps of an inquiry. The book gathers and integrates extensive knowledge on hierarchy which has not been considered before. Hence, it goes far beyond the introductory ideas offered in the articles.

Examples taken from my earlier articles illustrate the main topic of Chapters 4–7. Yet these examples are studied in light of new theories presented in the chapters. They also lead to new insights not dealt in the articles (which provide a detailed analysis of data that the book does not intend to repeat). For example, Section 4.1 relates to an article which analyzed the vertical hierarchy between a teacher and a middle manager, as revealed in the talk and the body of these interlocutors (Argaman, 2009). The section elaborates on the issue of middle management; the article did not cover this topic theoretically, apart from indicating that one of the participants was a middle manager and offering a brief explanation of the term. Section 4.1 discusses the illustrative example (extracted from the article) in reference to the distinction between “leader” and “manager.” In addition, the vertical relationship between the middle manager and the teacher relates to the disciplinary cultures to which the interlocutors belong (the teacher – science; the middle manager – literature). The book asks whether opposition to vertical hierarchy stems from the fact that the teacher belongs to a discipline that

is considered “worthier” than that of the middle manager (who is ranked higher, in terms of her institutional role). Consideration of this question is not present in the article. Section 4.1 suggests other related terms and theories that should be considered when vertical hierarchies are examined, e.g., social comparison, social justice, workplace expectancies, relational identities. The original article did not relate to any of these. The book offers a more mature reflection on an ever-developing topic.

1.2. The Organization of the Book

The book is divided into eight chapters. The Introduction is Chapter 1. Chapter 2 is dedicated to hierarchy. It discusses the etymology and early consideration of hierarchy, while referring to Dionysius’ (1894) religious and initial “secular”/earthly perspectives² of the term. Next, I discuss the related terms that frequently appear when hierarchy is considered. These include: (a) “positioning” (in Harré & van Langenhove, 1991) and “footing” (in Goffman, 1981), from a sociological or philosophical point of view. “Footing” is also connected to the literature on “frames” (Goffman, 1974), (b) “trees,” “rhizomes” and “folksonomies” in linguistics. Chomsky (1957/2002, 1970), Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2005), and Berg (2009) are the eminent scholars in this part, (c) “social class” and “castes,” from anthropological, sociological, economic, political, and psychological standpoints (Dumont, 1970/1999; Goffman, 1951; Marx, 1867/1965; Marx & Engels, 1848/2007; Weber, 1922/1978, 1947). The final part of Chapter 2 relates to hierarchical types which are generally regarded in binary sequences: celestial and ecclesiastical versus worldly/secular; formal versus informal; lean/flat/shallow versus steep; and mega- versus micro-hierarchy.

Chapter 3 deals with institutions and educational institutions. Drawing on Foucault (1975/1995, 1972/1980) and Lefebvre (1947/1991, 1987), it compares the institution to everyday life. It then elaborates on three approaches in organization studies, from traditional institutionalism in Weberian thought (which regards institutions as fixed and stable entities), to the linguistic turn (which focuses on “languages as a shaping force” in institutional settings; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 142), and the processual viewpoint (which studies processes in institutions, and institutions as the product of processes; Astley & van de Ven, 1983; Bakken & Hernes, 2006; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). Next, the chapter details four predominant types of institutions: the institution as a centralized bureaucracy, the organismic institution, the institution as a culture, and the institution as a political system. This classification expands to include additional subordinate types: (a) compulsory versus voluntary institutions, (b) manufacturing versus service institutions.

The second part of Chapter 3 addresses educational institutions. First, it considers educational institutions in light of the previous distinctions, i.e., as service

²Secularism is a modern term/worldview (see Casanova, 2009). Hence, “earthly” is more suitable when referring to Dionysius.

institutions, which are also compulsory (in countries with a state schooling law), and bureaucratic. The public/compulsory school is viewed in comparison with private/privilege schools and vocational schools, and in reference to the hierarchical status of these education systems. Pertaining to the bureaucratic nature of educational institutions, they are compared to factories, prisons, and hospitals (elaborating on the latter). The chapter questions whether educational institutions are fundamentally different from other service institutions and indicates the uniqueness of the former.

Whereas Chapters 2 and 3 provide background and information necessary for the understanding of hierarchy in educational institutions, the following chapters proceed to the heart of the matter (i.e., hierarchies in educational institutions) and elaborate on two main hierarchical types: the vertical and the horizontal. Chapter 4 expands on the first. It bears on the division into elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools, which implies a bottom-top relationship. Remaining within the boundaries of K-12 education, the chapter then considers the verticality of the curriculum, i.e., its organization according to age groups, the fact that it reflects dominant and subordinate subject-matter/disciplines, and comprises core versus elective content, skills, and values. Next, the pyramidal structure of formal role distinctions in schools is revealed (from the principal to the students) and this perspective extends to roles in higher education and its vertical chains of commands. This pecking order is discussed in light of the historical context of the Bolognese University, where students ranked higher than the professors they employed. In addition, the chapter focuses on the vertical hierarchical relationships that educational institutions maintain with their external environment, specifically parents (as an important external factor). An illustrative empirical example concludes the chapter. It provides a new angle to vertical hierarchy, referring (as a focal point) to the issue of middle management, the terms “leader” versus “manager,” and the potential clashes between academic disciplines which are ranked vertically (some are perceived as being of greater worth).

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to horizontal hierarchies. It defines this hierarchical type and restricts the ability of horizontal relationships to continue, based on the premise in the literature that verticality is unavoidable in institutions. It then situates horizontal hierarchies in the historical background of postmodern institutions. It also relates to the characteristics of educational institutions (including, their bureaucratic nature, eggcrate arrangement, the principle of unity of time, and the division into disciplines) which reflect and construct comparability or equivalence (i.e., horizontality). The dialogic pedagogy of Shor and Freire (1987) and Doll (1993) is discussed in this respect, as are the various linguistic means and interactive processes which convey and establish horizontality. The chapter differentiates between perspectives within neoinstitutionalism (i.e., process organization studies, discursive institutionalism, rhetorical institutionalism, and constructivist institutionalism) which focus on mutuality and reciprocity in institutions. It generates the understanding that horizontal hierarchies switch to vertical ones, and vice versa. The concluding section of this chapter reconsiders an example which was included in a previous article (Argaman, 2015). Expanding on it, by adding the framework of role theory and referring to the terms “role-set,”

“multiple-roles,” and “role-conflict,” it demonstrates the ever-changing nature of horizontal hierarchies.

Chapter 6 addresses the architectural design of institutions in general, and educational institutions in particular. It views architecture as a semiotic resource which provides insight into vertical and horizontal hierarchal relations. The chapter opens by defining the key terms “architecture” and “space.” Next, it deals with the issue of verticality. The chapter provides a review of various institutional settings whose physical arrangement disclose a vertical ranking order, starting with the historical period of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and the architecture of the church, the positioning in space of a men’s choir, and the beginning of urbanization, continuing to bureaucratic institutions (i.e., the panoptic prison; a courthouse building; a government agency).

The manifestation of horizontality in the architecture of institutions is then recapped. The chapter relates to the design of fast-food corporations (discussing the terms “McDonaldization” and “chains”), the division into departments, the cellular arrangement of workstations, the spatial layout in rows and columns, the furniture available for each institutional stratum, furniture types, and open-plan shared spaces.

The chapter then focuses exclusively on the architecture of educational institutions. Section 6.4 observes the architectural styles of (a) schools/colleges/universities buildings, (b) classrooms, (c) aisles and corridors, (d) recreations areas, including the academic staffrooms. It echoes the idea presented in Chapter 5 (that vertical and horizontal hierarchies coincide) and moves alternately between the two types of hierarchies. Section 6.4 returns to some of the institutions and the topics which were presented in the subchapters that preceded it, e.g., the classroom podium/lectern as resonating the architecture of the church (in Section 6.2); classroom furniture – specifically desks and chairs – recall a previous discussion of furniture in Section 6.3. At the same time, Section 6.4 highlights the distinctness of the architectural design of educational institutions, connecting it to pedagogy and the disciplinary cultures of the academic world.

Finally, Chapter 6 relates to the traditional classroom structure (which serves a teacher/lecturer-oriented teaching and learning process, hence confirming a vertical hierarchy) vis-à-vis an alternative classroom plan which may establish a more egalitarian relationship between a teacher/lecturer and students. This alternative architectural structure was introduced in a previous article (Argaman & Asa, 2017). Section 6.5 develops the ideas which were briefly mentioned in the latter.

Chapter 7 discusses the hierarchical relations of educational institutions with external factors/agents/partners. The chapter relates to the tension that educational institutions experience as they aim to satisfy the expectations of society on the one hand, while maintaining clear boundaries between them and their surrounding environment, on the other. Next, the literature on the Other and otherness, territory, and center-periphery relations is presented. With reference to the Other and otherness, the chapter shifts from colonial and postcolonial thought to contemporary perspectives, and reviews Said’s *Orientalism* (1978/2003),

metaphors of the Other (i.e., The Leper, The Court Fool, and The Noble Savage; Kroflič, 2007), and McDermott and Varenne (1995) *Culture as Disability* (which raises the question “Who Is the Other?”). The chapter also draws a link between the Other and geographical location, regards Other and Otherness as mediated thought language, and deals with the issue of self-othering (a situation where the Other seeks to maintain its separateness and constructs its own selfhood).

The following subsection pertains to territory and defines the key terms territory, territoriality, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. It associates territory with power and control, the Other, sovereignty, and superiority and submission, by examining the issue of territory on a state- and a non-state level.

Chapter 7 reviews the issue of “center-periphery.” The chapter moves from examining the spatial/geographical location of center versus periphery, to viewing the terms as a social phenomenon (involving issues of authority, rights, discrimination, fairness).

Otherness, territory, and center-periphery are inspected in reference to hierarchy in institutional settings in general, and educational institutions, in particular. An empirical example illustrates the way in which hierarchies are set and negotiated when the educational institution cooperates with an external partner whose identity is fundamentally different from that of the institution. The example blurs binary perspectives on hierarchies as classifying people permanently and inflexibly into either a higher or lower rank or position. Hence, questions such as “Who is at the top of the pyramid?” “When?” and “How do we know?”, are appropriate. Should we inspect hierarchical position in terms of physical location? The ability to impact others? Control? Physical size? The degree of attention received?

The book’s final chapter (Chapter 8) is divided into four sections. The first recapitulates ideas that were presented throughout the book, by summarizing the main standpoint of the different perspectives that the book addresses (i.e., the religious, historical, sociological, architectural, and the discursive). Section 8.1 notes the fuzzy boundaries between perspective and the fact that they not only juxtapose, but also overlap.

Next, the chapter provides a step-by-step guide for people who wish to identify and perhaps even change the hierarchical relationships that exist in their institution. This diagnostic process is linked to the actor–network diagram presented in Venturini, Ricci, Mauri, Kimbell, and Meunier (2015) in the field of business studies. Section 8.2 incorporates the necessary modifications that are to be made when analyzing hierarchies as opposed to controversies (the latter are the focus of Venturini et al., 2015). It also pertains specifically to educational institutions.

Section 8.3 outlines the directions that hierarchies in institutions may take, in light of new institutional trends and forms (specifically, cross-cultural management and virtual institutions). It notes that hierarchies in educational institutions (as discussed in the book) do not breach “traditional”/already-existing types (i.e., the vertical, horizontal, formal, informal, lean, steep, and mega-, micro-hierarchy). The section speculates on the dominance of current types (asking which of the above-mentioned types will become central in educational institutions) and the circumstances of such prevalence.

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Finally, Section 8.4 returns to the book's underlying question: Do educational institutions have hierarchies of their own? Recapping the unique characteristics of educational institutions, the book concludes by arguing that hierarchies in these institutions are revealed in manners consistent with the context of educational institutions *and are indeed specific to it*.