

# A Review of Lortie's *Schoolteacher*

Tsai-Hsiu Lin

**Abstract**—Dan C. Lortie's *Schoolteacher: A sociological study* is one of the best works on the sociology of teaching since W. Waller's classic study. It is a book worthy of review. Following the tradition of symbolic interactionists, Lortie demonstrated the qualities who studied the occupation of teaching. Using several methods to gather effective data, Lortie has portrayed the ethos of the teaching profession. Therefore, the work is an important book on the teaching profession and teacher culture. Though outstanding, Lortie's work is also flawed in that his perspectives and methodology were adopted largely from symbolic interactionism. First, Lortie in his work analyzed many points regarding teacher culture; for example, he was interested in exploring "sentiment," "cathexis," and "ethos." Thus, he was more a psychologist than a sociologist. Second, symbolic interactionism led him to discern the teacher culture from a micro view, thereby missing the structural aspects. For example, he did not fully discuss the issue of gender and he ignored the issue of race. Finally, following the qualitative sociological tradition, Lortie employed many qualitative methods to gather data but only focused on obtaining and presenting interview data. Moreover, he used measurement methods that were too simplistic for analyzing quantitative data fully.

**Keywords**—Lortie's *Schoolteacher*, Symbolic interactionism, teacher culture, teaching profession.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**S**CHOOLTEACHER written by Dan C. Lortie was published in 1975 and reprinted with new preface in 2002. Lortie began research for the book while teaching at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. When he had completed the book, he joined the faculty of the University of Chicago Department of Education. While Larson [1] considered Lortie's *Schoolteacher* to have been underappreciated by serious students of education, despite Lortie's poignant, unique and valuable study on the profession of teaching. However, *Schoolteacher* is a work worthy of review. This article analyzes this work from three aspects to highlight its strengths and weaknesses: thought resources, contents, and methodology.

## II. THOUGHT RESOURCES

Born in 1926, Dan C. Lortie graduated from the University of Chicago (Ph.D. and M.D.) and McGill University. He was awarded a Master's in Sociology in 1949 for his thesis *Doctors without patients: The anesthesiologist—A new medical specialist*. In 1958, he received a Ph.D. in Sociology for his dissertation entitled *The striving young lawyer: A study of early career differentiation in the Chicago bar*. He later became a professor emeritus of education at the University of Chicago. He is therefore known as a successor to the purveyors of the Chicago School. Members of the Chicago School are also

Tsai-Hsiu Lin is with the National Taichung University of Education, Taiwan (e-mail: lintsaihsu@yahoo.com.tw).

called symbolic interactionists. Basically, they are social psychologists.

The link from Georg Simmel in Germany to the group of social psychologists at the University of Chicago was forged when Robert Park spent a semester in Simmel's classroom. Simmel's conception of society as a system of interaction was adopted by Park and his colleagues and students at the University of Chicago, which became the birthplace of symbolic interactionism [2].

One of the characteristics of the Chicago School thinkers was their interest in the concerns of jobs, work, occupation, and profession. According to Lortie, "The study lies in that tradition and methods used provide persuasive documentation of genuine insights into the nature of teaching as an occupation" [3]. However, most studies during the 1970s were "less preoccupied with 'profession' and more with 'career'" [4]. Many of these studies were explicitly or implicitly in the symbolic interactionist tradition within which the study of 'work' and 'occupation' was generally traced back to Everett Hughes and Chicago sociology [4].

Lortie conducted research on at least three occupations: anesthesiologist, lawyer, and teacher. The eminent scholars of occupation at the Chicago School were Hughes and Becker. Lortie referenced Hughes's ideas on occupation in the notes of *Schoolteacher* and admitted that these ideas came from Hughes's classes. As Lortie wrote in Note 7 of Chapter 3, "I first learned to look for such exchanges from Everett Hughes during classroom discussions at the University of Chicago" [3]. He continued on Note 7 of Chapter 4, "E.C. Hughes developed the ideas of facets and phrase in a memorandum...I do not believe that the memo was published" [3]. Thus, Lortie was a student of Hughes who was the influence in his major book [4].

Lortie stated that he believed himself to follow in the tradition of Willard Waller's; however, Acker [4] believed that he more closely followed the style of Becker [4]. Furthermore, Acker said that David Hargreaves is more similar to Waller than to Lortie. Acker was also astonished that Lortie never mentioned David Hargreaves in his book. Andy Hargreaves said that David and he were colleagues at Oxford University. Despite having the same last name, however, they are not related. They team-taught master's degree classes in the sociology of education and are both interested in teacher culture. Both of them were inspired and influenced by Waller's *The sociology of teaching*, Jackson's *Life in classrooms* and Lortie's *Schoolteacher* [5], [6].

Jackson was not an interactionist but he abandoned traditional psychological methods for ethnography in order to more closely examine what was happening in schools [7]. However, Waller is completed an M.A. degree at the University of Chicago in 1925, he pioneered an ethnographic analysis of schools as miniature societies that have problematic

relationships with the larger community [8]. Accordingly Lortie is a sociologist and his thought originated from the Chicago School, following its legacy to further insight into the sociology of occupation.

Thus, after Goodlad completed his work *A place called school*, he felt that although he had not mentioned the social contexts of teaching, he believed that both of the Lortie's and Waller's work compensated for his omission [9]. He said:

Our study of school did not look into either the characteristics of a person who enters teaching as a career or the larger social and economic context in which teaching occurs, but some excellent studies are available. Particularly significant are those of Lortie and Waller [9].

However, Acland [10] did not agree that *Schoolteacher* was a work of sociology because sociology is a discipline that explores societal agencies, as he wrote:

Perhaps the most clearly articulated position about schools in the current literature is that teachers, as society's agents, are incapable of altering the basic terms of their existence. By this argument, schools exist to reproduce the division of labor, failure must be institutionalized, objectively valid standards of achievement take second place to the dictate that students must be sorted. The lack of tangibility in the definition of teachers' impact may be a necessity rather than an accident [10].

Acland was astonished that the keywords in Lortie's work are "sentiment," "cathexis," and "ethos," and that they are more related to psychology than sociology [10]. In his opinion,

There is a surprising lack of sociology in the study. The point of departure is the teacher's definition of the situation and the frequent use of key words like sentiment, cathexis and ethos leave the impression of a study nearer the psychological end of our spectrum [10].

For some authors [6], [9], Lortie's work is a sociological study, offsetting the deficiencies of their minor concerns of the larger world of teachers'. However, Acland believed that the sentiment or ethos of teachers, which made Lortie more psychological than sociological. In any case, it could be that Lortie based his writing on the tradition of the Chicago School, incorporating its advantages and flaws simultaneously.

### III. OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

In his work, Lortie analyzed many points regarding teacher culture. Andy Hargreaves, an educational sociologist, was interested in what he called a "trinity" in Lortie's work: individualism, conservatism, and presentism.

Hargreaves and Woods defined Lortie's trinity as follows:

Individualism is shown by a classroom teacher unwilling to collaborate with Colleagues; conservatism is resistance to radical change, and presentism the avoidance of long-term planning and the concentration of efforts on short-term projects that are thought to make a difference [7].

Andy Hargreaves mentioned that Lortie is the first person to discuss the phenomenon of teacher individualism in a

systematic way and Hargreaves identified three types of individualism. He explained,

[individualism] is associated with qualities of uncertainty and anxiety, which led teachers to rely on orthodox doctrines and their own past experience as students when forming their styles and strategies of teaching ... Three broader determinants of individualism that were identified in the main study have close but not exact parallels with Flanders' typology of teacher isolation.... These determinants of individualism [lead to] constrained individualism, strategic individualism, and elective individualism [11].

It is more difficult for us to understand what presentism is. Andy Hargreaves called Lortie's classic explanation of presentism an endemic feature of teachings [6]. Jackson referred to this quality as one of immediacy [12]. However, Jackson's idea of immediacy was gained from interviews with top teachers. As he wrote,

The judgements of administrators were used to identify a group of outstanding teachers, as perceived by their administrative superiors. These teachers comprise the top 5 or 10 percent of the instructional staff [12].

From the interview data, Jackson found that the teachers did not focus on the students' invisible changes from the interview data. He wrote,

One aspect of this immediacy particularly evidence in the reports of our teachers was the extent to which they used fleeting behavioral cues to tell them how well they were doing their jobs. They were not concerned about producing invisible changes within the student [12].

Just as Siberman wrote in *Crisis in the classroom*, failure or refusal to think seriously about educational purpose and reluctance to question established practices can skew teachers' behavior toward presentism [1].

Andy Hargreaves enlarged the definition of presentism beyond Lortie's presentism and Jackson's immediacy:

...in the organizations of the new, flexible economy and the public sector institutions that serve them, presentism--unlike in Lortie's day-- is now inversely related to individualism [5].

Andy Hargreaves [6] supposed that once individualism is eliminated, conservatism is cured—that being the theory of change that has followed in the wake of Lortie's work. This is illustrated in the following equation:

$$\text{If } P(\text{presentism}) + I(\text{individualism}) = C(\text{conservatism}) \text{ then reduced individualism will diminish conservatism, or } < I = < C \text{ (holding presentism as a presumed or unstated constant)}$$

Andy Hargreaves appreciated Lortie's social insight, stating, "Thirty years of educational reform have witnessed efforts to tinker with Lortie's formula for changes" [6]. However, Hargreaves suggested that not to understand the political and social ideology, the results of the efforts of education reform would make the teaching profession more conservative [6]. Acland also claimed that, "it was unclear whether Lortie

thought the cellular structure originated in the organization of the school or teachers' heads" [10].

In other words, Lortie followed the tradition of the Chicago School and focused on symbolic interactionism, and he was concerned with the self in the social world. Thus, his work had the tendency to approach psychology and did not consider the context of society as a whole.

In terms of gender, Lortie examined in detail the interacting influences of sex, age and marital status on teacher satisfaction and involvement in his work [4]. Lortie [3] reported that few female teachers become heavily involved in teaching during their twenties, and that married women who contribute the least are more eager to teach. In other words, those who highly involve themselves in teaching do not report higher satisfaction with teaching. In comparing men with women, claimed that most men are secondary schoolteachers and spend more hours on professional matters.

Casey and Apple [13] and Acker [4] have indicated the masculinist conception of the "Norm" that informed Lortie's conceptualization of gender in *Schoolteacher* thereby leading to his presentation of a deficit model of female teachers [14]. One of the components of the deficit model is the tendency to blame the victim and thus distract attention from structural factors [4].

With regard to the issue of race, it is seldom see it in Lortie's work. Troyna believed that,

Schoolteacher rests on the premise that intending and practicing teachers are white and this is a distinctive trend in the sociology of teachers and teaching which circumvent the issue [14].

Furthermore, Tronya [14] is curious that at the time of Lortie's research, race occupied the center stage of American politics in a manner unprecedented since the Civil War era a century before. After reviewing some literature on mainstream sociology, Troyna [14] felt that deracialized discourses in the discipline should come as no surprise.

Actually, Lortie had the opportunities to defend others' comments on his lack concerns of social structure, especially in a discussion of *Schoolteacher* at an AERA session in 1995. However, he seemed not to respond sufficiently on the discussion of race and gender. After 1995 AERA, he wrote an article titled "Unfinished work: Reflections on *Schoolteacher*", published in 1998, he asked a question about gender, "Is there sufficient evidence of the desirability of a gender mixed teaching force to justify concern about the decreasing numbers of men in teaching"[14]? He mentioned gender but only cared about the male teachers decreasing in the high school level; he worried about the lack of sex role models for children-particularly boys in the public school. Also, he asked a question about race, "Is the belief I find among many Afro-American teachers that their students need male role models psychologically defensible"[15]? Identically, it is difficult for us to justify whether he cares about race or not.

Lortie's perspective is largely made up of symbolic interactionism. He never really undertook a political or critical analysis of the macro system of society, so his trinity was depicted as cultural or professional traits. Thus, Andy

Hargreaves [6] suggested when education reform undertakes that we could not ignore the political side and the social aspects of teachers' professional development. Troyna [14] suggested that the micropolitics of institutions are a theoretical resource in the context of this study.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

Herbert Blumer was on the sociology faculty at the University of Chicago from 1927 to 1952. One of his chief contributions to symbolic interactionism is his perspective regarding methodology. He discussed the methodological issues of symbolic interactionism, which were adopted widely and diffused by field methods, ethnography, and qualitative sociology [2].

As to Lortie, he used historical methods, intensive interviews, observation and surveys to obtain his data and clearly portray the ethos of the teaching profession. As Guba [16] wrote:

*Schoolteacher* opens with a selective history of the structure of the occupation in America, and, with the help of intensive interviews with teachers, observational studies, and surveys, examines the ways teachers are recruited, socialized, and rewarded in their careers today.

As the historical method, Lortie gave a chronological review of selected structural features of teaching in which he explored the balance of continuity and change over three centuries of American history [3]. Lortie described that governance is centralized at the district level. Thus, teachers usually see little connection between school board decisions on budgets and their immediate work lives [17].

Lortie employed the interviews as his main approach in collecting data. Wenkert described Lortie's style and methods as similar to Becker, not Waller. Wenkert [18] wrote:

He liberally cites passages from interviews to explicate and clarify the various features of teaching as these are reflected in the accounts that teachers themselves give of it. In style and method, the book more closely resembles Becker's early work than Waller's *The sociology of teaching*.

Moreover, the survey data included both first-hand data, collected in Boston (1963) and Dade County (1963) and several secondary sources of data [6], e.g. the survey from the National Education Association (NEA). The history is selective and appears in Ch.1. In other chapters, most notably Chapters 2- 7, Lortie quoted "many excerpts from teachers' responses" [10]. Therefore, *Schoolteacher* is more qualitative than quantitative, or in Lortie's words, we may refer to the "lightly quantitative nature" of the study [3].

Furthermore, we are seldom presented with clear data comprise from observation in *Schoolteacher*. Lortie based his critique on what teachers say they do, rather than observing what they are able to do [14]. Just as Lortie wrote in his preface, he included "findings from observational studies by other researchers" [3].

However, Lortie seemed to feel comfortable using simple measures. As he said:

It is surprising how much one can learn about an occupation without using complex measures; simpler

tools such as the mode and the marginal distribution (even without concern for ordinality) are very useful in uncovering the ethos of a social group [3].

Acland [7] argued that using simple measures is not adequate, and that comparison and correlation would tell more than descriptive statistics would. He wrote:

The method of data analysis, though torturous in its detail, could be better designed to test central assumptions about cellular hypothesis. For instance, I would assume that some teachers cherish their isolation more than others. If so, are they also less enthusiastic about the development of a professional technology? Such a correlation would help us understand teachers' mental map [10].

Furthermore, research data were collected through interviews in 1963, questionnaires in 1964, and analyses of NEA surveys published in 1963, 1967, and 1972. Because Lortie's data are no more recent than 1972, and some readers might question the validity of the findings in relation to schools in 1976 [1]. However, Lortie made the point several times, even in the 2002 preface [17], that schools have changed so little since the 1960s.

As mentioned, Lortie's work is based in the tradition of the Chicago School, who involving ethnographical studies. This is the Chicago School's advantage. However, it is also its shortcoming.

#### V.CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed Lortie's *Schoolteacher: A sociological study* from the aspects of thought resources, issues (overview of social structure), and methodology used for analysis. The author of this paper finds that Lortie adopting the tradition of symbolic interactionism; he describes many points regarding teaching with insight detail. However, because of his use of symbolic interactionism, his work lacks in depth discussion from the perspective of structural issues, such as class, race, and gender. Therefore, the success and failure of Lortie's *Schoolteacher* both rest entirely on the very same factor—symbolic interactionism.

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