

Italian Sociological Association National Conference
Questioning sources. An interdisciplinary debate on
research questions and data sets

University Federico II, Naples
2009, October 15th-16th

*AIS EDUCATION SECTION SESSION: From institutional sources
to the ethnographic research: problems from the educational field*

by *Emiliano Grimaldi and Titti Romano*

The University of Naples Federico II has host the AIS National Conference “*Questioning sources. An interdisciplinary debate on research questions and data sets*” on 15 and 16 October 2009. The Conference has been organized in collaboration with SISCO (Italian Society of Contemporary History) and AISEA (Italian Association of Ethno-Anthropological Sciences). The aim was to create an interdisciplinary conference, both confronting approaches and research styles, and debating on the ways different quantitative and qualitative sources are questioned and critically used by historians, anthropologists and sociologists.

During the Conference, the AIS Education Section has organized the session “*From institutional sources to the ethnographic research: problems from the educational field*”, chaired by Paolo Trivellato¹. The following papers have been presented:

1) “*Fratelli, sorelle o figli unici: percorsi formativi tra rendimento scolastico e origine sociale*” [Brothers, sisters or only children. Educational

¹ Professor of Sociology of Education at University Milan Bicocca and Coordinator of AIS Education Section Scientific Board.

careers between achievements and social backgrounds] - Giulia Maria Cavaletto and Paola Maria Torrioni;

2) “*Genere e istruzione: un problema risolto? La segregazione di genere nelle università italiane*” [Gender and education: a solved problem? Gender segregation in the Italian Higher Education] – Carlo Barone;

3) “*Performance e disuguaglianze nei sistemi educativi europei nelle fonti OSCE-PISA*” [Performance and inequalities in the European educational systems. The OECD-PISA data] – Orazio Giancola.

4) “*I vantaggi dell’uso combinato di fonti nella costruzione degli strumenti di rilevazione: i laureati in Italia*” [The advantages of sources’ combined use in the construction of research tools] - Marialuisa Villani;

5) “*Quando una scuola rischia di morire: quali dati per una etnografia sul campo*” [When a school risks to die. Which data for an ethnographic research] - Federica Zantedeschi.

“*Fratelli, sorelle o figli unici: percorsi formativi tra rendimento scolastico e origine sociale*” [Brothers, sisters or only children. Educational careers between achievements and social backgrounds] has been the first paper presented, by Giulia Maria Cavaletto and Paola Maria Torrioni. The authors examined some factors and mechanisms influencing the educational choices of students and parents, starting from the hypothesis that family is still the institutional place where quantitative and qualitative choices (how much and what kind of education) are shaped, and consequently inequalities are produced. Analysing data concerning the educational choices of the urban working class in Turin (Italy) in 2007 and 2008, the paper aimed at understanding the inter- and intra-generational dynamics, identifying the mechanisms working within families with more than one son or daughter when students are asked to chose the high secondary school (age 14). The research questions focused on: a) the extent to which brothers and sisters influenced each others; b) the opinions expressed by the parents and their disposition to invest in education; and c) the “weight” of the first-born choice. The data presented drew attention to some significant key points. Choices look as being still influenced by ascribed (social background) and achieved (school results) variables. Closely analysing the data collected, some slight changes in the way the social background influences both educational choices and length and

quality of students' careers seem to emerge, however. First, families exert a significant role in transmitting habitus fitting to schools expectations and not only in making available financial resources. Second, the symbolic value attributed to education differs relevantly according to social background. Third, the influence of the wider social context and the available educational provision on educational choices clearly comes to light. Within this scenario, Cavaletto and Torrioni emphasized how the most innovative explanatory factor emerging from their research concerns the role of brother- and sisterhood relationships within families. Trends towards an homogeneity of choices between brothers and sisters are clearly recognisable.

Carlo Barone, in the second contribution, reported and discussed some findings from a study entitled "*Genere e istruzione: un problema risolto? La segregazione di genere nelle università italiane*" [*Gender and education: a solved problem? Gender segregation in the Italian Higher Education*]. Barone presented some key data on gender segregation in the Italian Higher Education looking at its intensity and configuration, emphasizing how the phenomenon is resistant to change. Although evidences are available that women have longer studying careers than in the past, achieving better results, the work showed how the education system still represents an institutional arena where gender inequalities are reproduced at women's detriment. Data reveal how gender segregation in education leads to segregation in the labour market as well. The author emphasized how there is not only equity at stake here. Gender segregation has also relevant consequences in terms of allocative efficiency, since it is one of the factors producing the chronic lack of graduates in scientific subject fields. Having described the phenomenon in focus, Barone's main contribute was to identify the intertwining of two gender fractures at its basis. Besides the classical fracture between scientific disciplines and humanities, it is argued, the one between technical- and care-oriented disciplines gives a fundamental contribution in order to understand gender segregation in Higher Education. This second fracture seems to be strictly connected to gender stereotypes and to practices of socialization and social control springing from them. The paper highlighted how the recognition of the intersection among the two fractures represents a crucial step in order to explain the persistence of gender segregation in Higher Education in time and space.

The third paper presented, by Orazio Giancola, was entitled “*Performance e disuguaglianze nei sistemi educativi europei nelle fonti OSCE-PISA*” [Performance and inequalities in the European educational systems. The OECD-PISA data]. Giancola examined some factors explaining the differences among the European students involved in the 2006 PISA research in terms of test results and educational careers. Focusing on students’ careers and achievements, the paper analysed both the dynamics producing the persistence of inter-generational inequalities and the impact of the institutional structure of educational systems on students’ performances and equity. Variables concerning social backgrounds and the institutional structure of the educational systems were used as explanatory factors. Giancola’s work studied in depth the case of Italy. According to the PISA data, in fact, Italy seems to be one of the most egalitarian European countries, since students’ achievements are less influenced by social background than in other countries. Critically engaging with the “construction” of the PISA data, Giancola highlighted how the Italian one is not an egalitarian education system. Rather, the analysis showed how the impact of social background on students’ achievements is mediated through the average background of the schools and the educational track chosen by the student or the family (the choice is strictly related, again, to the student and parents’ individual background). The paper concluded highlighting the opportunities and the risks inherent in the use of PISA data. PISA was regarded as a significant dataset that allows to test relations and produce reliable statistical inferences. Notwithstanding, the case of Italy clearly showed how even the correct use of the standard regression analysis could produce unreliable results, if peculiar features of the national contexts are not taken into account. The author claimed for further analysis introducing contextual specificities and emphasized how critically-informed controls on the “construction” of data and their “theory-ladenness” need to be done, when engaging with PISA data.

In the fourth contribution, “*I vantaggi dell’uso combinato di fonti nella costruzione degli strumenti di rilevazione: i laureati in Italia*” [The advantages of sources’ combined use in the construction of research tools], Marialuisa Villani presented the preliminary findings of a comparative research on the individual trajectories of the Italian and French undergraduate students. The key feature of Villani’s research was the use of

a mixed method combining different qualitative and quantitative techniques and data: 1) statistical data regarding the undergraduate's socio-economic and cultural background; 2) a questionnaire aiming at reconstructing the individual trajectories; 3) biographical interviews. The author highlighted the usefulness of the combined use of different statistical and qualitative sources concerning the same social phenomenon. Her objective was to underline the comparability and the criticality of different data and their potential contribution to research in the field of education.

In the last paper presented, "*Quando una scuola rischia di morire: quali dati per una etnografia sul campo*" [When a school risks to die. Which data for an ethnographic research], Federica Zantedeschi introduced the findings of an ethnographic research in two primary schools where headteachers and teachers have been facing the risk of school closure, and consequently have enacted innovative strategies in order to increase the number of students and to avoid the closure. The paper emphasized the methodological aspects of the research, pointing out the advantages inherent in the ethnographic approach and the possibility it offers to give voice to teachers and headteachers working in disadvantaged and challenging educational contexts, where children with learning problems and special needs are the majority and the risk for school to be turned into "ghettos" is at stake.

During the discussion following the presentations, an ample range of methodological issues were widely debated and analysed (integration between qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques, mixed methods, comparability, social construction of quantitative and qualitative data, the need for a critical approach to sources in social science). The inputs coming from the papers also allowed to address remarkable theoretical topics related to the challenges and the problems educational institutions and their professional cope with in their daily practices: immigration, stratification, inequalities reproduction, the enactment of reforms, gender segregation. In this respect, the session represented a fruitful occasion of knowledge exchange for the Italian scientific community of educationalists.