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The Challenges of Underconceptualizing Race in Educational Research

Amanda Lewis, Carla O’Connor, and Jennifer Mueller

Introduction

Concerns about racial inequity are central to conversations about the role of education in promoting social justice as well as in promoting more just educational outcomes and experiences. In this chapter we examine how race is typically deployed in educational research and raise a number of concerns about its underconceptualization in the literature. Specifically, at the same time that race serves as a commonplace marker for deciphering group-based distinctions in school experience, it has been undertheorized as a social construct (Lynn & Adams, 2002; Pollock, 2004). As we will elaborate upon below, our failure to attend to race with greater conceptual (and by implication methodological) precision, impinges upon our ability to develop more exact interpretations of how and why students fare in school as they do.

In order to make our argument both concrete and clear, we particularly focus our attention in this chapter on how race has been deployed in trying to understand and explain the educational experiences of one group—African Americans. African Americans represent the most often-studied minority group in educational research. While much of this research has invoked White Americans (explicitly and implicitly) as a comparative referent for measuring, interpreting, and explaining the educational experiences of African Americans, researchers have also examined how the schooling experiences of African Americans compare with those of other minority groups. Accordingly, researchers have marked and subsequently analyzed the underachievement of African Americans relative to how other groups (e.g., White Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, immigrants) perform on a wide variety of measures (e.g., standardized test scores; rates of high school attrition and graduation; cumulative grade point averages; enrollment in advanced vs. remedial vs. special education courses). Work that examines African-American students who beat the odds for failing in school is often implicitly concerned with understanding why these students compete favorably with White Americans in academic effort or educational outcomes. And, research that explores the promise of culturally relevant pedagogy and other interventions (pedagogical or reform) designed to raise the achievement performance of African Americans is implicitly concerned with eradicating group-based (especially Black-White) differences in educational opportunity and outcomes. Clearly, the larger problem is the lack of conceptual clarity about race and a similar set of analyses could (and should) be applied to the study of experiences of other groups. Here, however, we wanted to focus on arguably the most studied and discussed group in order to illustrate several larger patterns.

Our discussion will begin by reporting on the patterns by which race has been captured as a social category in contemporary educational literature. Focusing on research produced within the last 40 years, we will emphasize the work that has been concerned
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with the elementary and secondary schooling of African Americans. Within this area of research, we have identified two dominant traditions and one emerging focus, by which educational researchers have sought to invoke the significance of race. In terms of the dominant traditions, researchers have operationalized race most often either as a variable or as culture.

We will elaborate upon the nature and conceptual limitations of the two primary traditions. More precisely, we will discuss the following: (1) how these approaches (when taken in total) confound causes and effects in the estimation of when and how race is “significant” to Black achievement performance; (2) how they underanalyze the influence of institutionalized inequities and racial discrimination; and (3) the ways in which they mask the heterogeneity of the African-American experience, and its accordant relationship to the differentiated school performance of Black youth. These stated limitations effectively cloud our ability to interpret with precision when and how race is implicated in the educational experiences, achievement, and outcomes of Black students.

We will subsequently discuss how future studies on African Americans’ educational experiences might account for these limitations at different stages in the research process. More specifically, we will recommend productive directions in which researchers might reorient their empirical and analytical foci. We identify the emergent focus on race as capital as one of several fruitful starting points for this reorientation. Our call for reorientation necessarily warrants shifts in research design and methodology. Consequently, we will also elaborate upon the ways in which this reorientation might be supported via the use of ethnographic methods and mixed methods approaches.

Race As an Undertheorized Social Construct

Research on the educational achievement, outcomes, and experiences of African American youth must necessarily attend to race. However, undertheorized, oversimplified, or inaccurate conceptualizations of race can serve to create as many problems as they solve. We must, consequently, pursue more accurate and precise ways of capturing race as a social phenomenon.

Toward this end, we must first account for how contemporary educational discourse has circumscribed our understanding of how race is implicated in how Black students experience and perform in school. As aforementioned, we will focus the discussion on the categories that emerged in our examination of the research (i.e., race as a variable, race as culture, and race as capital). It is important to point out that these categories are not mutually exclusive. That is, while they represent different ways that race has been captured or conceptualized in educational discourse on African Americans, these different conceptualizations of race are sometimes reflected in, or alluded to, within a single text, study, or article. Our discussion begins by elaborating upon the most common pattern by which race has been captured in the literature—that being when race operates as a variable.

Race as a Variable

In most instances (particularly within sociological and psychological studies of education), little effort is made to theorize or conceptualize race as social category or as a social phenomenon. Typically, race is incorporated as one of many “control” variables, but often without any clear theoretical articulation of what it is imagined to be capturing. As Zuberi (2001) argues:
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Researchers typically use selected variables [race being amongst them] in a statistical model that purports to correspond to a poorly explained substantive theory. They then use some data to estimate the parameters of the model, and these parameter estimates and their functions give the effects of interest. However, this strategy makes too many unsubstantiated assumptions. (p. 123)

This work is often short on theoretical detail, and becomes a data-driven process intending to identify which variables are significant for explaining observed variance. The problems are several. First, race is typically included in statistical models as an individual attribute that is stable (doesn’t change across time or space). Second race cannot be, in the way that is often implied, a “cause” for social outcomes (Zuberi, 2001). While racial discrimination, for example, may be a cause of some specified outcome, race itself is merely a marker of social location. It is an ascribed characteristic and a political classification system. Race as a variable, thus, functionally serves as place-marker—a proxy—for an unspecified “something else” that is difficult to measure or quantify. While in some cases that imagined relevance is articulated, (e.g., Morgan, 1996), often it is the case that race is found to be significant without a discussion of why it is likely to have an association with the phenomenon under question (e.g., Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1996). 2

This is not, by any means, to suggest that we should not collect or analyze racial data. As Zuberi (2001) states, “Racial data are necessary for viewing the effects of racial prejudice” (p. 119) on such things as socioeconomic status, individual well-being, and educational experiences and outcomes. This kind of data is essential for tracking continuing racial inequalities, and for charting racial progress. However, it should not be used as a proxy for “traits” (such as intelligence or criminality) that are imagined to be innate or culturally engrained. There are several practical challenges of using race as a variable, including how to interpret the findings of racial “significance,” and how to avoid underestimating the effect of racial discrimination through the use of misspecified models. We will discuss these challenges in turn.

(Mis)Interpreting Significance

When studies suggest that “race” is a significant variable with regard to African Americans’ educational outcomes, what, in fact, does this mean? “African American” (or for that matter “Black”) is not a biological or genetic category. It is a social group united by a long history of racialized experiences within the United States. However, researchers regularly fail to pay attention to this when they interpret findings of statistical significance. Scholars from Herrnstein and Murray (1994), who treat race as genetic category, to those whose arguments constitute what William Darity (2002) has called a kind of “cultural determinism,” treat race as if it captures or identifies something deficient within individuals or groups. Race here is a proxy for bad genes or a lack of the “cultural ‘right stuff’” (Darity, 2002, p. 1). While “race as biology” has been entirely disproved in biological and anthropological literature, its more recent replacement, the “biologization of culture” (as it is termed by Bonilla-Silva, 2001) or the “culture as destiny” arguments (so named by Darity, 2002) are not all that different. These arguments suggest a mostly intractable set of cultural traits (sometimes reinterpreted as deficiencies) that lie within an imagined, coherent “Black” community, which are supposed to, at least partially, explain racial inequality.

Importantly, while there are studies where the focus has been unilaterally placed on documenting the cultural deficiencies of African Americans, these researchers have
been unable to substantiate their presumptions. For example, Graham (1994) noted that “motivation research on African Americans has been guided less by general theoretical principles than by the relationship of particular constructs to socioeconomic status, the ease with which comparisons could be made, and [for the purposes of our discussion] the availability of explanations to account for presumed motivational deficits in Blacks” (p. 2). But while researchers expected that motivational deficits would account for why Blacks performed poorly in school, their findings generally contradicted their presumption that Blacks had low expectations, felt hopeless, marginalized the importance of individual effort, gave up in the face of failure, and expressed low self-esteem (Graham, 1994).

Additionally, the notion of an homogeneous Black community that embodies a set of intractable (and deficient) traits has also been challenged by studies that show that family wealth or child socioeconomic status are much more important predictors of educational outcomes than supposed “cultural” measures such as family values (Conley, 1999; Darity, Dietrich, & Guilkey, 2001; Mason, 1996, 1999). For example, Dalton Conley (1999) found that once family wealth was controlled, African-American school performance and outcomes were equivalent if not superior to White outcomes. This is no small issue when thinking about educational success and failure. The cumulative consequences of several centuries of systematic racism in the United States have left some communities collectively with far more wealth than others (Johnson, 2006; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004; Wolfe, 1994). The parallel developments of White supremacy and capitalism in this country meant that even after emancipation, Black workers were limited to the worst and lowest paying jobs, blocked from access to union jobs, once admitted into unions were often the first fired in bad times because they were the last hired (Marable, 1983; Takaki, 1993). Urban Black communities forged in the context of virulent segregation were devastated by urban renewal programs, red lining, and other public and private practices (Drake & Cayton, 1993; Massey & Denton, 1993; Sugrue, 1996). One result is that today, even controlling for income and education, Blacks on average have far less wealth than Whites (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Wolfe, 1994).

While today, income differences persist generally and at all education levels (Table 17.1), they aren’t nearly as dramatic as wealth differences (Table 17.2). Wealth gaps are the effects of congealed effect of centuries of racial hierarchy and are almost entirely explained by intergenerational transfers (Wolff, 2000). As shown in Table 17.2, differences in median net wealth show Blacks on average with 2 to 3% of the median net wealth of White households. Recent studies indicate that wealth does more for you educationally than income (Conley 1999; Johnson & Shapiro 2003; Orr 2003; Shapiro 2004). However, we do not have good measures of wealth in most analyses of school

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<th>Educational level</th>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Degree</td>
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Source: U.S. Census.
achievement. This is no small issue when thinking about educational success and failure. As detailed in the careful work of Shapiro (2004), Johnson and Shapiro (2003), and Johnson (2006) intergenerational transfers of even small amounts of wealth provide a whole range of educational options to those who have access to them.

When resources are pooled so inequitably across communities, there are potentially multiple kinds of collective consequences—especially when those communities tend not to live and attend school together (Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, 1996; Orfield & Gordon, 2001). As Gary Orfield and colleagues’ work has shown, most White children, even poor White children, don’t attend high poverty schools (Orfield & Gordon, 2001; Orfield & Yun, 1999). But most Black and Brown children, even middle class ones, attend high poverty schools. Segregation in housing is key here and such segregation is, as Yinger (1995) points out “an outcome of a complex system in which prejudice, segregation, discrimination, and racial or ethnic economic disparities are simultaneously determined. Each one of these phenomena influences the other” (p. 122). Using longitudinal data, Roslyn Mickelson (2001) found that attending a racially isolated Black elementary school had both direct and indirect negative effects on achievement and track placement even with controls for numerous individual and family indicators. This measure is often not available and thus is not usually included in analyses, but given persistently high levels of school segregation it might well be one thing typically captured in the variable “race.” Studies that do not include measures of wealth, segregation, or related issues too often attribute to race a significance it does not have, and ignore meaning it does have. The second challenge of treating race as a variable provides a good example of this.

Underanalyzing Racial Discrimination

As opposed to our previous account of how certain meanings, which do not hold, are attributed to race, there are other examples where the effect of race on African-American educational outcomes is underappreciated. While culture has dubious significance in explaining educational outcomes (as will be elaborated upon further in the next section of the chapter), race does have an effect, particularly in the way it functions to shape access to resources (Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2001; Johnson, Libero, & Burlingame, 2000; Lewis, 2003b). Specifically, large disparities have been documented in the quality of K-8 educational experiences between White students and students of color (Carter, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; A. A. Ferguson, 2000; Lewis, 2003b; Mickelson, 2003; Nettles & Perna, 1997; Rist, 1970). There is substantial evidence that these gaps are often the result of widespread institutionalized racism in our national school system. Researchers continue to document differential disciplinary rates and teacher expectations, continuing and increasing patterns of racial segregation within schools, racially stratified

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<td>Americans</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>179.0</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>180.7</td>
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However, in using undertheorized racial constructs, researchers are unable to account for this differential access to educational opportunities. A good example of this comes from studies that measure an association between race and some school outcome after “controlling for previous achievement” (most often operationalized as test scores or grades). Such work fails to recognize that “previous achievement” may well serve as a proxy for racial discrimination. That is, “previous achievement” may, in fact, measure, in part, “previous institutional racism in educational opportunities.” For example, Dauber et al. (1996) discuss the way the effects of social background factors (race, SES, etc.) can be masked as “objective academic qualifications.” In their research on track placements they found that sixth grade course placement (i.e., advanced, regular, or remedial) was the main predictor of eighth grade course placements. However, they then found that the main predictors of sixth grade course placement included social background factors—race being one of the most significant. They state:

This finding suggests that social-background differences in eighth-grade course enrollments can be explained, to a large extent, by associated differences in students’ academic histories. However, the power of this explanation should be tempered by knowledge of social-background differences in initial sixth-grade placements, since the latter placements have large effects on eighth-grade assignments...by the eighth-grade, social-background differences in mathematics are almost entirely hidden by their strong association with sixth-grade placements. (p. 300)

This illustrates how using seemingly “objective” academic outcomes, from early in a student’s career, as controls in analyzing later academic outcomes can mask other effects. Specifically, in sixth grade, African-American students were much less likely than similar White peers to be placed in a higher track class and were more likely than similar White peers to be placed in low-track classes. Those patterns held in eighth grade, but any analysis that used sixth-grade placement as an objective measure of prior achievement would find almost no race effects—as they were almost entirely captured by the variable “sixth-grade placement.”

Similarly, studies that draw on large, longitudinal national data sets may well often underestimate the effects of institutional racism on educational outcomes by including measures of “previous achievement” as if they are good controls for academic ability or proclivity rather than of measures of “previous opportunity.” For example, Morgan (1996) used a measure of “cognitive skill,” a composite of students’ performance on a variety of standardized tests, which he described as “not an IQ measure of innate ability. Instead it measures the ability to succeed in postsecondary education and, as such, is a composite of unknown portions of innate intelligence and prior academic preparation” (pp. 309–310). As Oakes (1988), Dauber et al. (1996), Persell (1977), and others have argued, and as Morgan even seems to acknowledge in his description, such measures are not, as they are often used, direct measures of student ability.

Generally, findings that include such measures of “prior achievement,” but suggest that race is not “significant,” potentially have misspecified models with clear endogeneity problems. That is, by including race and prior achievement in a regression model it implies, temporally, that they occur or have effect at the same time, when, in fact, race (as
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a proxy for institutionalized racism) has causal significance in shaping prior achievement (e.g., sixth grade track placement).

Thus we need more conceptual clarity both in terms of how race is included in statistical models and how we interpret its significance.

Variation within the Category “Black”

Finally, how are we to interpret the election of individuals into the category of Black or African American on social surveys? Survey research accounts for individuals’ self-identification (or parental identification depending on who is responsible for filling out the survey questionnaire) with the category Black/African American, over the other racial categories featured on the questionnaire. However, it does not account for how the context of administration and the design of the survey impinged upon the respondents’ choice of label. Depending on how demographic questions are asked, the range of available options, and the context in which the asking is happening, we may well get different responses to “racial/ethnic questions” (Harris & Sim, 2000; Rodriguez, 1991, 1992, 2000; Rodriguez & Cordero-Guzman, 1992).

Additionally, surveys regularly prevent “Hispanics” from claiming a racial designation. Thus the racial and ethnic options provided on a given survey often situates “Hispanic” as a category that lies alongside “Black not of Hispanic origin” and “White not of Hispanic origin.” By defining racial and ethnic “choices” in this way, we blur the distinction between race and ethnicity and deny respondents the ability to claim (if they are so inclined) an ethnic as well as a racial affiliation. It is important to note that even when surveys enable “Hispanics” to claim a racial designation, the choices—to the chagrin of many Hispanics—are dichotomized (i.e., White vs. Black) (Rodriguez, 2000). And even when this racial data (however limited) is available to researchers, they rely on “Hispanic” as the default social categorization and avoid race-related analyses.

Additionally, while place of birth on these same surveys can signal the ethnic affiliations of Blacks (e.g., African vs. West Indian) researchers have rarely taken advantage of this data. Thus, with the few exceptions (e.g., Farley & Allen, 1989; Sowell, 1978; Waldinger, 1996; Waters, 1994, 1999), the ethnic differentiation amongst Blacks and its relation to their educational outcomes and experiences is not studied. The need to explore ethnic differentiation becomes exceptionally intriguing in light of findings that indicate that the differences in the achievement performance of native and immigrant Blacks has shifted over time (Waldinger, 1996). Additionally, there is evidence that immigrant Blacks are both the most and the least competitive students in America’s schools (Waters, 1999).

Often when researchers situate Blacks by birthplace, the focus is on their status as immigrants and not as members of ethnic groups. Moreover, the impact of race is often left unexamined. Such tensions are suggested in Portes and MacLeod’s (1996) examination of the educational progress of children of immigrants from Cuba, Vietnam, Haiti, and Mexico. The importance of the Portes and MacLeod study rests with its conceptual attention to how the context of reception is implicated in the differential performance of these immigrant groups. However, the researchers did not attend to how the race of their immigrants might have moderated, in part, the nature of that reception. For example, they noted that Cuban and Vietnamese refugees, compared to the Haitian and Mexican immigrants, were “received sympathetically by the U.S. government and were granted numerous forms of federal assistance” (p. 260). The authors indicated that Cubans and Vietnamese then used these subsidies to “create solidary and dynamic entrepreneurial communities” that framed, in part, their more competitive achievement performance.
However, Portes and MacLeod then pointed out that earlier waves of Cubans received generous governmental assistance that was denied subsequent arrivals. While the researchers register how social class distinguished the earlier and the later waves of Cubans, they silence the fact that the first wave was not only of higher social class origins, but was disproportionately “White” (Pedraza & Rumbaut, 1996). In contrast, the latter waves were not only of lower class origins, but were primarily “Black” and “Brown” (Pedraza & Rumbaut, 1996). The analyses, therefore, fail not only to conceptualize how “race,” as it is signaled by phenotype, might be implicated in institutionalized access to resources, but how it intersects with social class in the determination of that access.

The survey design and application issues discussed above raise the following questions: (1) About whom are we speaking, precisely? (2) Who is being captured within and being excluded by the category “African American” or “Black”? (3) How does this impinge upon our comparative analyses of African-Americans vis-à-vis others? While some of this can be addressed with the use of control variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, region, place of birth), some of this variation is often left out because of limitations in data collection.

Traditional survey approaches also constrain our ability to assess how the participants make sense of the racial options with which they were provided (i.e., etically rather than etically). While an etic approach privileges researcher imposed categories and interpretations, an emic approach enables the participants to introduce and offer interpretations of categories that were unanticipated by the researcher (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). By committing ourselves to more emic approaches, we can design surveys with the intent of examining how respondents understand their selected racial option in relation to researcher-selected parameters of interest.

For example, Sellers and his colleagues (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) have developed the Multi-Dimensional Model of Racial Identity survey (MMRI), which has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the multidimensionality of Black racial identity. Use of the MMRI allows us to gauge the following: (1) the extent to which “being Black” is central to the identity of the person under study; (2) whether the person assesses being Black in positive or negative terms, or believes this racial designation is regarded publicly in positive or negative terms; (3) when and under what conditions she or he imagines that being Black is especially salient to his or her experiences; and (4) whether this self-designation as Black is aligned with a specific racial ideology.

Like other surveys, however, the MMRI necessarily restricts the respondents’ ability to impose categories unanticipated by the researcher. Consequently, we are unable to assess dimensions of racial identity that were not targeted a priori. Nor can we make adequate sense of those dimensions that are represented via performance (e.g., style, dress, language) rather than cognition, and would be better captured via observation.

The substantive variation with which African Americans can perform their racial identity has been most recently and compellingly captured in John Jackson’s (2001), Harlem World. Educational researchers have additionally developed ethnographic insight into the variation with which African Americans can perform their Blackness (e.g., Ogbu, 1989). Sometimes these variations are performed via the intersections of class and gender (Carter, 2005; Cousins, 1999; Fordham, 1996; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kenny, 1999; O’Connor, 1999; Tyson, 2002). The complexity of such performances is, however, outside the scope of survey research.

The forced choice nature of survey research also prevents respondents from providing commentary that would qualify their responses in significant ways. This is true both for how students might identify racially (Harris & Sim, 2001), and true for the nature of
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their answers to substantive questions. For example, in a mixed-method study, Bonilla-
Silva and Forman (2000) found that respondents’ answers to survey items differed signifi-
cantly from the elaborations they provided in interviews.

Additionally, we are unable to explore how the social construction of these catego-
ries (via macro- and microdynamics; historical and contemporary forces) informs the
development and reflection of these categories, and constrain or frame, in part, the par-
ticipant’s election into one category rather than another (Cornell, 1996; Hall, 1990;
Ignatiev, 1995). For example, researchers (e.g., Bashi & McDaniel, 1997; Vickerman,
1999) have found that immigrants of dark phenotype, who had not previously imagined
themselves as “Black,” come to claim this identity upon their stay in the United States,
given the power with which skin color operates as signifier of race and ethnicity within
this context.

Our failure to attend to the methodological and conceptual issues elaborated upon
above has substantive implications for how we make sense of the statistically robust rela-
tionships that are regularly reported on in research that features race as variable. That is,
while this work is often focused on identifying correlates for Black achievement perfor-
mance and educational attainment (especially in relationship to educational “gaps” that
exist between racial groups) it does not allow us to interpret the way that race as a social
phenomenon is implicated in these relationships. For example, when a researcher finds
that income and occupation are less robust predictors of achievement performance for
Blacks than for Whites, we cannot discern (i.e., empirically) if this relationship is a func-
tion of: (1) the ways in which Blacks across social class groups might similarly make sense
of and display what it means to “be” Black within the school setting; (2) how frames or
meanings of Blackness are imposed upon Black bodies, by schooling agents and others,
in ways that diminish the significance of social class; (3) how social class as signaled by
income and occupation marks culture, and determines opportunity differently and less
powerfully than when it is signaled by wealth, and it is the similar wealth deficits African
Americans experience across income and occupation categories that account for their
performance in school; or (4) some interaction of the aforementioned.

The tendency to ignore variation within the category “Black,” and the inadequate
attention to how institutions and their agents are active agents in the racializing of Afri-
can-American youths, also marks the limitations in the second way race is deployed in
educational research on African Americans—race as culture.

Race as Culture

Within this tradition, researchers have historically interpreted culture as either the norms
and values, or the competencies and practices that distinguish one racial group from
another. Subsequent efforts have then been made to make sense of the academic under-
performance of African Americans relative to other racial groups—especially White
Americans. These efforts have often taken the direction of documenting a disjuncture
between the cultural norms, values, competencies, and practices that marked individuals
as Black, and those norms, values, competencies, and practices that frame the organiza-
tion and expectations of America’s schools.

Our review of the literature reveals that contemporary educational discourse has
generally evolved from the notion that culture operates as the norms and values that
distinguish African Americans from other racial groups. While this notion has not gener-
ally fallen out of favor in other academic arenas (particularly in relation to intellectual
debates on welfare reform), educational researchers have increasingly shied away from
this analytical orientation. This avoidance is due, in part, to the ardent criticisms that,
having situated Whites as the normative referent, Black culture has thus been interpreted from a deficit perspective, power has been stripped from the analysis, and a “blame the victim” orientation has been cultivated. Critics have additionally emphasized that this early work did not, in fact, capture culture at all. Rather, it captured traits, activities, and behaviors. More precisely, those like Valentine (1968) indicated that cultural deprivation theorists, having isolated select behaviors (or “nonbehaviors”) of the (Black) poor, imposed their own meaning on these behaviors (or their absence) and, in the process, obfuscated the native understanding of what was being “said” by engaging in or eschewing these actions. 8

The above criticisms did cause researchers to refrain from examining Black culture via the prism of norms and values. However, work continues to be conducted where culture is conceptualized in terms of the practices or competencies that presumably mark individuals as Black. 9 This notion of culture is commonly reflected in work that examines the empirical or theoretical promise of “culturally relevant pedagogy,” as well as efforts to analyze how race-specific practices are implicated in the achievement performance of African Americans. In accordance with this orientation, researchers have been especially sensitive to how African-American discourse practices, learning styles, and social dispositions are at odds with the norms and expectations of America’s schools. 10

In contrast to the emphasis on norms and values that had been privileged two generations earlier, and had interpreted registers of African-American culture (however inappropriate) via a deficit paradigm, work on the competencies and practices of African Americans is generally critical of how schools and their agents have failed to incorporate Black practices and competencies as scaffolds to academic learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 1988). Despite this advance, this work too has been criticized for not attending specifically to the meaning that undergirded the practices and competencies that were documented as “Black.” For example, John Ogbu (1999) in response to the national discourse on AAVE (or Ebonics) and the education of African American youth stated that:

…the national discourse focused almost exclusively on differences in dialects per se. Some people agreed...that the academic problems [of African Americans] are caused by large differences between Black students’ home dialect and school standard English. Others contended that the differences are not large enough to cause problems. The two groups, however, missed the point: It is not only the degree of differences in dialects per se that counts. What also seems to count is the cultural meanings of those dialect difference. (p. 148; authors’ emphasis)

Fordham (1999) similarly claimed that we cannot limit our analyses to how Ebonics “parallels or deviates from…standard dialect” but must examine “the meaning of the linguistic practices of African American youths” (p. 272). More specifically, she stressed the extent to which these language practices might operate as “marker[s] of Black identity,” and elucidate “imagined cultural traditions and practices” that facilitate the recognition and resistance to the imposition of White power (Fordham, 1999, p. 274; authors’ emphasis).

In alignment with these claims, contemporary scholars have sought to examine how Blackness is articulated via meaning-making rather than objectified competencies and practices. In accordance with this orientation, Blacks are distinguished from other racial groups in light of how they “take up” or make sense of publicly available tools or symbols. This conceptual emphasis is consistent with larger trends in both sociology and anthropology to characterize culture “by the publicly available symbolic forms through
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which people experience and express meaning” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). Through this emphasis on meaning-making, researchers have attempted to map, conceptually and empirically, how people interpret, act upon, and produce material (e.g., art forms, tools, books), as well as social texts (e.g., language, social interaction, ideology, rituals, moral codes; ceremonies, strategies for action, identity).

As suggested by our previous reference to Fordham (1999), researchers are especially focused on understanding how Black youths take up (or perform), make sense of (or perceive), act upon (or act within) race and school (two common symbolic referents within the American context). More specifically, researchers continue to examine the following: (1) how African American youths interpret themselves and others as racial subjects; (2) how they construct these understandings in relation to the perceived utility of school; and (3) how such meaning-making is implicated in how they act and subsequently achieve in school. John Ogbu’s cultural ecological model (CEM) provides us with not only the most cited, but also the most influential conceptual framework within this tradition (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

According to CEM, Black youths, via the experiences and narratives of family members and other Black adults, learn about the historical and contemporary subjugation of African Americans. In response, they not only generate theories of “making it” which contradict dominant notions of status attainment and produce disillusionment about the instrumental value of school, but develop substantial distrust for school and its agents, which then suppresses commitment to school norms. Moreover, youth develop an oppositional cultural identity. Situating schooling as a White domain that requires Blacks to “think” and “act” White in exchange for academic success, Black youth are said to limit their efforts in school because they do not want to compromise their own racial identity or risk affiliation with the Black community (Ogbu, 1987).

Ogbu’s framework has provided the impetus for continued investigations of how Black youths contend with what it “means” to be and act Black. Some of this work substantiates Ogbu’s claims (e.g., Fordham, 1996; Gibson, 1991; Solomon, 1991). For example, Fordham (1996) offers us insight into how Black students resist their peers’ normative interpretations of what it means to be Black, and consequently strive to assume a raceless persona in their pursuit of high achievement. Other work requires us to contend with the ways in which Ogbu’s framework might homogenize and essentialize the subjectivity and performances of Black youths (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Carter, 1999; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; O’Connor, 1997, 1999; Tyson, 1998). For example, Carter found that the Black youth in her study imagined that Blackness was reflected through a variety of statuses, preferences, and practices (e.g., affiliating with and respecting other Black folk; being able to speak Black English; dressing in popular urban youth attire), but never in opposition to school achievement. In response to these findings, Carter (2001) like others (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1998), argues that we should more carefully examine how schools situate Black subjects and “culture” in our effort to better understand the academic performance of Black youths.

Educational researchers’ efforts to contend with the limitations of Ogbu’s framework and develop ever more complex renderings of culture in relation to race and schooling, are first attempts to escape what Walter Ben Michaels (1992) refers to as the “anticipation of culture by race” (p. 677). Such anticipation occurs when we presume, “To be [Black] you have to do [Black] things, but you can’t really count as doing [Black] things unless you already are [Black]” (p. 677). When we anticipate culture by race, we not only reify race as a stable, objective, and measurable category, but for the purposes of our immediate discussion, link it deterministically to culture. When race is operationalized in this way we lose sight of Black heterogeneity, underconceptualize intersectionalities of
various identity markers, and silence the extent to which Blackness is not only reflected in the meanings students bring with them to school, but the meanings that are imposed upon them by school structures and officials. Omi and Winant (1994) have long claimed that “[t]he effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (p. 55). In the next section of the chapter, we consequently examine, more closely, the need for exploring Black heterogeneity, class, and gender intersectionalities, and the impact of institutionalized constructions of race that are articulated via political struggles that occur in school.

The Circumscription of Black Heterogeneity

Whether reporting on norms and values, competencies and practices, or subjectivity and meaning-making, researchers are usually reporting on findings that are specific to a particular segment of the Black community who are specifically framed by a host of social influences, including, but not limited to, race. While researchers often allude to these other influences via their elaborated descriptions of the research participants (e.g., by referring to the gender or social class of the Blacks under study) and the research setting (e.g., by referring to the demographics, organization, and location of the site in which the study was conducted), these influences are rarely invoked analytically, and the findings reported on are often attributed solely to the race of the participants. For example, while the majority of studies which have situated race as culture have focused expressly on lower income African Americans in contemporary urban spaces, the ways in which social class and place may have shaped these reported expressions of “Black” culture are often stripped from the analyses. Thus, in one stroke, researchers have not only cast the Black poor as a homogenous social category, but have silenced the ways in which space, time, and social class likely moderated the experience of being Black, and the consequent norms, values, competencies, practices, and subjectivity that derived from that experience.

Focusing first on the subject of space, there is already ample evidence that Black life in large urban cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and South is marked more profoundly by both race and social class segregation than life in the West (Massey & Eggers, 1990). Additionally, researchers continue to document how the Black experience varies from one school system to the next, in part as a consequence of how the economic and labor market influences differentially frame the demographics and funding of school systems (e.g., Anyon, 1997; Hertert, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Rubenstein, 1998). At more microlevels, scholars have documented how the specifics of neighborhood (e.g., MacLeod, 1995; Patillo-McCoy, 1999) and school (e.g., Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Comer & Haynes, 1999; Hemmings, 1996; Sizemore, 1998; Tyson, 1998; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994) impact Black life.

Racial experiences are additionally marked by historical time. However, with few exceptions (e.g., MacLeod, 1995; O’Connor, 2002; Siddle-Walker, 1996), educational researchers operate as if race related constraints and opportunities do not vary from one historical period to another to differentially shape the experience of being Black. To provide one example, John Ogbu’s cultural ecological model denies the dynamism with which Blacks have been subjugated across time. Instead the model operates as if there is only one story to be told about Black subjugation and it is this tale that is reiterated through the narratives of Black adults to frame Black youth’s renderings of opportunity, and their consequent performance in school. Sociologists, however, continue to mark critical shifts in Black people’s experiences with oppression. Sociologists have discerned shifts from “economic racial oppression” to “class subordination” (Wilson, 1978); from
“overt” racism to “color blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001); and, from “traditional” to “laissez fair” racism (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997). Operating within the logic of Ogbu’s model, then, we would expect that Black adults coming of age in particular eras would generate distinct narratives about Black opportunity. This would, then, differentially affect how different cohorts of Black youths come to interpret their life chances and subsequently how they respond to school. Unfortunately, the failure to attend to how the contexts and demands of particular environments (marked both by space and time) are implicated in the norms, practices, and meaning-making of Black youth is not an uncommon phenomenon. As indicated by Spencer, Swanson, and Cunningham (1991), with few exceptions, “studies that explore contextual effects are seldom conducted on minority youth” (p. 368).

Moving beyond the subjects of time and space, Blacks are additionally classed. The importance of social class as a moderating influence might be growing in significance in light of the income polarization that has occurred amongst African Americans. This polarization, which is defined by “proportionate declines in the middle class, and sharp increases in the proportions of both the affluent and the poor,” suggests that the experience of Black “haves” and “have-nots” has become more differentiated (Massey & Eggers, 1990). Further, political scientists and sociologists continue to document distinctions in how Black “haves” and “have-nots” not only interpret their life chances, but how they define their interests and ideologies (Hochschild, 1995; Reed, 1999).

But, we must also recognize the differentiation that occurs amongst African Americans when they are similarly classed and are operating within the same space and time. For example, O’Connor (1997) documents how African Americans who share the same class standing, and operate within the same social spaces, vary considerably in their social encounters, worldviews, and social identities. Additionally, gender as a differentiating experience amongst Blacks is especially understudied (O’Connor, 2002). But, the nature of this understudy is not simply a function of whether researchers have attended to the educational experiences of Black males and Black females (because they have), but whether they have examined the subject of race and gender intersectionalities with conceptual depth. The same would hold true for race and class intersectionalities, or the intersectional triumvirate of race, class, and gender. Before elaborating upon the subject of intersectionalities more specifically, we will discuss how the general failure to attend to Black heterogeneity has hampered our ability to make sense of the educational outcomes and experiences of African-American youths.

In the absence of accounting analytically for Black heterogeneity, we construct a seamless and necessarily oversimplified notion of what it means to be Black, and, in the process, mask our ability to make sense of the substantive variation in achievement performance that occurs amongst African Americans. Despite overarching accounts of Black underperformance in school, researchers have documented considerable distinctions in how Blacks have performed in school both within and across time. For example, the differences between Black and White educational attainment narrowed during the 1970s, but by the mid-1980s the gap in Black and White matriculation to college began to grow (Nettles & Perna, 1997). Similarly, researchers documented the dramatic narrowing of the Black–White test score gap during the 1970s, which leveled off during the 1980s, and then began to reverse itself on some measures (e.g., reading and science scores) (Grissmer, Flanagan, & Williamson, 1998; Hedges & Nowell, 1998).

Moving to the subject of space, across this same span of time, Black test score gains were somewhat larger in the Southeast and smallest in the Northeast (Grissmer et al., 1998). Researchers have additionally pointed out that while Black students in suburban (read racially integrated) settings tend to outperform their urban (and racially segregated)
counterparts on some measures (e.g., SAT scores), they lag behind them in others (e.g., enrollment in Advanced Placement courses). And within the same vein, Black students at Catholic and Effective Schools outperform Blacks in public and unreformed neighborhood schools (Bryk et al., 1993; Wang et al., 1994).

At the level of Black subgroups, while middle class Blacks are generally conceived of as having an academic advantage over poor Blacks, in some contexts poor(er) Blacks outperform their Black peers who are middle class (O’Connor, 2001b). And, while Black boys now lag behind Black girls on the rates at which they matriculate to and complete college (Hawkins, 1996; Nettles & Perna, 1997), this was not always the case. Prior to the 1960s and mid-1970s Black males had outperformed Black females on measures of educational attainment (Cross & Slater, 2000; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1940, 1960, 1980). In the 1970s in New York City, Black West Indians were significantly more likely than native born Blacks to be college graduates, and equally likely to have less than a high school education. By 1990, Black West Indians were almost as likely as Native Blacks to have attained a college education, and were more likely to be amongst the least educated (Waldinger, 1996).

Our account of the variation in Black school performance, both within and across space and time, is not exhaustive. These findings, nevertheless, signal the need to focus specifically upon which Blacks are being studied and the conditions under which they are operating. But this focus cannot stop with the naming and description of who, when, and where, but must analyze and theorize how these specificities are implicated prosessually in the cultural formations we attach to Black achievement performance. We must, however, stress that in our struggle to establish analytical and theoretical links between the heterogeneity of the African-American experience and the heterogeneity in African-American achievement and attainment, we must contend more substantively with the subject of intersectionalities.

The Underconceptualization of Class and Gender Intersectionalities

As conveyed above, African Americans are not only raced. They are positioned by gender, as well as by social class. In accord with this recognition, researchers have conducted studies that contrast the experiences of Black females versus Black males (e.g., Cross & Slater, 2000; Grant, 1984; Hawkins, 1996; Hubbard, 1999; Waters, 1999). Other studies have focused expressly on Black males or Black females, or otherwise used Whites or other ethnic groups of the same gender category as a comparative referent (e.g., Ferguson, 2000; Fordham, 1993, 1996; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). Similarly, there have been some attempts to account for the experience of middle class, working class, or poor Blacks (Heath, 1983; Hemmings, 1996; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Still others have sought to examine the intersections of race, class, and gender (Cousins, 1999; Horvat & Antonio, 1999).

Much of this work, however, stops short of actually examining intersectionalities in any substantive way (see Carter, 1999; Carter, Sellers, & Squires 2002; Frazier-Kouassi, 2002; O’Connor, 2001a for further discussion). In some instances researchers who compare Blacks of different genders or social classes, or Whites and Blacks of the same gender and social classes, simply list the differences in the groups’ educational experiences, achievement, or outcomes. They do not offer a concomitant analysis regarding how the social class location or gender location of their participants interfaces with their race location to explain the noted differences. When such analyses are attempted, the researchers often privilege one group position over the other(s). To provide one example, Holland and Eisenhart (1990), in their study of Black and White women in college, identify distinct-
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tions in how the two groups of women negotiate the culture of femininity in relation to how they achieve in and experience college. While noting that the culture of femininity and its accordant relationship with the women’s college achievement and experiences is differentially framed, partly as a consequence of the peer cultures that are found at their respective colleges, the authors offer no analysis regarding how race shapes these differences. The evident marginalization of race as an analytical (as opposed to a descriptive category) in this explicitly gendered analysis is not only highlighted by the fact that some of the women are Black and others are White. Additionally, the Black women are attending an historically Black college, while the White women are attending a predominantly White college.

The work of feminist scholars, however, warns us against emphasizing one social position over another, or establishing cumulative or hierarchal relationships between social positions (e.g., Collins, 1990, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991, 1992; King, 1998). Rather, they compel us to examine how these positions are “inextricably intertwined and circulate together in the representations [or structuring] of subjects and experiences of subjectivity (Ferguson, 2000, pp. 22–23). Researchers, however, have been hesitant to attend conceptually to the relevance of class and gender out of concern that the significance of race gets trumped in the process. Indeed, some researchers who have sought to attend to this relevance have been sorely criticized for their efforts (e.g., Wilson, 1978). But, by examining these positions as intertwined, rather than as “isolated and independent,” we evade the risk of displacing the significance of race, or placing it in competition with gender and social class.

The Silencing of Institutionalized Productions of Race

Within the tradition of examining race as culture, the latest emphasis on interpreting culture as racialized meaning-making has made some strides in reporting on intersectionalities. For example, Fordham (1993) examined how gender and race intersect in the production of Black women’s conception of womanhood, and how these conceptions are subsequently implicated in their pursuit of competitive academic outcomes. Alternatively, Lareau and Horvat (1999) examined, in part, how the race and social class of the Black parents in their study simultaneously (though not singularly) framed how they gauged the racial terrain of their child’s school, and how they then went about advocating on their child’s behalf.

Works like these provide us with growing insight into how Black individuals, who are simultaneously positioned by gender or class, produce classed and gendered interpretations (enacted via subjectivity and performance) of themselves as racial subjects. These interpretations are implicated in how these individuals then think about and act in school to affect their own achievement performance (writ large) or, that of their children. But, while this work is generally focused on making sense of the racialized (but not wholly raced) productions Black youths bring with them to school, very little of this work makes a concomitant effort to explore the racial productions that are generated as a consequence of the structuring of schools and the practices of schools’ agents. That is, race is not only a product of how African Americans make sense of themselves as racial subjects, and then enact this sense-making in relation to school, it is also a consequence of how schools and their agents racialize African-American subjects (Davidson, 1996; Dolby, 2001; Ferguson, 2000; Lewis, 2003a; Pollock, 2003).

For example, in Ferguson’s (2000) study, Black and White boys were both apt to perform their masculinity (or their position as males) through the transgression of school rules. Having identified some differences in how White and Black boys performed their
masculinity, she stressed that Black boys more often found themselves in trouble because of how their performances were interpreted, rather than how they actually performed. More specifically, Ferguson found that when White boys transgressed, school officials presumed that “boys will be boys,” attributed “innocence to their wrong doing,” and believed that “they must be socialized to fully understand the meaning of their acts” (p. 80). In contrast, when Black boys transgressed their acts were “adultified.” That is “their transgressions [were] made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of naivety” (p. 83). Having framed them as “not children,” the interpreters (most of whom were White and constituted authority and, therefore, power in the school setting) were necessarily directed toward treatment “that punish[ed] through example and exclusion rather than through persuasion and edification, as [was] practiced with the young White males in the school” (p. 90). Too often we have treated race, and even racial subjectivities, as something that students bring with them to school, rather than understanding race and racial subjectivities as coproduced in relation to educational practices and processes.

Race as Capital

Researchers such as Ferguson (2000) (cited above) are just beginning to address the ways that race can function as a source of capital in educational settings. As outlined by Pierre Bourdieu, “Capital” is those resources that serve to advance one’s position or status within a given context (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu discussed four types of capital: economic (money and property); social (connections, social networks); cultural (cultural knowledge, educational credentials); and symbolic (symbols of prestige and legitimacy). Each form of capital can be converted into the others in order to enhance or maintain positions in the social order (Connolly, 1996: Swartz, 1997). Race can function as capital in several ways. First, race has shaped historic access to economic resources, particularly wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995), such that it influences who has access to what kind of schooling (Kozol, 1991; Orfield, 1996). Second, race affects how cultural resources are responded to and rewarded in schools (Carter, 1999; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Tyson, 1998). Third, patterns of racial segregation impact social networks and, thus, access to social capital (Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, 1996). And, fourth, race or skin color can serve as symbolic capital. Because of racist presumptions and stereotypes, race functions at a conscious or subconscious level to shape interactions. In relation to classroom experiences, Connolly (1998) states, “It is clearly the case that White skin, for instance, can represent symbolic capital in certain contexts. Some teachers may be influenced (whether directly or indirectly) by a set of racist beliefs, which encourages them to think of White children as being more intelligent and well behaved than Black children” (p. 21).

There remains a hole in the literature on African-American educational experiences with regard to systematic studies of everyday practices and experiences in schools. The work of authors such as Ferguson (2000), Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003), Lewis (2003b), and Lareau and Horvat (1999) in elementary school; Davidson (1996), Dolby (2001), Ferguson (2004), Jewett (2006), Kenny (1999), O’Connor (2001b), Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004), and Pollack (2001) in middle and high schools; and Feagin et al. (1996) in college settings are significant contributions toward this end. However, the everyday practices within the Black box of schooling, which illuminate the subtle but powerful ways that race shapes interactions and opportunities, and serve as symbolic capital for some, remain far too scarce.
Orienting Future Research

Our analysis of research on African Americans’ educational experiences yields several specific recommendations for future efforts. We suggest the following: (1) a focus on school processes and racial meaning making; (2) more multilevel ecological approaches; (3) additional examination of the operation of institutional and everyday racism; (4) attention to the intersections of race class and gender; (5) multiple method strategies; and (6) more theoretically robust understandings of important constructs such as race, culture, and self-esteem.

School Processes and Meaning Making

Research on African Americans and education must pay attention to school processes and issues of racial meaning-making. This kind of research would go far in addressing some of the shortcomings in current research raised above, including the way race is, in fact, a product of educational settings, as much as it is something that students “bring with them” to school, the way educational outcomes are impacted by everyday interactions and practices in schools, and the way students make sense of their racialized social locations through their schooling experiences. This work could help to unveil the ways in which schools produce race as a social category.

One research strategy that will be especially important to consider here is ethnographic or participant observation research. Ethnographic research involves entering a social setting and getting to know the people who move within it. It thus holds the promise of also addressing the varying roles of different school contexts for African-American students. As Emerson (1983, p. 25) articulates, ethnography proceeds on the assumption that “context is not an obstacle to understanding but a resource for it.” Ethnography can also provide “empirical and theoretical gains in understanding larger social complexes of actors, actions, and motives” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 8). Thus, ethnography has the potential to provide insight into how race shapes interactions in schools, or why it is that disciplinary patterns differ across race and gender categories. Ethnography also permits the study of relationships as they happen and develop, rather than abstracting people from their lives and treating them as if they live, act, and believe “in isolation from one another” (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 8). Here it has the potential to illuminate what race means for particular African-American students in particular contexts, and how their understandings of themselves and others develop in relation to particular people or locations. Especially in the study of race and race relations, this kind of research is crucial for capturing the workings of complex social processes and for capturing the consistencies or inconsistencies between what people say and do.

Researchers have previously indicated that “[s]ome of the most insightful and provocative data in the area of race and race relations have been obtained via the method of participant observation” (Dennis, 1988, p. 44). We argue that this tradition will provide us with robust insight into how race shapes the educational experience and outcomes of African Americans if it is wed to multilevel ecological analyses, and is focused on uncovering the “everydayness” of racism and the dynamism of intersectionalities. In short, we need more ethnographic and ecologically grounded studies of how race is implicated in the education of African Americans, including how the impact of race is realized via institutional racism and informed by race, class, and gender intersectionalities. Below we elaborate upon the promise of each of these methodological orientations.
Multilevel Ecological Analyses

An ecological analysis requires us to link microprocesses (e.g., student subjectivity and actions; student–teacher interactions; peer interactions; familial relations and involvement in school) with more meso- (e.g., school and district level policies, practices, demographics, and organization) and macro- (e.g., the economic forces, system of racial hierarchy, and federal policies that are specific to the “time” in which the study is being conducted) influences. For example, recent advances in quantitative methods provide one useful tool for enabling statistical modeling of data on multiple levels (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Frank, 1998). By establishing empirical and analytical links between these levels of (inter)action and influence, we generate precise assessments of how the specificity of context is implicated in the educational realities of African Americans operating within a specific place and historical time (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997; Swanson, Spencer, & Peterson, 1998). Such multilevel and historically specific studies are essential to the task of unpacking why Black students operating within one space and time have distinct educational experiences and outcomes compared to Black students operating within a different space and time.

Institutional and Everyday Racism

Just as importantly, a multilevel analysis establishes the groundwork for exploring, with more conceptual rigor, the impact and operation of institutional racism on the achievement, attainment, and experiences of Blacks in school. As Holt (1995) argues, the analysis of racism requires us to resolve the “linkage” between the “individual actor” and the “social context.” In other words, we must analyze “the levels of the problem” such that we establish “continuity between behavioral explanations sited at the individual level of human experience and those at the level of society and social force” (p. 7). Holt, therefore, conceives of “everyday” acts of racism as “minor links in a larger historical chain of events, structures, and transformations anchored in slavery and the slave trade.” Holt’s use of the term anchored, however, conveys that slavery and the slave trade do not operate deterministically to frame contemporary expressions of racism but only provide a root for its reflection. Consequently, educational researchers must explore how contemporary social forces nourish the racial knowledge, structures, and practices that sustain and reward everyday racism (Essed, 1991). As Holt (1995) outlines:

…it is at…[the] level [of the everyday]…that race is reproduced via the marking of the racial Other and that racist ideas and practices are naturalized, made self-evident, and thus seemingly beyond audible challenge. It is at this level that race is reproduced long after its original historical stimulus—the slave trade and slavery—have faded. It is at this level that seemingly rational and ordinary folk commit irrational and extraordinary acts. (p. 7)

The irrational and extraordinary acts to which Holt directs our attention should not be imagined simply as traditional and explicit forms of racism, but the many complicated social processes whereby educational opportunities are circumscribed for some racial subjects and fostered for others. Within this frame, then, we can explore more subtle forms of racism that are not readily signaled by overt behavior (Forman, 2001). Thus, like Ferguson (2000) did, we can study how the interpretations and responses of individual school actors shape Black students’ experiences in schools in ways that systemically deny them privilege and educational access. In this way we not only come to understand
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how culture can operate as structure (Hays, 1994; also see Gould, 1999 for further discussion), but we establish an analytical lens for revealing the meso- and macrolevel forces that legitimize, reinforce, and institutionalize these actions.

**Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender**

African-American educational research needs to take seriously how race intersects with social class, gender, and other markers of identity. This includes paying attention not only to variation in Black school experiences, but to how and why class and gender might shape African-American school experiences differently from the way they shape other groups’ experiences. As aforementioned, it is essential that work of this kind examine race, class, and gender as intertwined and not isolated and independent social positions. As indicated by McCarthy and Crichlow (1993) you cannot interpret the educational experiences of minority groups “from assumptions about race pure and simple” because different gender and class interests and identities within minority groups often “cut at right angles” to racial politics and identities (p. xxvii). Ideally, however, analyses of intersectionalities should be conducted in accord with the kind of multilevel analysis we discussed above. Here, examining “levels of the problem” is warranted because “the relative significance of race, sex, or class in determining the conditions of [people’s] lives is neither fixed nor absolute, but rather is dependent on the sociohistorical context and the social phenomenon under consideration” (King, 1998, p. 49).

**Multimethod Research Strategies**

In our effort to make better sense of the education of African Americans we must additionally take advantage of the natural complement of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and more aggressively and effectively pursue mixed-methods studies toward this end. For example, challenges abound in understanding fully why we continue to have racial gaps in achievement. Some recent research has shown that students often come into kindergarten with different skill sets. Rather than narrowing, however, these gaps in skills increase in the first couple of years in school (Denton & West, 2002; Phillips, Crouse, & Ralph, 1999). We are only now beginning to fully understand how this process unfolds over time, and why it is that African-American students are being undereducated (Tyson, Darity, & Castellano 2005). This issue, along with other important research questions about African-American educational experiences, can only be fully addressed with productive pairings between quantitative and qualitative methodology. The pairing of survey research and qualitative interviewing is an especially productive option. Young (1999) argues that qualitative interviews provide the entrée to what Erving Goffman (1973) identified as “schemata of interpretation. These are the meanings that actors formulate about their social encounters and experiences.” Consequently, when coupled with individuals’ “forced choice” selection, we are provided with a phenomenological framing of the responses they provided.

The aforementioned pairing not only provides possibilities for clarification and elaboration of survey findings, but also can provide an important corrective function. For example, recent studies on racial issues, both in school and beyond, have found important inconsistencies between survey and qualitative data. For example, Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) found gaps between people’s responses to abstract survey items about race (e.g., whether they approve of interracial marriage in general) and their expanded responses in an in-depth interview (e.g., how they felt about interracial marriage and whether they would ever marry someone of a different race). Additionally, in recent
school research, one of the coauthors found inconsistencies between teachers and parents reported views, and the way they acted when in direct relation to someone of another racial group (Lewis, 2001). These are not mere “contradictions” but provide more complex information about how race works in and across settings.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the problems we have identified with the deployment of race in educational issues shapes our understanding not just of African-American students’ educational outcomes but those for all racial/ethnic groups. For example, much research on Latino/a and Asian-American educational outcomes does not give enough attention to phenotypic variation, ignores bimodal distributions in group success or failure, or reifies culture in an effort to explain aggregate group achievement. Throughout this paper we have focused on research on African Americans’ educational experiences in order to make the general case for the need to develop more theoretically informed understandings of race, in particular, but also of other related constructs such research includes (e.g., culture, racism, self-esteem). The question of what meaning race has for Black students’ educational outcomes is one that must be theorized, not assumed or implied. Our ability to develop more accurate interpretations of how and why students fare in school as they do, depends at least in part on our ability to attend to race with greater conceptual (and by implication methodological) precision. This challenge is relevant to a range of methodological issues that include the productive framing of research questions, the proper specification of statistical models in quantitative analyses, and the appropriate selection of research design.

Our emphasis on developing more theoretically informed relationships between key constructs, such as race, and research design and methodology is not simply an academic matter. Educational research can impact life outcomes via the policy implications that emerge. For example, work that suggests that African-American students’ underperformance in school is a function of individual or group deficiencies leads to very different policy proposals than work that suggests that school policies and practices are responsible. Moreover, work that suggests that African Americans are a monolithic cultural group facing the same issues across space, time, and context flattens out the complex topography of Black life in the United States, and misses important variation in educational experiences. The stakes are, therefore, substantial. Our failure to establish more theoretically rigorous relationships between central concepts, such as race, and research design and methodology will not only deny us the ability to improve educational opportunity for African Americans, but will likely impinge negatively on Black people’s already narrowed educational chances.

Notes

1. In this paper we generally use the terms African American and Black interchangeably. However, as later discussion will reveal, we recognize that the term Black references a variety of ethnic groups that comprise the African Diaspora. We, therefore, specify when we are referring to Blacks who are not ethnically American.
2. Here we are not citing examples that are particularly egregious or exemplary. Rather, we have selected some examples from a major social science education journal (Sociology of Education) that are quite interesting and important articles but which, nevertheless, have possible shortcomings in this arena.
3. This review included research that examined more specifically Blacks’ (a) need for achieve-
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4. Median values are often better indicators than “Mean values” as means can be skewed upwards by very few very wealthy individuals at the top of the distribution.

5. For example, in a recent analysis of national data, Harris and Sim (2000) found that multi-racial students responded differently to questions about their racial identification depending on the mode of the questioning—self-administered survey or interview—and the location of the questioning—school vs. home.

6. For example, when the NELS survey asks Hispanics to “mark one” of the following in response to the question “What is your race?”—Black Hispanic; White Hispanic; Other Hispanic.

7. It should be noted, however, that items which reveal place of birth provide inadequate proxies for ethnicity, as some Blacks claim ethnic affiliations that are not signaled by where they are born (e.g., Blacks who claim West Indian identity but were born in Britain or the United States) (Waters, 1990).

8. For example, researchers like Deutsch (1967) maintained that the “implicit value system of the poor” (especially the Black poor) was communicated via the structure, interactions, and activities of their homes. In accord with this presumption, he concluded that the Black poor devalued “intellectual activity” in light of having limited if any “dinner” conversation, books in the home, and trips to the museum, library, and zoo.

9. For another recent example see Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom’s No Excuses (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2005).

10. More specifically, researchers have examined the mismatch between African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), and the privileging of Standard English in America’s schools, but reported on disjunctions between the style, tone, and nuance of “Black” talk and that of teacher discourse (e.g., Delpit, 1988). Researchers additionally documented the devaluation of “Black” students’ everyday experiences and the knowledge that accompanies them (Asante, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Willis, 1995). Contrasts have been established between Black students’ orientations toward interdependence and collective survival, in contrast to schools’ emphasis on independence and individuality (Ward, 1995). And still other work focused explicitly on “learning styles,” argued that, while African Americans could be characterized as “field dependent” (i.e., learners who are more impulsive, unreflective, and reliant on the social environment and authority figures), instruction in America’s school is designed for field independent learners (i.e., learners who are more conceptual and analytical in orientation detached, goal oriented, and self-aware) (see review by Irvine & York, 1995).

11. We have substituted the term Black where Michaels (1996) had previously used the term Navajo.

References


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