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Sociological Perspectives on Black-White Inequalities in American Schooling

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This article discusses sociological contributions to an understanding of black and white inequality in education over the past several decades. It outlines political, cultural, and ideological perspectives on black-white inequality that are seen as guiding empirical research on access to schooling, educational opportunities in schools, and outcomes of schooling. These perspectives are also related to educational policy decisions aimed at reducing racial inequalities. The extant body of scholarship on schooling provides a solid foundation for sociological research on racial inequality in the 21st century.

Two of the primary goals of sociologists are to identify the causes and consequences of social inequalities and to describe the social processes that perpetuate them. As a major societal institution, education is generally viewed as providing access to societal resources. Many see education as a way of reducing social disparities by compensating for past injustices and countering present social inequities. Others perceive it as a means of perpetuating social inequalities by preserving the status quo and by creating new disparities within society. Sociologists of education have directed much of their effort to understanding the role that education plays in increasing or reducing inequalities.

Of particular concern to sociologists has been the persistence of social disparities between blacks and whites. With roots in a history of slavery, civil war, and racial segregation, black-white differences in social status and resources have been difficult to overcome. Building on the scholarship of earlier social scientists, contemporary sociologists of education have attempted to identify the mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequali-

ties through schooling. This article examines recent theoretical and empirical work by sociologists on black-white differences in access to educational opportunities and in the outcomes of schooling.

RACE AND EDUCATION IN AMERICA

Most Americans are committed to the ideal of a meritocratic society—one in which individuals' social and occupational positions are determined by achievement rather than by ascription (Bell 1973; Turner 1960). A commitment to meritocracy motivated the establishment of the American public school system, which was designed, in part, to promote social equality through equal access to education (Mann 1832). However, for decades after its creation, the public school system enrolled primarily nonblack students. In most states in the South, it was illegal to teach black students to read or write or attend school. When the Civil War brought an end to slavery, these laws were

repealed, but freed black children were still not permitted to attend white schools.

Both federal and state legislation and a strong black educational movement supported the establishment of black schools in the decades following the Civil War. However, although blacks were eager to pursue an education, economic and social obstacles prevented many black children from attending school. Since children of ex-slaves were needed for labor during the day, black communities tried to provide at least some access to education through the creation of Sabbath schools, night schools, and informal learning centers. But many blacks were not able to take advantage of even these limited educational opportunities (Anderson 1988).

Schooling became more of an option for southern black children in the first few decades of the 20th century for two main reasons. First, child labor laws were established in various states in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was enacted at the federal level, fixing 16 as the minimum age for working during school hours (U.S. Department of Labor 1967). Second, compulsory attendance legislation began to be established in the mid-19th century, and by 1918, all states had compulsory education laws (Krug 1966). Although many southern states were slow to enforce these laws, especially for blacks, the laws did become standard by the mid-20th century, and black enrollment in school became virtually universal. In 1954, in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that a dual segregated school system was unconstitutional, and black children began to attend predominantly white public schools throughout the country.

The desegregation of the American public school system drew attention to a significant gap between the achievement of black and white students. As concern over this gap increased, various interventions were attempted to raise black students' test scores. Some progress was made over the years, but the differences were not eradicated. The black-white achievement difference remains a defining mark of racial inequality in public education today.

Several sociologists have documented the

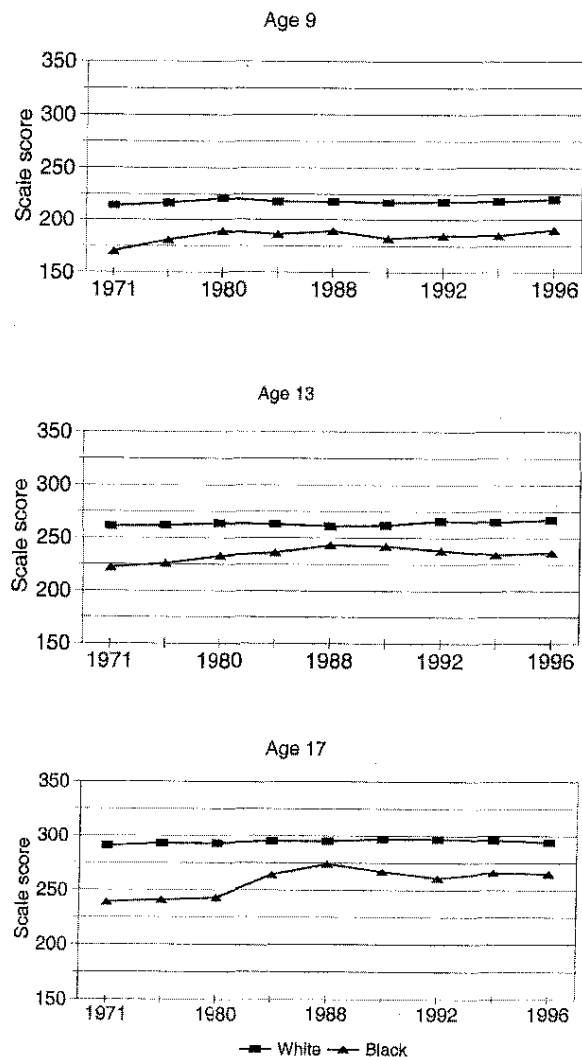
achievement gap between black and white students. Hedges and Nowell (1998) showed that in both 1982 and 1992, white high school seniors were about 10 times more likely than black high school seniors to score in the top 5 percent of the national distribution on a test of academic skills. Analyzing data from six major national surveys, they reported that while the gap had narrowed since 1965, the rate of decrease had slowed since 1972 and that only a third of the achievement gap was attributable to social-class differences. Jencks and Phillips (1998) reported that while the gap has narrowed since 1970, the average American black student still scores below 75 percent of American white students on most standardized tests.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a survey begun in the 1970s to assess trends in students' progress, also provides evidence of a black-white achievement gap. The results are based on tests administered to students in reading, mathematics, science, and writing in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades. The NAEP test scores in reading for 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old black and white students from 1971 to 1996, presented in Figure 1, show a significant lag in the achievement of black students. For example, in 1996, 17-year-old blacks had an average reading proficiency equivalent to that of 13-year-old whites. The results were similar for mathematics, science, and writing.

The NAEP data reveal some narrowing of the achievement gap between blacks and whites during the 1970s and 1980s. Figure 1 shows that in 1988, 9- and 13-year-old blacks scored 20 points lower than age-equivalent whites in reading, and the scores of 17-year-old blacks were 30 points lower than those of 17-year-old whites. These are the smallest differences in achievement between blacks and whites since the NAEP data became available. However, the differences began to widen again in the 1990s. The new reading proficiency examination administered in 1998 showed that the gap in the test scores of black and white students failed to improve between 1992 and 1998 for the three grades tested (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2000a).

The NAEP data reveal a racial gap in other educational outcomes as well. First, black stu-

Figure 1. NAEP Test Scores in Reading for 9-, 13-, and 17-Year-Old Black and White Students: 1971-96



dents are more likely than white students to repeat a grade. Second, black students who complete high school are less likely than white students to enroll in and to complete college. Third, blacks are less likely to be employed and, if employed, are apt to receive lower salaries than whites with the same educational attainment (NCES 2000a).

EXPLANATIONS OF RACIAL INEQUALITIES

Researchers have formulated several theories to explain the disparities between black and white educational outcomes. These theories include (1) biological differences; (2) family and cultural influences; and (3) the effects of

social stratification, school characteristics, and organizational processes.

Biological Differences

The theory of biological determinism (Gobineau 1915; Terman 1916) asserts that immutable genetic differences separate blacks from whites, with whites having superior cognitive ability. The theory became popular among some whites in the early 20th century because it implied that blacks were responsible for their own inadequacies, thus allowing whites to excuse themselves of culpability for blacks' poor performance.

Biological determinism had fallen into disfavor by the middle of the 20th century but reemerged in the 1970s. Reanalyzing several sets of descriptive statistics on IQ and achievement, Jensen (1973) claimed that his results supported a theory of genetic differences between blacks and whites. He and other adherents of biological determinism relied on these results to argue that schools fail to take the genetic factor into account when they offer a traditional curriculum to all students. He believed that educators should provide blacks with a special type of education that is consistent with their limited mental abilities and their likely low-level future occupations.

Critics condemned biological determinism as an explanation of the lower academic achievement of black students. Social scientists from various disciplines provided empirical evidence to refute Jensen's results and the theory of biological determinism. Psychometricians demonstrated that standardized achievement tests, on which most racial differences in achievement are based, are culturally biased and discriminate against black students whose cultural backgrounds differ from white students' (Scarr and Weinberg 1976). Cognitive psychologists claimed that intelligence is a multidimensional factor and cannot be measured accurately by unidimensional ability tests (Gardner 1983; Stodolsky and Lesser 1967). Sociologists stressed the role played by social class and school organization in students' learning and argued that intelligence or ability changes in response to opportunities to learn (Sørensen and Hallinan 1984).

Despite the frontal attack of social scien-

tists on biological determinism in the 1970s, the genetic explanation for the gap between black and white achievement reemerged in the mid-1990s in the controversial study, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). On the basis of their analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Herrnstein and Murray claimed empirical support for their argument that differences in inherited intelligence partly explain social inequality between blacks and whites.

Sociologists were quick to critique Herrnstein and Murray's findings. Fischer et al. (1996) argued that economic success is linked to structural and social factors in society, not to inherited intelligence. Their reanalysis of the NLSY data showed no support for Herrnstein and Murray's argument that a single, primarily inherited, dimension of human intelligence predicts the underachievement of blacks. The strong outcry of the social science community and the public to *The Bell Curve* has likely suppressed the biological determinism argument again, at least temporarily.

Family and Cultural Influences

Family Background Effects The idea that minorities are different and inferior surfaced from time to time over the past century for reasons other than biogenics. Many sociologists who rejected biological determinism claimed that the characteristics of black families accounted for racial disparities in educational outcomes. This hypothesis was influenced by two research orientations that were prominent in sociology in the 1960s and 1970s: studies of intergenerational mobility and of school effects.

During the 1960s and 1970s, sociologists were actively studying processes of intergenerational mobility (Blau and Duncan 1967; Sewell Haller, and Porras 1969; Sewell and Hauser 1975). This research showed that family background was a critical factor in status attainment: the higher a father's educational and occupational status, the higher the son's socioeconomic status (SES). The studies also determined that the influence of father's status on son's status remained fairly constant over the first half of the 20th century. This finding implied that society was not becoming

ing more meritocratic, even in a period of dramatic expansion of schooling. Since school is second only to family as a socializing agent of children, the research suggested that schools may be playing a significant role in perpetuating social status across generations.

During the same period, the federal government became concerned about racial inequality in America and whether differences in educational opportunities might account for blacks' low achievement. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 commissioned an empirical investigation to examine whether students who differed by race, religion, or national origin were given equal educational opportunities. Much to the surprise of politicians and the academic community, the study, known as the Coleman Report (Coleman et al. 1966), found that family background was a stronger predictor of academic achievement than were school differences. The Coleman Report demonstrated that schools account for only a small part of the achievement differences among students. Several reanalyses of the data supported this conclusion, as did subsequent national studies using different data sets and analytical methods (Armor 1972; Jencks et al. 1972; Spady 1973). Hence, the Coleman Report, though designed to examine equality of educational opportunities across schools, actually drew attention to the influence of family background on academic achievement and attainment.

In addition to studies of social mobility and the Coleman Report, other sociological analyses examined the structure of the black family and its effects on children's education. Concern about a breakdown in black family structure was highlighted in the Moynihan Report (Moynihan 1965), one of the most controversial studies of the civil rights era. Focusing on the effects of social and economic forces, Moynihan pointed to what he termed a "crisis" in the black family. He saw this "crisis" as a long-term consequence of slavery and accompanying laws forbidding black marriages and denying blacks economic opportunity. Moynihan argued that the breakdown of black family structure and the prevalence of female-headed households was the cause of poverty among blacks and had a negative impact on the education of black

children. His data showed that children in poor, single-parent black families had a high probability of dropping out of school and engaging in deviant and destructive behavior. To address this situation, Moynihan recommended social policies to support blacks and to improve their economic condition.

Moynihan's critique of the black family was intended to alert the public to the need for better economic opportunities for blacks in the form of jobs, housing, birth control, and affirmative action. However, Moynihan's perceived failure to fight for these governmental programs angered the political Left, who then characterized his report as racist. These leftist critics claimed that Moynihan presented the black family as inferior and beyond governmental intervention and construed his concern about out-of-wedlock births as "blaming the victim." Liberals condemned suggestions that characteristics of the black family were responsible for blacks' underachievement just as energetically as they had disavowed biological and genetic explanations for the academic failures of black students (Weisberg 2000).

Concern about the structure of the black family has not diminished since the civil rights era. Social scientists continue to look to differences in the family structures of blacks and whites for explanations for black students' low performance in school (Ferguson 1998; McAdoo 1988). Researchers have focused primarily on demographic and cultural differences between black and white families.

Black families and white families can be compared in terms of family composition, marriage and divorce, and SES. Glick (1994) pointed to several findings of differences in these three dimensions by race. First, black families are larger than white families. Second, the average educational attainment of women who are heads of households is lower for blacks than for whites. Third, the median household income of black families is lower than that of white families. And fourth, the proportion of households that are headed by unmarried persons is higher for blacks than for whites.

Although these descriptive statistics are valid, Glick (1994) argued that they fail to take into account important changes in the

structure of the black family. He showed that observed differences between black and white family composition, marriage and divorce patterns, and education and income have been shrinking steadily over the past several decades. Willie (1970) made the same point by demonstrating that different family structures predominate at different class and income levels. He provided evidence that the structure of contemporary middle- and upper-class black families bears a greater resemblance to that of similar white families than to black families at lower socioeconomic levels. These findings suggest that while differences in the structure of black and white families continue to exist, they are diminishing in some areas. The remaining differences may be due more to blacks' response to social and economic pressures than to matters of preference.

Cultural Effects In addition to research on the effects of family structure on students' outcomes, sociologists have posited an effect of culture on school performance. Two neo-conservative theories of the underachievement of blacks became popular in the 1970s and remain so today: cultural deprivation theory and cultural difference theory. Cultural deprivation theory suggests that the failures of blacks are due not so much to genetic inferiority, but to blacks' own negative and self-defeating attitudes (Loury 1985; Simpson 1987). According to this theory, deep structural problems in the black community having to do with values and attitudes disadvantage black students and inhibit their educational accomplishments (Hunter 1986). This perspective claims that black families fail to provide their children with the kinds of skills and educational attitudes and aspirations that support and encourage success in school (Deutsch 1967).

Cultural difference or cultural conflict theory is a related explanation of the low achievement of blacks. This view attributes the poor educational skills of black students to their growing up in a culture that differs from mainstream white culture (Loury 1985; Sowell 1981; Steele 1989). Some proponents of this view have argued that black students live in a "culture of oppression." Ogbu (1978)

contended that blacks are not socialized to succeed in an educational system dominated by whites; rather, they are trained to cope with their lower status in a society that limits their occupational opportunities. Some cultural difference theorists claim that black students reject schooling because they believe it symbolizes white middle-class values or because they think that public schools have rejected them by failing to recognize their skills and potential. Thus, cultural difference theory suggests that black culture fails to prepare black students effectively to succeed in school. It also faults whites for failing to take into account the differences in black culture when educating black students.

Some sociologists have expressed concern about the possible effects of notions of cultural deprivation and cultural difference on blacks' attitudes and behaviors (Bernstein 1971-75; Karabel and Halsey 1977; Wilson 1987). They have argued that if blacks rely on cultural exceptionalism and cultural deviance to justify poor school performance, they will simply perpetuate their dependence on whites. Steele (1989) supported this position, contending that terms like *diversity* and *pluralism* are codes for a politics of difference that fails to benefit black students. He stressed the importance of enriching the environment of black students while improving their self-image and urged efforts to attain the cultural incorporation and productive participation of all Americans.

Ogbu (1978) broadened and extended sociological analysis of black culture and its effects on students' performance. He argued that students from historically oppressed minorities resist school goals as a way of opposing the values of a dominant society that constrains their educational and occupational opportunities. Comparing the attitudes of these involuntary minorities to those of minorities who freely migrate, Ogbu claimed that the latter are more optimistic about their life chances and more likely to internalize the values and goals of the dominant group. Ogbu's thesis suggests that while blacks may value education, their disillusionment in the face of perceived limited educational and occupational opportunities leads them to disengage from the learning process. One

strength of Ogbu's analysis is that it relates structural constraints on behavior to individual motivation and effort.

Despite wide acceptance of Ogbu's thesis (Fischer et al. 1996; Jaynes and Williams 1989), recent analyses have raised questions about some of its assumptions. For example, using data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey, Ainsworth-Damell and Downey (1998), showed that black students do not perceive fewer educational and occupational opportunities than do white students and that blacks have more pro-school values and greater esteem for high-achieving peers than do whites. They argued that the reason for black students' poor performance in school is that blacks lack the material conditions that lead to good study habits and successful school performance. This finding shifts the responsibility for blacks' low achievement from inadequacies of black culture to the economic and social forces that limit blacks' educational success.

Other theorists have advanced the discussion of cultural effects on black students' performance by arguing that the cultural environment of both the dominant and the minority race need to be taken into account in explaining inequalities between racial groups (Arrow 1973; Becker 1957; Friedman 1962). Highlighting the role that the white majority plays in blacks' underachievement, they have contended that racist white attitudes and prejudices weaken the self-esteem of blacks and reduce their opportunities to advance educationally and economically. This racism delegitimizes the aspirations of blacks, lowers their self-confidence, deprives them of social support, and contributes to their poor school performance.

Tension between an individualistic or microlevel perspective and a structural perspective continues to be played out in these debates. An individualistic perspective attributes blacks' underperformance primarily to individual, family, and cultural factors associated with the black race, while a structural perspective concentrates on the impact of social structure on the black experience.

Another conceptual lens for the analysis of racial disparities in educational outcomes is cultural capital theory. Bourdieu (1977)

defined cultural capital as "the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next." He argued that cultural capital is a means of social reproduction, transmitting the effects of social origins to school performance and conveying intergenerational class advantage. Students from privileged families are socialized to a lifestyle that confers privilege and opportunity. Since SES is related to race and blacks are likely to have lower SES than whites, blacks are apt to have less cultural capital as well. Hence many blacks lack the resources accompanying cultural capital that promote educational and occupational careers.

Social capital, a concept related to cultural capital, provides a similar explanation for racial disparities in educational outcomes. It accrues from membership in social networks that provides valuable information and resources to students. Like cultural capital, social capital is related to SES. To the extent that blacks have lower SES than do whites, they are likely to have less social capital, resulting in fewer educational advantages.

In general, the body of sociological research on the effects of family background and culture on educational and occupational outcomes suggests that schools can play a central role in producing a more meritocratic society. Although background and cultural factors have powerful effects on students' outcomes, they are resistant to change, but school practices and policies may be more amenable to modification. Consequently, the school is a likely vehicle for social transformation.

The idea of compensatory education arose from a growing conviction that schools have a role to play in social transformation, particularly a social responsibility to students who are disadvantaged by life experiences and systemic institutional racism. Research has shown that children from low-income families are handicapped when they start school and fail to recover for the duration of their schooling (Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber 1993). Compensatory education provides academic assistance to help at-risk students overcome their educational shortcomings. Since a large percentage of black families have incomes

that are below the poverty level, black students benefit significantly from compensatory education programs.

The assumptions underlying compensatory education are related to those of cultural deprivation theory, namely, that poor school performance is a consequence of a culturally deprived family life and an impoverished neighborhood. Critics of cultural deprivation theory condemn compensatory education either because they adhere to biogenic beliefs about the inherent abilities of blacks or because they argue that in a meritocracy, special assistance to any student or group is inappropriate.

Despite the arguments of critics, the federal government established the Office of Economic Opportunity and implemented Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. Title 1 provides over \$8 billion per year to support preschool programs, such as Head Start, and remedial education programs for school-age children. In 1994, the government mandated the evaluation of Title 1 to determine the progress of students served by the program. Results based on the NAEP data revealed substantial gains in reading and mathematics since 1992 for children in the highest poverty schools. Similar gains have been observed for Head Start students (Lazar and Darlington 1982). However, these children still obtain significantly lower test scores than do children in higher SES schools.

Social Stratification, School Characteristics, and Organizational Processes

Without downplaying the importance of an individual's background and culture on racial disparities, most sociologists focus on the effects of social structure, school characteristics, and organizational processes on racial inequalities in educational outcomes. They have studied the role of the school in preparing students for placement in a stratified society, the effects of school characteristics on opportunities to learn, and the influence of the organization of the school on racial disparities. A particular emphasis in this work is whether these factors differentially affect

black and white students and, if so, how they explain the discrepancy between black and white students' achievement.

Effects of Social Stratification The question of how social class reproduces itself from one generation to another has engaged sociologists for decades. A related question is what role the school plays in the transmission of status and privilege. Two theories of status transmission have commanded attention: social reproduction theory and resistance theory. Both theories view the school as the primary agent for both social reproduction and social change.

Social reproduction theorists (Bernstein 1971-75; Bourdieu 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Heath 1983; Willis 1977) view the transmission of class structure as a response to the demands of a capitalist society. They argue that the school perpetuates a capitalist system by preparing students to assume their place in a hierarchy of dominance and subservience. Schools channel different learning opportunities to students depending on their ascribed and achieved characteristics. In the process, schools adopt the authority and control relations that are found in the workplace.

Resistance theorists (Giroux 1981) focus on the reaction of students to the efforts of schools to reproduce the social order. They examine the motivations, behaviors, and cultures of those who consciously or unconsciously reject part or all of the economic and social system. Emphasizing students' nonconformity and resistance, they argue that, in some cases at least, students' negative responses to the educational system are rooted in justifiable moral and political anger.

Many reproduction and resistance theorists view social class, not race, as the basis of social reproduction and resistance. Others posit an influence of race but argue that its impact is declining. For example, Wilson (1978) acknowledged that race has constrained social mobility in the past, but argued that in contemporary society, social class is a more relevant factor in accounting for social disparities.

Still others insist that race continues to play a dominant and undiminished role in creating educational disparities (Fordham and Ogbu

1986). Ogbu (1978) contended that the social stratification of blacks has developed at a different rate and in a different manner in America than that of whites. The roots of racial stratification include the limited access of blacks to employment, a perception by blacks of unequal opportunities for economic and social advancement, and residential patterns that isolate blacks and generate feelings of oppression. The roots of class stratification include rules governing social mobility that privilege those with the greatest number of resources and disadvantage those with the fewest. The factors creating and perpetuating racial stratification and class stratification lead to distinct structures with different effects on individuals. Ogbu argued that an understanding of racial disparities in education and the labor market requires an examination of characteristics of the racial stratification system as distinct from the class-based stratification system.

Two ethnographic studies grounded in social reproduction and resistance theories shed light on how race operates in channeling opportunities to students. MacLeod (1987) studied the occupational aspirations of two groups of teenagers, one black and the other white, in a poor working-class neighborhood. He found marked differences in the level of optimism the boys felt about their prospects for social mobility. Black boys were far more sanguine about their future than were their white peers. These attitudes were played out in school. The black students were cooperative and respectful; satisfied with course assignments, even when their programs would not further their career goals; and turned to extracurricular activities and athletics to have an opportunity to excel. The white students were unmotivated, undisciplined, engaged in deviant behavior, changed courses often, and were likely to drop out of school.

MacLeod (1987) argued that the differences between the black and white boys in his study stemmed from their attitudes toward the achievement ideology. The black boys believed that schooling could help them reach their career goals, while the white boys perceived their chances of success to be so slim that it was not worth their effort to

achieve in school. Since these two groups were from the same neighborhood, the differences could be attributed to race rather than class.

Revisiting these students eight years later, MacLeod (1995) found that both groups of boys had been singularly unsuccessful in achieving social and economic success, a finding that suggested that the white boys had a more realistic sense of their constrained opportunities in the social stratification system. Many of the boys were incarcerated, unemployed, or engaging in deviant behavior, and nearly all had given up hope of improving their status in life. Reaching the same conclusion as Willis (1977), MacLeod claimed that the white boys' earlier rejection of school was an attempt to salvage their self-esteem and dignity. Neither the rebellious attitudes of the white boys nor the more optimistic attitudes of their black peers were instrumental in improving their social mobility.

Solomon's (1992) ethnography of West Indian boys in a Canadian high school focused more explicitly on race as a factor in the processes of social reproduction and resistance. Like MacLeod's study, Solomon's research showed that black students generally embrace the goals of schooling, but that they sabotage their own goals by not making the effort to succeed academically. Solomon distinguished between the school performance of native black Americans and West Indians, arguing that the higher social status of the latter accounts for their greater academic success. His study also demonstrated that black students, while not directly resisting school goals, develop a peer culture that adversely affects their school performance by distracting them from their academic goals and interfering with their studies. Both MacLeod's and Solomon's ethnographies expand our understanding of how social structure constrains students' opportunities for success.

Effects of School Characteristics Schools differ in terms of resources, racial and ethnic composition, and academic climate. Sociologists have examined each of these factors to determine whether they contribute to

racial inequalities in students' outcomes. School resources have been defined in terms of the physical plant, science equipment, library books, technology, and other instructional resources. The Coleman Report was the first of a host of studies, referred to as school-effects research, that examined the impact of school resources on students' achievement (Jencks et al. 1972; Mosteller and Moynihan 1972; Spady 1973). The research typically showed only small effects of school resources on students' achievement. No differential effects of school resources on black and white achievement were found within schools.

Despite the small effects of differences in resources across schools on students' achievement, a norm of equity that holds that resources should be equally distributed across schools is widely held among Americans. Yet, specific efforts to redistribute resources have met with considerable resistance, especially at the state level. Wealthy school districts have been reluctant to have their financial resources redistributed to support schools in poorer districts. Progress toward a more equal distribution of resources has been made, however, with continued pressure from the federal government and the states. In 1998, New Jersey became the first state to mandate the equal distribution of educational funds across school districts, and other states are following in the same direction (NCES 2000b).

The school-effects research, especially studies showing that majority white schools tend to be resource rich compared to predominantly black schools, led to an examination of the effects of the racial composition of a school on students' achievement. This research showed that black students attain higher achievement when they attend majority white schools without jeopardy to white students (McPartland 1969; McPartland and York 1967; Spady 1973; St. John 1975). In addition, social scientists found evidence that black and white students attending racially mixed schools exhibit less prejudice and more interracial sociability than do those in segregated schools (Hallinan and Smith 1985; Schofield and Sagar 1983; Wells and Crain 1994). However, other studies failed to document these various benefits of desegregation

or found them to be small and, at times, even negative (for a review, see Crain and Mahard 1978). In discussing these social science findings, Coleman (1979) concluded that while desegregation has many advantages, the evidence from research is hardly strong enough to consider desegregation a major policy instrument for increasing blacks' performance and self-esteem.

Whereas the 1960s and 1970s were a period of sustained effort to desegregate public schools, the more conservative climate of the 1980s and 1990s led to a change in attitudes toward school desegregation. On the basis of the persistent achievement gap between blacks and whites and the negative consequences of desegregation in terms of residential choices that isolated blacks in poor urban schools, many argued that mandatory desegregation was not a successful public policy. Conservatives claimed that desegregation discriminated against whites, while liberals contended that voluntary integration was preferable to mandatory desegregation. Federal and state support for schooling became less tightly linked to compliance with desegregation legislation, and school districts began to dismantle their desegregation plans (Orfield 1997). In July 1999, Boston, one of the major sites of the school desegregation struggle, voted to eliminate race as a factor in determining which school a student would attend (Ferdinand 1999).

A consequence of public disillusionment with school desegregation policies has been a pattern of resegregation in many public schools. The Harvard Civil Rights Project reported that in 1996-97, 69 percent of black students in Boston attended schools where at least half the students were minorities, compared to 63 percent in 1980-81. Suburban schools are also resegregating. Black students in the suburbs of large metropolitan areas typically attend a school that is 60 percent nonwhite (Orfield and Gordon 2001).

The rationale behind efforts to resegregate public schools differs from the reason a dual system was initially established. Surveys have shown that Americans are fairly committed to diversity. Orfield (1995), for example, found that most whites who attend integrated schools or live in integrated neighborhoods

have a positive view of diversity. Patterson (1999) pointed out that the recent trend to re-segregate the public schools is primarily the result of residential segregation and that neighborhood patterns, not schools, should be the target of social reform. He also claimed that one of the reasons for suburban racial segregation is the emphasis that blacks and other minority groups place on ethnic pride and on developing their own communities.

New data on the achievement gap between black and white high school students in desegregated, suburban, middle-class schools add to the complexity of the desegregation issue (Belluck 1999). An examination of test scores shows that black students in these academically strong schools attain higher SAT scores than do poor black students in academically weaker schools. However, these middle-class blacks receive significantly lower SAT scores than their white classmates and are more likely to fail a class and attain lower grades. These results imply that social class is not an adequate explanation for the achievement gap. The differences in performance between middle-class black and white students in a strong academic environment may be an indication that family background, teachers' expectations, and students' self-confidence assume an even stronger role in the achievement process than was previously believed.

Another school characteristic that may have a differential influence on black and white students is school climate. School climate is conceptualized as the academic orientation of the school. It is typically measured in terms of mean SES, mean academic ability, school racial composition, and teachers' expectations.

Sociologists have relied on normative and comparative reference-group theory and propositions about modeling to predict the effects of school climate on students' achievement. They have made conceptual links between the norms and values of a student's peer group and a student's academic performance. They have also predicted that the presence of academic role models promotes students' achievement. Yet little empirical support for these propositions has been found. Mean SES and mean academic

achievement explain only a small part of the between-school variation in students' achievement and aspirations. McDill, Rigsby, and Meyers (1969) found that the effect of climate disappears when parental involvement is included in the analysis. Thus, school climate does not appear to have a significant direct effect on achievement, though it may have an indirect effect through parental involvement.

The initial enthusiasm for studying the effects of school climate on achievement in the 1960s and 1970s was dampened by weak empirical findings. Subsequently, researchers lost interest in examining contextual effects on student outcomes. Recently, however, school climate has regained attention as the result of two major studies. In the first study, an analysis of the High School and Beyond longitudinal survey of students' achievement, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) reported that students attending Catholic schools attained higher achievement scores than did students in public schools. Moreover, black and low-income students benefited the most from attending Catholic schools. The authors attributed the "Catholic school advantage" to a more challenging curriculum and to the sense of community fostered in Catholic schools.

In the second study, Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) analyzed data from a small number of Catholic high schools and from the HSB survey to determine what characteristics of Catholic schools promote academic achievement. Their results were consistent with Coleman and Hoffer's findings and pointed to the importance of a strong academic curriculum, communal organization, decentralized governance, and an inspirational ideology in promoting students' engagement and academic achievement. Their study also underscored the benefits of parental involvement in school activities, a finding that is consistent with contextual studies of the 1960s. These two studies added a new dimension to the research on school climate and within-school processes by showing that an academic climate, supported by a strong, school-oriented social network, promotes students' learning.

These two studies suggest an explanation for the achievement gap between black and

white students. They imply that the strong academic programs found in Catholic schools and the presence of a faculty and student body with a sense of communal responsibility may offset the disadvantages of a student's background. A supportive academic and social climate may be particularly effective in promoting learning for disadvantaged students. On the basis of these findings, many public schools are implementing educational reforms that strengthen academic programs and promote social ties within schools. Examples of these reforms are the formation of schools within a school; smaller class sizes; school choice plans; and the establishment of charter schools, magnet schools, alternative schools, and all-black academies. These reforms are expected to provide black students with educational opportunities that are not available in traditionally structured public schools.

Effects of School Organization The findings of earlier studies that school resources are only a weak determinant of students' achievement led researchers to search for within-school processes that might affect students' academic performance. In particular, they focused on instructional processes as a possible source of racial disparities in students' achievement. Considerable attention was given to two areas: the organizational differentiation of students for instruction and teachers' expectations.

American schools typically assign students to a stratified hierarchy of courses for instruction. The assignment depends, to a large extent, on students' ability and career objectives. During the 1960s, most schools established a tracking system consisting of academic, general, and vocational tracks. Students in the academic track were prepared to attend college, those in the general track were given both academic and vocational courses, and those in the vocational track were taught work-related skills. Since the 1980s, tracking has been replaced by ability grouping, in which students are assigned to classes, such as advanced, honors, regular, or basic, based on their academic ability. Ability grouping is usually employed in English and mathematics and often in other subjects as well.

Ability grouping is an example of an educational practice that is deeply embedded in a political context that sets the terms of the debate about its effectiveness. Its proponents argue that ability grouping benefits all students because teachers can gear instruction to the students' ability levels. Its critics claim that homogeneous grouping disadvantages minority students because these students are disproportionately assigned to low ability groups that provide inferior instruction and damage students' self-esteem (for a summary of the debate, see Hallinan 1994a, 1994b; Oakes 1994a, 1994b).

Sociologists of education have produced a systematic body of research on the determinants and consequences of ability grouping that informs this debate. One concern has been whether race is a factor in ability-group assignments. A number of studies have shown that black students are disproportionately assigned to lower ability groups in middle school and high school (Alexander and McDill 1976; Catsambis 1994; Darling-Hammond 1994; Ekstrom et al. 1986; Hallinan 1991, 1992; Oakes 1990; Vanfossen et al. 1987). When achievement is taken into account, however, the results are less consistent. Some studies have shown that racial differences in ability-group assignments disappear when achievement is controlled (Hallinan 1991, 1994b; Pallas et al. 1994). Other studies have reported that blacks are more likely to be assigned to higher ability groups (Alexander, Cook, and McDill 1978; Gamoran and Mare 1989; Hanson 1994; Rosenbaum 1980). At the elementary level, Sørensen and Hallinan (1984) found that race influences the formation of ability groups within a classroom. High ability groups tend to be larger in racially mixed classrooms than in all-white classrooms, giving black students a greater chance of assignment to a high group.

In addition, research has shown that ability-group assignments are flexible in many schools. Students may be reassigned to a different group, presumably to improve the fit between their ability and course content. Hallinan (1996) found that black students are less likely than white students to be reassigned to higher ability groups and are more

likely to drop ability-grouped classes. As is the case with initial ability-group assignment, the effect of race on group reassignment declines when prior achievement is controlled. In general, research on the determinants of ability-group assignment provides little evidence of a direct effect of race on initial group placement or subsequent reassignment when ability is controlled. However, the close association between race and achievement results in a disproportionate number of black students being assigned to lower ability groups.

A second set of studies has examined the effects of ability-group level on students' achievement. These studies have provided strong evidence that students learn more in higher ability groups than in lower groups (see a review in Oakes et al. 1992). Regardless of race or other background characteristics, students attain higher standardized test scores when assigned to higher ability groups. Indeed, recent evidence has shown that regardless of prior achievement, students would make greater achievement gains if they were moved to higher ability groups (Hallinan 2000). The studies have associated the advantages of placement in higher ability groups with better instruction, less distraction, more time spent on task, more academic role models, and a more serious learning climate. Thus, black students are disadvantaged by ability grouping not because of their race, but because their achievement leads to their being enrolled in lower ability groups.

The body of sociological research on the organizational differentiation of students for instruction clearly implies that if ability grouping is to be retained as an equitable pedagogical practice, educators must ensure that the quantity and quality of instruction is as strong in the lower ability groups as in the higher ones. However, the political context influences the way in which ability grouping is evaluated and how research findings are interpreted. The debate about ability grouping continues in the public forum, with little reference to the research.

Social scientists have claimed that the expectations that teachers hold for students' performance affects students' motivation, effort, and achievement. Empirical evidence has supported his belief. The classic study by

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) showed that students who were assigned to teachers who believed that the students had high ability made significantly greater IQ gains than did their peers who were assigned to a control group. Rist (1970) demonstrated that teachers' behavior is correlated with the social-class characteristics of their students and that teachers have lower expectations for the achievement of lower-SES students. Although some of the studies on teachers' expectations and behavior have been criticized on methodological grounds, the empirical evidence is sufficient to suggest that teachers' bias may contribute to the differences in achievement between black and white students.

Ferguson (1998b) argued that teachers can be biased by deviating from unconditional race neutrality, from race neutrality conditioned on perception of past performance, or from race neutrality conditioned on unobserved potential. Reviewing the research on the effects of teachers' expectations on achievement, he concluded that whether teachers are biased against black students depends on the baseline. If the baseline for determining teachers' bias is unconditional race neutrality, studies have shown that teachers do exhibit bias against black students. This finding is not surprising, since experience informs teachers that blacks, on average, perform less well than do whites. When the baseline is race neutrality conditioned on past performance, studies have found that teachers are not biased. That is, when a student's past grades, test scores, attitudes, and behaviors are taken into account, teachers do not have lower expectations for or behave differently toward black students than white students. Clearly, it is difficult to estimate the third kind of bias, based on race neutrality conditioned on potential. Many blacks claim that teachers underestimate the potential of black students and that teachers' lower expectations for black students' performance activate a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ferguson (1998b) reported some studies that found that teachers are less supportive of black students, which may indicate teachers' bias in evaluating students' potential.

Several critical questions regarding the

impact of teachers' expectations on students' learning remain unanswered. The evidence thus far suggests that teachers' expectations and behaviors do contribute to the achievement gap between black and white students. However, sociologists need to examine this issue in greater depth to determine the magnitude of the influence; how it can be modified; whether black students respond to interactions with teachers differently than do white students; how familial, environmental, and cultural factors mediate the teacher-student relationship; and how teachers can raise their expectations for the performance of black students.

It should be noted that most of the research that has reported between- and within-school effects on students' achievement has been based on standardized achievement tests. Yet, these tests may be inappropriate measures of achievement. Critics of standardized tests have argued that they are culturally biased against blacks. Jencks (1998) added a new dimension to the cultural bias criticism, pointing out that standardized tests have a "labeling bias," that is, they do not measure what they purport to measure. While standardized tests are typically interpreted as measures of innate ability or intelligence, they actually measure developed abilities that depend, at least partly, on environmental factors. In addition, social scientists have begun to see intelligence as a multidimensional concept, rather than a single cognitive trait. Gardner (1983) identified seven dimensions of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Most of these dimensions are not measured by standardized tests.

Psychometricians have revised standardized achievement tests in an attempt to remove cultural bias and have created new tests to tap various dimensions of intelligence. These efforts to increase the validity of standardized tests and to create better measures of ability appear to be consistent with the goal of reducing racism. Yet even attempts to conceptualize ability more broadly, which may seem to be essentially non-racist, allow for racist interpretations. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argued that

the heritage of slavery is that whites have come to devalue the activities in which blacks excel. Although this statement, at first glance, seems to support more equitable treatment, it is inherently racist and can lead to the justification of an unequal distribution of social resources. For example, a common racist view of the 1950s and 1960s was that blacks excelled at athletics and entertainment but were deficient in intellectual activities. If black students are seen to have different skills than whites, particularly if those skills are not academic, they may be excluded from opportunities to advance educationally and professionally.

Despite the criticism leveled against standardized tests, these tests continue to be widely used as a measure of academic achievement. One component of the Goals 2000 program, initiated by President Bush and endorsed by Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, calls for standardized assessments to measure students' progress. States are using standardized tests to evaluate school effectiveness in order to identify low-performing schools and to ensure that they improve. In June 1999, Florida became the first state to provide tuition vouchers to students in schools whose standardized test scores fall below a certain minimum. It is significant that although critics have argued that standardized tests are culturally biased, complaints about Florida's voucher plan rest not on the charge of test bias but, rather, on the constitutionality of public support for private schools. The Florida voucher plan was repealed in 2000 on church-state grounds (Wilgoren 2000). Measuring the performance of black students relative to the performance of their white peers will likely continue to be based on standardized test scores for some time to come.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Most of the sociological research on racial disparities in educational outcomes over the past few decades has concentrated on students in grades K-12. Recent research has focused on

equity issues in higher education as well. One reason for the interest in racial inequalities in higher education has been the growing number of blacks seeking admission to colleges and universities. In the first half of the 20th century, few black students attended college, and hardly any received graduate or professional degrees. After World War II, the number of black students began to increase, as people took advantage of the GI bill and benefited from the general expansion of education in America. Black college enrollment increased steadily until the late 1970s. After a short period of decline, the percentage of blacks who enrolled in college rose again until the late 1980s, when it leveled off at about 50 percent ("Vital Signs" 1997).

Despite a dramatic increase in black students' enrollment and graduation, the gap between black and white educational attainment persists. College enrollment rates for white high school graduates increased from 50 percent in the early 1970s to about 60 percent in the mid-1980s and have fluctuated between 60 and 65 percent since then, compared to only 50 percent for blacks. In 1995, whites were more than twice as likely as their black peers to have earned a bachelor's degree, with about 32 percent of whites graduating from college compared to 15 percent of blacks (NCES 2000a).

Colleges and universities have initiated a number of programs to encourage black educational attainment. Beginning in the 1960s, they recruited academically promising black students by offering them summer school programs, career counseling, tutoring, and research experiences to prepare them for college. Yet colleges were slow to support black students once they enrolled in college, which partly accounts for the high dropout rate of black students.

As racial and ethnic minorities grew in size and became more visible, they exerted more pressure on colleges and universities to increase opportunities for minorities to attain higher education. One response of colleges and universities was to implement affirmative action policies aimed at ensuring that minorities and women were given full consideration in admissions decisions. The goal of affirmative action was to compensate for past injus-

tices, to counter present discrimination, and to create culturally diverse institutions of learning. Efforts to attain this goal included widening the pool of candidates for college admission to include more minorities and broadening admissions criteria beyond a narrow focus on standardized test scores.

Affirmative action policies were highly controversial. Critics of affirmative action in college admissions brought suits against several colleges and universities, claiming that their admissions policies discriminated against whites. Some of these challenges reached the Supreme Court, whose rulings have weakened affirmative action practices. In *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), compensation was dismissed as a valid justification for affirmative action policies, and in *Wygant v. Jackson Board of Education* (1986), correction was ruled out as a legitimate rationale.

The only remaining legal basis for affirmative action in admissions is diversification, and even this basis is being questioned. The constitutionality of using race to attract a diverse student body is currently under challenge in appeals to *Hopwood v. Texas* and in other pending court cases. In these cases, proponents of affirmative action argue that student diversity enhances education and that race is a critical factor in creating a multicultural student body. Notable educators and academics have supported this position (Bowen and Bok 1998; Glazer 1997; Hesburgh 1973). Critics have countered this argument by claiming that the goal of creating a diverse student body does not justify discriminating against qualified white students.

Compared to the fairly large body of literature on the effects of desegregation at the elementary and secondary levels, research on the consequences of affirmative action policies for black and other minority students and the effects of multiracial colleges on student outcomes is scarce. The few studies that have examined the effects of desegregation at the collegiate level have been fairly consistent in showing that racial diversity promotes learning, increases understanding of racial groups, reduces racism, and promotes positive social relationships among blacks and whites. These benefits of diversity appear to be conditioned

on a supportive institutional environment that promotes multiculturalism (see reviews in Hallinan 1998; Smith et al. 1997).

Bowen and Bok (1998) provided insights into the short- and long-term consequences of taking race into account in college admissions. Analyzing data from 28 academically selective colleges, they demonstrated that the black students admitted to these select institutions struggled in college and attained a significantly lower class rank than did their white classmates. At the same time, the black students benefited from attendance at the select institutions in terms of graduation rates, occupational status and income, satisfaction with life, and community participation. The authors interpreted these results as implying that the matriculation of black students in the 28 select colleges benefited the students themselves, their colleges, and the society at large.

Although social science research provides evidence that is directly relevant to the affirmative action debate, the issue is likely to be resolved not by research, but in the courts. Racial preference in college admissions has been banned in California, Texas, and Washington through court decisions and popular referenda. Although social scientists have been asked, on occasion, to provide expert testimony in these cases, the current political climate is less favorable to social science research than it was during the civil rights era, when the testimony of researchers influenced desegregation and school busing cases. The Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit rejected as unconstitutional more than a dozen social science studies invoked by lawyers who were defending a blacks-only scholarship program at the University of Maryland (Jaschik 1995). Similarly, in *Hopwood v. Texas*, federal justices determined that race was irrelevant to a person's views, thus summarily dismissing social science research on the effects of race on student outcomes. These cases suggest that affirmative action policies are in jeopardy and will continue to be challenged legally. Additional sociological studies on the effects of diversity on student outcomes are needed not only to inform the affirmative action debate, but to increase understanding of how diversity affects learning.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of the 20th century, DuBois (1903:vii) declared that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Almost a hundred years later, Franklin (1993:5) made virtually the same claim, asserting that "the problem of the 21st century will be the problem of the color line . . . by any standard of measurement or evaluation, the problem has not been solved in the 20th century, and thus becomes a part of the legacy and burden of the next century."

During the century that spanned DuBois' and Franklin's remarks, sociologists have made the study of social inequality one of their main preoccupations. They have formulated theories and conducted empirical analyses to explain the persistence of racial tensions and of racial and class differences in American society. Their work has provided important insights into how race operates in society and how social institutions can perpetuate racial differences in educational and occupational attainment. Sociologists of education have studied the role that schools play in perpetuating or reducing social inequality and have identified academic and social structures and processes that channel educational opportunities to students.

Despite these significant sociological contributions, the persistent gap between the education and income levels of blacks and whites indicates the need for greater effort to understand racial inequality in America. Massey (1995) argued that 20th-century sociologists have acted cowardly by failing to bring the power of their theories and empirical analyses to bear on sensitive political and social issues. He pointed to the study of mental ability, claiming that the reluctance of sociologists to examine how mental ability may be related to racial differences in social outcomes and inequalities created an intellectual vacuum that made *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) possible. According to Massey, if sociologists in the 1970s and 1980s had addressed the issue of IQ testing to measure racial differences, a body of research

would have been available to counter the arguments advanced in this work. While not all sociologists agree that they have avoided asking difficult questions about race relations in America, most will acknowledge that difficult work remains to be done before the social structures and processes that generate and perpetuate racial inequalities are fully understood.

Shortly before his death, Coleman (1994) stated that the focus of sociological research must be the social system rather than the individual. He claimed that the essential requirement for sociological theory and analysis is that the system itself, not individuals or other components of the system, must be the explanatory focus. Current research on race and schooling has stressed either individual attitudes and behaviors or properties and functions of schools and the community in which they are embedded. If Coleman's advice is to be followed, sociologists need to extend existing theories of racial inequality to take into account individuals, schools, and communities and how they interact as a dynamic social system to affect racial inequality.

The political and social agendas of the federal and state governments since the civil rights movement seem to suggest that schools should assume the primary role in reducing racial inequality in America. However, the persistence of racism has its roots in the larger society and cannot be addressed by the schools alone (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Jencks et al. 1972). Schools are only one of many social institutions that must build more equitable social structures and processes. Nevertheless, they are a major social institution that affects the lives of nearly all Americans and, as such, bear responsibility for reducing racial inequalities in educational opportunities. Sociologists made a significant contribution in the 20th century by increasing understanding of the determinants and consequences of racial inequality in educational achievement and attainment. This theoretical and empirical work provides a solid foundation for sociological research in the 21st century aimed at more fully explaining racial inequality to finally eradicate "the problem of the color-line."

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