

Comment

Making Sense of the Complexity of Social Identity in Relation to Achievement: A Sociological Challenge in the New Millennium

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Who fails and who succeeds in America's schools? For sociologists of education, the significance of this question rests with the fact that academic performance is socially stratified. Some social groups repeatedly outstrip the academic performance of others. But while sociologists of education have become reasonably adept at identifying group and even subgroup differences in educational achievement, we still struggle to explain why and how these differences emerge.

Relying on what is said and left unsaid in the articles by Paul W. Kingston, Maureen T. Hallinan, and Carol Schmid in this issue, I argue that the inadequacy of our explanations rests, in part, with our failure to make sense of social identity in all its complexity. If we understand social identity to be how people are differentially positioned in the social world, then any one individual reflects multiple social identities. In addition, these identities are simultaneously structured and cultured and operate differentially across place and time. However, the traditions that generally characterize sociologists' efforts to make sense of group differences in achievement have differentially denied this more complex rendering of how people are positioned in the social world.

In some cases, social positionings have been reduced to variables, and the operation of structure and culture has been absent from or oversimplified in the analyses. In

other cases, the operation of structure and/or culture has been explicitly explored, but the multiple ways in which people were situated in relation to these phenomena have been denied. And when we attend more closely to how structure and culture have actually been rendered in such analyses, we see that meaning making has often been stripped from articulations of culture and structure has been regularly overemphasized as a macrosociological phenomenon that is static across place and time. There is, however, a growing body of work that situates people in the social world in ways that more complexly indicate how structure and culture operate simultaneously to affect achievement outcomes. Before I provide a more precise account of how previous discussions of achievement differentials have elucidated sociologists' struggle to make sense of why some students fail and others succeed in America's schools, I elaborate more fully on what it would mean to render social identity as a more complex social phenomenon.

STRUCTURE, CULTURE, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

At the structural level, social identities reflect divisions in society that are marked by systematic material and/or power

inequities. Thus, class identity is marked by the fact that those with wealth have privilege and power compared to those without. Gender identity is marked by the fact that men have privilege and power compared to women. Racial identity is marked by the fact that whites have privilege and power compared to those who are black and brown. And in accordance with the logic of these divisions, the denial of power and privilege is analogous to systematic and institutionalized experiences with discrimination. Thus women, unlike men, are subordinated by sexism; minorities, unlike whites, are subordinated by racism; and the poor and working class, unlike the middle class, are subordinated by classism. It is these three structural divisions—race, class, and gender—that have generally preoccupied sociologists of education.

But because people are marked by all three of these identities at the same time, we necessarily struggle with making sense of how power and privilege are “particularly” reflected or denied in light of how these identities intersect. In other words, how do we make sense of the operation and denial of power and privilege in relation to those who are poor, black, and male; compared to those who are poor, black, and female; compared to those who are brown, middle class, and female; compared to those who are middle class, white, and female; compared to those who are poor, white, and female? The intersectionalities are many, and people do not experience these different social categories “as if they are isolated and independent social locations” (Ferguson 2000:22).

But understanding how power and privilege are reflected or denied via the different intersectionalities should not be registered through some mathematical calculation. For example, even though white skin registers privilege compared to black or brown skin, being middle class registers privilege compared to being poor, and being male registers privilege compared to being female, it is overly simplistic to conclude that a poor, black woman’s experience with discrimination is more profound than a poor, black man’s because while the poor, black man has one indication of privilege (his maleness), the poor, black woman has none. Rather, the spe-

cific intersection, in and of itself, represents a distinct but not necessarily a cumulative experience with the operation and denial of power and privilege (King 1988).

But these structured positions and their accordant intersectionalities are also reflected through and refracted by culture. Although sociologists had previously reduced culture to the norms and values that characterize a social group (e.g., Parsons 1951), culture is now regularly characterized by “the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning” (Swidler 1986:273). Through this emphasis on meaning making, sociologists have attempted to map conceptually and empirically how people interpret, act upon, and produce material (e.g., art forms, tools, and books), as well as social texts (e.g., language, social interaction, ideology, rituals, moral codes, ceremonies, and strategies for action) (e.g., Griswold 1987; Lamont 1999; Swidler 1986; Young 1997, 1999). But because how people interpret, act upon, and produce texts is bound, in part, by the aforementioned inequities in materials and power that structure social life, people who occupy different structured locations regularly express and experience meaning in distinct ways. As part of this meaning making, they make sense not only of their positions in the social order, but of how “others” are positioned against or relative to them (O’Connor 1999).

My use of the term *reflection* registers how social identity is experienced as a consequence of how individuals interpret and subsequently perform their identities. Alternatively, *refraction* registers how the same individuals experience social identity as a consequence of how others, given their own structured and cultured positionings, make sense of and, subsequently, respond to the individuals. When the interpretations and responses of others shape individuals’ experiences in ways that systematically or institutionally deny or accord them privilege, this articulation of culture through meaning making is then operating as social structure (see Hays 1994 for a discussion of how culture can operate as structure).

Making sense of social identity is further complicated by the fact that social identities (both structured and cultured) are also

reflected and refracted differently across space (physical and institutional) and time. Thus, the experience (material or subjective, structural or cultural) of being black, male, and poor, for example, is not exactly the same from one nation to the next, one school to the next, one family to the next, or one historical period to the next. In short, as King (1988:49) noted, "in the interactive model, 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."

Taken in total, then, social identity is both an objective and subjective position. It reflects material and power inequities, as well as instantiations of meaning making, as they are differentially framed and performed across place and time. And although different macrostructural positionings are articulated in the same body, they are not experienced separately, but are "inextricably intertwined and circulate together in the representations [or structuring] of subjects and experiences of subjectivity" (Ferguson 2000:22-23). In other words, attention to the complexity of how social identity is registered in the social world provides one lens by which we may make sense of how culture, structure, and human agency intersect.

Despite this complex rendering of social identity in the social world, the methods and conceptualizations that sociologists of education have often advanced in their efforts to make sense of group differences in achievement deny or reduce this complexity. Using Hallinan's, Schmid's, and Kingston's articles as points of reference, I now illustrate more concretely how this denial and reduction occurs (often implicitly) and limits, in part, our ability to develop sufficiently dynamic accounts of achievement that more accurately explain group and subgroup differences in achievement. When referring to these articles, I sometimes discuss what is made explicit in these authors' accounts and criticisms of how sociologists of education have tried to make sense of group differences in achievement. At other times, I attend to how the logic and content of their discussions (what is empha-

sized, de-emphasized, silenced, or contorted) provides implicit indications of how we have struggled inadequately with the subject of social identity. This discussion also provides the opportunity to highlight some recent work that has struggled more effectively with the complexity of social positioning in relation to achievement outcomes. My discussion begins with Kingston's article, which offers an entrée into the question of how people are positioned in the social world as a consequence of the operation of culture.

CULTURE AND POSITIONING IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

Kingston's article wrangles explicitly with the concept of cultural capital as it was conceived by Bourdieu (1977) and subsequently "distilled" by Lamont and Lareau (1988). As Kingston indicates, cultural capital theory "enjoys great currency" in the United States and is one of the most often-cited explanations of why those with more social (class) privilege academically outperform those with less. He argues, however, that this currency is unwarranted because the theory's major claims have not been substantively supported by empirical evidence. In developing his argument, Kingston acknowledges the relevance of culture for making sense of why some social groups continually outperform others, but maintains that the way in which culture is rewarded in school reflects functional, rather than exclusionary, practices. He concomitantly offers a rendering of culture that strips it of meaning making.

Let us consider Kingston's presumption that teachers' high valuation of particular characteristics (e.g., ability, hard work, staying out of trouble, and general articulateness) reflect not social biases that produce high achievement, but professionally informed assessments of which characteristics are essential to high academic and subsequent social achievement. Although Kingston pays some attention to the fact that the characteristics that inform high academic performance are not "culture-free concepts," he dismisses such bias as exclusionary if it is in accord with

the structure and expectations of the society under study.

His stance presumes that hard work, ability, articulateness, and staying out of trouble are wholly objective and culturally unambiguous phenomena. For Kingston, students either work hard in school or they do not, they are either more able or less able, they can or cannot communicate effectively, and they simply stay in or out of trouble. Kingston does not consider the extent to which hard work, ability, articulateness, and compliance with school rules may be rendered via meaning making as it takes place through practice and subjectivity. And though meaning making is bound culturally to people and places and reflects human agency, it also operates as social structure when it functions to constrain human action in systematic or institutionalized ways (Hays 1994).

Ferguson's (2000) work is relevant here. Ferguson found that black and white boys are 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 perform their masculinity, she stressed that black boys more often find themselves in trouble because of how their performances are interpreted, rather than how they actually perform. More specifically, Ferguson found that when white boys transgress, school officials presume that boys will be boys, attribute "innocence to their wrong doing," and believe that "they must be socialized to fully understand the meaning of their acts" (p. 80). In contrast, when black boys transgress, their acts are "adultified." That is, "their transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naivete" (p. 83). Having framed them as "not children," the interpreters (who constitute authority and, therefore, power in this case) are necessarily directed toward treatment "that punishes through example and exclusion rather than through persuasion and edification, as is practiced with the young white males in school" (p. 90).

Through this case study, one sees culture operating through meaning making and how that meaning making is reflected through

both agency and structure. At the level of agency, these boys perform their gender identity as an expression of what it means to be either black and male or white and male. At the level of structure, school officials differentially and systematically sanction the performances of white and black boys, given how they make meaning of transgression as it is enacted by white and black bodies. Thus, Ferguson's (2000) study offered evidence that meaning making as it is rendered via the performance of social identity and the evaluation of that performance is implicated in group differences in schooling experiences.

At first glance, Ferguson's (2000) findings require us to question Kingston's presumption that in the absence of exploring meaning making, we can readily distinguish those practices that give advantage as a consequence of functional adaptation and those that give advantage via exclusion. By denying the significance of meaning making, Kingston reduces culture to behavioral traits or characteristics that are either consistent or inconsistent with the demands of a society. He thereby denies the complexity with which people perform their identities and how others then render these performances as a consequence of their own social positioning. Moreover, he is inattentive to how expressions and experiences of meaning making help to account for differences in educational outcomes as is evident in the Ferguson study. At a more substantive level, then, the presumptions that drive the logic of Kingston's article remind us of sociologists' evolving struggle to make sense of how culture and, therefore, meaning making position people in the social world and are implicated in achievement differentials. As part of this struggle, structure was either blatantly absent or deterministically present in sociologists' efforts to make sense of how people are positioned for success or failure in school.

CULTURE IN RELATION TO STRUCTURE

Through the theory of cultural deprivation, sociologists, in a manner similar to Kingston,

have also reduced culture to traits or behaviors of particular groups. However, those like Valentine (1968) have argued that while proponents of cultural deprivation theory might have identified the practices of poor (read black) people, researchers' imposition of their own meaning (usually cast as what was "valued" by the social group under study) obfuscated the native understanding of what was being "said" by engaging in these practices. In other words, culture as it was rendered through the performances of people who were particularly positioned by race and class was stripped of meaning making. This theory also denied an analysis of how meaning making regarding what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is displayed, how knowledge is evaluated, and who has knowledge was institutionalized in schooling practices. And there was no accordant analysis of how such institutionalization afforded some, but not others, a systematic advantage in school.

The theory of cultural difference would bridge these analytical gaps. The empirical renditions of this theory have offered insights into how the "mismatch" between the culture of schools and the culture of social groups has positioned some but not others for school failure (e.g., Heath 1983; Labov 1972; Shade 1982). In addition, they have offered a more sophisticated rendering of culture. By framing culture as a "way of life," they attend to the "sense-making devices that shape and guide behavior" (Irvine and York 1995).

Cultural capital theory (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) has retained a similarly complex sense of culture that incorporates the meaning making of social groups (as suggested by the concept of habitus). And the logic of the theory is consistent with the findings of studies of cultural differences. The framework is, however, "more powerful" sociologically (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). As Lamont and Lareau (1988:155) noted, the empirical renditions of cultural difference theory, along with other school-based accounts of the discriminatory character of schools (e.g., Anyon 1981; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1969; Rist 1970; Wilcox 1982), have revealed the "subtle and not so subtle ways that formally meritocratic institutions help recreate

systems of social stratification. However, rather than interpreting these patterns as examples of an individual's or school's discriminatory behavior Bourdieu and Passeron saw these behaviors as institutionalized [i.e., throughout schooling systems]" and afforded a "more structural" analysis.

But while some empirical renditions of cultural difference theory have attempted to account for racial differences in achievement (Kochman 1981; Shade 1982), cultural capital theory has been decidedly fixed on social-class positioning, as have other models of social reproduction (e.g., Bowles and Gintis's, 1976, correspondence theory; Bernstein's, 1977, account of class codes; and Willis's, 1977, theory of cultural production and its relationship to social reproduction). These models of reproduction have provided macrosociological accounts of how social-class inequalities are reified, legitimated, or contested via the culture of social groups or the organization of institutions to shape, in turn, the development of skills, dispositions, apperceptions, and appreciations at the individual level that "determines" group differences in educational outcomes.

Hallinan's article in this issue, however, reminds us that despite sociologists' preoccupation with the statistically robust effect of socioeconomic indices, "only a third of the achievement gap [between blacks and whites is] attributable to social-class differences." In addition, Schmid (in this issue), reporting on the findings of White's (1982) "meta-analysis of more than 200 studies from the late 1970s and early 1980s," similarly indicates that "social class [accounts] for only about 5 percent of the variance in performance" among children of immigrants who are of different racial-ethnic groups. Schmid also points out that although social class is explicitly tied to the educational measures of some social groups, it is inconsequential to others (see Schmid's report on Goyette and Xie 1999).

Class-based models cannot, however, make sense of such findings and the commensurate variation in achievement that occurs within social-class groups. They provide no means of explaining why some poor and working-class youths succeed in school (Kingston, this issue) and cannot account for

the relationship between gender positioning and achievement. With the exception of Willis's (1977) study, we have no sense of how gender moderates (if at all) the operation of these achievement models. And even in Willis's study, achievement performance is rendered only in reference to those who are positioned as male. Therefore, we have no means of making sense of how and why working-class girls fare academically in school as they do.

Furthermore, the sociological studies that have attended to how white working- and middle-class girls perform their gender identity in school (e.g., Anyon 1983; Davies 1983; McRobbie 1978) have not generally linked these performances to achievement outcomes. It is not until the work of Fordham (1993, 1996) and Holland and Eisenhart (1990) that one can observe a link between female-gendered performances and achievement outcomes. Mickelson (1989), however, observed that making sense of girls' achievement is a complex phenomenon, since girls regularly outperform boys in school on a number of traditional measures (e.g., grades received and high school graduation rates).

Ogbu's (1981, 1994) cultural ecological model offers a means of making sense of the race-based differences in achievement that are unaccounted for in class-based models. Sociologists have been especially impressed with the fact that this model offers a structural analysis of how culture is implicated in the underachievement of some minority groups but not of others. But like the class-based theories, the cultural ecological model is also unable to account for within-group variation in achievement.

If one uses African Americans as the case for illustration, Ogbu's model affords processual insights into how structured racial inequalities are contested through the culture of African Americans to explain their underperformance in school and, by implication, the white-black achievement gap. But this theory cannot account for the fact that some African Americans compete favorably with white Americans, in terms of both effort and educational outcomes (Cook and Ludwig 1998; Tyson 1998). Nor does it account for why African American women academically

outperform African American men or why middle-class African Americans academically outperform poor African Americans.

Taken in total, then, the aforementioned structural theories have failed to account for within-group variation in achievement because they are rendered as if class or race unilaterally positions people in the social world. But people are not simply raced or classed. They are raced and classed and gendered. And as Schmid noted, they are additionally marked by ethnicity, native or immigrant status, and dark or light skin.

These structural theories have also ignored the fact that the meaning of such macrosociological positions is not static but shifts over time in relation to changing economic and opportunity structures (O'Connor 2000; Portes 1999; Wilson 1978, 1987). The dynamism of the social system is seemingly signified by the closing of the white-black achievement gap over the past 30 years (see Hallinan's article and Jencks and Phillips, 1998, for an elaborated discussion), as well as the historical shifts in the educational attainment of women relative to men during the past century (Fass 1989).

These structural theories are also inattentive to the fact that meso- and microsociological positions have been implicated in achievement differentials. As Hallinan (this issue) and Schmid (this issue) noted, a wealth of survey-based inquiries have revealed that a host of factors—individual (e.g., ability, beliefs, attitudes, and effort), home related (e.g., educational resources and family structure), and school related (e.g., financial and material resources, demographic composition, teacher expectations, and organizational features)—account for some of the registered differences in the educational outcomes among social groups. Consequently, in explaining achievement outcomes, we have to attend to the fact, for example, that being black in a public school is different from being black in a Catholic school, being black in a low-ability group is different from being black in a high-ability group, and being black in one family is different from being black in another.

But while survey-based inquiries have confirmed, in the abstract, that micro- and

mesosociological positionings also moderate group differences in achievement, by reducing these positions to variables, we lose the dynamic sense by which structure and culture operate on and through these positions to affect achievement. There is a growing genre of qualitative studies, however, that have been decidedly fixed on process and help us to make better sense of how people are variously and complexly positioned in the social world (i.e., given the intersection of structured locations; the simultaneous influence of macro-, meso-, and microsociological positions; and the effect of sociohistorical context). These studies have also tried to make sense of how the specifics of social positioning are bound to material inequities and to representations of meaning making that are manifest both as structure and agency. Although specific achievement outcomes have not always been the focus of these studies, the studies have offered critical empirical and theoretical insights by which we may make better sense of achievement differentials within and across social groups.

THE RISE OF A NEW GENRE

In addition to the work of Ferguson (2000), which I discussed earlier, a host of other studies have reflected this growing tradition in more precisely situating people in the social world as a means of making (direct and indirect) sense of achievement differentials. There has been increased attention to how structured social positionings are "particularly" and differentially reflected in and refracted by the specifics of school sites, family histories, historical moments, peer group cultures, and individual agency (e.g., Carter 1999; Foley 1991; Hemmings 1996; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lee 1996; MacLeod 1995; O'Connor 1997, 2000; Tyson 1998).

Lareau and Horvat (1999), for example, described how both racial and social-class positionings were simultaneously, variously, and complexly articulated within the contexts of one school to determine parents' ability to advocate successfully on behalf of their children. They found that structure (revealed through the historical legacy of racial discrim-

ination and social-class privilege) framed but did not wholly determine how parents made sense of the racial context of their children's school and subsequently enacted (or did not enact) their own agency in response. However, the effectiveness of these differentially raced and classed performances were refracted by how school officials "made sense" of these acts in relation to their own constructions of what should constitute meaningful parental involvement.

Lewis's (2000) study found that people who share the "same" racial position (in a structural sense) are differentially raced or deraced (in a cultural sense) from one schooling context to another as a consequence of the racial meanings that are differentially constituted at each site. More important, she showed how this meaning making has objective (and negative) educational consequences for those without social class and white skin privilege.

My research (O'Connor 1997, 2000) indicated that the meaning that African Americans construct about their own racial positioning and agency are differentiated in light of the specifics of family discourse, as well as racial constraints and opportunities that shift over time. These meanings then have consequences for how African Americans perform in school.

Lee (1996) revealed how immigration status, ethnicity, class, gender, and individual agency intersect and influence how Asian American students in one high school differentially interpret and take up the "model minority" stereotype in relation to making sense of their own identities and that of black and white others. She showed that the academic consequences of this sense making are not bound to these intersections in and of themselves, but how these intersections are particularly articulated in relation to how the model-minority stereotype (a hegemonic device) is locally and culturally reified via teachers' beliefs and organizational practices that characterize the high school.

Each study just cited has illustrated how structured social positions are reflected and refracted through local meaning making as a precursor for understanding within- and across-group variation in achievement. Unlike

macrosociological frameworks, then, these studies have attended not only to how structure affects culture, but how culture operates both as structure (at the meso- and microlevels) and agency to frame achievement outcomes. Thus, social structure is alive and well in these analyses, but the specifics of its operation are dependent on meso- and microsociological contingencies. Studies like these have brought us closer to the call made by both Hallinan and Schmid that we must develop more dynamic models of achievement outcomes—models that focus more specifically on individual, school, and community forces, as well as on internal and external forces. They have done so by showing how people are positioned complexly in the social world and how these positions are structured and cultured to affect achievement.

We must make a concerted effort to build upon this growing tradition. Future studies must attend to intersectionality more precisely. The subject of gender, its relation to other social positions, and the consequences for achievement have been especially understudied. In addition, we must struggle to generate metanarratives of what is learned from the variety of microsociological studies that are completed within this tradition. That is, consistent with the logic of meta-analysis, which operates in relation to quantitative studies, sociologists need to develop narratives that theoretically integrate the findings of these microanalyses of why children perform the way they do in America's schools. These are our challenges for the new millennium.

NOTE

1. Although King (1988) was especially concerned with making sense of intersectionalities in relation to black women, the logic of her analysis is applicable to other social groups.

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