

PRESENT STATUS OF SOCIOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES

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This past summer, the American Sociological Association celebrated its 100th anniversary. The centennial prompts sociologists to reflect on the discipline of Sociology and its growth in the United States over the last century. It also motivates us to think about the future of Sociology and the direction it will take during the next several years.

A reflection on the discipline first requires attention to its history, both within and outside the university. Sociology's debut in the U.S. began around the turn of the twentieth century. This was a time of rapid growth in public and private institutions of higher learning. A number of societal forces were shaping the development of higher education in America. Among these were educational expansion, easier access to college and graduate school, a growing commitment to excellence in research and teaching, an increase in the number of international students attending American universities, and a commitment to the role of the university in producing a meritocratic society. These same forces are seen today in a strong impulse toward multiculturalism, equality of educational opportunity, and affirmative action in American educational institutions.

From its infancy, the discipline of Sociology was strongly influenced by the growth of higher education in America. Educational expansion and access to higher education, especially with financial assistance from legislation such as the G.I. Bill following World War II, led to the growth of the social sciences in colleges and graduate schools. In the 1960s and 1970s, when social activism was widespread, Sociology became a popular undergraduate major and graduate specialization. The increased demand for sociology courses led to an increase in the number of faculty teaching Sociology and the number of researchers studying from a sociological perspective.

While the growth of American sociology was closely related to the development of the American university system, the discipline was also shaped by forces outside the university. Throughout the twentieth century, Americans were concerned about social class and social mobility, capitalism and socialism, civil rights and social reform, immigration, democratic participation, and advances in industry, technology and medicine. Sociologists were attracted to these issues as opportunities to study society and to formulate theories to explain and predict social change.

A low-keyed tension between an academic or "ivory tower" approach to sociology, and a social problem approach to the discipline was present during the early decades of the twentieth century. This tension became more overt and intense in the 1960s and 1970s. These were years of considerable civic unrest in the U.S. Social movements, including the civil rights and feminist movements, the

sexual revolution, and later the gay and lesbian rights movement, led many sociologists to become personally active in social activities in an effort to change society.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, a conservative reaction to the liberal attitudes and values of the preceding decades set in. With it came a renewed emphasis on the importance of sociology as a scholarly discipline rather than as an opportunity for social activism. During the 1980s and 1990s, the goal of many, if not most graduate students in sociology, was to attain a faculty position in a sociology department at a major university. While some students reached this goal, others were hampered by a tight academic job market. This motivated many students to study areas that would lead to nonacademic jobs, such as criminal justice or quantitative research methods. New Ph.D.'s in sociology often accepted positions in professional fields or in business where more jobs were available.

With the dawn of the twenty-first century, the academic job market opened up again and more faculty members are being hired. Sociology departments are now established in virtually every major college and university in the U.S. The number of students choosing to study sociology is increasing, partly due to the growing number of international students applying to U.S. universities. Chinese students, in particular, are applying for admission to U.S. sociology departments in great numbers. For the first time, they can take social sciences at their home universities and want to complete their advanced training in the United States.

These factors promise a bright employment future for U.S. and international students pursuing a graduate degree in sociology. The citizenry is increasingly realizing that we must renew our attempts to understand, ameliorate or solve problems in the U.S. and around the world—problems that affect individuals, like poverty and unemployment, and problems that affect societies, like ethnic conflict and environmental pollution. The need to address these problems is creating jobs in policy research and administration, in clinical and applied sociological practice, as well as in the traditional areas of teaching and basic research. Moreover, the demand for additional college and university professors is likely to increase due to high rates of retirement among “baby boom” faculty and a predicted growth in the college-age population for the next decade or two.

The internationalization of both higher education and the profession of sociology should also lead to new opportunities inside academia and in applied settings. The number of “third-sector” jobs, that is, careers that service a post-industrial economy, is increasing. Sociology is an ideal preparation for these jobs, due to its general liberal arts orientation, as well as the skills sociology hones particularly well: the ability to see the big picture, the ability to bring multiple sources of information and data to bear on a social problem, the ability to take the role of the other, and the ability to communicate to different audiences based on an understanding of other cultures.

In addition to a good fit between a degree in sociology and the job market, young scholars are attracted to the field because its status as an academic discipline has risen considerably in the past few decades. It is now generally recognized that the quality of contemporary sociological theory and empirical research is high and that sociologists have made significant contributions to an understanding of social problems and social change.

American sociology today is distinguished by a strong emphasis on sociological theory and a widespread use of statistical methods and mathematical modeling to analyze empirical data. Building on the work of Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Parsons, Merton, Coleman and others, American sociological theory has provided new insights into the causes and consequences of social behavior and societal change. Developments in quantitative and qualitative methodologies and access to large, longitudinal, national and international surveys, have permitted empirical tests of these theories. As a result, far from being the poorly defined field of its early years, with boundaries that overlapped with anthropology and social work, contemporary sociology is seen as a rigorous scientific discipline consisting of a large body of theoretical and empirical research focusing on the analysis of society.

This brief historical overview highlights the fact that sociology is a product of its past history and its present context. Contemporary scholarship in sociology and its future direction are shaped by the political, economic and social pressures of the times. This is true, of course, not only of American sociology but of Japanese sociology and of sociology in general. Further, it is true not just of sociology but of all the social sciences and, arguably, the natural sciences as well.

The influence of social context on current sociological theory and research in several developed countries around the world is easily illustrated. A recent issue of *Contemporary Sociology* (1997), a journal of symposia and book reviews sponsored by the American Sociological Association, contains a dozen essays in which leading sociologists describe how the field of sociology is developing in their own countries. Each report demonstrates that the political, economic and social structure of the country is directly influencing the sociological theory and empirical research being conducted in that country.

For example, in Turkey, where secularism is challenged by the growing strength of Islamic fundamentalism, sociologists are trying to understand the complexity of cultural and ethnic identities (Oncu, 1997). Sociologists in Sweden, confronted by their country's economic crisis, by changes in the welfare system, and by internationalization, are broadening their previous interest in the welfare state to focus on race and ethnic issues, civil and human rights, development, and culture (Esseveld, 1997).

In Argentina, sociologists are moving beyond their preoccupation with Peronism to examine contemporary income stratification, the weakening of the middle class, and unemployment (Jelin, 1997). In the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, sociologists are moving away from the study of South Africa's racial divisions and the quest for democracy, and toward analyses of the labor market, class divisions and internationalization (Webster, 1997). Similarly, in the United States, current sociology is being shaped by contemporary conditions. In a time of uncertainty about the political standing of the U.S. in the world, when terrorism and the war in Iraq have shaken national confidence, sociologists are asking questions about democracy and autonomy, about geopolitics and hegemony, about diplomacy and multilateralism. In light of the devastation following hurricane Katrina, sociologists are once again focusing on the deeply rooted racial and class-based inequities that have received insufficient attention by politicians and scholars. Political dissensus and a new awareness of the differential impact of natural calamities on rich and poor are expected to generate a

new wave of sociological research on the causes and consequences of economic and social inequality in America.

An awareness of the influence of contemporary social factors on the content of sociological theory and research makes possible several predictions about the direction American sociology will take in the near future. Some of these trends are already noticeable. I draw your attention to three underlying themes that seem to be influencing the direction in which U.S. sociology appears to be moving: the advancement of public sociology, the genderization of sociology, and understanding race and class inequities in American society. Given its importance, I will spend most of my time discussing race and class inequities.

The Advancement of Public Sociology

When American sociology was born at the dawn of the twentieth century, religious belief and social activism focused public attention on social reform. As a result, many sociologists believed that the role of their discipline was to examine and solve social problems. Students began studying sociology with the goal of reforming society and improving the lives of people. The discipline was widely seen as closely related to social work, with its aim being to explain and guide social change.

Later, however, with the rise of universities and their growing emphasis on scientific research, the role of sociology in the public domain began to recede. For the last three or four decades, sociology has been widely viewed as a scientific discipline. Sociologists came to be seen as producers of the kind of scholarship that informs social activists and provides information to help them solve social problems rather than being social activists and problem solvers themselves.

Widespread appreciation for sociological scholarship has led to the establishment of a new role in American society, that of the public sociologist. Relying on their disciplinary knowledge, public sociologists seek to explain and interpret contemporary society to a lay audience. The public sociologist is not necessarily an academic and need not have conducted original scholarship. Nor is the public sociologist a social activist who is directly involved in contemporary issues through protests, debates, or other forms of social involvement. Rather, public sociologists explain and interpret contemporary theory and empirical research to a public forum. Their analysis expands general understanding of contemporary events and their causes and consequences. In this way, the public sociologist contributes to a general awareness of the social forces and processes that affect change throughout the world.

To draw attention to the important role of the public sociologist, the ASA has instituted an award entitled Award for the Public Understanding of Sociology, presented each year at the ASA annual meetings. This award is given to a sociologist or journalist who contributed most to the American public's understanding of contemporary life and culture. The growing number of nominations for this award reveals the high regard that ASA membership has for this role.

At the same time, sociologists have gained enough experience to understand that when social engineering is not backed by rigorous scholarship it can be harmful. In an effort to insure that the

public has access to sound sociological scholarship, ASA has begun a new journal, called *Social Context*. In this journal, sociologists apply rigorous theory and empirical research to the analysis of critical social problems. In so doing, they raise critical awareness of the social processes that influence contemporary life.

In general, American sociology at the beginning of the twenty-first century is both more scholarly and more accessible to the general public than at any earlier point in its history. As a result, public understanding of the role of institutions, organizations, social groups, and culture in providing opportunities and imposing constraints on human behavior is increasing. A better understanding of how social structures and processes create opportunities and constraints on human action should lead to more enlightened solutions to contemporary social problems.

The Genderization of Sociology

The 1972 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association was held in New Orleans, Louisiana. The conference hotel had an all-male bar which many male sociologists frequented. They met there after ASA sessions to relax and discuss conference events and the discipline in general. In reaction to the exclusion of women from this bar, and to gender discrimination in general, female sociologists held a protest demonstration in the hotel lobby. This protest, born of frustration and defiance, awakened many sociologists, both male and female, to gender-based structural inequalities that characterized the profession of sociology.

Sociologists for Women in Sociology (SWS), an organization to promote gender equality, was founded in 1970. Not long after the demonstration at the annual meetings in 1972, membership in SWS increased dramatically. Since that time, SWS members have energetically and persistently pressured ASA membership and the discipline at large to work for gender equity in the profession and the academy. SWS continues to be a vital force within ASA today. Its members have affected important changes in university admissions decisions, in faculty hiring, tenure and promotions, in journal editorships and in publications. Members of SWS have also generated a large body of scholarship on gender roles in American society.

Today, the inclusion of women in the discipline has improved considerably but parity has not yet been achieved (ASA, 2003). In 1999, women earned 60 percent of the Ph.D.'s awarded at American universities but obtained only 50 percent of assistant professorships in sociology. In 2000, only 32 percent of the tenured faculty were females. Departments ranking in the top twenty by the National Research Council lag behind departments in lesser Ph.D. granting institutions in their percentage of tenured woman faculty members. The gap between the salaries of male and female sociologists in public institutions decreased slightly by 0.7 percent between 2003 and 2004, compared to the two previous years when the gap increased by 4.0 percent. Whether the slight recent decrease is a trend remains to be seen. The gender composition of the ASA membership is relatively steady. Yet, while about half of the regular members of ASA are men, about two-thirds of student members are women. Thus, there is some small evidence that ASA is becoming more female, the growth in the

percentage of female members is due to an increasing number of student memberships.

Despite the slow pace of change, ongoing efforts by many sociologists are leading to a fundamental transformation of the discipline. The core of American sociology is being rethought to incorporate the attitudes, values, cultural experiences and intellectual contributions of women. American sociologists are beginning to ask different questions about society (Ferree, 2005). Women are suggesting that housework be included in the definition of work, that beauty, sex and food be regarded as legitimate cultural objects of study, and that domestic abuse be viewed as a form of violence. Until recently, discussions of these topics were generally limited to courses on Gender Roles. With a growing awareness of the need for greater inclusiveness and a broader focus, sociologists are gradually making the perspectives and scholarship of women part of mainstream sociology. The ultimate goal is to include the study of gender, along with race and class, as part of the legitimate core of sociology, rather than marginalizing it theoretically and empirically, as has been the case in the past.

Understanding Racial and Class Inequities in American Society

Most Americans are committed to the ideal of a meritocratic society—one in which an individual's social and occupational position is determined not by ascription, but by achievement. Of course, even if a society were truly meritocratic, it still would be stratified by wealth, educational attainment, and occupational status. Individual differences in ability, motivation and preference create stratification. However, in a meritocracy, opportunities for social mobility are not constrained by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or family background. Access to societal resources is based on ability and effort.

Two major barriers to the existence of a meritocratic society in America are race and class. Hurricane Katrina reminded Americans of the continuing legacy of race- and class-based inequities in our society. Plans for the evacuation of New Orleans before the hurricane struck failed to take into account the reality of the poor, black population in the city. Most of those who did not evacuate could not because they did not have access to their own or public transportation. Consequently, the death toll from the storm was highest for the poor blacks in Louisiana. The incredible destruction of the hurricane was exacerbated by the failure of federal, state and local officials to develop adequate plans for crisis management. This disaster is reawakening the American public to the structural and personal constraints under which minorities and the poor live in American society.

The correlation between race and poverty that existed throughout the twentieth century in America continues into the twenty-first century. Both race and class strongly influence opportunities for social mobility in American society. Blacks and the poor have higher unemployment rates and hold lower paying jobs than whites and those in the middle and or upper classes. They are less likely to own their own homes, less likely to afford rent for a decent apartment and more likely to suffer bankruptcy. Blacks and the poor have fewer professional contacts to help them choose a career, find employment or advance in their jobs. They have fewer role models of professional success. Those

who manage to accumulate wealth, do so at a significantly slower rate than whites and wealthier peers.

The key to socioeconomic opportunity and social mobility in the U.S. is education. Commitment to establishing a meritocracy with equal opportunities for all citizens motivated the establishment of the American public school system. In principle, public schools were designed to provide free and equal access to schooling for all students, regardless of background, class or religion. However, in practice, we have not achieved this goal. While 90 percent of American children are educated in public schools, not all these students have the same opportunities to learn, as a brief history of American public schools demonstrates.

For decades after it was established, the public school system enrolled primarily nonblack students. In most states in the South, it was illegal to teach black students to read, 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, 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.

Schooling became an option for Southern black children in the first few decades of the twentieth century for two main reasons. First, child labor laws were established in various states, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was enacted at the federal level. These laws fixed sixteen as a minimum age for working during school hours. Second, compulsory attendance legislation began to be established in the mid-nineteenth century, and by 1918, all states had compulsory education laws. Although many Southern states were slow to enforce these laws, especially for blacks, they did become standard by the mid-twentieth century, and black enrollment in all black schools became virtually universal.

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal schools were constitutional. This ruling held until the famous *Brown v. the Board of Education case of Topeka* in 1954, in which the Supreme Court ruled that a dual segregated school system was unconstitutional. Opposition to Brown was strong in the South. In some places, such as Little Rock's Central High School, integration was achieved only after a powerful show of force by federal troops (Exploring Constitutional Conflict, 2005).

The wisdom of the Supreme Court ruling mandating school desegregation was supported by social science research. The most influential study was conducted by James Coleman and became known as the Coleman Report (1966). In this landmark national survey commissioned by the U.S. Congress, Coleman showed that black students learned more when educated in racially mixed schools than in segregated black schools.

Despite efforts to desegregate the public school system throughout the second half of the

twentieth century, recent analyses show that many public schools are once again out of compliance with desegregation goals. Court orders to bus students to attain racial integration are often ignored without penalty. Residential segregation perpetuates school segregation. The unequal distribution of financial resources to schools within states elicits charges of institutional racism. Wealthier school districts have markedly higher per pupil expenditures than poor school districts. As a result, U.S. public schools are more segregated today than they were a decade ago.

In addition, segregation within U.S. public schools continues. A school policy of assigning students to instructional groups by ability has the unintended consequence of segregating students. Moreover, students segregate themselves by race in extracurricular activities, in sports, and in the lunchroom. White students are more likely to be elected to student government, black students have a higher representation in sports, and nearly all students sit with their same race friends in the cafeteria.

When the American public school system was desegregated, attention was drawn to a significant gap between the achievement of black and white students. Concern over this gap led to various interventions in an attempt to raise black students' test scores. Some progress was made over the years, but differences have not been eradicated. The black-white achievement difference remains today as a defining mark of racial inequality in public education.

Several sociologists have documented the achievement gap between black and white students. For example, the research shows that during the 1980s, white high school seniors were about ten times more likely than black seniors to score in the top 5 percent of the national distribution on a test of academic skills. While the gap has narrowed since 1965, the rate of decrease has slowed since 1972. Moreover, the average American black student still scores below 75 percent of American whites on most standardized tests. The research further shows that only a third of the achievement gap is attributable to social-class differences.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a survey begun in the 1970s to assess trends in students' academic 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 fourth, eighth and twelfth grades. The NAEP test scores in reading for nine-, thirteen- and seventeen-year-old black and white students from 1971-2004 show a significant lag in the achievement of black students. For example, in 2004, seventeen-year-old blacks had an average reading proficiency equivalent to that of thirteen-year-old whites. The lag was 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. In 1988, nine- and thirteen-year-old blacks scored 20 points lower than age-equivalent whites in reading, and the scores of seventeen-year-old blacks were 30 points lower than those of seventeen-year-old whites. These were 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 most recent test administration of NAEP, in 2004, shows little change in the size of the

achievement gap for seventeen year-olds in both reading and mathematics, but a slight shrinkage of the gap for nine and thirteen year-olds in both subjects. The smaller gap is most pronounced for nine-year-old students in reading. Black student scores increased 14 points, from 186 in 1999 to 200 in 2004 while white student scores increased 5 points from 221 to 226. These differences shrank the achievement gap from 35 to 26 points. Since these are trend analyses, it is difficult to determine yet whether the decline represents a new and encouraging pattern or is random fluctuation. Nevertheless, even with improvement, the gap remains. Despite efforts to increase black achievement through various compensatory programs, black students, on average, continue to have significantly lower test scores than white students.

The long term consequences of low achievement for blacks are profound (Brooks, 2005). College graduates earn nearly twice as much as high school graduates and those with professional degrees earn twice as much as those with college degrees. Yet black students have far lower educational attainment than white students. Black students are more likely to repeat a grade and to drop out of high school than white students. Those who complete high school are less likely to enroll in college. Those who enroll in college are less likely to complete college. Black students are less likely to be employed and if employed, are apt to receive lower salaries than whites with the same educational attainment.

The black-white achievement gap is paralleled by an achievement gap between rich and poor students in the U.S. Poor students are more likely to have lower academic achievement than their economically advantaged peers. Students in the poorest quarter of the population have a 9 percent chance of attaining a college degree while students in the top quarter have a 75 percent chance.

Behavioral differences are also associated with race and poverty. Since blacks and the poor have less education than whites and the middle or upper class, they are less likely to engage in healthy activities and to establish stable homes. Demographic data show that high school graduates are twice as likely to smoke as college graduates and much less likely to exercise. College graduates are twice as likely to vote, to do voluntary work and to give blood. While the divorce rate is plummeting for college graduates, it remains high for those with less education. High school graduates are twice as likely to divorce than college graduates.

As in the case with the black-white achievement gap, sociologists show that the primary reason that poor children have significantly lower test scores than their more advantaged peers is that poor children begin school inadequately prepared, and are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources than students in wealthier neighborhoods. For example, twenty-one public schools in the city of Chicago have failed to meet state testing standards for six years, putting them in danger of being closed under the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind law. That includes twelve elementary schools and nine high schools in the neediest sections of the city.

School differences in per pupil expenditures also disadvantage the poor. In the state of Illinois, the gap in pupil spending between the wealthy and the poor widened substantially this past year. The top-spending district spent \$19,361 more per student than the lowest spending districts in the state. That is the biggest gap in ten years. The poorer schools cannot afford gym, special education,

subsidized lunches or books, bilingual teachers or texts, English as a Second Language classes or language labs, or counseling programs. School-based inequalities exacerbate early achievement differences. Deprived of quality schools and learning opportunities, poor students learn less than their more privileged peers in better schools. Their learning shortcomings accumulate over time, increasing the achievement gap between them and students in wealthier schools. Unequal learning opportunities are associated with race and social class and explain the black-white and class-based achievement gap that persists through all levels of the educational system.

Sociologists have formulated several theories to explain the disparities between black and white educational outcomes. These theories include biological differences, family and cultural influences, the effects of social stratification, school characteristics and organizational processes (see pp.52-63 in Hallinan, 2001). I will briefly review these theories because they are the building blocks of future work on race and class inequities.

The theory of biological determinism 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 twentieth century because it implied that blacks were responsible for their own inadequacies, thus allowing whites to excuse themselves of culpability for poor black performance.

Biological determinism had fallen into disfavor by the middle of the twentieth 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. 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 race differences in achievement are based, are culturally biased and discriminate against black students whose cultural backgrounds differ from white students. Cognitive psychologists claimed that intelligence is a multidimensional factor and cannot be measured accurately by unidimensional ability. 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.

Despite the frontal attack of social scientists on biological determinism in the 1970s, the genetic explanation for the gap between black and white achievement reemerged recently in the controversial study, *The Bell Curve*. On the basis of their analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) 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, arguing that economic success is linked to structural and social factors in society, not to inherited intelligence. A 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.

A second theory explaining disparities between black and white education outcomes is family and

cultural influences. Many sociologists who rejected biological determinism claimed that characteristics of black families account 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. This research showed that family background was a critical factor in status attainment. During the same period, the landmark Coleman Report (1966) found that family background was a stronger predictor of academic achievement than were school differences. These studies drew attention to the influence of family background on academic achievement and attainment.

Concern about the effects of family background on student achievement led social scientists to look to differences in the structure of black and white families for an explanation for the low academic performance of black students. Researchers point to differences in family composition, marriage and divorce rates, and socioeconomic status. Among the differences observed are larger black families, lower educational attainment of black female heads of households, lower black median household income, and a higher proportion of black families headed by unmarried persons.

Although these findings are accurate, most sociologists question whether they explain the achievement gap. Their argument is that important changes in the structure of the black family have occurred over the past few decades. Differences between black and white family composition, marriage and divorce patterns, and education and income have been shrinking steadily while racial differences in educational outcomes have not.

In addition to research on the effects of family structure on student outcomes, sociologists have posited an effect of culture on school performance. Two neoconservative 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. 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. Proponents argue 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.

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. Proponents of this view argue 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.

Many sociologists have expressed concern about cultural effects theories of poor black achievement. They argue that the empirical evidence of a culture of oppression is sparse and that relying on a notion of black cultural exceptionalism and cultural deviance simply perpetuates the dependence of blacks on whites. They point to recent analyses to support their arguments. Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey show 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. These data suggest that the reason for the poor performance of blacks is that they 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. They highlight the role that the white majority plays in blacks' underachievement and contend that racist white attitudes and prejudices weaken the self-esteem of blacks and reduce their opportunities to advance educationally and economically.

These theoretical formulations reveal a tension between an individualistic and a structural perspective of low black performance. An individualistic perspective attributes black 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. Bourdeau (1977) 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 Socioeconomic Status (SES) is related to race, and blacks are likely to have lower SES than whites, blacks are apt to have less cultural capital. Similarly, blacks are believed to have less social capital as evidenced by low membership in social networks that provide valuable information and resources to students.

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. Background and cultural factors have powerful effects on students' outcomes, but they are resistant to change. However, school practices and policies may be more amenable to modification. Consequently, the school should be seen as a critical partner in efforts to transform society.

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 to explain black underperformance. Researchers 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.

Social reproduction theory and resistance theories identify the school as the primary agent for

both social reproduction and social change. Social reproduction theorists view the transmission of class structure as a response to the demands of a capitalist society. They argue that schools channel different learning opportunities to students depending on their ascribed and achieved characteristics and their future roles in a capitalist society. Resistance theorists focus on the reaction of students to the efforts of schools to reproduce the social order. Emphasizing students' nonconformity and resistance, they argue that 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. Still others insist that race continues to play a dominant and undiminished role in creating educational disparities. Sociological debate on the validity of these theories is expected to continue in the twenty-first century as more sociologists examine issues of social inequality.

Another theory of racial inequalities examines the effects of school characteristics on student outcomes. 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 student outcomes. Studies of the effects of school resources, such as the physical plant, science equipment, library books, technology, and other instructional resources have found only weak effects, if any, of these resources on student achievement. No differential effects of school resources on black and white achievement were found within schools.

Research on the effects of the racial composition of a school shows that black students attain higher achievement when they attend majority white schools. Moreover, the positive effect on black students does not jeopardize the achievement of white students. In addition, studies find that black and white students attending racially mixed schools exhibit less prejudice and more interracial sociability than those in segregated schools. However, other studies fail to document these various benefits of desegregation, or find them to be quite small, and at times even negative. 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 black performance and black self-esteem. Other more compelling reasons for school desegregation exist.

Another school characteristic studied by sociologists is school climate or the academic orientation of a school. It is typically measured in terms of the SES, ability or racial composition of a school, teacher expectations, and parental involvement. Sociologists have relied on normative and comparative reference group theory and propositions about modeling to predict the effects of school climate on student achievement. They link the norms and values of a student's peer group to a student's academic performance. They also predict that the presence of academic role models will promote student achievement. Yet little empirical support for these propositions has been found.

In the past two decades, another approach to the study of school climate effects on student achievement has been taken. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) argued that the communal organization of Catholic schools and their strong academic orientation and strict discipline should have a positive effect on student achievement. Empirical analysis supported this prediction. Moreover, black and low-

income students benefitted the most from attendance at Catholic schools. Similarly, Bryk and colleagues (1993) predicted that a strong academic curriculum, communal organization, decentralized governance, and an inspirational ideology would promote student engagement and academic achievement. Again, their prediction was supported in empirical data.

These two studies suggest that strong academic programs and a faculty and student body with a sense of communal responsibility may offset the limitations of a student's background. A supportive academic and social climate may be particularly effective in promoting learning for disadvantaged students.

Finally, sociologists search for within-school processes that might affect student academic performance. In particular, they focus on instructional processes as a possible source of racial disparities in student achievement. Particular attention is given to the organizational differentiation of students for instruction and teacher expectations.

American schools typically assign students to a stratified hierarchy of courses for instruction. In most middle and high schools, students are assigned to Advanced, Honors, Regular or Basic courses, depending on their academic ability. Proponents of ability grouping argue that the practice benefits all students because teachers can gear instruction to the students' ability level. Critics claim that homogeneous grouping disadvantages minority students because they are disproportionately assigned to low ability groups, which offer a weaker learning environment.

Sociologists of education have accumulated a large body of research examining ability grouping. A number of studies show that black students are disproportionately assigned to lower ability groups in middle and high school. However, when achievement is taken into account, the results are less consistent. 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 does result in a disproportionate number of black students being assigned to lower ability groups.

A second set of studies examines the effects of ability group level on student achievement. These studies provide strong evidence that students learn more in higher ability groups than in lower groups. Data also show that the quantity and quality of instruction is higher in higher level ability groups. The Basic ability group is often characterized by less experienced teachers, a less challenging curriculum, more disciplinary problems, and fewer academic role models than higher level groups. The research indicates that if ability grouping is to be retained as an equitable pedagogical practice, educators must insure that students at all group levels have equal learning opportunities.

Another within-school process studied by social scientists is the set of expectations teachers hold for student performance. Social science theory claims that teacher expectations affect student motivation, effort, and achievement. Empirical evidence supports this proposition. Some studies find that teachers have higher expectations for white students than for black students. However, the findings from studies of differential teacher expectations for students by race are inconsistent. Future work in this area needs to examine in greater depth the effects of student characteristics, particularly race, on student achievement. Sociologists need to determine the magnitude of the influence, how it

can be modified, whether black students respond to teacher interactions differently than 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.

Sociologists are likely to continue studying the determinants and consequences of social inequalities throughout the twenty-first century. In examining educational inequities, they will build on the foundational work accomplished in the twentieth century. In particular, they will study the effects of biology, family, and culture, as well as structural, organizational and institutional influences on educational achievement, educational attainment, and occupational attainment.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) declared that "the problem of the twentieth 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 one hundred years later, John Hope Franklin (1993) made virtually the same claim, asserting that "the problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of the color line...by any standard of measurement or evaluation, the problem has not been solved in the twentieth 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 class-based stratification. Their work has provided important insights into how social institutions perpetuate racial and class differences in educational and occupational attainment. Sociologists have identified institutional and social structures and processes that channel differential opportunities to Americans.

Despite these significant sociological contributions, much work remains to be done. Recently, Douglas Massey (2005) argued that twentieth-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. While not all sociologists agree that they have avoided asking difficult questions about race and class 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 and the social agents that can reduce social inequalities are identified.

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, be the explanatory focus. Sociological analysis of contemporary issues tends to stress either individual attitudes and behaviors, or properties and functions of the entities in which they are embedded. If Coleman's advice is followed, sociologists need to extend existing theories to take into account individuals and the groups to which they belong to determine how they interact as a dynamic social system.

As sociology begins its second century as an academic discipline, we cannot fail to appreciate its unique and powerful resources. According to Laic Wacquant (2005), a researcher at the Center for European Sociology in Paris and faculty member at the University of California, Berkeley, American

sociology has unique assets to bring to social analysis. It has established high standards of technical competency and developed strong traditions of research in the three main strands of social inquiry—the ethnographic, the historical, and the statistical. It is surrounded by vibrant sister disciplines with which to cross-pollinate. The United States is also the epicenter of the neoliberal revolution that is now sweeping the globe, and as such, it offers an extraordinary laboratory to scrutinize the major social transformations of our age.

To fulfill its mission, American sociology must draw on its resources to foster theoretical breadth and depth and methodological rigor and diversity. We should respond to the substantive, methodological, and empirical strength of our scholarship by engaging international scholars and joining them in a collaborative effort to address the critical issues of our times. We should continue to welcome students from around the world to study in our institutions of higher education. And we should generously, and without fear, share our ideas and resources with all social scientists from around the world in order to work together to transform society. This is the lofty goal of sociologists in the twenty-first century.

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