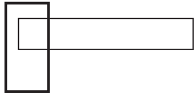

Researching "Black" Educational Experiences and Outcomes: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

by Carla O'Connor, Amanda Lewis, and Jennifer Mueller

This article delineates how race has been undertheorized in research on the educational experiences and outcomes of Blacks. The authors identify two dominant traditions by which researchers have invoked race (i.e., as culture and as a variable) and outline their conceptual limitations. They analyze how these traditions mask the heterogeneity of the Black experience, underanalyze institutionalized productions of race and racial discrimination, and confound causes and effects in estimating when and how race is "significant." The authors acknowledge the contributions of more recent scholarship and discuss how future studies of Black achievement might develop more sophisticated conceptualizations of race to inform more rigorous methodological examinations of how, when, and why Black students perform in school as they do.

Keywords: achievement gap; Black achievement; race

In recent years, Black student achievement in the United States has garnered substantial attention. In particular, there has been sustained focus on the persistence of racial gaps in educational outcomes and on why Black students are underperforming in school. In analyzing how and why the educational experiences and outcomes of Blacks differ from those of other racial groups—particularly Whites—the concept of race is regularly invoked. At the same time, race is often undertheorized in education research (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pollock, 2004; Tate, 1997). Although some research of the past decade offers more complex conceptualizations of race, we argue that there is still much work to be done in the interest of capturing the meaning and consequences of race for educational experiences and outcomes. The absence of conceptual (and, by implication, methodological) precision impinges on our ability to interpret accurately how and why Black students fare in school as they do and to develop policy that will ameliorate racial gaps in achievement.[1]

To delineate how race has been undertheorized in contemporary education research, we zero in on two dominant traditions in which race has been captured as a social category in research conducted in the past 40 years. The first tradition treats race as culture; the second treats it as a variable. We outline the two traditions and discuss their conceptual limitations. We analyze how one tradition (race as a variable) confounds causes and effects in the estimation of when and how race is "significant" to Black achievement. We then discuss how both traditions not only mask the heterogeneity of the Black experience and its relationship to the differentiated academic performance of Black youth but also underanalyze institutionalized productions of race and racial discrimination. We subsequently discuss how future studies on the Black educational experience might correct for these limitations. Finally, we recommend productive directions for reorienting empirical and analytical focuses, a move that will necessitate a shift in research design and methodology.

The Dominant Traditions

Race as Culture

During the past 40 years, education researchers have variously defined and examined the impact of culture on Black student achievement. Initially, researchers conceptualized culture as consisting of norms and beliefs, and they sought to document differences in the norms and beliefs that governed the life of the poor, who were disproportionately Black, as contrasted with the middle class, who were imagined as White (e.g., language practices, parenting approaches and child-parent interactions, educational attitudes and aspirations). They concluded that the differences elucidated deficiencies in lower-class and Black culture and explained why Blacks underperformed in school relative to Whites (e.g., Bloom, Whiteman, & Deutsch, 1965; Deutsch, 1964a, 1964b).

Critics, however, argued that researchers working in this tradition had not in fact captured culture in their analyses but had only isolated and described selected behaviors of the (Black) poor (Gordon, 1965; Valentine, 1968). In the process, researchers had imposed their own meanings on the behaviors, positioned Whites as the normative referent, and obfuscated native understandings of what was being communicated by Blacks who engaged in or eschewed particular actions.

To disrupt this White normative referent, a growing community of scholars sought to define Black culture in terms of competencies and practices. They documented the linguistic codes, learning styles, and social orientations that distinguished Blacks. In doing so, they attempted to curtail the invidious comparisons between presumably Black and White practices. These scholars highlighted the productive qualities of these codes, styles, and orientations and faulted schools for institutionalizing norms and

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practices that failed to build on the competencies that Black children brought to school (e.g., Kochman, 1981; Labov, 1982; Reissman, 1962). Critics responded that this school of thought often fell short of exploring the meanings that undergirded "Black" competencies and practices and also offered oversimplified conceptualizations of culture (research like that of Heath, 1982, Irvine, 1990, and C. Lee, 2007, being notable exceptions). For example, Ogbu (1999) noted that the Ebonics debates that emerged in response to the Oakland School District's effort to use African American Vernacular English as a scaffold for teaching and learning

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

Fordham (1999) similarly noted that researchers should not limit analyses to how Ebonics "parallels or deviates from . . . standard dialect" (p. 272) but must examine how "the meaning of the linguistic practices of Black youths" operate as "marker[s] of Black identity" (p. 274).

In alignment with these claims, contemporary scholars have examined how Blackness is articulated through meaning making rather than through objectified competencies and practices. In accordance with this orientation, Blacks are distinguished from other racial groups in light of how they make sense of publicly available tools or symbols. This conceptual emphasis is consistent with larger trends in sociology and anthropology to characterize culture "by the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning" (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). Through this emphasis on meaning making, researchers have begun mapping, conceptually and empirically, how Black people interpret, act upon, and produce material (e.g., art forms, tools) as well as social texts (e.g., interaction, identity, ideology, strategies for action; Yosso, 2005).

Despite exceptions (e.g., Carter, 2005; Tyson, 2002), this continued progression in researchers' efforts to develop ever more complex renderings of culture in relation to race often stops short of escaping what Michaels (1992) refers to as the "anticipation of culture by race" (p. 677). That is, we presume that "to be Navajo you have to do Navajo things, but you can't really count as doing Navajo things unless you already are Navajo" (Michaels, 1992, p. 677). Although we must substitute *Black* for *Navajo* in this instance, the effect is the same. Such anticipation reifies race as a stable and objective category and links it deterministically to culture.

When race is operationalized in this way, we lose sight of Black heterogeneity and underconceptualize accordant intersectionalities. In addition, we overlook the extent to which Blackness is reflected not only in the meanings students bring with them to school but also in the meanings that are imposed on them by school structures. In the process, we underestimate the emergent and dynamic meanings of race and the impact of racial discrimination.

Race as a Variable

Education research that treats race as a variable also tends to conceptualize race as a stable, objective category and to demonstrate the aforementioned limitations that derive from this conceptualization. For example, in their efforts to explain a range of educational outcomes—particularly gaps in Black-White achievement—researchers rely on statistical models where race is included as one of many control variables (e.g., social class, previous achievement, school resources) and is treated as an individual attribute. These models "test" whether mediating factors decrease the significance with which race is associated with educational outcomes.

When interpreting the cause of the racial differences in educational outcomes, scholars in this tradition often collapse conceptually the statistical relationships they document between race and the moderating variable under study. For instance, if IQ scores predict educational achievement and Blacks have lower scores than Whites, then being Black is seen as equivalent to being intellectually deficient (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Alternatively, if two-parent households and the presence of a father in the home correlate with more competitive educational outcomes, and Blacks are shown to grow up in households headed by single women at disproportionately higher rates than are Whites, the prevalent family structure of Blacks (even if founded in economic inequities) is reduced to a cultural dysfunction (e.g., Bankston & Caldas, 1998; A. A. Ferguson, 2001; Moynihan, 1965). In both of these examples, being Black functions as a conceptual proxy for something else (i.e., biology or culture). What was once a statistical correlation is now conceived as a trait embodied in a coherent "Black" community. So, although "race as biology" has been disproved in biological and anthropological literature, scholars continue to conceptualize it as a proxy for bad genes or a lack of the "cultural 'right stuff'" (Darity, 2002, p. 1). The logic of these analyses parallels that found in the cultural arguments, thus delineating a place of convergence between the treatment of race as culture and race as a variable. Bonilla-Silva (2001) calls this approach the "biologization of culture."

Although other scholars in this tradition examine the impact of social and institutional inequities on observed racial differences in achievement, their analyses also treat race as if it were an individual attribute that is stable across time. For example, researchers have controlled for social class and educational resources in the interest of exploring whether their differential distribution across racial groups explains racial gaps in achievement and diminishes the significance with which race "predicts" educational outcomes. Although researchers have found that these resources account for some of the documented differences in racial achievement gaps, their effect is minimal and does not reduce substantially the statistical significance with which race correlates with educational outcomes (e.g., Coleman, 1966; Grissmer, Kirby, Berends, & Williamson, 1994; Hallinan, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). In addition, changes in the socioeconomic status (SES) of racial groups across time do not predict changes in racial achievement gaps, and the gaps between middle-class Whites and Blacks (even among those attending resource-rich schools) are greater than those between lower-class Whites and Blacks ("Confronting a Widening Racial Gap," 2003; "The Expanding Racial Scoring Gap," 2002; Hallinan, 2001).

Looking to explain these findings, researchers argue that studies that control for the influence of social class generally and inaccurately assume that the effects of social class are constant across racial groups (J. Lee, 2002) and historical time and are comparable at the top and bottom tails of achievement distributions (Hedges & Nowell, 1999). In making these arguments, researchers attribute to social class a sociohistorical dynamism but stop short of attributing the same dynamism to race. Without considering how the meaning and effect of race is differentially articulated across space, time, and reference groups, researchers relegate race to a unified and stable social category that powerfully predicts Blacks' educational outcomes. The conceptual dilemma is that "Black" is not a biological category that can be reduced to an individual trait (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007). It is a social group united by a long history of racialized experiences in the United States (Davis, 1991; Takaki, 1993). Unfortunately, education researchers are often inattentive to this when they interpret findings of statistical significance. Moreover, in these analyses race is often mistakenly situated as a cause for educational outcomes (Zuberi, 2001). Although racial discrimination, for example, may be a cause of some specified outcome, race itself merely marks a social location. It is an ascribed characteristic and a political classification system.

We do not mean to suggest that we should not collect or analyze racial data. Nor are we diminishing the importance of quantitative education research. Collecting and analyzing racial data is essential for understanding and tracking racial inequalities and for charting progress on a range of social outcomes such as SES, individual well-being, and educational attainment. However, we must be theoretically precise in our articulations of what is being captured when race is a variable in the analysis. This means, in part, that racial data should not be used as proxies for traits (such as intelligence or motivation) and subsequently interpreted as innate or culturally ingrained. In the absence of theoretical precision, not only do we misinterpret findings of racial "significance," but as in previously discussed studies that treat race as culture, we are also inclined to homogenize the Black community and underestimate the effects of racial discrimination. What follows is a delineation of these limitations across the two traditions.

Conceptual and Methodological Limitations

Masking the Heterogeneity of the Black Experience

When researchers in the race-as-culture tradition report on norms and values, competencies and practices, or subjectivity and meaning making, usually they are reporting on findings that are specific to a particular segment of the Black community that is subject to a host of social phenomena including, but not limited to, race-related dynamics. Although researchers often allude to these other influences in their elaborated descriptions of the research participants (e.g., by referring to the gender or social class of those under study) and the research settings (e.g., by referring to the demographics, organization, and location of the site of the study), these influences are rarely analyzed. For example, although the majority of studies that have situated race as culture have focused on lower income Blacks in urban spaces, the ways in which social class and place may have shaped these reported expressions of "Black" culture are not examined. In turn, researchers inadvertently cast the Black poor as a homogenous social category and overlook the ways in which space, time, and social class moderate the experience of being Black and the consequent norms, values, competencies, practices, and subjectivities that derive from that experience.

Space, Time, and Intersecting Identities. These are problems because, in terms of space, Black life in large urban cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and South is marked more profoundly by both racial and social class segregation than in the West (Massey & Eggers, 1990). Moreover, researchers have documented how the Black experience varies from one school system to the next, in part as a consequence of how the economy differentially frames the demographics and funding of school systems (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1991). Scholars have also documented how the specifics of neighborhood (Patillo-McCoy, 1999) and school (e.g., Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Hemmings, 1996) affect Black life.

Racial experiences are also marked by historical time. However, although there are some important exceptions (e.g., Galletta & Cross, 2007; MacLeod, 1995; O'Connor, 2002), education researchers have approached their analyses as if Blacks' race-related constraints and opportunities did not vary from one historical era to another. To provide one example, Ogbu's cultural ecological model (CEM) denies the dynamism of Black subjugation across time.[2] The model operates as if there were only one story to be told about Black subjugation and as if it were only this tale that framed Black youths' renderings of opportunity and their consequent performance in school. However, sociologists have marked critical shifts in Black people's experience with oppression. They have discerned shifts from "economic racial oppression" to "class subordination" (Wilson, 1978), from "overt" racism to "color blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), and from "traditional" to "laissez-faire" racism (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997). Operating within the logic of CEM, we would expect that Black adults coming of age in different eras would generate distinct narratives about opportunity and thus differentially affect how Black youths come to interpret their life chances. Failure to attend to how the demands of particular geographic or historical contexts influence the norms, practices, and meaning making of Black youth is not uncommon. As indicated by Spencer, Swanson, and Cunningham (1991), "Studies that explore contextual effects are seldom conducted on minority youth" (p. 368).

Beyond time and space, Blacks are also classed. The impact of social class as a moderating influence may be growing in significance, given the increased income polarization among Blacks. This polarization, which is defined by "proportionate declines in the middle class, and sharp increases in the proportions of both the affluent and the poor," suggests that the experience of Black "haves" and "have-nots" has become more differentiated (Massey & Eggers, 1990, p. 1166). Researchers continue to document distinctions not only in how poor and affluent Blacks interpret their life chances but in how they define their interests and ideologies (Hochschild, 1995). Differentiation also occurs among Blacks who are similarly classed and are operating in the same space and time. For example, O'Connor (1997) documented how Blacks who share the same class standing and operate in the same social spaces vary considerably in their social encounters and worldviews. Horvat and Lewis (2003) examined how SES mediated the ways

that Black families were able to access social networks and influence school decisions.[3] In failing to attend to variation in the Black experience, we construct Blackness as a static social category.

In research that treats race as a variable, this static expression of Blackness is made evident when we scrutinize the methods by which respondents are categorized as Black. To begin, survey research categorizes individuals as Black when they or their parents identify them as such. However, this research does not account for how the context of administration and the design of the survey influence the respondents' designations. Depending on how demographic questions are asked, the range of available options, and the context in which the asking occurs, we may well get different responses. For example, in a recent analysis of national data, Harris and Sim (2000) found that multiracial students responded differently to questions about their racial identification depending on the mode of the questioning (self-administered survey or interview) and the location of the questioning (school or home).

In addition, surveys regularly prevent Hispanics from claiming a racial designation. The racial and ethnic options provided on surveys often situate "Hispanic" as a category that parallels "Black not of Hispanic origin" and "White not of Hispanic origin." By defining racial and ethnic choices in this way, we blur the distinction between race and ethnicity and deny respondents the ability to claim an ethnic and a racial affiliation.[4] Even when surveys enable Hispanics to claim a racial designation, the choices—to the chagrin of many Hispanics—are usually dichotomized, for example, between White and Black (Rodriguez, 2000). Moreover, researchers rarely use the information, thus avoiding race-related analyses. And although place of birth on the same surveys can signal the ethnic affiliations of Blacks (e.g., African or West Indian), researchers do not often take advantage of such data.[5] With some exceptions (e.g., Butterfield, 2006; Farley & Allen, 1989; Waters, 1994), the ethnic differentiation among Blacks and its relation to their educational outcomes is understudied.

Such issues are suggested in Portes and MacLeod's (1996) study of the educational progress of children of immigrants to the United States from Cuba, Vietnam, Haiti, and Mexico. This study focuses our attention on the importance of the context of reception in the differential performance of these immigrant groups. The researchers do not, however, analyze how race may have moderated the nature of that reception and how race and ethnicity intersect to explain variation in educational outcomes and experiences. For example, they found that Cuban and Vietnamese immigrants, in contrast to Haitian and Mexican immigrants, were "received sympathetically by the U.S. government and were granted numerous forms of federal assistance" (p. 260). Portes and MacLeod indicate that the Cubans and Vietnamese used the subsidies to "create solidary and dynamic entrepreneurial communities" that, in part, framed their more competitive achievement performance. The authors also note that earlier waves of Cubans received generous governmental assistance that was denied to those who arrived later. Although the authors report that the first wave of Cubans were of higher social-class origins, they fail to point out that the first wave was also disproportionately "White," whereas later waves were primarily "Black" and "Brown" (Pedraza & Rumbaut, 1996). The analyses did not explore how race (signaled by phenotype) might be implicated in institutionalized access to resources.[6] Although Portes and MacLeod did not pursue this study in the interest of examining how race and ethnicity influence reception and educational outcomes, their sample calls attention to the ways that the reception and subsequent outcomes of Black Haitians and Black Cubans may have been similar. The study unintentionally illustrates the importance of exploring when, how, and why educational experiences and outcomes vary (or do not vary) among Blacks of different ethnic groups.

The issues of design and analysis discussed earlier raise two important questions: (a) Who is being captured in and who is being excluded by the category "Black"? and (b) How does this categorization impinge on our comparative analyses of Blacks vis-à-vis others? Although these questions can be addressed in part with the use of control variables (e.g., SES, region, nationality), some of the variation is left out because of limitations in data collection.

It is not beyond the scope of a survey to assess how participants make sense of the racial options with which they are provided. We can design surveys with the intent of examining how respondents understand their selected racial options in relation to researcher-selected parameters of interest. We might, for example, use Sellers and colleagues' (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) multidimensional model of racial identity to gauge, among other things, (a) the extent to which being Black is central to the identity of the person under study, (b) whether the person assesses being Black in positive or negative terms, or (c) whether the self-designation as Black is aligned with a specific racial ideology. This model contributes significantly to our understanding of the multidimensionality of Black racial identity. However, like other survey approaches, it also restricts the respondent's ability to impose categories unanticipated by the researcher. Consequently, we are unable to assess dimensions of racial identity that were not targeted a priori. Nor can we make adequate sense of those dimensions that are represented by performance (e.g., style, dress, language) rather than by cognition and would be better captured by observation.[7]

We are also unable to explore how the social construction of these categories (through macro- or microdynamics or historical or contemporary forces) informs a participant's interpretation of or election into one category over another (Cornell, 1996; Hall, 1990). For example, researchers (e.g., Vickerman, 1999) have found that many immigrants of dark phenotype who had not previously imagined themselves as "Black" adopted that identity after their arrival in the United States, given the power with which skin color signals race in the U.S. context.

Our failure to attend to the aforementioned methodological and conceptual issues necessarily influences how we make sense of the statistically robust relationships that are reported in research that features race as a variable. That is, although this research is often focused on identifying correlates for Black educational outcomes, it often prevents us from interpreting how race, operating as a social phenomenon, impinges on these relationships. Thus, when some research finds that income and occupation are less robust predictors of achievement for Blacks than for Whites, we cannot unpack the relationship. Is the relationship a function of the ways in which Blacks across social class groups similarly make sense of and display what it means to "be" Black

in the school setting? Is it due to the frames of Blackness that are imposed by schooling agents on Black bodies in ways that diminish the significance of social class? Or is it how social class, as signaled by income and occupation, marks culture and determines opportunity differently and less powerfully than when it is signaled by wealth (a measure in which Blacks across income categories have huge deficits relative to Whites)?

When studies fail to account analytically for Black heterogeneity, we construct oversimplified notions of what it means to be Black and thereby compromise our ability to make sense of the substantive variation in achievement performance that occurs among Blacks in and across time. Despite overarching accounts of Black underperformance in school, Black performance in school varies. For example, the differences between Black and White educational attainment narrowed during the 1970s, but by the mid-1980s the gap began to grow (Nettles & Perna, 1997). Similarly, researchers documented the dramatic narrowing of the Black-White test score gap during the 1970s, which leveled off during the 1980s and began to reverse itself on some measures, such as reading and science scores (Grissmer et al., 1994). Across the same span of time, Black test score gains were somewhat larger in the Southeast and smallest in the Northeast (Grissmer et al., 1994). Black students at Catholic and "effective" schools outperformed Blacks in public and unreformed neighborhood schools (Bryk et al., 1993; Wang & Gordon, 1994). The performance of Black subgroups also varies. Although Black men now lag behind Black women in the rates at which they earn advanced degrees (Nettles & Perna, 1997), this was not always the case. During the mid-1970s, for example, Black men outperformed Black women on this measure (Cross & Slater, 2000).

Certainly, our account of research on the variation in Black achievement is not exhaustive. These findings nevertheless signal the need to specify which Blacks are being studied and the conditions under which they are operating. We cannot stop with naming and describing who, when, and where but must analyze and theorize how these specificities are implicated in the cultural formations that we attach to achievement outcomes. In our struggle to establish conceptual links between the heterogeneity in the Black experience and the heterogeneity in Black educational outcomes, we must also contend with intersectionalities.

The Underconceptualization of Intersectionalities. As noted earlier, Black variation is marked not only by space, time, and ethnicity but also by gender and social class (Carter, 2005; O'Connor, 2002). Recognizing this, researchers have conducted studies that contrast the experiences of Black men with those of Black women (e.g., Cross & Slater, 2000; Grant, 1984). In other instances, researchers have focused on Black men and women and have used Whites or members of other ethnic groups of the same gender category as comparative referents (e.g., A. A. Ferguson, 2001; Fordham, 1996; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Similarly, researchers have captured the experiences of middle-class, working-class, and poor Blacks (Hemmings, 1996; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Still others have sought to examine the intersections of race, class, and gender (Cousins, 1999; Horvat & Antonio, 1999).

Although some of the works cited offer notable exceptions (e.g., Carter, 2005; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), much of this work stops short of examining intersectionalities substantively. In some instances, researchers who compare Blacks of different genders or social classes or Whites and Blacks of the same gender and social class simply list the differences in the groups' educational experiences or outcomes. They do not offer a concomitant analysis of how the participants' social class or gender locations interface with racial location to explain the noted differences. When such analyses are attempted, one group position is often privileged over another. For example, Holland and Eisenhart (1990), in their study of Black and White women in college, identify distinctions in how the two groups of women negotiate the culture of femininity in relation to how they achieve in and experience college. The authors note that the culture of femininity and its accordant relationship with women's college achievements and experiences are differently framed for the two groups, in part because of the different peer cultures operating at the two colleges. However, the authors offer no analysis regarding how race shapes these differences. The marginalization of race as an analytical category is especially problematic because the Black women were attending a historically Black college and the White women were attending a predominantly White college.

Feminist scholars warn us against establishing hierarchal relationships between social positions (e.g., King, 1988). They compel us to examine how these positions are "inextricably intertwined and circulate together in the representations [or structuring] of subjects and experiences of subjectivity" (A. A. Ferguson, 2001, p. 22). Many researchers have been hesitant to examine class and gender out of concern that the significance of race will be trumped in the process. Some of those who have done so have been criticized for their efforts (e.g., Wilson, 1978). If, however, we examine these positions as intertwined rather than as isolated and independent, we evade the risk of displacing the significance of race.

Underanalyzing Institutionalized Productions of Race and Racial Discrimination

Related to these concerns, the framing of race as culture can have the effect of ignoring or minimizing how race is produced institutionally. Although some cultural analyses have attended to racialized meaning making and have made strides in reporting on intersectionalities, such work is generally focused on examining the racialized understandings that Black youths bring with them to school. For example, Fordham (1993) examined how gender and race intersected in the production of Black women's conceptions of womanhood and how these conceptions were implicated in the pursuit of competitive academic outcomes. Alternatively, Lareau and Horvat (1999) showed how the race and social class of the Black parents in their study simultaneously framed how they gauged the racial terrain of their children's schools and how they went about advocating on their children's behalf. Works such as these provide insight into how Blacks produce classed and gendered interpretations of themselves as racial subjects and of their status in social settings. Such works also elucidate how these raced, but not solely raced, interpretations influence how some Blacks think about and behave in school in their efforts to influence their own or their children's educational outcomes. In delineating how Blacks make sense of their status and experience as raced (but not solely raced) subjects and then act accordingly in school, studies such as these often stop short of examining how schools and their

agents simultaneously racialize Black subjects and in turn structure racism (Dolby, 2001; Lewis, 2003a).

A. A. Ferguson's (2001) work substantiates the need for such analyses. She found that although both Black and White boys perform their masculinity by breaking school rules, Black boys more often find themselves in trouble because of how their performances are interpreted. When White boys transgressed, school officials presumed that "boys will be boys," attributed "innocence to their wrongdoing," and believed that "they must be socialized to fully understand the meaning of their acts" (p. 80). In contrast, when Black boys transgressed, their acts were "adultified." That is, "their transgressions [were] made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone . . . stripped of any element of naivete" (p. 83). Having framed them as "not children," the interpreters (most of whom were White and constituted authority in the school setting) were 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 the school" (p. 90). The relationship between these institutionalized productions of race and the higher rates at which Black boys find themselves in trouble is evident. Other researchers have contributed to our growing understanding of how school-based productions of race shape race-related inequities in educational access and opportunity (e.g., Dolby, 2001; Lewis, 2003a; Pollock, 2001, 2004) and ultimately function as institutionalized racism (even if not explicitly labeled as such by the researchers). Researchers who fail to build on this emerging approach to studying race in schools will likely underestimate the effects of racial discrimination.

The risk of underestimating the effects of racial discrimination also emerges in education research that deploys race as a variable. One example comes from national studies of secondary school that "control" for previous achievement (most often operationalized as eighth-grade test scores) in the effort to determine whether race is significant in predicting educational outcomes. Such studies, often drawing on large, longitudinal national data sets (e.g., the National Education Longitudinal Study), may underestimate the effects of institutionalized racism on educational outcomes by including measures of previous achievement as if they were good controls for academic ability rather than measures of previous opportunity. The studies fail to recognize that previous achievement may well serve as a proxy for racial discrimination—systematically poor educational experiences and opportunities in the early years that are captured in eighth-grade test scores.

In an example from the research on track placements, Dauber, Alexander, and Entwistle (1996) discuss how the effects of social background factors (race, SES, etc.) can be masked as "objective academic qualifications" (p. 300). They found that sixth-grade course placement (i.e., advanced, regular, or remedial) was the main predictor of eighth-grade course placement. However, they found that the main predictors of sixth-grade course placement included social background factors—race being one of the most significant. The authors state that, "by the eighth grade, social-background differences in mathematics are almost entirely hidden by their strong association with sixth-grade placements" (p. 300). This illustrates how using seemingly objective academic outcomes from early in a student's career as controls in analyzing later academic outcomes can mask other effects. Specifically, in sixth grade, Black students were much less likely than similar White peers to be placed in high-track classes and were more likely than similar White peers to be placed in low-track classes. Those patterns held in eighth grade, but any analysis that used sixth-grade placement as an objective measure of prior achievement would find almost no race effects—as they were almost entirely captured by the variable "sixth-grade placement."

In another example, Mickelson (2001), using longitudinal data, found that attending a racially isolated Black elementary school had both direct and indirect negative effects on achievement and track placement, even with controls for numerous individual and family indicators. This measure is often not available and thus is not usually included in analyses. But, given persistently high levels of school segregation, it might well be one factor that is typically captured in the variable "race." In fact, ample evidence exists suggesting that institutionalized racism of various kinds shapes access to educational opportunity and resources (Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 1999; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; R. Ferguson, 1998; Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2001; Lewis, 2003b; Mickelson, 2003; Roscigno, 1998). But research that includes prior achievement and race in a regression model and concludes that race is not significant has the potential to miss such effects. This kind of analysis implies that race and prior achievement occur or have effects at the same time, when, in fact, race (as a proxy for institutionalized racism) potentially has causal significance in shaping prior achievement.

Our call for more purposeful theorization of how racism is implicated in Black educational experiences and outcomes is consistent with that of education scholars who build on the social science and legal literature in critical race theory. These scholars challenge researchers to examine how racism shapes educational experiences and outcomes, in part by studying (a) how the discourses that emerge in and around schools and students are not neutral but, rather, have "embedded in them values and practices that normalize racism" (Duncan, 2002, p. 131; Rousseau & Tate, 2003); (b) how the historical legacy of racism structures group advantage and disadvantage in school (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); and (c) how the narratives of people of color are central to analyzing and understanding these phenomena (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; see Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, for further discussion.)

Orienting Future Research

Our analysis of research on Black educational experiences and outcomes yields several theoretical and methodological considerations for future efforts, including (a) theoretical attention to how race-related resources shape educational outcomes, (b) attention to the way race is a product of educational settings as much as it is something that students bring with them, (c) a focus on how everyday interactions and practices in schools affect educational outcomes, and (d) examination of how students make sense of their racialized social locations in light of their schooling experiences. Such studies will continue to unveil how schools produce race as a social category.

Toward that end, researchers are only just beginning to examine how race can variously shape capital in educational settings (A. A. Ferguson, 2001; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Lewis, 2003b). As defined by Bourdieu (1977), *capital* consists of the resources that serve to advance one's position or status in a given context.[8] Race shapes (a) economic capital, given how it defines historical

access to economic resources, particularly wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995), and therefore influences who has access to "good" schools (Kozol, 1991; Orfield, Eaton, & The Harvard Project on School Desegregation, 1996); (b) cultural capital, given how it affects which cultural resources are rewarded in schools (Carter, 2002; Lareau & Horvat, 1999); (c) social capital, given how it informs patterns of segregation that affect social networks, which in turn affect educational access and achievement; and (d) symbolic capital, given how skin color influences which bodies are privileged in school. For example, theorizing in terms of symbolic capital reveals how such capital can serve as a resource, affecting our expectations and interpretations. Like what some call "White privilege," race as symbolic capital captures the daily, sometimes subtle forms of discrimination that can affect daily educational experiences.

Despite the potential benefits of such investigations, analyses of how race shapes everyday practices and experiences in schools—including how those practices and experiences affect the production of capital and the institutionalization of racism—are in short supply. Important work has emerged in recent years, such as that by A. A. Ferguson (2001), Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau (2003), Lewis (2003b), and Lareau and Horvat (1999) on elementary schools; Davidson (1996), Dolby (2001), Fergus (2004), Jewett (2006), Kenny (2000), O'Connor (2001), Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004), and Pollock (2001, 2004) on middle and high schools; and Feagin et al. (1996) on college settings. However, there is still not enough work examining how Black educational experiences and outcomes are founded in everyday experience with race and racism. Moreover, the works cited here do not reflect in full the kind of multilevel ecological studies that we call for later in this article. These works, all of which are ethnographic in orientation, nevertheless indicate that ethnographic research provides one critical starting point for these multilevel studies.

Ethnographic research involves entering a social setting and getting to know the people who move within it. Thus researchers can use ethnography to unearth how various school contexts affect Black students and how Black students experience and understand various school contexts. As Emerson (1983) articulates, ethnography assumes context as a resource for understanding. Ethnography permits the study of relationships as they happen rather than abstracting people from their lives and treating them as if they lived, acted, and believed "in isolation from one another" (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991, p. 8). Thus ethnography has the potential to provide insight into how race shapes interactions in schools. For example, why do disciplinary sanctions differ across race and gender categories? What are the perceptions of these sanctions on the bodies on which they are enacted? Ethnography has the potential also to illuminate what race means for particular Black students in particular contexts and how their understandings of themselves and others develop. Especially in the study of race and race relations, this kind of research is crucial for capturing the workings of complex social processes and for capturing the inconsistencies between what people say and do.

The promise of ethnographic methods rests with their ability to capture the everydayness of racism, a second recommendation for future research. More ecologically grounded studies of how race is implicated in the education of Blacks, including how its impact is realized through institutionalized racism, are warranted. This recommendation is consistent with current efforts to integrate multiple levels of analyses when interpreting educational outcomes (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; DiPrete & Foristal, 1994; Frank, 1998). In the interest of explaining racial gaps in achievement, researchers have linked microprocesses (e.g., student subjectivity and actions, student-teacher interactions) with mesoinfluences (e.g., school- and district-level policies, demographics, and organization) and macroinfluences (e.g., the economic forces or systems of racial hierarchy that are specific to the time and space in which the study is being conducted; DiPrete & Foristal, 1994; Roscigno, 2000; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006). By establishing empirical and analytical links between these levels of interaction and influence, they have generated more precise estimations of how context affects the educational realities of Blacks operating in a specific place and time (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). Such multilevel and historically specific studies are essential to the task of unpacking why Black students, operating in one space and time, have educational experiences and outcomes different from those of Black students operating in other contexts.

When we wed multilevel and historically specific analyses with ethnography, we establish the groundwork for exploring with more conceptual rigor the operation and impact of institutionalized racism on the experiences and outcomes of Blacks in school. As Holt (1995) argues, the analysis of racism requires us to resolve the linkage between the individual actor and the social context. In other words, we must analyze the levels of the problem, such that we establish "continuity between behavioral explanations sited at the individual level of human experience and those at the level of society and social force" (Holt, 1995, p. 7). Consequently, education researchers must explore how contemporary social forces nourish the racial knowledge, structures, and practices that sustain and reward everyday racism (Essed, 1991; Tate, 1997). As Holt outlines,

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

The irrational and extraordinary acts to which Holt directs us should not be reduced to explicitly racist actions. They consist of the many complicated social processes whereby educational opportunities are facilitated or circumscribed. Within this frame, we can explore more subtle forms of racism that are not signaled by overt behavior (Forman, 2001). Thus—like A. A. Ferguson (2001), Lewis (2003b), Duncan (2002), or Morris (2006)—we can study how the interpretations and responses of individual school actors shape Black students' experiences in schools in ways that systemically deny them privilege and educational access. In this way, we come to understand how culture can operate as structure (Hays, 1994), and we establish an analytical lens for revealing the meso- and macrolevel forces that legitimize and institutionalize that operation.

Black education research also needs to analyze how race intersects with social class and gender. This includes studying not only variation in Black school experiences but also how and why class and gender shape Black students' school experiences differently than they shape other groups' experiences. As discussed previously, it is essential that work of this kind examine race, class, and gender as intertwined rather than as independent social positions (Akom, 2003; Carter, 2005; Mickelson &Velasco, 2006; Tyson, 2002). As indicated by McCarthy and Crichlow (1993), one cannot interpret the educational experiences of minority groups "from assumptions about race pure and simple" because different gender and class identities within minority groups often "cut at right angles" to racial politics and identities. In addition, ethnic variation of Blacks has only recently gained attention in education research, although it is an important component of complex racial identities (Bryce-Laporte, 1972; Butterfield, 2006; Fergus, 2004; Goodstein, 1990; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2002; Waters, 1999). Ideally, analyses of intersectionalities should be conducted in accord with the kind of multilevel analysis we discussed earlier. In this instance, examining "levels of the problem" is warranted because "the relative significance of race, sex, or class [or ethnicity] in determining the conditions of [peoples'] lives is neither fixed nor absolute, but rather is dependent on the sociohistorical context and the social phenomenon under consideration" (King, 1988, p. 49).

In addition, research needs to incorporate multiple methodological strategies. For example, challenges abound in the effort to understand fully why we continue to have racial gaps in achievement. Recent research has shown that students often enter kindergarten with different skill sets. Gaps in skills increase in the first years of school (Denton & West, 2002). We have yet to develop a complete understanding of how this process unfolds over time and why it is that Black students are being undereducated. This issue, along with other research questions about Black educational experiences, can be more precisely addressed with productive pairings of quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Anyon, 2005; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). The pairing of survey research and qualitative interviewing is an especially productive option. Young (1999, p. 206) argues that qualitative interviews provide the entrée to what Goffman (1974) identified as "schemata of interpretation. These are the meanings that actors formulate about their social encounters and experiences." Consequently, when an understanding of these meanings is coupled with individuals' forced-choice selections (i.e., on a survey), we are provided with a phenomenological framing of the responses.

This pairing of methodologies not only provides possibilities for clarification and elaboration of survey findings but also serves an important corrective function. For example, recent studies on racial issues, both in school and beyond, have found important inconsistencies between survey and qualitative data. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) found gaps between people's responses to abstract survey items about race (e.g., whether they approved of interracial marriage in general) and their expanded responses in in-depth interviews (e.g., how they felt about interracial marriage and whether they would ever marry someone of a different race). In addition, in recent school research, one of the coauthors found inconsistencies between teachers' and parents' reported views and the ways they then interacted with someone of another racial group (Lewis, 2003b). These are not mere contradictions but provide more complex information about how race works in and across settings.

Finally, as we have argued throughout, research on Blacks' educational experiences needs to have more theoretically informed interpretations of the constructs it includes (e.g., race, culture, racism; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pollock, 2004). In particular, research in this tradition needs more robust conceptualizations of race. The question of what meaning race has for Black students' educational outcomes is one that must be theorized, not assumed or implied. Our ability to develop more accurate interpretations of how and why Black students fare in school as they do depends on our ability to attend to race with greater conceptual precision. This challenge is relevant to a range of methodological issues, including the productive framing of research questions, the proper specification of statistical models in quantitative analyses, and the appropriate selection of research designs.

Our emphasis on developing more theoretically informed relationships between key constructs and research design and methodology is not simply an academic matter. Education research influences policy decisions, which in turn have an impact on life outcomes. For example, scholarship suggesting that Black students' underperformance in school is a matter of individual or group deficiencies leads to very different policy proposals than does scholarship suggesting that school policies and practices are responsible. Moreover, studies that suggest that Blacks are a monolithic cultural group facing the same issues across space and time flatten the complex topography of Black life, ignoring important variations in educational experiences. In failing to establish more theoretically rigorous relationships between research designs, methodologies, and central concepts such as race, we limit our ability to improve educational opportunity for Blacks and impinge negatively on Black people's already narrowed educational chances.

NOTES

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[1]Although this article elucidates the analytic imprecision with which researchers have studied Black educational outcomes, similar arguments can be made about understanding the educational experiences of other racial and ethnic groups.

[2]According to the cultural ecological model, Black youths learn about their group's historical and contemporary subjugation through the experiences and narratives of Black adults. In response, they generate theories of "making it" that contradict dominant notions of status attainment and that produce disillusionment about the instrumental value of school. They thus develop distrust for schools and their agents, and an oppositional cultural identity emerges. Situating schooling as a White domain that requires Blacks to "think" and "act" White in exchange for academic success, Black youths are said to limit their efforts in school because they do not want to compromise their racial identity or their affiliation with the Black community.

[3]We found limited literature on class differences in the educational experiences and outcomes of Blacks. For some recent examples, see Diamond and Gomez (2004), Harding (2006), Horton-Ikard and Miller (2004), Lareau (2000, 2003), Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003), Rothstein (2004), and Sirin and Rogers-Sirin (2004).

[4]For example, in their recent analysis of multiracial identities among adolescents using the Add Health data, Harris and Sim (2000) exclude Hispanics altogether from their study. This is because, as they state,

> Add Health follows the convention of asking separate questions about race and Hispanic origin. In treating Hispanicity as distinct from race, Add Health deviates from conventional academic uses of race that tend to contrast Hispanics with non-Hispanic whites, blacks, and Asians (Farley, 1996), as well as understandings of race among Hispanics, many of whom treat Hispanic, white, black, Asian, and American Indian as comparable identifiers (Hirschman[, Kasinitz, & DeWind], 1999; OMB [Office of Management and Budget], 1997). The two-question approach lowers the threshold for identifying as Hispanic (Hirschman et al., 1999) and leads to confusing responses. Comparisons cannot be made between Hispanic and non-Hispanic multiracials, because selecting two or more responses to the race question is very different from selecting a Hispanic origin in one question and a race in another. Moreover, it is not clear what people mean when they select a Hispanic origin and a race. Some are indicating mixed ancestry (e.g., mestiz mother from Mexico and a white father from Ireland), while others are indicating an ancestry and a nationality (e.g., Japanese from Peru, German from Argentina). (p. 617)

[5]Nativity is not always an adequate proxy for ethnicity. Some Blacks claim ethnic affiliations that are not signaled by their places of birth; for example, some Blacks who were born in the United States claim West Indian identity (Waters, 1999).

[6]The question of how race may factor in the U.S. resistance to defining Haitians as political refugees and therefore eligible for federal subsidies also warrants exploration (Lennox, 1993).

[7]In addition, the forced-choice nature of the survey prevents respondents from providing commentary that would qualify their responses in significant ways and possibly require the researcher to reinterpret findings (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000).

[8]Bourdieu (1977) discussed four types of capital: economic (money and property), social (connections, social networks), cultural (cultural knowledge, educational credentials), and symbolic (symbols of prestige and legitimacy). Each form of capital can be converted into the others to enhance or maintain positions in the social order. For example, families use economic capital to buy housing in neighborhoods with good schools or to pay for private schooling. These schools can bestow important cultural capital and social connections (social capital), which can then be converted back into economic capital when deployed in gaining access to elite colleges and good employment opportunities.

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