

A Brief Consideration of the Role of Socioeconomic Attainment as a Demographic Factor for Research

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Two Theories of Differences in Socioeconomic Attainment: Cultural Deficit and Sociocultural Reproduction Theories

The sociological model of cultural deficit dominated initial educational thinking about multiculturalism during the 1960's (Deutsch 1967), and many argue that it continues to affect policy today through the less-obvious language of students being "at-risk" (Flores 1993; Sleeter and Grant 2003) and obviously traditional insistence upon the existence of American "meritocracy" (Solorzano and Yosso 2001). Basically, cultural deficit is a model in which minority cultures and peoples are described as failing to attain the levels of socioeconomic and academic status obtained by the majority culture due to the disadvantages and failures within the minority cultures themselves. For instance, Yosso (2002) has exposed the manner in which such argument proliferates through Hollywood films on Latinas/os in schools when these films routinely blame Latinas/os' "socioacademic failure on their culture, language, family values, cycle of poverty, lack of motivation, inclination to violence, and proclivity to unplanned pregnancy." Also known as the cultural deprivation and social pathology models, the theory has attempted to link poor school and work performance, as well as low self-esteem and motivation, amidst minority populations to problems in their homes, families, and traditions (Trueba and Bartolome 1997; Valencia 1991).

In its most aggressive variety, however, it dovetails into a model of genetic deficiency in which minority peoples are depicted as not simply culturally deprived, but

as “mentally retarded,” “semi-lingual,” “linguistically handicapped” (Flores 1993) and other biologically-based descriptions. Horrifyingly, Gould (1993) points out how this conceptual rhetoric pervades 18th and 19th century racist formulations that were used to legitimate slavery and colonization, while the “soft-line” of cultural deficit thinking was also pervasive – from Ben Franklin’s views on the remediability of Blacks to the creation of Indian schools meant to educe indigenous peoples up and out from their supposed savagery.

At the least, then, cultural deficit theorists would explain the racial differences in socioeconomic attainment measured in the 1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics, United States by attempting to explain that Chicano, Native American, and Black cultures produced values and practices that were incongruent with successful social status and employment. Some might relativize this further by noting that it was not the absolute inability of these cultures to function in a socioeconomically equivalent manner, but rather that they were minority cultures in a society that was predominantly white (75.8%). Thus, in this sense, the argument would explain that as the United States has developed a society and economy constituted by white culture, other cultures are disadvantaged to compete and flourish by not being literate and assimilated into the hegemonic norms and values. Of course, the leading socioeconomic attainment of Asian/Pacific Islanders should then present a difficulty and challenge to such thinking: how can white culture be outperformed if it sets the standard? Yet, cultural deficit theorists would argue that it is the peculiar nature of Asian/Pacific Islander culture to place greater emphasis on educational success than does white culture (Kao 1995) and that Asian/Pacific Islander academic success translates into economic success. In fact,

Asian/Pacific Islander success would be drawn upon as proof that the United States was meritocratic and open to all people's achievement, regardless of difference.

To speak of sociocultural reproduction theory is in many respects to reference the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who provided a theory of a capitalized social structure that attempts to reproduce itself through economized and indirect control of cultural meanings and the ability for high status culture to be meaningful via educational transmission.

Bourdieu (1997) spoke of "cultural capital," by which he referenced the prestigious and institutionalized culture of the dominant class and the cultural hierarchy it effects. Per Bourdieu's theory of sociocultural reproduction, the upwardly mobile middle-class is able to reproduce itself intergenerationally, not through the transmission of saved economic wealth, but because the families comprising the middle-class tend to translate parental economic gains into childrens' saturation in the dominant class's cultural norms and artifacts. This process results in the embodiment of cultural capital and a beginning "habitus" – a worldview and sense of emplacement within it – in children so privileged and thus, upon entry into the formal education system upwardly mobile children have established greater degrees of cultural capital and of having dispositions towards accumulating it than their lower class counterparts (Dumais 2002). This, then, is rewarded and encouraged by teachers, who because of their own positionality and function within the field of education and society represent the veritable stockbrokers of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio and Useem 1978). Educational institutions, then, tend to foster success for those who entered with the ability to succeed, as they

convert student cultural capital into the institutionalized capital of degrees and credentials. Finally, students can reconvert this newly acquired capital into entry into the social system's hierarchy at a place of status and privilege.

A sociocultural reproduction theorist of Bourdieu's persuasion, then, would explain the differences in socioeconomic attainment measured in the 1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics, United States by noting the correspondence between median family incomes, educational attainment, and professional status that appears therein. Whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders rank either first or second in all three categories, while the significantly lower median family incomes of Chicanos, Native Americans and Blacks accordingly relate to less educational and professional success. However, while the demographics would appear to reveal a sociocultural reproductive circuit – inclusive of two groups and exclusive of three – additional explication would be required to explain how Asian/Pacific Islander children establish cultural capital that can be recognized and rewarded within educational institutions when they enter with a statistically high propensity towards being non-English speakers. While there is no way to establish the answer from the census alone, one possible answer lies in hypothesizing that Asian/Pacific Islander children who enter the school system move quickly to acquire “linguistic capital” and so the statistic is misleading. Another hypothesis might involve demonstrating that Asian/Pacific Islanders are acquiring specific forms of cultural capital that allow them to compensate for not fully assimilating into the dominant culture's language system.

Educational Policies

Cultural deficit theorists would no doubt target racial groups who were demonstrating non-assimilative tendencies. Compulsory schooling for such children would be mandated and “special” programs in language and cultural immersion might be instituted. Assuming that the “problem” with such children is largely more cultural than individual, extracurricular educational institutions might be set up to support after school programs, tutoring, and so-called “Americanization” for families and communities. Additionally, cultural deficit theorists would also attempt to institute new curricula that might call for the lessening of standards for these students, for the use of visual and audio media-based approaches, and finally for the tracking of such students into technical skills programs meant to give them the abilities to succeed as employed members of the socioeconomic underclass.

On the other hand, Bourdieu found that schooling was relevant for employment opportunities because of the status, and not the skills, it could convey upon students (Morrow and Torres 1995); and so one would not expect skills-based policy initiatives from a sociocultural reproduction theorist. Instead, one might expect the attempt to support more oppositional and resistant movements by gaining greater institutional representation for subordinated races, classes, and genders. Alongside of this, policy would seek to support attempts by these groups to “to elevate the prestige and legitimacy of cultural forms associated with their identity groups” (DiMaggio 2004). Likewise, multicultural programs and new paradigm disciplines like cultural studies would be encouraged because of their ability to generate wide acceptance of opposition to the dominant status quo.

Comparative Research Plan

Bourdieu's own research style would be of importance in the way I conducted comparative studies with the populations included in the 1990 census data. The summary analyses of the data explicated above, regardless of the ideological failings of the positions which inform it, does reveal the probability of large-scale inequality and oppression across its demographics. In tackling such problems, Bourdieu himself balanced normative-based theoretical assumptions about political realities with careful empirical investigations of actual sociocultural practices. This model of research would be appropriate in this case as well.

Further, Bourdieu militated for epistemological self-reflection amongst researchers and counseled pulling backward in two steps from the survey before undertaking it – the first step backward would be from the situation being examined and the second from “the stance required by disinterested observation” (Jenkins 2004). In this manner, one can attempt to guard against making instrumental use of people's oppression and better situate oneself in the problem experienced by the subjects themselves which requires identification and solution. Branching off from this idea, I would consider undertaking forms of participatory action research (Wolf 1996) in which populations that appeared to be underserved according to the demographic data could be dialogued with towards developing joint research projects with expected social, economic, or political goals.

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