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## **Policy Research and the Sociology of Education: Contributions to Understanding the Experiences of Marginalized Populations**

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Historically, policy analysis has assisted in the country's move from an unquestioned "meritocracy" to a system that strives towards the democratic ideals of equal educational opportunity and civil rights (Boyd, 1999 p. 231). In his discussion of the paradoxes of educational policy, William Lowe Boyd explains how rather than having a strong direct effect on educational policy through problem solving and data accumulation, educational research holds greater influence indirectly through problem formation and defining alternatives to a given problem (Boyd, 1999, p. 230). The following discusses the contributions of policy research in the policy process and methodological strands in the sociology of education that facilitate application of sociology to educational research as it relates to Blacks and other marginalized groups.

### **The Identification of Social Problems**

A key contribution of policy research to the policy process is the identification or definition of a given problem. The very act of defining a problem yields power to the definer. Schattschneider acknowledges this truth in explaining:

*The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power; the antagonist can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definition. He who determines what politics is runs the country, because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power" (1960, p. 68, emphasis in the original).*

Influenced by one's interests, preferences and perceptions, the same problem may be defined in various ways depending upon "different standards of judgment, different explanations of causation, and different solutions" (Portz, 1996, p. 372). The definitions of problems are shaped by interpretation, as well as social definition, and must compete for consideration on policymakers' agendas (1996). Multiple definitions of one issue may even compete for resources and attention (1996). Defining elements that influence the prominence of a particular definition are the problem's visibility, political sponsorship, and viable solutions (1996).

### **Analysis of Interest Group Concerns**

Policy research has also played a crucial role in understanding and addressing concerns of interest groups within education, most notably, that of educational equality. David Truman defines an interest group as a "shared-attitude group that makes certain claims upon other groups in the society" (Truman, 1954). This group becomes political "if and when it makes a claim through or upon any of the institutions of government" collectively (1954). A group's strength is determined by its organization, internal cohesion, population, wealth, leadership, and access to decision makers (Dye, 1998). Interest groups in the educational arena include professional educators, teachers' unions, voters, tax payers, parents, school boards, alumni, and racial, as well as religious groups (1998). Within higher education, interest groups include students, faculty, trustees, presidents, and unions (1998). Policy research, which is conducted at both the micro (institutional) and macro (national) levels, defines and advocates issues of importance for a given population. Policy analysts utilize qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical frameworks in understanding the effects of policies and contributing factors to inequality, as well as social, economic, and educational stratification between various segments of the population.

### **Forms of (Critical) Policy Analysis**

Both academic and applied policy analysis contribute to the prediction of the impact and effects of policy through empirical study, theory, and evaluation. To maintain social strata, governments act according to the values and interest of dominant groups (Taylor, et al, 1997). This elitist approach influences the social values that shape the distribution of resources. The application of alternative methodologies of analysis, such as critical race theory, its primary tenet of "interest convergence," and policy archeology offer examples of contemporary scholarship that

provide frameworks in understanding and predicting policy outcomes. In his discussion of critical race theory (CRT) and its application to the desegregation of higher education, Edward Taylor explains that the theory comprises the following ideas:

. . . racism is a normal, not aberrant or rare, fact of daily life in society, and the assumptions of white superiority are so ingrained in our political and legal structures as to be almost unrecognizable. Racial separation has complex, historic, and socially constructed purposes that ensure the location of political and legal power in groups considered superior to people of color. Racism is also likely permanent, and periods of seeming progress are often followed by periods of resistance and backlash as social forces reassert white dominance. (Taylor, 1997)

The theory further holds that employing color blindness in policy development threatens social justice as it allows us to ignore whiteness as a racial construction and reinforces its oppressive, privileged position (Parker, 1999).

Interest convergence (a key concept of CRT) holds that Whites will promote advances for Blacks only when they also promote those of Whites (1990). Derived from the Marxist theory, that the bourgeoisie will allow advances for the proletariat only if these developments further benefit the bourgeoisie, interest convergence fosters social stratification and values which facilitates its prevalence (Parker, 1999).

Policy archeology analyses the construction of social problems and the nexus of regularities stemming from the “assumptions, conditions, and forces” that underlie it (Scheurich, 1994). Also described as the “post-positivist unconscious,” social regularities comprise thought, the values that prompt their development, and perceptions of reality which manifest as policy and practice. In determining values inherent in social inequity and stratification, policy archeology calls for the examination of race and its effect upon in-group attitudes. Critical race theory, in conjunction with policy archeology, exemplifies both the connection between power and stratification and the importance of the utility of these in predicting the impact and effects of policy alternatives.

### **Limitations of Policy Research**

Ethel Sawyer’s work “Methodological Problems in Studying So-Called Deviant Communities” reminds us that in “focusing upon deviance, one fails to discover what patterns continue to exist” (Ladner, 1973, p. 366). Concerns have grown regarding the role of traditional positivist methodology in promoting epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997, Feagin, 2000) and slighting feminist discourse (Troyna, 1994).

Traditional social science research's tendency to portray minorities as pathological poses a limitation to policy research. In his work "Critical Policy Research and Education Policy," Barry Troyna writes "[Scholars of education policy] fail to give rise to analyses which possess a particular strategic edge or to identify those elements which have the potential to change or resist 'social reality' as it is articulated through current reforms" (Troyna, 1994, p. 82). For instance, state policy and differences in districts' abilities to provide their constituents resources might be viewed as equitable or "racial inequity in disguise" (Walters, 2001, p. 45). Troyna's emphasis on strategies of changing social reality suggests critical analysis that moves beyond strict objectivity.

Limitations also exist in terms of the adoption of research by policy makers. Though research findings may inform policy at the federal level, lack of staff may prevent implementation locally. Policymakers also tend to privilege studies conducted or sponsored by government or state agencies over academic research. Sponsored work is viewed as more influential in the policy world than the individual "claim" of an academic expert (Hallinan, 2000, p. 559). Such limitations may not be addressed by scholarship in the sociology of education, but rather by an increased presence of academic scholars in the political arena and their active involvement in local communities via research collaboration with individual schools and districts.

### **The Sociology of Education as a Useful Tool in Addressing Limitations**

The policy making process is driven by bias, values, conflict, individual interpretation, and philosophical debate (Marshall, 1997). In response to this, a growing number of researchers are calling upon both the academic community and policy makers to embrace inclusive research methodologies, specifically those centered in race and gender (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Stansfield, 1999). This critical social research "is concerned not only with unpacking reality, but suggesting ways of altering it; to provide genuine support...in the struggle against the structural oppression of discernible groups" (Troyna, 1994, p. 82).

Two emerging methodologies include interpretive and narrative policy analysis and critical policy analysis (Marshall, 1997, p. 8). Interpretive and narrative policy analysis uses "stories, scenarios and tales...when the issues' empirical, bureaucratic, legal, and political merits are unknown, not agreed upon, or both" (p. 9). Policy analysts and scholars holding a critical lens deconstruct traditional policy analysis "by describing the limits of traditional mainstream conceptions (or) methods and demand-

ing a widened view of policy arenas, policy, policy discourse, politics and policy agendas” through focus upon structures, policies, and assertions of power that block access to knowledge or influence (p. 3). These forms of analysis promise to prove valuable in understanding and addressing practices and factors that promote educational stratification.

### **Methodological Strands in the Sociology of Education that Facilitate Research on Race, Class, and Gender**

Methodological strands in the sociology of education that facilitate research on race, class, and gender include stratification research, equality research, critical theory, and interpretive research. The following briefly describes these areas.

#### ***Stratification Research***

Stratification research, which has played a key role in studying the influences of schooling upon mobility, educational attainment and occupation, has historically been linked to the sociology of education (Hallinan, 2000). The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study of Income and Occupational Attainment of the 1960s represents an early longitudinal study of intergenerational mobility, yet failed to consider race as a variable (2000). Prompted by the Civil Rights Act, sociologists increasingly acknowledged the importance of understanding the roles of not only socioeconomic status, but race and ethnicity in ameliorating inequality and addressing stratification (2000). Replications of the Wisconsin study suggested that the stratification process results in differing outcomes of individuals from varying backgrounds and that race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status were considerable factors in educational and occupational attainment (2000).

#### ***Equality Research***

Equality research centers upon the mobility of various social groups within educational and occupational realms and examines equality within schools through school specific research focusing upon the effects of schooling (Hallinan, 2000). These works seek to understand inequalities in learning and access based on social class, race and gender (2000). Many of the methodological empiricists featured in the anthology of Karabel and Halsey from functionalist and neo-Weberian traditions were equality researchers (2000). Some early equality research, such as the Coleman Report, received federal sponsorship to support its efforts of meeting the goals of expanded civil rights.

Equality research has been criticized for its tendency to frame “social

class inequity in education as de-gendered and a politically neutral issue thereby foreclosing intellectual debate about the complex and variable character of class related inequalities” (Hallinan, 2000, p. 87). Correspondingly, feminist and post-modern researchers have argued that the objectivity and positivistic stance of this research conceals imbedded assumptions of researchers’ work.

### ***Critical Theory***

Critical theory explores the “nature of knowledge and patterns of power and control within education” (Hallinan, 2000, p. 89). The most significant contribution to the sociology of education is critical theory’s recognition of “the importance of non-class forms of social exclusion (such as gender, ethnicity, and race) for understanding the patterning of domination and inequality in education” (p. 90). The acknowledgement of the importance of these social influences have given rise to epistemologies that place race (such as in critical race theory) and gender (feminist theory) at their centers. These epistemologies have assisted in unveiling research assumptions and countering problems of validity associated with traditional positivist inquiry.

### ***Interpretive Research***

Inspired by the work of Weber, the interpretive tradition of sociology involves “analyzing systems of power control and influence in...the micro-processes of school life and the macro-processes of educational systems” (Lynch in Hallinan, 2000, p. 88). Interpretive, ethnographic research is critical in further understanding schooling’s role in the reproduction of social stratification, educational outcomes of various ethnicities, and equality of educational input (i.e., resources and access to a wide range of institutions) and outcomes such as attainment. In her work, “Understanding Inequality in Schools: The Contributions of Interpretative Studies,” Mehan explains that this methodological approach “highlights(s) the importance of cultural elements in the production and reproduction of inequality, refocus(es) attention on the role of human agency in the educational and social process, and help(s) unravel the complex dialogical relationship between institutional practices and individual actions which contribute towards the perpetuation of inequality” (Hallinan, 2000). Such qualitative contributions hold particular importance in American society, where wealth, income, degree of educational attainment, and class have historically and currently are influenced by race (Conley, 1999; Feagin, 2000; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995).

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## **The Roles of the Sociology of Education and Educational Policy Research in Understanding Access to Higher Education**

Sociology of education and educational policy research has played a key role in understanding inequities in educational access. The following considers the role of cultural capital, the influence of race, and wealth accumulation to postsecondary access. Concluding remarks focus upon the benefits of qualitative research in understanding and addressing issues of access to higher education.

### ***Cultural Capital and Its Role in Stratification***

The interest in developing human capital for increased international competitiveness has replaced higher education's traditional exclusionary practices. However, the beneficiaries of these social goods overwhelming fall within the middle and upper stratus of society. Although improved from decades past, the lower and under classes of American society continue to face segregation at home and in schools, factors that some argue strongly reinforce and reproduce cycles of poverty, including the spread of deleterious social and economic behavior (Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 139). In his work, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Julius Wilson (1987) holds that social dislocations of the poor create a barrier between them and mainstream society by isolating them from social and occupational networks that model a stable lifestyle and increase the likelihood of social advancement. The exodus of middle income and working class African Americans, as well as changes within the urban economy are viewed as key in the creation of this isolation. Though he does not entirely discount the effects of race in the plight of the underclass, Wilson views the junction between the lower and upper tiers of the African American hierarchy as predominantly a function of class stratification.

Dalton Conley's *Being Black, Living in the Red* reiterates this class based focus in terms of the acquisition of human capital in noting:

Blacks are not disadvantaged in the educational system; rather, they are disadvantaged in the resources they bring to the system. Race matters, but only indirectly- though the realm of class inequality. (1999, p. 80)

Conley reaffirms this finding in a more recent work, stating that "non-human capital (property) and human capital are linked across generations" (p. 68). Such capital may be provided by one's parents or external intervention. An example of the positive impact of human capital's influence upon social mobility is Zweigenhaft and Domhoff's longitudinal study of the "A Better Chance Program" (ABC), an initiative that supported



the secondary private school attendance of low income minority junior high school students (1991). Immersed in a new world of elites, ABC graduates went on to attain the educational, social, and occupation benefits of their White peers.

### ***The Role of Race in Wealth Accumulation and Social Mobility***

Oliver and Shapiro's (1995) examination of the role of wealth in contemporary inequities between Blacks and Whites with regard to the ability to finance higher education illustrates an accumulation of intergenerational disadvantages found within many African American families. One out of three Blacks lives in poverty, compared to less than one out of ten Whites. Approximately three fourths of all Black children, 1.8 times the rate for Whites, grow up in homes holding no financial assets. Nine in ten Black children are reared in households that lack sufficient financial resources to endure three months of no income at the poverty line, a rate four times that of Whites. Assets held by the less educated lie primarily in housing and vehicle equity (98 percent), while over one fourth of the assets held by college graduates lie in investments which yield additional wealth and income.

Inequity between Blacks and Whites are also revealed in the discrepancies between educational rewards for these groups. A high school diploma renders over \$9,000 in net worth for Whites, yet yields a net worth of only \$800 to Blacks (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Similarly, a college education yields \$27,000 for Whites, but less than \$10,000 for their Black peers. Wealth discrepancies between Blacks and Whites holding similar credentials and achievements result in a continued economic gap between the two groups. Oliver and Shapiro note that Blacks earn merely 55 percent of what Whites do over a lifetime. This finding is compounded by Conley's (1999) work that suggests that Blacks are underemployed, working less hours than their White peers despite wealth and class. Such discrepancies in wealth and income gaps between Blacks and Whites, coupled with rising tuition costs and the continued popularity of policy, that restricts post-secondary access, renders a significant number of African Americans unable (or less able) to finance higher education. Those who do attend often graduate with massive loan debt, as well as less income and wealth to alleviate this burden.

The cost of living is not merely the cost of acquiring goods and services, but rather the cost of *full* participation within a society (Jencks, et al, 1972). Inability to meet the costs associated with participation yields social exclusion. The lack of wealth prevalent amongst individuals holding low income, continued geographical and educational segregation of racial minorities, and the decline in progressive distribution of student



aid prompts this exclusion and stifles social mobility. Family wealth and neighborhood poverty rates, which are highly correlated with race, promise to serve as a reliable measure in achieving racial and economic diversity and parity at the postsecondary level when considered in concert with ethnicity (Kane 1996; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). The increased proportion of underrepresented minority groups and subsequent change in the composition of American colleges and universities (Altbach & Berdahl, 1981) calls for institutional commitment to the realization of the democratic ideal of equality of access to postsecondary education at all levels, particularly selective institutions where peripheralized groups tend to be grossly underrepresented.

***What Sets Higher Education Access  
apart from Competing Policy Issues?***

Higher education is all encompassing, in that it reflects the quality of one's entire educational trajectory, from elementary to postsecondary experiences. Educational attainment also is a subtle indicator of environmental factors such as a neighborhood, family environment, family, and wealth. The ability to acquire human capital through higher education influences an individual's life chances and the ability to improve or stifle mobility for a specific individual and generations that may follow. More importantly, our global economy has increased credential requirements for the most desirable occupations, particularly within the professions (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Access and attainment at the postsecondary level improves the likelihood of lower class persons' social and occupational mobility and the subsequent chance of heightened financial stability and acquisition of cultural capital of their offspring (Conley, 1999).

***Sociology of Education and Projected Trends  
in the Study of Racial Inequality***

Gamoran (2001) maintains that an increase in educational success for African Americans will lessen the cultural mismatch (ex. language patterns) between schools and homes and promise to influence educational attainment of the group in the future. However, he warns that the case of current salary differentials between men and women point to corresponding differentials for racial groups. He maintains that "even if racial differences in educational outcomes disappear, labor market inequities may persist" (2001, p. 141).

While trends between African Americans and Whites are foreseeable, challenges prevent such predictions being drawn between Hispanics and Whites. For instance, such a comparison is dependent upon immigration patterns, specifically for individuals from poor economic and educational

backgrounds. Furthermore, the term Hispanic proves problematic, for it comprises individuals from varied nations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and levels of educational achievement (Gamoran, 2001; Schmid, 2001). Finally, the increase of interethnic marriages will fade the influence of ethnic categories (Gamoran, 2001, p. 141).

The potential challenges posed by these trends and the gap between ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, in terms of income and education levels calls for increased understanding of social outcomes in regards to race (Hallinan, 2001, p. 65). The application of critical theories to “individuals, schools, and the communities (promise to suggest) how they interact as a dynamic social system to affect racial” disparities (p. 66).

### **Conclusion**

The definitions of social problems are rooted in interpretation and social influence (Cobb & Elder, 1983). As political tools these “strategic representations” of reality reveal the interests, preferences, and perceptions of the power elite (Portz, 1996). Hence, education problems are value-laden and hold implications for social justice, the distribution of opportunity, as well as the structure and character of future society (Boyd, 1999). The democratic ideal of promoting equality of opportunity has given in to Darwinist competition and marketization, as well as productivity at any costs (Apple, 1997). Tools such as critical policy analysis promise to assist in the development of improved policy and lead to greater understanding and revelation of methods for ameliorating social stratification.

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