

Family (Dis)Advantage and the Educational Prospects of Better Off African American Youth: How Race Still Matters

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While the educational difficulties of poor black students are well documented and have been discussed extensively, the academic performance of well-off African American children has received much less attention. Even with economic and educational resources in the home, well-off African American youth are not achieving at the levels of their white peers. Why is this? A review of relevant literature identifies a set of social processes that pose formidable barriers to the academic and personal development of middle-class African American youth, the closing of the black-white achievement gap, and the preservation of African American family advantage across generations. Constituting a social ecology of African American family life, these processes emanate outward from the immediate home environment, through peers and friends, into neighborhoods and schools, and to society at large.

INTRODUCTION

While the educational difficulties of poor black students are well-documented and have been discussed extensively, the academic performance of well-off African American children has received much less attention.¹ However, despite economic and educational resources in the home, well-off African American youth are not succeeding in school at the levels of their white peers.² This has prompted some to propose biological explanations. For example, Murray and Herrnstein (1994, p. 30) ask, “Why, if

the black-white difference is entirely environmental, should the advantage of the 'white' environment compared to the 'black' be greater among the better-off and better-educated blacks and whites? We have not been able to think of a plausible reason. Can you?"

For Murray and Herrnstein, it seems the answer is self-evident, but we have to wonder how deeply they have pondered the realities of contemporary racial stratification.

Constraints centering on race as socially constructed, we believe, hold the answer to Murray and Herrnstein's rhetorical question. We review scattered literature that speaks to the issue through an interpretative lens that envisions the forces that impinge on black-family functioning and youth development as radiating out from the family unit in ever-wider, yet interpenetrating, ecological rings (e.g., Epstein, 1990; 1992; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994). At the broad societal level, race continues to propose formidable barriers to the preservation of African American home advantage across generations (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Draper, 2002).

This approach is broadly similar to Ogbu's *cultural-ecological* perspective on the low educational achievement of affluent blacks in that both direct attention to the external context of black family life. But whereas Ogbu connects "culture" to context, our framework stresses social factors. Ogbu's conceptual framework encompasses structure, but his research focuses on the cultural aspect. For balance, our perspective highlights social processes that emanate outward from the immediate home environments of blacks, through peers and friends, into neighborhoods and schools, to society at large. Areas of concern involving the academic performance of better-off African American children are reviewed first.

BLACK HOME ADVANTAGE: LESS ADVANTAGES THAN WHITE

African American youth from higher-income households and/or with more highly educated parents do much better in school than African American youth who lack these advantages, but not nearly as well as whites in similar family circumstances. Indeed, the school performance of affluent African American children often is closer to that of poor white children than that of affluent whites. Some examples follow.

The Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) is a network of 15 affluent suburban school districts. Schools in the MSAN network "have a history of high achievement, connections to major research universities, and resources that generally exceed their neighboring cities" (msanetwork.org). These schools hardly fit the profile of horrible minor-

ity schools depicted by Kozol (1991), yet even among the better-off black students attending MSAN schools, one sees evidence of Mickelson's (1990) "attitude-achievement paradox." Despite low levels of academic achievement, better-off black students profess positive attitudes towards school.

Black MSAN students report working hard and say they want to do well in school, but evidence crucial gaps in their mastery of skills. From student reports of GPAs, Ferguson (2002) finds that half of white students but just 15% of black students report "A" range averages; at the other extreme, just under half (44%) of black MSAN students report grades of "C" or below versus 14 percent of whites. Perhaps most troubling, many African American students in the MSAN project report understanding their teacher's lesson half the time or less. Blacks and whites in the same classes spend similar amounts of time doing homework, but black students are less likely to finish it. These racial differences in homework completion and lesson comprehension contribute to GPA differences, but also may falsely signal to teachers that black students are disengaged from school.

Socioeconomic disadvantages accounts for about half of these children's academic shortfall, in that black MSAN families lag behind whites in the standard measures of socioeconomic well-being (e.g., parental education, household composition, books at home). However, according to Ferguson (2002), the achievement gap is better explained by family background disparities among lower-SES students than among higher-SES ones, leaving open the question of better-off African American students' lower academic achievement.

Ogbu's (2003) recent report on the black-white achievement gap in Shaker Heights, Ohio, likewise examines the experience of black students in a favorable school environment. Servicing a middle-class suburb of Cleveland, the Shaker Heights school system is by reputation one of the best in the country. Blacks there perform well above the national average for African Americans, but are underrepresented in honors and advance placement classes and lag behind local whites on most educational measures (Ogbu, 2003, p. 4-7), including subject proficiency scores, grade-point average, high-school class rank, and later college attendance. Whereas Ferguson finds that both black and white students are indistinguishable in their school work ethic and desire to do well, Ogbu finds an anti-school orientation among black students. Ogbu's diagnosis centers on what he calls a "low-effort syndrome" (academic disengagement) that he says begins in elementary school (2003, p.17-20). He also says black parents are less invested in their children's schooling than are Shaker Heights' white parents, and that the two are related.

The problems identified in Shaker Heights and the MSAN studies are mirrored in national trend data. According to the cohort comparisons afforded by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the overall black-white achievement gap narrowed during the 1970s and 1980s, before stalling during the 1990s. The gap reduction during this time was impressive, some 45% in reading and 33% in math (Ferguson, 2001), confirming that such deficits are mutable. But upgrading family status in the African American community apparently played little role in narrowing this achievement gap (e.g., Grissmer, Flanagan & Williamson, 1998; Grissmer, Kirby, Berends & Williamson, 1994; Hedges and Nowell, 1998).³

Moreover, the black-white achievement disparity is large even with comparable family SES background, and the gap is *largest* among children of college-educated parents (The College Board, 1999). Among students whose parents had not completed high school, whites in 1994 averaged 16 points higher than blacks on the NAEP reading exam; among students whose parents had college degrees, the difference was 30 points, representing almost a full level of reading competence.

A large black-white gap among better-off children also is evident in SAT data. In 1995, the children of black parents with graduate-level education averaged 191 points lower than their white counterparts on the combined verbal-math SAT (884 vs. 1035) (Belluck, 1999). Black children from upper-income families likewise fell short. In 2002, the SAT scores of black children in families earning more than \$100,000 averaged 142 points lower than those of similarly situated whites (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2003). And, proportionately fewer blacks than whites who do well on the SAT are from affluent families. Households with incomes above \$70,000 account for less than one-third of black students compared to half of white students with SAT totals of 1200 and above (Bell-Rose, 2000).⁴

The African American “home advantage” also is less advantaging for college attendance and college completion. Ten years after high school, Grodsky (2002) finds enormous disparities comparing the college-completion rates of black and white youth with college-educated parents (21% among African Americans; 47% among white), while Bowen and Bok (1998, p. 54–78), analyzing College and Beyond (C&B) data, find large black-white gaps in achievement and graduation at the county’s most exclusive colleges and universities. Black students attending the C&B schools are considerably more advantaged than black students nationally. For example, 64% of the black 1989 C&B cohort had at least one college-educated parent compared to 11% of black college matriculants nationally (p. 341). Controlling for SES, SAT scores, high-school

grades, field of study, athletic participation, and other characteristics, black students attending these schools had considerably lower grades and class rank, and were less likely to graduate within six years compared to whites (80% versus 87%). Berkeley linguist John McWhorter also reports low academic performance among middle-class and wealthy black students at the college level. His *Losing the Race* (2000), an account of affluent blacks at select universities, including Berkeley, Stanford, and Cornell, echoes Ogbu in that it documents widespread disengagement from the learning process. According to McWhorter, middle-class black students are less inclined to turn in homework, put less effort into exams, and attend classes less often than white and Asian students.

Success in school long has been the traditional route to upward mobility in American society. It also is one of the primary means by which parents pass their advantages on to children, as documented in literature on the relationship between family SES characteristics and academic performance (White, 1982; Hauser, 1994; McLoyd, 1998; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). But this strategy is more problematic for black parents of means than it is for white. Why is this? We begin by examining the socio-historical development and current composition of the black middle class—perhaps “better-off” blacks aren’t really as well-off as are “better-off” whites.

STATUS CRYSTALLIZATION OF BLACK AFFLUENCE

Prior to the second half of the twentieth century, blacks who gained prominence in economic and public life generally did so by looking inward to their own community, through family connections, skin color, and/or white approval (Landry, 1987, p. 39). A college degree and high income didn’t insulate African American life chances from dependence on whites. In consequence, black managers, teachers, and doctors found it difficult to provide opportunities for their children. It took the hard-won victories of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s for large numbers of blacks to achieve middle-class standing—the so-called “new” black middle class (Washington & Landry, 1980). That also is when, according to Wilson (1978), racial barriers to African American advancement began to recede.

Most middle-class blacks—upwards of 80%—are first-generation middle-class (Billingsley, 1992; Landry, 1987; McAdoo, 1978). As Landry describes it (1987, p. 86), “[middle-class blacks] continue to have roots stretching far down into the neighborhoods and homes of truck drivers, assembly line workers, and waiters.” Among whites, in contrast, middle-

and upper-class ties often go back three or four generations (Wilkerson, 1990, puts the figure at 70%).

Does it matter that black parents are much more likely than white to have attained middle-class standing only recently? Perhaps not on the surface—the color that counts for acquiring a nice home, nice clothes, and goodies for the children is green. But material possessions aren't the only consideration. The cultural content of class—for example, the values, attitudes, and habits used by parents of successful children to reinforce the school's agenda at home—is not so readily acquired. Rather, it is cultivated over time and through experience, and it is reasonable to suppose that a family lineage of high educational attainment and economic security will foster, for want of a better expression, a more authentic, deeper kind of class background. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of "habitus," a set of dispositions that unconsciously guides behavior, comes to mind.⁵ But there is a material side to these class differences too: middle-class blacks are less likely than middle-class whites to receive sizeable inheritances (Spilerman, 2000, p. 508).

Basing middle-class standing on occupation or a standard of earnings at least twice the poverty rate, about half of all black workers qualify (McWhorter, 2000, p. 7; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999, p. 27). Using income as the yardstick, Frey (2003) estimates that 30% of all black households are middle class. But any such approach is flawed, as no single measure of well-being can capture the essential wholeness of black family life. As an example, *at every level of income and level of education*, white households accumulate vastly greater wealth than do black households. Oliver and Shapiro (1995) estimate that in the late 1980s, the median net worth of whites in 1995 was more than eight times that of blacks (\$61,000 versus \$7,400); 60% of black households but just 25% of white had no assets (see also Keister & Moller, 2000; Bradford, 2000; Conley, 2001).

These wealth comparisons apply overall; more fine-tuned ones reveal much the same. Black parents who are college-educated or have high incomes lag behind whites in their ability to provide opportunities for their children owing to other socioeconomic disadvantages.

Table 1 uses data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY97) to compare the family circumstances of college-educated and middle-class black and white parents with school-age children (12- to 16-year olds in 1996).⁶ Better-off black parents lag behind *on every available indicator*, including income, wealth,⁷ household composition, grandparents' education, and home computers. For example, in comparing black and white households in which at least one parent has two years or more of college, white households average almost \$25,000 more in gross income and \$200,000 more in net worth. These same comparisons show

Table 1 Socioeconomic Profiles of Well-Off Black and White Households in the NLSY97

	At Least One Parent Two-Year College or More		At Least One Parent Four-Years College or More		Middle-Class Household Income ^f	
	African Americans	African Whites	African Americans	Whites	Americans	Whites
Median Income ^A	38,875	58,025	53,300	70,200	48,435	60,000
SD	32,875	52,458	36,794	59,060	27,380	45,079
N	442	1732	143	948	456	2053
Median Wealth ^B	30,850	113,500	62,989	155,500	46,750	111,250
SD	203,636	574,763	257,153	701,213	216,572	544,099
N	430	1663	131	895	372	1795
% 1 Yr Income in Assets	47%	72%	57%	81%	47%	72%
SD	.50	.45	.50	.40	.50	.45
N	375	1520	112	815	372	1795
% 2 Parent Household ^C	58%	81%	69%	85%	61%	83%
SD	.49	.39	.46	.35	.49	.38
N	624	2195	219	1222	456	2049
% 2 Parent Biological Household ^D	38%	67%	51%	74%	42%	67%
SD	.49	.47	.50	.44	.50	.47
N	624	2195	219	1222	456	2049
% Any Grandparent Any College Experience ^E	20%	48%	31%	61%	17%	50%
SD	.40	.50	.46	.49	.26	.31
N	538	2033	183	1142	456	2053
% Any Grandparent College Degree	12%	32%	20%	43%	14%	33%
SD	.32	.47	.40	.50	.18	.25
N	538	2033	183	1142	456	2053
% Home Computer	50%	79%	62%	87%	56%	74%
SD	.50	.41	.49	.34	.50	.44
N	351	1133	124	643	225	1044

Source: NLSY97 Rounds 1-4 Release Public Use Data

^A Gross household income level from 1996, including monies received beyond wages and salary (e.g., interest from stocks, SSI, etc.). Gross income is topcoded in the NLSY97 at \$200,000.

^B Measure of household net worth reported by the parent, calculated as total assets minus total debts. Topcoded at \$2,000,000.

^C Two “parental figures” present, regardless of composition (e.g., biological mother and step-father).

^D Both biological parents or adoptive parents present.

^E College experience or degree by grandmother/father on either side of family.

^F Middle-class income is defined as gross household income between 100 percent and 499 percent of the 1996 poverty line for households of their size.

three-fourths of white households but just half of African American with accumulated wealth equivalent to one year of income. Highly educated black families in the NLSY97 also are less likely to be biologically two-parent households (38% versus 67%) or to have two-parent figures present (58% versus 81%), and the parents in them are more often first-generation college attendees (48% of white grandparents had college experience versus 20% of black; with grandparent college-completion the criterion, the figures are 32% and 12%). Children in white households also report having greater access to computers at home than blacks (79% versus 50%).

Like patterns are evident using “four years of college” and “middle-class income” to identify “better-off” black and white households (see Table 1).⁸ For an overall picture, we tallied five representative “high-end” socioeconomic indicators: (1) gross income over \$60,000, (2) wealth above one year of income, (3) two-parent household composition, (4) at least one grandparent with college experience, and (5) computer access in the home. At the two-year college level and above, black parents average almost one standard deviation lower than whites on this SES profile (2.02 items versus 3.3).

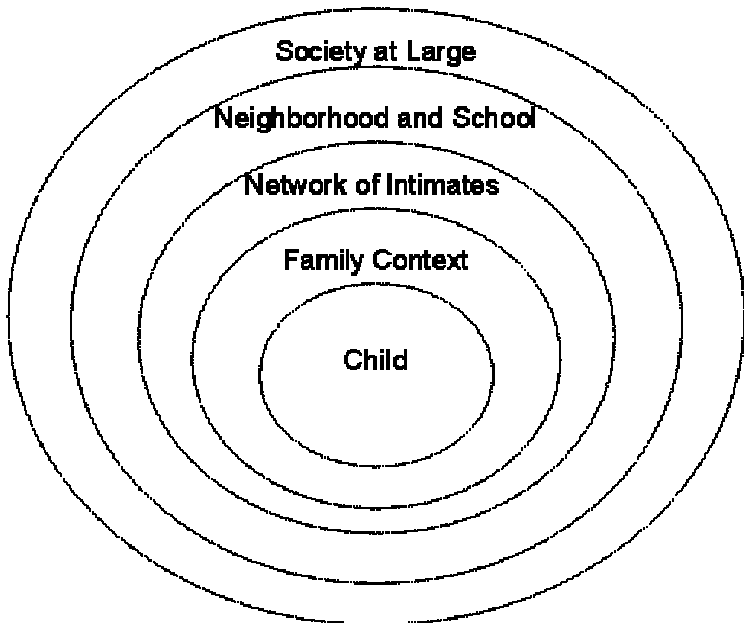
Among black parents with four years or more of college the scale mean increases to 2.5, but they still average 1.3 resource units, or one standard deviation, below college-educated whites. Finally, with middle-class income level, used to identify better-off families, the black profile average falls .9 units short of the white (2.3 versus 3.2), about a .70 standard deviation. In sum, status crystallization at the high end is much less pronounced in middle-class black households than in white. That is to say, even when blacks attain parity with whites on a given measure of socioeconomic well-being, they typically lag far behind on others—a playing field level in one respect turns out to be quite uneven in others. This is the reality of black family life, and it no doubt has implications for black children’s academic and personal development.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF BLACK FAMILY LIFE

These socioeconomic disparities make it harder for black families of means to support their children’s schooling, but African American children and their parents also are embedded in complex social webs that impact family life and youth development in ways not captured by traditional measures of socioeconomic standing. These “webs” can be usefully envisioned in Bronfenbrennerian terms (1979; 1994) as radiating out from the child in ever widening ecological circles (proximal to distal), or

by using Epstein's "overlapping spheres of influence" imagery (1990; 1992). The nuclear or extended nuclear family would come first under either conceptualization. Being the most immediate and intimate social unit, family members are the child's primary source of emotional support and agents of socialization. Next would be the network of intimates: peers for children; friends and relatives for parents. They offer support, but also make demands. They are role models, sources of inspiration, and the basis of reflected appraisals that help define who we are, how we come to think of ourselves, and how we view the world around us. Next would be the extra-familial institutional contexts of neighborhood and school. For most young people, these two settings circumscribe life experience in their early years, and encounters in them are profoundly important for children's personal, social, and academic development. At the outermost circle is society writ large. The broader social context touches us in a whole host of ways—business cycles, political climate, issues of war and peace. Our present concern is the place of race in the larger social fabric. These several layerings of social organization are discussed in order (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Social Context of Black Family Life and Youth Development



FAMILY DYNAMICS

The family is the child's launching pad, and how parents conduct themselves in relation to their children does much to determine the path eventually followed. Parents who provide emotional support, encouragement, and structure (e.g., "authoritative parenting" in Baumrind's typology, 1996), invest themselves in their children (e.g., daily reading sessions), monitor and shelter their children yet provide space for exploration, and encourage constructive experiences outside the home (the "protective-promotive duality"—e.g., Elder, Eccles, Ardel, & Lord, 1995; McLoyd, 1998) are helping to build a sturdy foundation.

These parental behaviors—aspects of internal family social capital—actualize parents' human capital endowments in support of their children's schooling (e.g., Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). According to Coleman and Hoffer (1987, p. 222): "If the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is *irrelevant* to the child's educational growth that the parent has a great deal, or a small amount of, human capital," (*italics added*).

"Irrelevant" likely overstates the case, but certainly the quantity and quality of interactions embodied in parenting style are the means by which parents' personal resources, including the resources that come with more advanced levels of schooling and high income, "pass through" to their children. What, then, is the picture of childrearing and parenting practices in stable middle-class black families?

African American parents, especially African American mothers, are said to be more authoritarian and punitive than white parents. According to Steinberg, Dornbusch and colleagues (Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Steinberg, Dornbusch and Brown, 1992; Dornbusch, Ritter & Steinberg, 1991), "authoritative parenting" is more prevalent in white households than in black and more strongly related to school performance. They also find that among blacks (compared to whites), parental level of education is less predictive of high-level math and science course-taking in high school and high-school grades, presumably owing, at least in part, to differences in parenting style.

Black mothering also has been characterized as "parent centered," insensitive to children's needs and demanding complete obedience. Children raised this way typically do not shine in school, but there are problems with this depiction of African American parenting (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). Gonzales, Cauce, and Mason (1996), for example, find that the race of the rater is a factor in the coding of black parenting. Non-African American (outgroup) observers tend to characterize black mothering styles as more restrictive and record higher

levels of mother-daughter conflict than do African American (ingroup) coders.

Until recently, deviations from the standard of white, middle-class home life have been viewed through a “deficit” lens (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1996; Toliver, 1998), with “difference” taken to mean “deficient” (for overview, see Coll et al., 1996). This is changing though, as recent work on non-poor black mothers documents great diversity in black family life (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000, p. 1083), and wide variation in the socialization experiences of black children (Coll, Meyer, & Brillon, 1995). This includes reliance on child-centered parenting in middle-class families (e.g., Bluestone & Tamis-LeMonda, 1999).

According to Kelly, Power, and Wimbush (1992, p. 574), characterizing black mothering as rigid and low warmth is an “oversimplification and overgeneralization.” But if the portrayal of black families as disorganized and pathological is problematic, so too is its blanket rejection. As Toliver (1998, p. 25) points out, “Black families are not all weak and unstable, but neither are they ‘superfamilies.’”

Clearly, more and better research is needed on the family life of middle-class African American households. However, it would be a mistake for this work to be exclusively inward-looking, as black families and their children face obstacles beyond the family circle that have implications for family functioning (Coll, Meyer, & Brillon, 1995, p. 192) and the effectiveness of different parenting strategies (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Lareau (2003), for example, finds that middle-class black and white parents engage in similar behaviors, but that black parents *additionally* utilize strategies to shield their children from racism. As Baumrind (1996, p. 409) recognizes: “Parenting practices that would be deemed overly restrictive in a benign middle-class environment may provide optimum supervision and support in dangerous, impoverished neighborhoods.”

That there is not one best approach to parenting finds support in a longitudinal study of kindergarten and first-grade children conducted by Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, and Jones (2001). In this study, high levels of parental education in black families are not associated with high levels of parental warmth—this is opposite the pattern for whites. Black parents evidence less warmth and are less sensitive to children’s wishes, but Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, and Jones conclude that this is understandable in light of the need for black parents to prepare their children for a world that is harsher and more threatening than the one experienced by white youth (see also Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996; Baumrind, 1996).

This illustrates one way in which the world outside penetrates black family life, and there are others. Race-specific contextual constraints that impede black parents' ability to lift their children to the heights they want for them are taken up in the sections that follow.

NETWORK OF INTIMATES

Most people want to feel good about themselves, and when attempts to attain self-validation in one domain are thwarted, it is natural to turn to others—if not in school, then perhaps on the streets. Some research indicates that members of subordinate groups (e.g., blacks) rely more on self-affirming family and friends in forming an academic identity, while dominants (e.g., whites) more often take their cues from school personnel and the performance feedback conveyed by grades and achievement test scores (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Whatever the reason—be it the perception of glass ceilings and blocked opportunities (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1985), an inability to bond with teachers (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), or avoidance of discomfort when performance disappoints (Crocker & Major, 1989)—such a turning away from school is likely to prove costly in the long run. Stanton-Salazar (1997), for example, traces the posture of hyper-masculinity and swagger adopted by many African American and Hispanic youth to difficulties experienced in relationships with teachers. Finding that avenue for building social capital cut off, they turn to others, but they are ones that frighten school personnel and do not encourage school commitment.

If the idea is to reinforce the school's agenda through personal ties, peers may not be the best source of "significant others" in the lives of black youth. Here is how Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1992, p. 727–728) put it:

...an important predictor of academic success for an adolescent is having support for academics from both parents and peers . . . Although [African American] parents are supportive of academic success, these youngsters . . . find it much more difficult to join a peer group that encourages the same goal. Our interviews with high-achieving African American students indicated that peer support for academic success is so limited that many successful African American students eschew contact with other African American students and affiliate primarily with students from other ethnic groups.

There is a large body of literature identifying adolescent peer processes that negatively sanction effort towards school success (e.g., Mason, Cauce, Gonzales & Hiraga, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steinberg, Dornbush & Brown, 1992; Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1994; Ford, 1993) due to shared perceptions of a limited opportunity structure; although the oppositional culture explanation is not universally accepted (see Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Akom, 2003). But what of black children's parents? They, too, are embedded in social networks, and these might or might not work to their children's advantage.

With resources from mainstream society not readily accessible to people of color, extended and fictive-kin networks are of great importance in the African American community (Hill, 1972; 1999; McAdoo, 2002a). Middle-class and affluent blacks likewise are embedded in strong kin networks (McAdoo, 1978, p. 775; Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Uttal, 1999), but their middle-class standing often is tenuous and the pressure on them to give back to less well-off relatives and friends can be a heavy burden (Billingsley, 1992).

Better-off black parents who want to use their mobility-related resources to benefit their children instead may find them diffused *horizontally* through social networks of friends, extended kinship, and associates—this to a much greater degree than among middle-class whites. Such obligations leave many members of the African American middle class living “check to check” (Wilkerson, 1990).

The pressures described by Wilkerson, Billingsley, and others follow from resource asymmetries paired with resource limitations that are quite real, and we believe, widespread. Middle-class blacks, for example, are much more likely than middle-class whites to have a poor sibling (40% vs. 16% in the NLSY79^a—see Heflin & Pattillo, 2003; 2002; Pattillo-McCoy & Heflin, 1999; 33% vs. 8% in the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics—see Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002), and/or a poor parent (36% vs. 8%, Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002). And the associated burden? Chiteji and Hamilton (2002) find that almost \$10,000 of the middle-class black-white wealth gap can be accounted for by financial help to poor relations.¹⁰ At 27% of the total explained by their analysis, help-giving contributes more to the wealth gap than the 23% attributable to traditional socioeconomic considerations (e.g., differences in lifetime income, education, occupation).

This greater degree of intra-familial class diversity along “well-off–worse off” lines leaves middle-class African Americans (relative to whites) more vulnerable to personal and macro-economic setbacks and hence at much greater risk of downward mobility. And beyond financial considerations,

there are equally weighty social-capital and cultural-capital implications. Here is how Heflin and Pattillo (2003, p. 22–23) put it:

Generally a poor sibling requires more extensive help-giving by family members and is much less likely to be able to provide support for another family member in periods of economic stress . . . A poor sibling is less likely . . . to be able to provide job or educational contacts . . . or impart important cultural capital. . . . Finally, kin matter because of the psychological strain or boost family members represent.

With such huge differences across racial lines in the likelihood of having a needy sibling or parent, one can only imagine what including cousins, uncles, extended family, fictive kin, friends, and neighbors would show. Presently, for example, more than 25% of young black men ages 20 to 29 are under correctional supervision (Blank, 2001, p. 35). By current estimates, almost 30% of black males at some point in their lives will serve time in a state or federal prison; for white males the estimate is 4.4% (Blumstein, 2001, p. 22). In some cities, over half of black males in their 20s are under control of the criminal justice system, meaning they are in prison or jail, on probation, or on parole.

Arrest and incarceration pose problems not just for the persons involved (e.g., Pager, 2002; Bound & Freeman, 1992; Freeman, 1991; Grogger, 1997), but also for friends and family who care about them and want to help. In Washington, D.C., the high cost of collect calls from jail causes “many families to have their phones disconnected within two months of an incarceration” (Braman, 2002, p. 120). In the same ethnographic study, prison-related phone calls consumed almost 20% of some families’ income.

For the new black middle class, obligations to siblings and extended family members caught in the revolving door of crime and punishment pose immense burdens—for example, requests for help with bail money; in more severe cases, risking the house (mortgage) or the children’s college fund to get a relative out of jail until a trial; taking in the children of a brother or sister who is incarcerated. And there are other costs not measured in dollars. Relative to whites, whose circle of privilege tends to be more circumscribed, the children in black middle-class “helper” families have more expansive social horizons. They are more likely to have family friends, neighbors and relations who wear different workplace collars (e.g., white, blue, and none), live more varied lifestyles, and exemplify greater diversity in value systems. Their realm of experience may include not just hard-working, successful role models, but possibly also drug deal-

ers and users, convicts, ex-cons and/or those on a path to prison, people out of work or those who work only intermittently, high-school dropouts, and so on.

Our point is not to elevate exclusivity, and certainly not privileged exclusivity. There is great value in experiencing, close up, the rich mosaic of difference in everyday life. If more of us had that experience, we no doubt would be a stronger, more compassionate society. But the experience of diversity also opens up more possibilities. For well-off parents eager to keep their children on a positive developmental path (academic and otherwise), diverse social networks may expose their children to various kinds of negative role models.

NEIGHBORHOODS

Black children are much more likely than white children to grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods (poverty rates of 20% and above) and hyper-poverty neighborhoods (40% and above poverty rates). According to 2000 Census data, levels of concentrated poverty nationwide have dropped sharply since 1990, and more so among minorities than whites. Nevertheless, large disparities persist across social lines. Just under 19% of African Americans in 2000 resided in neighborhoods with 40% and above poverty rates (down from 30% in 1990) versus 6% of whites (Jargowsky, 2003). By way of comparison, and for perspective, in 1990 some 27% of black children versus 3% of white resided in census tracts with poverty rates of 40% or greater (and for completion, 30% of Hispanic children, Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The relevance of this to the life experience of poor urban blacks has received much attention in research on the urban underclass and conditions of persistent poverty, but neighborhood conditions have relevance for the non-poor also: affluence doesn't insulate African Americans from other disadvantaging community conditions to the extent it does whites (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In their famous book *American Apartheid* (1993), Massey and Denton show that, at any given level of family income, blacks tend to live in neighborhoods with lower housing values and higher percentages of births to unwed mothers, and their children attend schools with lower achievement test averages (see also Massey, Condran, & Denton, 1987).

Massey and colleagues make their case with numbers, and compelling numbers at that, but census calculations can't capture the pulse of a community—the rhythms of daily life at the street level. Pattillo's (1998; Patillo-McCoy, 1999) account of conditions in a black middle-class Chicago neighborhood does just that. Pattillo describes a world of rela-

tive comfort, one in which relatives and neighbors look after one another's children, and so exhibit high levels of what Coleman (1988; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) calls "intergenerational closure." But other elements of this world fit more the picture of social capital sketched by Portes and Landolt (1996) than Coleman's. It is a world in which social capital can "drag down" as well as "lift up," for Pattillo's neighborhood is not just a community of vigilant, caring neighbors, but also one rife with drug dealers and gang members. As Pattillo-McCoy (1999, p. 211) notes, one of the overriding features of black middle-class neighborhoods is their close connection and proximity to poor neighborhoods:

The ecological context of black middle-class families is a basic feature of difference between the white and black middle class. The location of black middle-class neighborhoods dictates the experiences to which black middle-class youth will be exposed. Living near blighted, poor neighborhoods with substandard schools, crumbling institutions, and few businesses presents an extra challenge to managing the negative influences on black middle-class children.

To complicate matters, the criminal element in this neighborhood isn't an invasion by "outsiders" against which the community might rally. Rather, it is made up, substantially, of friends and relatives, creating pressures for accommodation. Pattillo points out the many ways in which this integration of licit and illicit contributes to community stability—e.g., by providing material support to local families and thwarting inroads by other criminal elements—but these benefits come at a price. We mentioned previously the more expansive social networks in the life experience of better-off African American youth. Pattillo's research buttresses and extends the point by bringing in broader neighborhood conditions.

Shielding children ought to prove more difficult in communities where overt criminal activity is a daily presence and criminal elements mix and mingle without remark. In their analysis of *suburban* crime patterns in the New Jersey portion of the New York CMSA (Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area), Alba, Logan, and Bellair (1994) implicate community contextual factors (e.g., racial composition, extent of poverty, and population size) in blacks' excess crime exposure relative to whites' (more than a two-fold difference for violent crimes; a difference of 1.5 times for property crimes). They (1994, p. 427) conclude:

In the case of blacks, whatever their individual characteristics of income, home ownership, etc., they are more exposed to crime

because they tend to be channeled into larger suburbs with relatively high black and poor proportions. . . . The findings for blacks point up the continuing significance of segregation. . . . Surely high community crime rates constitute [community] disadvantage, even for those individuals who are not directly victimized by crime [italics added].

Extending the point, Dornbusch, Ritter, and Steinberg (1991) draw out some of the implications of harsh community conditions for African American family functioning. In their studies, the correlation between parent education and high-school grades is attenuated for families living in census tracts with large minority populations (25% or more), and even more so with large African American populations (30% or more). The pattern is similar for black and white families, but impacts African Americans more because many more black than white families live in high minority neighborhoods. Here is how the authors assess this pattern (1991, p. 565):

African American parents who have preserved their family stability and attained a high level of education must fight a second battle: they must overcome the influence of general patterns of social discrimination if they reside in communities with a substantial proportion of minority residents. *Family advantages among African Americans in minority communities are not as likely to be passed on to their children* [italics added].

In addition to continued exposure to pockets of poverty and crime, black children residing in relatively affluent neighborhoods benefit less from the positive social influences characteristic of those neighborhoods. Sociologists have long argued that social bonds in the family and the broader community are strengthened when parents know their children's friends and their friends' parents. With respect to children, this "social network intergenerational closure" includes monitoring and sanctioning inappropriate behavior, increasing the likelihood that nascent problems will be picked up and dealt with early.¹¹ But a recent study using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Turley, 2003) finds that black children living in higher-income, predominately white neighborhoods are less socially integrated at the local level—e.g., they have fewer "in-neighborhood" friends and more out-of-neighborhood friends. And what of schooling outcomes? According to Turley, living in an affluent neighborhood only yields improved school behaviors and performance when those communities also are predominantly African American (85%

and higher), where one presumes African American youngsters (and their parents) fit in more comfortably.

Even when minority youth do experience high levels of social network intergenerational closure (SNIC), the effects apparently are not always salutary. For example, Fletcher and colleagues (Fletcher, Newsome, Nickerson, & Bazley, 2001) find that higher levels of SNIC for black children are unrelated to achievement scores and are associated with more, not less, reported externalizing behaviors, including being defiant and talking back (their study focuses on fourth-grade students). Among whites, the pattern is the opposite: more SNIC is associated with higher achievement test scores and less externalizing behavior as reported by parents and teachers. The African American pattern seems odd upon first consideration, but perhaps not in light of the more diverse social networks available to better-off black children through extended family, friendship, and community ties.

SCHOOLS

Schools are where the problems that prompt this essay present themselves, and for that reason alone the school experience of middle-class African American youth surely must be relevant. But there is little research targeted to this population segment specifically, and for obvious reasons we cannot simply extrapolate findings from studies of disadvantaged blacks or of blacks overall. This is much like the situation encountered in literature on the family process—there too, better-off blacks as a group have received little attention. The two projects that seem most relevant—Ogbu's Shaker Heights book and the MSAN studies—regrettably have little to say about school organization and practices.¹² Still, there are useful hints in both studies, as well as in other literature already mentioned. Ogbu, for example, points out that African American parents interact with school personnel differently than white parents, and that blacks are badly underrepresented in advanced placement courses; Stanton-Salazar notes the difficulties experienced by minority youth in forging strong ties with their teachers; and Massey-Denton remind us of the links between residential segregation, school segregation, and school quality. These materials suggest to us three promising lines of inquiry: differences in school quality that follow from residential patterns; segregative patterns *within* schools; and teacher relationships, both parent-teacher and pupil-teacher. School quality is taken up first.

Despite the recent explosive growth in the number of charter and magnet schools, the vast majority of youth still attend neighborhood public schools,¹³ and we have seen already that neighborhood comparisons work

against African Americans, including better-off African Americans. Here is how Massey and Denton (1993, p. 153) put it:

For blacks . . . high incomes do not buy entrée to residential circumstances that can serve as springboards for future socioeconomic mobility; in particular, blacks are unable to achieve a school environment conducive to later academic success. In Philadelphia, children from an affluent black family are likely to attend a public school where the percentage of low-achieving students is three times greater than in the schools attended by affluent white children. . . . Because of segregation, the same income buys black and white families educational environments that are of vastly different quality.

For Massey and Denton, residential segregation is the issue, but concerns about the school-quality implications of segregative patterns extend beyond issues of residence. The recent retreat from school desegregation as national policy is a case in point. It took years of hard work and much suffering in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to achieve meaningful desegregation in the nation's public schools; it appears it will take far less time for those hard-won victories to slip away.

With the courts relaxing desegregation requirements in recent years (Orfield & Eaton, 1996) and most neighborhoods still highly segregated by race, black students today are more segregated from white students than they were in the mid-sixties. Black enrollment in majority white schools fell an estimated 13% in the 1990s. Nationwide, minorities make up about 40% of the public-sector enrollment, while whites on average attend schools that are 80% white. Three-fourths of black students attend schools that are predominantly minority. Indeed, one of six black students attends a segregated "apartheid" school, for example, one that is 99% to 100% minority. Such schools are characterized by concentrated poverty, limited resources, social and health problems, and less parental involvement (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Black youth enjoy improved educational and later life outcomes when they attend integrated schools (Wells & Crain, 1994) or schools with diverse socioeconomic enrollments (Kahlenberg, 2001). That being the case, the flagging national commitment to school desegregation in the public sector will likely incur substantial costs for the young people involved (and eventually for all of us). For example, analyzing National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS88) data in conjunction with data from the Department of Education Common Core of Data, Roscigno

(1998) finds evidence of strong school racial composition effects on tenth graders' reading and math achievement, even after adjusting for other school and classroom factors and measures of family background. "Attending a black segregated school," Roscigno concludes (p. 1051), "continues to have a negative influence on achievement."

We cannot say how many, or how much, better-off black youth are held back by attending lower quality, substantially segregated schools, but it would be good to know. However, school desegregation alone doesn't guarantee a quality educational experience. This brings us to our second issue: internal (re)segregation as a result of educational tracking, a form of segregation not usually thought of as such. Middle-class black students who are not isolated in poorer, racially segregated, low-achieving schools may find themselves instead in substantially segregated classrooms owing to patterns of within school ability grouping and tracking (Oakes, 1995).

Black students tend to be overrepresented in lower-track programs and curricula, sometimes beyond levels predicted by prior academic achievement (Hallinan, 1994). Mickelson (2001) makes this distinction in her "Subverting Swann" study of enrollments and track placements in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, an "ostensibly desegregated" school system. "First-generation segregation" entails the physical separation of blacks and whites by school building; "second-generation segregation" inheres in placement patterns that have the effect of separating whites and blacks within nominally desegregated schools.

Mickelson's analysis demonstrates sizeable disparities in the classroom placements of comparable black and white students, with blacks overrepresented in remedial academic courses,¹⁴ and underrepresented in advanced courses. Likewise, Kelly (2002) finds strong evidence of a black-white gap in upper-track mathematics course-taking in nominally integrated high schools after controlling for prior achievement and SES. Related to these placement patterns are striking differences in so-called "opportunities to learn" (Dougherty, 1996). For example, higher percentage black enrollments at the school level are associated with a lower percentage of fully certified teachers, fewer average years of teaching experience, a lower percentage of teachers with Master's degrees, higher enrollments of ESL (English as a second language) students, and higher percentages of low-income students (Mickelson, 2001, p. 236–238). Like differences are found in research that compares teacher characteristics and opportunities to learn differences across low-track and high-track classes (Oakes, 1990; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Delany, 1991).

This tendency for desegregated schools to segregate internally has been detected in other studies also (Oakes, 1995; Bush, Burley, & Causey-Bush, 2001; Mallery & Mallery, 1999). However, we stress again that track-

placement patterns and opportunity to learn disparities are not well described for better-off African American youth. There is some evidence of placement disproportional placement (e.g., Ogbu, 2003), but whether that holds for middle-class blacks net of appropriate qualification criteria has yet to be tested.

Our third schooling issue involves relationships with teachers. Teachers matter: the arena of the classroom is intensely interpersonal, and teacher-student relationships affect school success beyond objective considerations of test scores and grade point average. Black students, especially black males, have difficulty forming positive relationships with school personnel, and more generally are seen as displaying problem behaviors at a rate far exceeding that of their white peers. Studies in the early primary grades consistently find teachers rating black children more severely than white in terms of classroom deportment, compliance with school routines, and the like (e.g., Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Sbarra & Pianta, 2001),¹⁵ all correlates of later academic difficulty, including depressed achievement scores and elevated risk of high-school dropout (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992). Indeed, large differences in teacher assessments are apparent as early as kindergarten (e.g., West, Denton, & Reaney, 2001; Downey & Pribesh, 2004), before children have had much experience with school.

Whether these findings hold for better-off black children has yet to be researched. Still, the white middle-class “cultural toolkit” is very much evident in the behaviors parents and teachers take as indicative of academic ability and intelligence—e.g., sitting quietly, being “reserved,” speaking in turn (e.g., Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997, p. 490–491). Many African American and other minority children enter school with quite different behavioral repertoires and dispositions, but while the operative word here is “different” (not “wrong” or “bad”—e.g., Boykin, 1978; 1982; 1984), there can be little doubt that when filtered through the lens of race, such understandings of academic potential and intelligence hinder de-tracking efforts and contribute to within-school racial segregation.

Regarding parents, Ogbu (2003, p. 236) describes black parents in Shaker Heights as relatively passive in the educational experiences of their children: “. . . They did not perceive themselves as active agents in the education process. They did not think they needed to be involved in the teaching process for their children to learn. The role of parents is apparently limited to putting pressure on teachers to do their job of teaching well; that is, limited to pushing teachers and other school personnel to educate their children.” According to Ogbu (p. 263), this *laissez faire* parental style, when combined with a lack of knowledge con-

cerning school tracking and leveling schemes, contributes to the low AP and honors-level course enrollments of affluent black youth. Related literature (Lareau 1987; 1989; 2002; Useem, 1991; Baker & Stevenson, 1986) finds similar differences across social class lines in how parents engage school personnel. This might help explain black parents' more passive stance in dealing with school authority. Many more black parents than white achieve their middle-class standing through upward mobility, and perhaps it is vestiges of their lower-class origins that render them less effective in advocating their children's interests at school.

These differences in school quality, segregative patterns *within* schools, and teacher relationships intersect to hinder the academic development of better-off black youth. Consequently, the family background advantages that middle-class whites enjoy in positive schooling outcomes are not realized to the same extent by middle-class blacks.

THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE IN THE WIDER WORLD

The everyday lived experience of race in post-civil rights America is distinctively different from that of yesterday. The elimination of *de jure* discrimination from most spheres of public life and a generally more polite racial etiquette give the appearance that racial antagonism no longer pervades race relations, but this notion is mistaken. At the start of the twenty-first century, racial discrimination, albeit often in subtle forms, remains virulent and middle-class African Americans are included among its victims.

In the black community, the common experience of discrimination tends to override distinctions of social class and other individual characteristics (Harrison-Hale, 2002, p. 193). Toliver's (1998) study of Fortune-100 black corporate managers and their families is instructive. These high level executives live well and comfortably. Most reside in predominantly white, affluent neighborhoods; their children receive private lessons and other privileges. But beneath the surface there are problems. As a group, they feel a lack of control over their work, isolated in their work lives, and face numerous incidents of racism. Toliver (p. 10) concludes, "For them, the significance of race undeniably continues," and because race "still matters" pervasively, affluent black parents are obliged to invest resources, time, and emotional energy dealing with issues of race (see also Lareau, 2003; Peters, 2002).

Micro-level manifestations of the continuing significance of race include avoidance acts, such as a white couple crossing the street when a black male approaches, poor service in public accommodations, verbal

attacks and racial slurs, harassment by police, and physical attacks from white supremacists (Feagin, 1991, p. 102; Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Danny Glover and other celebrities recount innumerable racist incidents with taxicab drivers and shopkeepers (Schadler, 2000). Reminiscent of the disturbing Broadway taxi scene in Savion Glover's musical "Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk," nine cabs reportedly turned down Cornell West en route to a photo shoot for his 1993 book entitled, ironically, *Race Matters* (Wieseltier, 1995).

In studies, Siegelman (1999) has shown how race enters into a variety of everyday commercial interactions, including buying a car, hailing a taxicab, and dining out. In one study, testers with similar background characteristics (e.g., age, education, and appearance) and uniform bargaining scripts were sent to local car dealerships. After negotiations, the black male asking price for the same vehicle averaged \$1600 above the white male average; for females, the difference averaged \$400. In a paired tester study of taxicabs in the Washington, D.C., whites were about 11% more likely than blacks to get a cab and blacks waited 27% longer to do so (5.7 minutes vs. 4.5). Concerning discrimination at restaurants and stores, in a 1997 Gallup poll, 45% of African Americans reported being discriminated against at least once in the past month—30% in stores; 21% while eating out (some both).

Years of these small, and no doubt sometimes imagined, assaults take a toll on the victims of discrimination. Recent research links psychological distress and depression among blacks to discrimination (Brown, 1999; Carter 1994), while worrying about race relations is associated with low levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Brown, Wallace, & Williams, 2001), all of which filter through to children's development.

Race also continues to play a role in residential patterns, beyond considerations of affordability and location (Bullard, 1990; Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1993). Three matched tester studies conducted by HUD (the 1977 Housing Market Practices Study; the 1989 Housing Discrimination Study; the Housing Discrimination Study 2000) document extensive racial discrimination in housing rental and sales markets (Turner, Ross, Galster, & Yinger, 2002). In this research, white and black persons supplied with identical backgrounds are sent to real estate companies (or respond to newspaper advertisements) to inquire about rental properties or buying a home. The most recent of the three HUD studies involved 4,600 paired tests in 23 cities. Rental agents were found to engage in discriminatory practices in 22% of the cases; sales agents in 17%. Blacks sometimes were told properties were unavailable, while white seekers were shown the property; often blacks and whites

were shown properties in different neighborhoods (i.e., so-called steering).

A recent study of banking practices in more than 60 US cities found African Americans more than twice as likely as whites to be denied a home loan. In Chicago and Milwaukee, blacks were four times more likely to be turned down, with wealthy blacks rejected twice as often as whites with the same income (Bergquist, 2001). Holloway and Wylly (2001) report that African American applicants face the greatest barriers when applying for credit to live in high-income white neighborhoods. For many whites, an influx of black neighbors apparently still is associated with decreasing property values and increased criminal activity (Farley et al., 1994).

The same paired testing paradigm also documents employment discrimination in the initial stages of the job hunt (e.g., Bendick, Jackson & Reinoso, 1994). Using ethnically distinctive names, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2002) find that job applicants with black-sounding names, such as "Lakisha Washington" or "Jamal Jones," are less likely to be called back for interviews than are applicants with white-sounding names, for example, "Emily Walsh" or "Brendan Baker." With the same level of prior labor-market experience, credentials, and overall quality of resume, applicants with white-sounding names received 50% more callbacks than applicants with black-sounding names. In fact, applicants with black names and high-quality resumes received no more callbacks than whites with low-quality resumes.

Race also affects which applicants receive job offers (e.g., Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991). In a matched-pair study conducted by the Fair Employment Council, one in four employers was found to discriminate in hiring (Job Opportunities Task Force, 2003; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001). Forty-seven percent of white testers who were interviewed received job offers, as against 11% of black testers. White job applicants were offered higher starting salaries and more often advised of other job openings with better pay and benefits.

This evidence of the pervasive, continuing significance of race in the larger social fabric makes suspect statistical manipulations that presume to isolate African American disadvantage by "netting out" socioeconomic disparities through statistical means. Certainly such adjustments alter the picture. On the order of a third of the test-score gap and perhaps all of the difference in college entry and graduation can be accounted for by associated SES differences (Gamoran, 2001, p. 137). Indeed, some statistically adjusted comparisons involving schooling outcomes show blacks

advantaged relative to whites (e.g., McDonald & LaVeist, 2001; LaVeist & McDonald, 2002). But how should we construe the attenuation of race differences that follows from SES adjustments when opportunities for socioeconomic advancement are race-constrained? Are effects of race only evident when comparing the school performance of black and white children of like socioeconomic profiles? We hardly think so. Or are socioeconomic factors somehow more fundamental than race, as in “it’s their disadvantaged class background that holds blacks back, not their race” (or not race “per se”). Possibly, but that’s not self-evidently the case.

The meaning behind such statistical operations depends, fundamentally, on what is behind the race–SES confound. More specifically, what is to be made of the “high end” socioeconomic disparities seen in Table 1 comparing middle-class African Americans and whites? Is it reasonable to suppose they trace, partly or in whole, to racial dynamics of the sort reviewed in this section? If so, then it hardly can be said that eliminating racial inequality statistically makes race irrelevant. As Martin and Yeung (2003, p. 539) state: “Racial differences [are] something to be explained analytically, as opposed to being taken into account and implicitly taken for granted.” It is likely that a bit of probing would reveal race lurking in the background, even when statistical adjustments diminish black-white differentials in schooling.

The picture sketched in this section of continuing racial liability for even the most privileged of black Americans accords with McAdoo’s conclusion (2002b, p. 48): “Even when parents are highly educated, have sufficient resources from professional positions, and are middle class in orientation, they encounter subtle discrimination throughout their lives.” It seems a small step from this realization to consequences for the intergenerational transmission of advantage from parent to offspring. Duncan (1969, p. 95–96) concluded much the same back in the sixties:

Negroes who do have favorable social origins cannot, as readily as whites, convert that advantage into occupational achievement and monetary returns thereto in the course of their own careers. The Negro family, in other words, is relatively less able than the white to pass on to the next generation any advantage that may accrue to substantial status achievement in the present generation.

Surely much has changed since those words were written, but perhaps not as much as is often assumed.

CONCLUSION

Children of highly educated, affluent African Americans lag behind their white counterparts in educational success. These education gaps at the top partly reflect socioeconomic differentials, but more so how race limits or constrains the life chances of black parents and their children, including well-off parents and their children.

Our review identifies, and implicates, social processes that ripple outward from the immediate home environments of blacks, through peers and friends, into neighborhoods and schools, and finally to society at large, processes somehow overlooked in Herrnstein and Murray's consideration of why middle-class black children are not achieving. The spiral of contextual constraints is unforgiving: it is the harsh reality of racial stratification that causes many black children, even in families of high economic standing and abundant home resources, to fall short of their educational potential.¹⁶

When the literature on race, family, neighborhood, and schooling is viewed through a social-ecological lens, the puzzle of African American educational disadvantage at the high end appears not quite so puzzling. But the literature is widely scattered, and the evidence we have pieced together is more abundant and more definitive in some areas than others. In the areas of schooling and family process, there is little research focused specifically on the new African American middle class, and that which we have uncovered tends to be narrowly cast. More direct comparisons of better-off black and white family processes are needed. Do stable middle-class and affluent black families handle parenting like their white counterparts? Do their children benefit in equal measure from the same parenting behaviors? If not, why not? Research also is needed concerning the school experiences of better-off African American children. How many affluent black youth attend low-quality segregated schools or experience re-segregation in nominally integrated schools? Few studies have examined teacher-pupil bonds and social support among well-off black students.

Of course, many black families successfully nurture high levels of academic achievement despite the externalities we have identified, and high-achieving African American youth are represented at all levels of schooling (Hrabowski, 1998; 2002). This essay has scrutinized the challenges they and their families face by virtue of the place of race in contemporary US society, but many rise above those challenges to achieve distinction, and that too is an integral part of today's racial dynamic. Research is

needed to uncover the strategies black parents of means utilize to keep their children on a positive academic path. Recent projects like the Minority Student Achievement Network are a good start, but more large-scale survey research and local case studies are needed to inform these neglected research topics. Our findings cannot be generalized to the youth development of other racial and ethnic minorities, but the issues highlighted in our social-ecological approach ought to be broadly applicable when adapted to each group's historical and contemporary particularities.

We conclude with a policy observation. Race-neutral remedies are increasingly favored over race-specific ones (e.g., Wilson, 1987; 1996); indeed, some even want to suppress the collection of racial identifiers in research and government records (e.g., Carlson, 2004; or Connerly, 2000). This denial of race seems to us misplaced, and potentially dangerous. Ignoring race won't eliminate it as a stratifying mechanism, but it will slow the search for corrective remedies and progress toward a more just society. Our examination of the educational difficulties of middle-class African American students highlights the many and varied ways in which race "still matters." It is hard to contemplate articulating, not to mention effectively addressing, the problems identified in this essay without invoking race. But the race at issue is a social construction, imbued with meaning through its particular history and current place in the social fabric. The liabilities that prevent black parents from passing on advantages to their children are racial, in the sense that they follow from the contemporary and historic social ecology of race.

Closing the black-white education gap, and keeping it closed, necessarily will involve strategies that acknowledge and address the continuing significance of race. Recent educational upgrading in the black community is to be applauded (e.g., Gamoran, 2001), and we hope the trend will continue. But unless and until that upgrading is accompanied by fundamental changes beyond the family in how race fits into the larger fabric of society, we're afraid today's pleasing "leave no child behind" rhetoric will remain just that. Better-off black youth will be left behind in large numbers, and with them a vast reservoir of unrealized talent.

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Race, Inequality, and American Education Conference at the University of Notre Dame, April 3-4, 2003 and at the Future of Racial Inequality Seminar at Wisconsin University on November 22, 2003. For comments and suggestions on a previous draft of this article, we are grateful to the Sociology of Education Journal Club at Johns Hopkins University.

Notes

1 In this paper we use the terms black and African American interchangeably, while recognizing that these labels may obscure ethnic and nativity differences within the black community.

2 The boundaries of “well-off” are not easily defined. The criteria used in the literature to indicate socioeconomic status are not consistent or even especially rigorous. Also, these constructs very likely have different meanings and implications for blacks and whites. By “well-off” and “better-off” we refer to college-educated parents, income that locates them in the middle class or above, and high-level technical and professional jobs. The three terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

3 Studies instead attribute black progress to broad social changes (e.g., the Civil Rights movement) and school improvement (e.g., progress in school desegregation, increased funding, reductions in class size).

4 Self-selection bias is a problem when using SAT performance to inform general population trends, but the SAT picture for better-off black youth aligns with the other data reviewed.

5 Orr (2003) demonstrates that black-white wealth differences affect academic achievement through child exposure to cultural capital (e.g., trips to museums, musical instruments in the home). Like Bourdieu, Orr suggests that white families reproduce their high status by converting income-producing assets (e.g., stocks, bonds) to cultural capital.

6 The NLSY97, which oversampled black youth, is nationally representative of youth born between 1980 and 1984. The screening criteria used in Table 1 were applied to the 6811 unique households in the NLSY97 baseline sample. Multiple child households are represented only once. See NLSY97 User’s Guide (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002) for a discussion of multiple-response household sampling.

7 Wealth (or net worth) is defined as total household assets minus total debt. Assets include property, retirement pension, savings accounts, stocks, the value of owned vehicles and furniture, and other assets. Debt values used are a mortgage, a second mortgage, loans owed, and amount owed on a car.

8 Middle-class income is defined as gross household income between 100 percent and 499 percent of the 1996 poverty line for households of their size (Farley, 1996, p. 66).

9 The contrasts are similar, though less pronounced, when the comparison is college-educated blacks against college-educated whites.

10 The life cycle, demographic, socioeconomic, and family background variables Chiteji and Hamilton use in their analysis only account for 55% of the black-white wealth gap. The *predicted* wealth gap of \$36,000 that they decompose represents about 40% of the *actual* \$90,000 wealth gap among middle-class blacks and whites in the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics.

11 Many studies find positive “social capital” effects, although often the term is used loosely (e.g., Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; McNeal, 1999; Parcel & Menaghan, 1993; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). When social capital is defined along SNIC lines, the evidence is mixed (e.g., compare Carbonaro, 1998, against Morgan & Sørensen, 1999).

12 Obgu (2003: xiii–xiv) is explicit in this, setting aside “school factors” in favor of “community factors.”

13 In the 2001–2002 school year, only 3% of students attended magnet schools; charter-school enrollment accounted for an additional 1.2% of elementary and secondary student enrollment (Hoffman, 2003). In 1998, the public share of the K–12 total was 88.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, p. 151). According to Loveless (1997), private-school enrollments as

a percentage of the total reached their historic high for the modern era during the decade of the 1950s (averaging 13.1% annually).

14 And in her descriptive analysis, special-education classes.

15 An exception is Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1994). They find race differences in teacher ratings over grades K–3, but these drop to non-significant levels when measures of family SES are controlled.

16 We have focused on the unseen yet enduring obstacles faced by black families and their children, but racial *disadvantage* for some implies racial *advantage* for others. This could equally as well be a story about white privilege. We thank Robert Hauser for reminding us of this.

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