Working Toward the Cultural Discontinuity Hypothesis in Appalachian American Education:

Theoretical Considerations

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Abstract

K.M. Tyler et al.'s (2008) seminal inquiry into establishing new measures for the study of cultural discontinuity and the role it may play in education provided a foundation from which to consider the ways in which cultural discontinuity might play a role in other, less discussed marginalized student populations. One such group of students are those that live within the socio-cultural confines of the Appalachian region of the United States. Although several theoretical perspectives might serve to orient the investigation of cultural values, marginalization in education and cultural discontinuity in Appalachia, serious inquiry into theoretical perspectives should be examined to determine which theoretical perspective (or perspectives) best serve as a means of understanding this type of inquiry. This paper reviews several theoretical perspectives, and examines the relative strengths and benefits of each as it relates to the study of Appalachian cultural discontinuity. In the end, a final theoretical framework is offered, with an explanation as to why it serves the study of cultural discontinuity in Appalachia so well.

KEYWORDS: Appalachian American, Socio-cultural
                      Conditions, Education, Regional Culture,
                      Marginalization

Cultural Discontinuity in Appalachian Education

Overview and Research Direction

Armed with decades of data that demonstrate achievement gaps between Caucasian American students and many of their ethnic minority peers, researchers who focus on the importance of cultural considerations in psychology and education and educators alike search for viable ways of providing and sustaining social equity for all citizens in the U.S. and indeed, throughout the world (Banks, 2006, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 1999; Sue & Sue, 2004). Many hypotheses have emerged to help provide researchers with foci in which to conduct the scholarly pursuit of this systemic problem as it relates to the social field of education, one of which is the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education. Emerging from the work of several scholars over time (the most prevalent perhaps being with the work of Wade Boykin and his contemporaries), the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education proposes that ethnic minority students are compelled to attend schools that operate within mainstream, Eurocentric cultural values and that within these schools students are often expected and forced to acculturate themselves to unfamiliar values and practices not aligned with their home socialization experiences while simultaneously being discouraged (explicitly and implicitly) to demonstrate behaviors associated with the cultural repertoires of practice (Guitierrez & Rogoff, 2003) of which they are accustomed and in which they have learned throughout their lives (Deyle, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ndura, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Parsons, 2001, 2003; Parsons, Travis, & Simpson, 2005; Solano-Flores & Nelson-Barber, 2001; Tyler, 2008). Further, it is argued that, due to the role culture plays in cognitive and emotional development (and behavior) (Luria, 1976; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978) students who cease to demonstrate values and associated behaviors acquired in home and social settings from early childhood forward are more likely to be

negatively affected in U.S. schools, not only in terms of actual measured learning outcomes for students (i.e. tests, G.P.A.), but also, in terms of the psychological antecedents to learning that are known to be important for academic achievement (academic motivation, academic self-efficacy). As stated in Banks and Banks (2004), researchers who investigate ethnic minority student underachievement "purported that instruction should bridge the gap between the culture of African American students and the White middle-class culture of schools" (p. 729). The cultural discontinuity hypothesis has been extended to other ethnic minority student groups, namely Latino American, Native American, and Asian American students as well, providing a collective body of research that aims to understand the ways in which ethnic minority and mainstream value clashes may influence and in many cases prevent the academic success that would otherwise be had by all students in U.S. schools (Tyler et al., 2008).

That very brief introduction into what is essentially a very substantive hypothesis (see Tyler et al., 2008 for further details) stated, understanding the theoretical orientation that best serves understanding the cultural discontinuity process in education becomes paramount in importance—not only as an anchor with which to logically attach this hypothesis, but also, as a critical component in understanding how the hypothesis relates to learning psychology generally and to potential advances in educational outcomes for non-mainstream youth, specifically. With these important reasons in mind, it is important to start with well-established theoretical frameworks in educational psychology—frameworks that have anchored other hypotheses and ideas used in practical ways to aid in student learning.

Theoretical Frameworks that Support Cultural Discontinuity

       Sociohistorical/Sociocultural theory.

       Emerging most largely from the scholarship of the "Russian troika" (A.R. Luria, Alexander Leontiev, and Lev Vygotsky), this theoretical perspective focuses on the relationships that exist "among individual, interpersonal, and socio-historical influences on human development" (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003, p. 207). Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and Luria (1976) further explained that all knowledge acquisition and subsequent learning behaviors are situated within cultural space, influenced by the historical events over time, and socially transmitted from person to person(s) while working together within shared environments. That is to say, rather than viewing knowledge as information that is merely acquired by a student from the teacher, sociocultural theorists acknowledge that learning is a process that is co-constructed by the individuals involved and all of the individuals involved are going to bring the customs and traditions they have used for previous learning, along with any unique differences, to the table as the learning situations unfold (Luria, 1976; McInerney & Van Etten, 2004; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003). The social practices, languages, signs, and routines used by learners throughout their in-school and out-of-school experiences to shape, understand, and function within their everyday lives are viewed as "cultural tools" and are considered vitally important to the enterprise of learning (Vygotsky; Zimmerman & Schunk). Learners who are able to internalize those messages, activities, and practices taught via co-construction with other, more knowledgeable persons and peers will ultimately, according to this theoretical perspective, be the viewed as the "most knowledgeable" (McInterney & Van Etten) in particular contexts.

       The sociohistorical/sociocultural theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to the study of the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education most notably because it acknowledges

the critically important role of culture and history in the learning process (Tyler et al., 2008). In fact, as stated above, Vygotsky (1962, 1978) was adamant in his belief that all knowledge was socially situated and influenced by the cultural practices shared by the learning community (here I refer to in-school and out-of-school learning). In reviewing the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education, one can note that the hypothesis suggests that students who are not as familiar with the Eurocentric, mainstream cultural values and values-based behaviors endorsed in U.S. schools, or who have had home socialization experiences before and during school which are not aligned with those mainstream practices are less likely to fare well in schools as those students who were equipped with the "cultural tools" necessary to effectively navigate school expectations during their home socialization experiences (Tyler et al., 2008). Therefore, it is easy to see that the sociocultural theory provides some theoretical foundation from which researchers can assert that achievement gaps and other differences in educational performance demonstrated between European Americans and other ethnic minority student groups is related to differences in the "cultural tools" or repertoires of practice brought to schools by various learner groups (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003).

Understanding that culture plays such a significant role in the learning process means not only understanding that White, middle-class, mainstream students in the U.S. come to school better prepared to navigate in the cultural space of the schools, but also, that the cultural values and values-based practices of other minority student groups are not and should not be viewed as deficient as compared to the mainstream models of practice, but rather, as merely alternate means of learning to live from a unique historical perspective (different from the legacy of European Americans) in the U.S. (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). The socio-historical theory becomes critically important in advancing the cultural discontinuity in education claim here in

that, if statistical evidence yields support to the hypothesis, researchers would have ample theoretical foundation upon which to hopefully infuse more culturally responsive teaching practices into the U.S. schools (Gay, 2000). Student performance outcomes should not be due to the inability for mainstream schools to adapt their cultural routines and expectations; instead, educational institutions would be compelled to include multiple cultural and historical perspectives as a means toward achieving more equitable learning opportunities for all students (Banks, 1996; Gay, 2000; Lowen, 2007).

The sociocultural theory provides a strong foundation from which to extend the current cultural discontinuity in education work so that it may consider the Appalachian student population. First of all, several studies that have sought to examine the phenomenon of cultural discontinuity in education have already set a precedent for the use of this particular theory in the development of their research programs (Boykin, 1986; Deyle, 1995; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; and Mehen, 1998, to name a few). Such wide-spread use of the theory for previous investigations into cultural discontinuity suggest that the theory is viewed by others with expertise in the study of culture, psychology, and education as directly relevant to the cultural discontinuity in education claim. Secondly, to advance the claim that Appalachian American students may have share cultural values and value-based practices that are not endorsed in schools and that lack of expression of these values and practices may influence educational outcomes, it must be argued that any shared cultural values and practices found among the students of Appalachia that differ from those mainstream values reported in schools are in fact, influential in the development of children as they learn, just as Vygotsky would claimed (1962, 1978). Finally, if research in the area of Appalachian cultural discontinuity in education is supported statistically in the future, this particular theory serves as an excellent foundation upon which to argue for schooling practices

that are better aligned with the home experiences and practices had among many Appalachian

American students (Gay, 2000; Guitierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Tyler et al., 2008).

The only drawback that I can see with this particular theoretical framework is that

although it serves well to explain what might be happening with respect to cultural discontinuity

and educational outcomes, it does not address power issues that emerge in America when

European, middle-class, American values serve to oppress the expression of other ways of

knowing and living in the world. As such, this theoretical perspective is necessarily limited and

does not quite capture the larger social reasons for the existence of the cultural discontinuity

phenomenon. However, the sociocultural/sociohistorical theory does seem to align well with a

particular research focus (such as the study of cultural discontinuity in Appalachian students) and

could be used as a strong foundation upon which to pursue research plans in this area.

Ecological systems theory.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems theory serves as another theoretical

framework, contextually oriented, that could be applied to the development and study of the

cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education. In this theory, Bronfenbrenner (1986) asserted

that there are several levels, or "systems" that interact with one another, working together to

influence development (Santrock, 2014). These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem,

exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (and later, the biological influences) on

development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, & Santrock, 2014). The microsystem includes the places

and persons in which an individual comes into direct contact for daily life (i.e. home, schools,

family, peers etc.), and the mesosystem is the portion of the model that acknowledges that

interactions between various microsystem agents can influence development in ways that are

different from the unique contributions of each of those agents (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, &

Santrock, 2014). Exosystem influences on development include forces that serve to influence

development indirectly, such as media, legal policies for parenting and school attendance,

neighbors etc., all of which can influence the microsystemic level of development

(Bronfenbrenner, 1986, & Santrock, 2014). The macrosystem includes the general cultural

situations in which children live, and finally, the chronosystem refers to sociohistorical

conditions that emerge over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, & Santrock, 2014). Taken together,

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model argues that individual student development cannot be

understood unless one considers the ways in which various external forces work together to

influence said development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, & Santrock, 2014).

The ecological systems theory could serve an a theoretical foundation upon which to

build a claim for the cultural discontinuity in education hypothesis, above all, because it directly

acknowledges the importance and primacy of family and schooling experiences in the

development of learners, and because it situates those experiences in a sociohistorical context

(Bronfenbrenner, 1986, & Santrock, 2014). In that way, the ecological systems theory does much

to reinforce or parallel the theoretical positions taken within the sociocultural theory as espoused

through the work of the Russian Troika. Additionally, the ecological systems model leaves room

for the discussion of the marginalization experiences felt by many minority groups within the

U.S. in general (and in education specifically), as Bronfenbrenner acknowledges, via the

development of the macrosystem portion of his model, that attitudes and beliefs of the cultural

environment influence child development (Santrock, 2014). Applied to the cultural discontinuity

hypothesis in education, one can see that the macrosystem portion of the model would be an

ideal portion of the model from which to address Eurocentric values and practice based

dominance in America's schools and in American society in general and how having values not

aligned with those mainstream values could serve to disadvantage students of minority status who are trying to earn an education in a way foreign to their home experiences.

In terms of study cultural discontinuity in Appalachia, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (later bio-ecological systems theory) (Santrock, 2014) has many of the same advantages found with the sociocultural theory, in that importance is placed on the presence of cultural differences that influence the development of Appalachian American learners and by extension, that variations in cultural value-based behaviors or practices exhibited by Appalachian Americans might not be argued as weaknesses, but rather, as differences to be utilized for the benefit of the diversity of students present within U.S. schools. As such, the ecological systems theory could be utilized not only to justify a need to investigate the unique relationships that may influence the development of Appalachian American students within the various systems of the model, but also, to promote those same culturally inclusive practices referenced with respect to the sociocultural theory (see above). An additional benefit to this theoretical perspective is in the ability to properly situate discussion of differences in opportunity for this marginalized student group, as well as to demonstrate how stereotypes and other macrosystem level forces serve to continue the oppression of this minority student group while supporting or anchoring the success of those from the mainstream. Similar chains of reasoning have been argued for other minority student populations, allowing for a truly contextualized picture of the interrelationships of various social forces on the disenfranchisement of certain ethnic minority student groups (Boykin, 1986; Cholewa, & West-Olatunji, 2008; Lee, 2001). Although this might be achieved with the sociocultural theory as well, it seems more easily supported by the ecological model in that this line of reasoning has its own place within the theoretical framework.

One drawback of Bronfennbrenner's theory, as compared to the sociocultural theory, is that the theoretical lens is somewhat broad for specific application to the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education. Unlike Bronfenbrenner's theory, Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and Luria (1976) focus discussion and study on directly addressing the importance of culture in the development of *cognitive* abilities; as such, the sociocultural theory does more to show the relationship between cultural forces, cognitive factors, and by extension, educational outcomes, all of which are necessary components of any discussion of the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education (Tyler et al., 2008). What this theoretical framework lacks due to breadth, it makes up for in direct inclusion of a place to discuss marginalization effects and how they relate to the cultural discontinuity claim.

Ethnocentric monoculturalism.

Utilized in Tyler et al. (2008) as the theoretical foundation for the studying of the cultural discontinuity in education claim, ethnocentric monoculturalism, as proposed by Derald Wing Sue and David Sue, occurs when "the individual, institutional, and cultural expression of the superiority of one group's cultural heritage over another [is] combined with the possession of power to impose those standards broadly on the less powerful group" (Sue & Sue, 2003, p. 71). From this theoretical perspective, public schools are seen as social agencies that promote the cultural values of mainstream America over other members of U.S. society, and through individual practices of personnel, institutional practices of the schools, and the prevailing cultural environment of education, compel students who are not part of the dominant culture to feel as if they *must* abandon their home socialization experiences and adopt those of the educational system in order to be successful (Sue & Sue, 2003). It is for this reason that Tyler et al. (2008) argue for the use of this framework in the study of cultural discontinuity in that is acknowledges

not only that schools endorse one particular set of values and practices over all others (i.e. the mainstream values), but also, in that it clearly articulates a rationale for why students of ethnic minority status might feel compelled to cease the demonstration of behaviors associated with home socialization experiences while they are in school.

As a theoretical framework, it seems that ethnocentric monoculturalism has mostly been applied to the discussion of the various ways in which ethnic minority groups have been oppressed in U.S. society; however, that does not mean it cannot be applied to the study of other cultural groups that have a history of being exploited and oppressed in the U.S. In fact, ethnocentric monoculturalism, in this way, serves as a very strong theoretical framework to advance the claim that there may be discontinuities between the home and school socialization experiences of children in Appalachia and that these differences may influence educational outcomes for these learners. For example, one might readily see that researchers could advance the claim that Appalachian American children have cultural values and value-based practices that are different from and not aligned with those of the dominant, European American, middle class, suburban values typically endorsed in schools and that those differences in the values and practices endorsed at home versus school might influence psychological and educational outcomes for students in this area. Evidence above suggests that there are disproportionalities in educational outcomes and later socio-economic success between Appalachian students and students from the dominant group (Brown-Ferrigno & Knoeppel, 2004; Bush, 2003). With this information in mind, ethnocentric monoculturalism seems quite the appropriate theoretical lens from which to advance a research agenda in cultural discontinuity with an Appalachian American student focus.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education generally, and its application to the Appalachian American student population specifically, can be theoretically supported through a variety of frameworks, so long as the particular theoretical framework to be utilized is inclusive of cultural considerations in the development of learners. Sociocultural/Sociohistorical theory has strengths in that it strongly asserts that all knowledge is socially situated and that cultural tools, learned in context, allow development of particular cognitive abilities that promote success in particular settings. In this way, researchers can use the sociocultural theory to build linkages between culture and its influence on cognition and subsequent educational outcomes.

Ecological systems theory can be utilized to advance the cultural discontinuity in education claim in that it includes cultural considerations that emerge in the discussion of home/school experiences and their influence on the development of learners while also providing that macrosystem level of discussion to examine social forces that oppress some and advantage others such as stereotypes and media (Lee, 2001). It has some drawbacks however in that the theory seems a bit too broad to be directly applied to the cultural discontinuity in education claim.

Finally, ethnocentric monoculturalism, as proposed by Sue and Sue (2003) serves as an extremely powerful theoretical framework from which to advance the cultural discontinuity claim not only in that it has been used as the theoretical framework to advance the cultural discontinuity claim by others seeking to study the phenomenon recently (Tyler et al., 2008), but more importantly, because of the acknowledgement of how oppressive practices held by those that operate educational institutions (oppressive to all but the dominant group) might *compel*

students to abandon those practices and values learned at home as they run contrary to those expressed in the school environment. In fact, because of its recent development and use within the current literature, and because of its direct application to the ways in which culturally congruent *behaviors* of some students (perhaps Appalachian Americans) have to be abandoned in schools and how that may lead to negative psycho-educational outcomes, it is my opinion that ethnocentric monoculturalism is the best theoretical framework from which to advance a research agenda studying the possibilities of Appalachian cultural discontinuity.

Although ethnocentric monoculturalism would appear to be the theoretical framework to be best utilized in the construction of Appalachian cultural discontinuity, I must add that it is my opinion that any and all of these theoretical perspectives could be included in the development of a theoretical discussion of cultural discontinuity. Sociocultural theory, with its discussion of culture and cognition along with ethnocentric monoculturalism, in the development of the theoretical support for the cultural discontinuity in Appalachian education claim appear to be the strongest of the theoretical orientations. Taken together, both of these theoretical traditions provide the information needed to truly link culture, cognition, behavior, and educational outcomes, all of which are necessary components in the discussion of the cultural discontinuity hypothesis in education.

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