Connecting Social Disorganization Theory to African-American Outcomes to Explain the Achievement Gap

By Na'im H. Madyun

Na'im H. Madyun is a professor in the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning of the College of Education at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

African-American student achievement outcomes have been and continue to be a critical concern for education researchers. Scholars have made strides in their analysis of pertinent factors that explain achievement gaps between African-American and White students such as poverty, family composition, teacher/school quality, and achievement motivation among others (Davis-Kean, 2005; Entwisle &Alexander, 1992; Rankin & Quane, 2002). Moreover, researchers and practitioners have designed interventions to contribute to African-American student outcomes (Hudley, Graham, & Taylor 2007; Reynolds et. al, 2001; Slavin & Madden, 2006) with a goal being to address achievement gaps. Much of the framing of African-American student outcomes centers on what is known as achievement gaps that exist between African-American and White students. Unfortunately, these gaps have remained roughly the same since the 1950s (Roach, 2001) due, partly, to a lack of attention to what Milner (2007) called “unseen dangers” (p. 388) in education research. Unseen dangers, according to Milner are those implicit, hidden, and oftentimes not properly identified factors that are essential to understand when researchers study populations of color and problems that they face such as issues around the achievement gap and outcomes of African Americans. Social disorganization theory, a theory developed in the sociological and criminology literature, can help education researchers address important unseen dangers in studying African-American outcomes and achievement gaps. In this article, I address the following question: How can social disorganization theory explain African-American outcomes and the Achievement Gap by uncovering unseen dangers?

In the next section, before explaining how social disorganization theory can assist researchers in explaining African-American outcomes and achievement in education, I address what I mean by the achievement gap and provide an argument for its existence. This will make clearer both the areas for both potential dangers for education researchers and applications of social disorganization theory towards uncovering those dangers.

African American Outcomes and Achievement

In 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision. The desegregation of students brought with it issues that were not immediately obvious for many educators. Teachers and administrators had to learn how to nurture the development of students from very different backgrounds and also confront how the cultural differences of their students would be addressed in the school. Post-Brown experiences required that teachers and administrators re-examine existing views of contextual development—peer culture, cultural values, and quality of schools. Unfortunately, since desegregation began, African-American students, in comparison to their White counterparts, have been consistently “outperformed” in the classroom (Mickelson, 1990). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the average Black 12th grade student’s proficiency is roughly the same as the average White 8th grader (Roach, 2004). This achievement gap has been explained by any of a number of logical causal factors (see, Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, for a more detailed and diverse list), but they mostly fall into areas of parental/family attributes, school quality, or individual psychological characteristics. The number of different logical causal factors reflects the size and complexity of the achievement gap. Given that the achievement gap is an issue present at the social level, a possible danger may exist if research is not focused enough on social explanations as opposed to an over emphasis on individual and/or classroom-level factors.,

The works of William Julius Wilson (1987, 1996) can be used to understand the complexity of the achievement gap existing at the social level. A major argument of Wilson centered on how, through role-modeling and a connection to and demand for community resources, the Black middle class played a significant role in the development of poor Blacks (Wilson, 1987). When working Black middle-class role models are not present, not only is there a higher probability of the youth living in a poor neighborhood, but the youth's perceptions of work and the workforce are indirectly influenced by unemployed and lower-class Blacks. A potentially unseen danger in past research on African-American achievement has been focusing too narrowly on poverty as a condition or reality and not as a structural limit to potential socializing opportunities. Poverty in and of itself is not the issue, but what it typically denies is access in terms of positive models and other social resources. It is important to note that I am not suggesting removing poverty as a single indicator from a community level analysis of the achievement gap. Rather, I am suggesting that a deeper analysis of the role poverty plays in education research must be undertaken.

Poverty has always been used as a key community-level variable in explaining the achievement gap (Ferguson, 2004; Wiggan, 2007). African-American children's exposure to neighborhood poverty was particularly problematic in the 1990s. While approximately 90% of White children were born in "non-poor neighborhoods" having less than 20% of their residents in poverty, about 39% of Black children were born in such neighborhoods during the period between 1994 and 1996 (Timberlake, 2007). When 40% or more of the population in any given area lives below the poverty line, they are living in concentrated poverty (Massey & Denton, 1989); the prevalence of this concentration increased significantly from the 1950s to the 1990s (Massey & Denton, 1990), especially for Blacks of low socio-economic status (Massey, Gross, & Eggers 1991). Poverty, particularly concentrated poverty, is clearly an issue that should be a part of education research. The more important question is what does the presence of this complex variable that is sometimes unseen really tell us?

Concentrated poverty is mainly alarming because it is coupled with several other negative socializing factors and more likely disconnected from many positive ones. Taylor and Covington (1988) reported a relationship between the concentration of minority poor and inner-city violence. Likewise, Land, McCall, and Cohen (1990) found the concentration of minority poor from the 1960s to the 1980s to be correlates of homicide rates. For African Americans in particular, the identification of neighborhood factors influencing individual behavior led to the re-emergence in the literature of social disorganization theory (Sampson & Groves, 1989). I argue that the application of this theory can lead to a view of understanding the achievement gap that is less vulnerable to unseen dangers of education research.

Social Disorganization Theory

Sociologists Shaw and McKay (1942) developed social disorganization theory to explain and predict violence and other criminal activities in communities. Their theory was based upon the logic that the closeness of neighbors and their subsequent collective efforts directly contributed to the social control[1] of community problems. When community concerns arise, neighbors could pool resources to resolve the concerns. The more close-knit the community, the more effective they would be at identifying a common problem, pooling resources and ultimately reducing the occurrence or magnitude of future community violence and crime. Following this theory, it should be interpreted that the high crime and delinquency rates too often observed in low-income communities are a consequence of social disorganization.

Shaw and McKay developed the foundation of social disorganization theory when they noticed high crime rates persisting in some Chicago neighborhoods despite high population turnover (Sampson, 1997). Social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) supports a logic that four interconnected neighborhood factors function as an index of a community's capacity for formal and informal social control on individual development. According to this theory, the number of single-parent households, mobility, diversity, and poverty undermine a community's ability to socially control and pass on the norms, expectations, and values that lead to acceptable successful outcomes by diluting modes of socialization. The dilution is both an antecedent and consequence of weakened social ties, networks (a collection of and nature of social ties around an individual or thing), and social capital[2] (potential resources accessed through social ties).

Factors of Social Disorganization Theory

The first interconnected factor of social disorganization theory is *family composition* (single-parent households) because having fewer two-parent families in a community typically results in less adult supervision and fewer role-models (Sampson, 1997). One of the major achievement gap categories previously identified was parental/family characteristics. I argue that being in a single-parent household is more of a problem at the social level rather than the individual level. A potential unseen danger for educational researchers would be to focus too much on family composition and not enough on the presence in the community of adult supervision and role-modeling. Moreover, an unseen danger for researchers would be to focus on the influences of living in a single-parent home on the individual rather than the influence of living in a community of single-parent households. If an educational researcher wanted to examine parental engagement or student readiness, the proportion of stay at home moms in the neighborhood should be taken into consideration.

The second interconnected factor is high *residential mobility* because population turnover reduces the probability of long-standing relationships (Bursik, 1999). Fewer long-standing relationships results in weaker social ties, less social capital, and thus poorer quality resources (Warner, 1999). A social tie is a relationship to a potential resource. It can be a strong tie (close, frequent relationship) or a weak tie (distant, infrequent relationship). Social capital is most commonly defined as both the actual and potential resources embedded in social ties that can be used to achieve an outcome. Two of the previously identified achievement gap categories were individual psychological characteristics and school quality. Research has shown how individual behaviors and development result from the quality of social ties. Also, school quality may suffer due to the absence of trust resulting from few stable, long-standing relationships. A potential unseen danger for educational researchers may result from underestimating the impact of poor relationships and low trust on both the power of academic interventions and the motivation of individuals in the community. If an educational researcher wants to examine underachievement by focusing on teacher expectations, an unseen danger may exist if the duration of time the student has been a part of the community is not taken into consideration. An unseen danger may also result when trying to examine parental presence and involvement, if a researcher fails to account for a parent’s connectedness, commitment, and tenure with the community.

Because a more diverse population could make it more difficult to establish collective norms or expected behaviors, *racial diversity* is the third interconnected factor of social disorganization theory. Even if collective norms are established, cultural barriers may weaken the social ties needed to enforce and maintain the norms, thus reducing social capital (Sampson & Groves, 1989). The existence of cultural barriers is particularly important when considering achievement gap factors focused on parental/family attributes and school quality. When community members are unable to find common ground due to cultural barriers, it could translate into different expectations and approaches to after-school programs, school leadership, curricula choices, and overall participation. A potential unseen danger for educational researchers could come from not fully accounting for the impact of diversity on the parents and community and its resulting influence on the school and individuals. If there are cultural divisions among the community, it might be difficult to unite the different groups to vote on school-related policies. This would be especially true if there were issues of trust across the racial/ethnic groups. Imagine a community where each ethnic group loudly questioned the sincerity and collective value of the others. In this same community, students of color disproportionately receive special education services and overall standardized test scores for the school rank among the lowest in the state. How likely would it be that the community could unite regarding the best way to educate their children? Might the willingness of the teachers and administrators to make tough, unpopular decisions be adversely affected by concern of favoring one ethnic group over another? Educational researchers should consider the quality of communication and the level of trust across ethnic lines in a community when examining educational outcomes.

The fourth interconnected factor is *poverty* (Warner, 1999). Poorer communities include many residents who lack the money and resources necessary to pass on and enforce normative expectations and behavior (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Because of limited money and resources, it would be difficult for community members to participate in the organizations necessary to establish positive social ties and generate resources necessary to address academic concerns. As addressed earlier, educational research has focused considerably on poverty as an explanation for disparate achievement outcomes. However, the importance of poverty should not center on a family’s school-related purchasing power (e.g. school supplies, study aides, a home computer). I am arguing that poverty is important because of its adverse impact on the ability to establish social ties and implement solutions to academic problems. If a family or community is focused on developing ties to satisfy the most basic of needs (e.g., stability, food, safety), obviously less energy will be placed on developing ties to address academic quality and vision. Therefore, establishing the social ties necessary to implement or strengthen a mentoring or tutoring program might seem overwhelming and unwise. A potential unseen danger for educational researchers may result from not tying poverty to a reduction in the necessary ties for addressing academic concerns. If an educational researcher is interested in examining the after-school interests and career choices of students in poor neighborhoods, both the availability of and access to academic social ties should be considered. However, an unseen danger may result if an educational researcher does not consider how poverty may impact the motivation to establish social ties for academic goals.

In summary, a high number of single-parent households, a high rate of residential mobility, a high degree of diversity, and high levels of poverty undermine a community's ability to establish the ties and generate the resources necessary to influence and maintain expectations. This lack of social control over positive socialization factors is a consequence of neighborhood social disorganization and can lead to less successful development toward desirable academic outcomes (Madyun & Lee, 2008). I argue that in neighborhoods high in social disorganization, there should be considerable focus on the social ties. Particularly a focus on the social ties established through close friendships, organizational participation, and various peer groups (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003) might prove key toward understanding how to account for the impact of the social context on individual academic outcomes.

Jencks and Mayer (1990) theorized a set of models that can explain why close friendships, organizational participation, and peer groups can be used to link individual achievement outcomes to the social disorganization of a community. Collective socialization, institutional, and epidemic are three models of social development that function from the logic that positive members of a community promote positive development while negative members may undermine healthy development. The collective socialization model suggests that every adult in the community is a model for appropriate behavior to every youth in the community. This relationship exists on both a formal and informal level regardless of intentionality. By shopping at a local convenient store, a youth establishes a level of relationship with the clerk—even if the social tie lacks warmth, trust, or words. Even the nonverbal communication that may flow through this social tie could impact the youth. The frequency of the contact and the trust that could develop with the relationship could in turn influence the degree of impact. If the degree of impact is influenced by frequency and trust, the status and experiences of the youth's social tie can influence the quality of the impact. According to Wilson (1987), the proportion of same race individuals influences the probability that positive, quality expectations can be transmitted through the community to a youth. The institutional model suggests that youth development can be influenced from social ties to structural components of the social system. This could include schools, businesses, service workers, and even exposures to how to successfully navigate interpersonal relationships (e.g., clerk/customer, husband/wife, parent/teacher, and so forth). Certain ways of interacting within a particular culture are important structural components to learn in a community (Bourdieu, 1977). Through participation in certain organizations, individuals gain access not only to opportunities but can also learn skills for successful navigation of future contexts. Epidemic models explain development by utilizing peer influence logic. Appropriate behaviors and attitudes are constructed and maintained by a peer culture that is recognized as a critical socializing force within the community (Madyun & Lee, 2008). Often, larger social norms and expectations become stronger or weaker depending on how well they are adopted by the peer group. Supervision of peer groups thus becomes important in managing and delivering these norms and expectations. If the community wanted to deliver the message that closing the achievement gap will begin if the youth study for one hour immediately after school (Posner & Vandell, 1999), managing and supervising peers to implement, encourage and support this strategy would be important. The three social development models function in different ways to pass on the norms, expectations, and values that are ingrained in the culture of the community via social ties. Education researchers must consider the existence and placement of these social ties in a community when analyzing their data. They must also consider the organization and application of those very ties.

The organized use of the social ties will likely generate the social capital necessary to reach common academic goals. The density of those social ties is an indicator of the amount of community social capital (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999) which directly relates to the ability of a community to socially organize (Coleman, 1990) for the purpose of delivering norms, expectations, and values. If residents wanted to implement a community-wide program that students will study for one hour immediately after school, influential adult role models, connected organizations and institutions, and supervisors of the peer groups in question must function under a shared mission. The better organized and like-minded the various components of the community are, the easier it will be to generate, access, and apply the resources necessary to achieve their study-time goal.

Shaw and McKay (as cited in Warner, 1999) observed that a socially disorganized community allows unwanted cultural norms, expectations, and values to emerge (i.e., only study before a test, studying is too hard, or only dumb students study). If certain study habits are unwanted by the community but still allowed to emerge, it may lead to an attenuation of the very culture needed to discourage the unwanted study habits. This weakening of the culture both causes and results from a weakening of many of the social ties. When the social ties are weakened, a possible result is the actual or perceived lack of community organization and like-mindedness. This reality or perception could result in a reduction of social capital. Therefore, social control is weakened and commonly expressed expectations of achievement and/or successful behaviors are not conveyed effectively to the individuals in the community. I argue that poverty, mobility, diversity, and the number of single-parent households make it difficult to establish an organized, like-minded network of social ties that can be used to deliver the wanted norms, expectations, and values of a community. In neighborhoods where this social disorganization is high, parental/family attributes, school quality, and individual psychological characteristics must be examined with social ties taken into consideration.

If educational researchers follow this logic, social disorganization theory can provide a framework for connecting larger social factors to individual outcomes and therefore support Milner's (2007) call to incorporate institutional, systemic, and collective issues into analyses that address African-American outcomes and gaps that exist between African Americans and Whites. Existing research on community effects on academic outcomes can provide more evidence of this proposed logical link between social disorganization theory and youth academic outcomes.

Community Effects: General Outcomes

Using 1970 Census data of over 92,000 teenagers, Crane (1991) found a dramatic increase in dropout numbers in neighborhoods where less than 5% of the population had high status jobs. Dornbusch, Ritter, and Steinberg (1991), in a sample of Black and White students, looked at the effects of neighborhood characteristics on students' grades. Neighborhoods were measured using neighborhood SES, number of families above the poverty line, number of professional/managerial workers, and mean level of completed education. Not only was it found that the level of disadvantage in the neighborhood was a good predictor of grades, but it was also found that the neighborhood had a greater impact on Black achievement as compared to Whites. These two studies are consistent with both the collective socialization and institutional models on neighborhood influence on individual development. Duncan (1994) found that Black males became more likely to stay in school as the racial integration of the community increased. It could be argued that this study reflects both collective socialization and an epidemic model of influence. All of these findings are consistent with collective socialization and institutional models which are theoretically linked through social ties and social capital to social disorganization theory (Rose & Clear, 1998; Sampson & Groves, 1989). To finally understand how social disorganization theory can be linked to individual academic outcomes, social ties from the community to the family (Roche et. al., 2007) and peers will next be examined.

Social Disorganization and Parental/Family Factors

Certain family variables such as income, living arrangements, parental decision-making, and parental mental health are shaped by social ties to the neighborhoods (Duncan, Connell, & Klebanov, 1997). Garbarino and Crouter (1978) found that over 50% of the variation in child abuse rates could be explained by three factors: poverty, residential mobility, and single-parent households. Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994) found that as the proportion of poor families increased in a neighborhood, there was also an increase in children with externalizing behavior problems. Coulton, Korbin, Su, and Chow (1995) found that as residential mobility increased, there was a subsequent increase in reports of the maltreatment of children by their families. Kupersmidt et al. (1995), using a data set of 762 White and 509 Black 2nd through 5th graders, found that the association between single-parent homes and aggressive behavior in Black children was reduced as opportunity for more social ties with middle SES neighbors increased. The influence of the neighborhood on the family in individual development is important due to the family's obvious role in academic outcomes.

Over the years, research has explored the interaction of parenting practices/involvement and academic school performance (Hoffman & Dufur, 2008; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Yan, 1999), but less attention was paid to the influence of the neighborhood on this interaction. Datcher (1982) noted that neighborhood differences were just as important as family characteristics in explaining Black and White achievement and found that over 40% of the racial differences in education attainment and earnings resulted from Blacks who came from poor neighborhoods. Parenting practices, for example, may be dependent upon the nature of the community (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Roche et al. (2007) found that permissive parenting strategies were more likely to be exhibited as neighborhood disadvantage increased. This could partially explain poorer academic habits displayed by students from disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Ensminger, Lamkin, and Jacobsen (1996) reviewed the data from the Woodlawn (Chicago) Longitudinal study to investigate the direct, indirect, and interactive effects of neighborhoods on school completion. They found that Black males were three and a half times more likely to graduate from high school if there were middle class families in neighborhoods in which more than 40% of the residents were white-collar workers. Similarly, Duncan (1994) found that as the number of female-headed households increased, smaller proportions of Black females finished high school. It can easily be argued that ethnic differences in school performance are traceable back to family socialization practices with regards to achievement (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). A potential unseen danger for educational researchers could result from overlooking how an increase in female employment could also indicate the absence of fathers in the home and its subsequent impact on motivation and achievement. Another danger might be overlooking how the presence of middle class families may play an important role in the available ties for students and in the support and modeling directly and indirectly provided to single parents. Yet another potential unseen danger for educational researchers may result from not accounting for the other socializing areas impacted when a neighborhood has a high level of single-parent households. More single-parent households can easily lead to poorer supervision and socialization of peer groups. Peers are a powerful day-to-day influence on academic behavior (Brown, Steinberg, Mounts, & Phillips, 1990; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Guiffrida, 2003).

Social Disorganization and Peers

Sampson and Groves (1989) found that the number of unsupervised peer groups was directly related to criminal offense rates and the level of victimization. Case and Katz (1991) found that neighborhood peers had a significant influence on church attendance, friendship with gang members, alcohol and drug use, and criminal activity. The impact of peer influence was found to be especially true for African-American adolescents (Brown, Steinberg, Mounts, & Philips, 1990). African-American adolescents are often forced to choose between academic excellence and peer popularity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Strong social ties typically do not move beyond peer groups and close relatives. If peer groups in disadvantaged neighborhoods have a lower probability of supervision and are developing in neighborhoods with fewer social ties to critical adults, the parental/family structure logically would become more important. However, the literature suggests that families within those same neighborhoods may also be weakened. Thus it can be argued that the academic performance of individuals within neighborhoods high in disadvantage can be negatively impacted by the influence of poverty, mobility, the degree of diversity, and the number of single-parents households on the social ties available to families and peer groups within those neighborhoods. If this logic is reasonable, then through the effective social organization of ties within the community, the necessary socialization of peer groups to improve educational outcomes could occur.

Social Disorganization Theory and Achievement

Although social disorganization has been linked traditionally to community crime rates (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Rose & Clear, 1998; Warner, 2007) and more recently delinquent-type behaviors (Osgood & Anderson, 2004; Parker & Reckdenwald, 2008), few studies have connected social disorganization theory to individual academic behavior (e.g., performance on tests, attendance). Many of the social disorganization studies that are linked to achievement either focus on schools as the level of analysis (Baker, 2000; Birnbaum et. al., 2003) or behavioral outcomes that are non-academic (Welsh et. al., 2000). The possible link between social disorganization theory and individual academic outcomes should be further explored given its potential for revealing dangers for educational researchers. The social disorganization theory and individual academic outcomes link is similar to the theoretical and logical motivations for using low-income communities as a causal factor in achievement outcomes.

Traditionally, low income has been used as an indicator of possessing the necessary skills to navigate effectively through society and not the means for acquiring the skills because those skills are transmitted through social ties and social networks (Madyun & Lee, 2008; Madyun & Lee, 2010). Through the social ties present in a community, things such as informal knowledge, expectations, mentoring, modeling, ideas, and decision-making can all be influenced (Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004). This reasoning is consistent with social theory that posits that poor academic performance stems from weakened or poor quality social networks (Coleman, 1988; Sander & Putnam, 1999). Researchers have increasingly recognized the impact of social networks on student achievement over the last two decades (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lareau, 1987; Lee & Croninger, 1994). I argue that those same social networks that are being identified as critical to student achievement are the same social networks that have been tied to delinquent behavior in the criminology literature and are directly impacted by the level of neighborhood disadvantage. Social disorganization theory provides a method for educational researchers to explore the impact of the neighborhood on those social networks.

Conclusion and Implications

In this article I have argued that areas for potential dangers in educational research include not considering family composition's impact on student readiness, mobility's impact on parental involvement, poverty's impact on choices, or diversity's impact on community trust. It is likely for these dangers to result from not understanding the critical role of social ties in explaining African-American achievement outcomes by their influence on families and peer groups in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In areas of high disadvantage, many opportunities and resources may not be accessed or applied effectively. Many maladaptive and counterproductive behaviors may be modeled and transmitted through social relationships. These transmitted behaviors and restricted access areas result from a weakening of the necessary social ties for successful outcomes. According to social disorganization theory, poverty, mobility, diversity, and single-parent households impact the norms, expectations, and resources that are delivered through social ties. Those impacted social ties in a community influence families and peer groups which in turn have an effect on the norms, expectations, and resources delivered to the individuals within those families and peer groups. When a community is high in social disorganization, it is more likely that too many deviant norms can be embraced by individuals. It is also possible that too many lowered expectations are accepted by individuals. Lastly, when a community is disorganized, access to resources may be unevenly distributed or less visible to too many individuals within the community. The literature suggests that neighborhoods high in disadvantage have a higher potential for being socially disorganized. When education researchers try and examine achievement outcomes in disadvantage neighborhoods, failure to account for the quality of social ties within the community might result in dangerous interpretations.

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