

## **Race and Schooling: Theories and Ethnographies**

**Lesley Bartlett, and Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy**

Hurricane Katrina made clear, among other things, the continuing significance of race in the United States. As we write, efforts to rebuild the controversial New Orleans school system, which some have argued was among the worst systems in the nation before the storm, is wracked by racial politics. Meanwhile, efforts to secure permanent school placements for poor black storm refugees are facing opposition from some local school boards who not only do not wish to shoulder the inevitable costs of a larger student population but also worry about the impact of such integration on standardized test scores—that anomalous measure that would purportedly contribute to greater equity and instead has come to take on a life of its own, justifying all sorts of racially and economically exclusionary tactics. At the same time, the influence of Katrina on the lives of Indigenous communities in Louisiana and Mississippi has largely been ignored. While scholars continually remind of us of the myopia of the black–white paradigm (Brayboy, this issue; Castagno, this issue; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Lee, 2005), public discussions such as those generated and sustained by media coverage of natural disasters harp on the differential capacities of African Americans and Whites to secure safe haven from the storm, writing other populations out of the national experience.

Race has been and continues to be significant in matters of schooling. Popular, public discourses and academic discourses reflect continuously on the racial achievement gap in schooling, posing various explanations:

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Lesley Bartlett is affiliated with Teachers College, Columbia University. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy is an Assistant Professor in the University of Utah. Address correspondence to Lesley Bartlett, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W 120th St, Box 55, New York, NY 10027, USA; e-mail: bartlett@exchange.tc.columbia.edu.

intellectual deficits, cultural deficits, cultural difference, resistance, and institutional racism, among others. As Ray McDermott stated 17 years ago, we continually seek to explain minority school failure by asking what is wrong with 'those students' or their families rather than by examining how schools (and larger society) structure and produce the failure of particular groups. Failure, he argues, "is a culturally necessary part of the American school scene. We do not need to explain it; we need to confront it.... [T]he ethnographer's work might be better focused on how Americans have become so preoccupied with failure, and how, being so preoccupied, we have found ways to make so constant the attribution of failure to particular children or particular kinds of children" (1987, pp. 362–364). McDermott's work, along with others (e.g. see Fine, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Lee, 1991; Weis & Fine, 1993), has pointed to the need to examine the ways that race has been taken up in society and to more closely examine the ways that institutional and societal structures figure into the educational achievement of underrepresented students of color.

In this introduction, we briefly outline five theoretical approaches engaged by many contemporary ethnographers of race and schooling. While there are certainly many other perspectives on the issues of race and schooling in the field, we feel that these frameworks have greatly influenced the field and hold significant potential for future work. In what follows, we review the contributions of these frameworks even as we examine incisive critiques of them, and we discuss future directions for sociocultural studies of race and schooling.

First, John Ogbu's cultural ecological theory constitutes arguably the most influential and controversial approach in sociocultural studies of race and schooling in the last 25 years. Ogbu (1978, 1991) differentiated between "voluntary minorities," who willingly immigrate to a host country and maintain a pragmatic or opportunistic approach to the country's institutions, and "involuntary minorities," populations who are minoritized by dominant society through enslavement or conquest. Involuntary minorities, according to Ogbu, develop an oppositional stance regarding the country's institutions. Cultural-ecological theory:

posits that there are two sets of factors influencing minority school performance: how society at large and the school treats minorities (the system) and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling (community forces). The theory further posits that differences in school performance between immigrant and nonimmigrant minorities are partly due to differences in their community forces (Ogbu, 1999, p. 156).

Thus, according to Ogbu, the differential systemic treatment of different categories of minorities, as well as the disparate, culturally determined

coping strategies developed by different communities, together account for the disparities in educational performance among various minority groups. Ogbu and others have argued that recent immigrants, namely Asians (including Southeast Asians), Africans, and Eastern Europeans, have fared well in school because they view their presence in the United States as a positive (and perhaps temporary) opportunity, despite any systemic discrimination they may encounter. In contrast, groups who have long histories of forcible integration to the United States through conquest, slavery, or colonization (namely American Indians, African Americans, and many second-generation Latino/a groups) have fared poorly in school because they face systemic racism and they resist mainstream academic expectations and refuse to buy into the “American Dream.”

Controversies arose from Ogbu’s descriptions of what he considered dysfunctional cultural adaptations and values adopted by involuntary minorities, and African Americans in particular. Ogbu, himself a voluntary immigrant, argued that, in response to the discrimination they faced in American institutions (including schools), involuntary minorities developed “self-affirming norms and values that maintain boundaries between themselves and the majority group—norms and values that undermine academics” (Foster, 2004, p. 372). With this strand of research, Ogbu’s work supported a culture of poverty argument that blamed blacks for the discrimination they faced (Foley, 2004; Gould, 1999; Mickelson, 2003).

Further, scholars have taken Ogbu to task for his reluctance to engage class theory and his avoidance of contemporary theories of race and ethnicity that frame racializing as a cultural process rather than race as an inherited, fixed term (Foley, 1991; 2004). Others have argued that his work is deterministic (e.g. see Erickson, 1987) and ahistorical in its treatment of American Indians (Deyhle, 1995).

Despite these limitations, Ogbu’s work made vital contributions to the study of race and schooling. Most significantly, he emphasized the importance of attending to the historical racial experiences of minority groups. Further, his insistence that scholars attend to the interaction between what he called community and system forces is a useful directive. Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory has inspired and informed important work on race in the field, including Fordham’s nuanced analyses of the ways that gender complicates academic coping strategies (1996), Gibson’s discussion of the “accommodation without assimilation” she discovered among Sikh immigrants (1988), Foster’s comparative study of African and African-American college students (2003), and Valenzuela’s discussion of within-group variance among both immigrant Mexican youth and U.S. born Chicanos (1999).

Recent work in sociocultural studies of race and schooling has eschewed Ogbu’s fixed notion of race in favor of a more nuanced idea of race as a

sociopolitical construction. While this trend is informed by many theoretical sources, such as Stuart Hall's excellent writings (see, for example, Morley & Chen, 1996), the framework known as racial formation theory unifies much of this work. Racial formation theory, developed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, rejects notions of race as a fixed, inherited, biological essence, a product of material conditions, or an ideological construct. Instead, the historically-informed, process-oriented racial formation theory considers the critical interaction between historical contingencies, racially defined experiences, and political relationships. Omi and Winant emphasize that racial politics entail "both a discursive or cultural initiative, an attempt at racial signification and identity formation on the one hand; and a political initiative, an attempt at organization and redistribution on the other" (Omi & Winant, 1986: 56). In other words, racial formations entail cultural and social initiatives to define what race means as well as political and economic schemes to distribute power along racial lines. Racial formation theory's primary contributions are: its processual, change-oriented model; its simultaneous attention to multiple levels of racialization and signification, including the discursive, cultural, political, and economic; and its insistence that we analyze the intersection of race with other social factors, such as class, gender, and nation, without ignoring the significance of race as system.

Racial formation theory has been employed by a range of educational scholars. Cameron McCarthy (1990, 1997) has used it to discuss the cultural politics of curricular reforms. Lewis (2003) employs racial formation theory, among other frameworks, to analyze "the reality of race as a product of schooling" and the racialization of people in and through schools (p. 11). She explains how both curriculum and classroom interactions are infused by racial understandings. Bartlett (under review) adapts Omi and Winant's idea of racial projects to discuss *educational projects*, or discursive/cultural and sociopolitical initiatives, accomplished by alliances of social actors, who employ a variety of pedagogies and educational philosophies and theories in order to benefit certain groups (often racially and class-specific groups). Educational projects, she argues, shape how we think about knowledge, intelligence, and personhood, even while they structure our material world, including the kinds of buildings we congregate in, and determine our use of desks, blackboards, walls, or classrooms, instructional materials, and books.

In this issue, Melissa Marinari employs racial formation theory to examine how Korean immigrants and American born Koreans complicate the model minority stereotype of Asian students. Marinari demonstrates how these students engage competing racial projects of neutrality and visibility to embrace and/or contest the dominant. Her findings emphasize the need to look beyond cultural explanations of success and failure to include

an analysis of the ways that schools themselves affect the constantly shifting terrain of racial formation.

Third, the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu has greatly influenced sociocultural studies of race and schooling. Bourdieu exposed the advantages granted to middle class students, whose cultural capital, or tastes, etiquette, demeanor, speech, writing, and general interaction styles, are arbitrarily more valued in the middle class institution of schooling than those of their working class counterparts. He also emphasized the advantages granted middle class youth by virtue of their social capital, which may be defined as a durable, interpersonal network of relationships that can be mobilized to provide social and other forms of support (Bourdieu, 1986).

While Bourdieu focused on class, subsequent authors have adapted his ideas to discuss ethnic (dis)advantages. Studies of the differential respect accorded to speakers of language varieties have benefited from Bourdieu's framing. For example, Heller's examination of the construction of "legitimate language" demonstrated, in the Canadian context, how teachers used their classroom authority to construct what counted as "good French" and to diminish bilingual practices and vernacular forms (1996). In many ways, much of the work on developing culturally relevant pedagogies for minority students built on the basic insight of the gap between white, middle class discourses and those employed by poor and/or minority youth (see, for example, Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1993; Valdés, 2001; Vasquez et al. 1994). Bourdieu's ideas about social capital have been equally fruitful. For example, Stanton-Salazar's analysis revealed the critical importance of social capital, built through relationships with "institutional agents" such as teachers, to the academic success of racial minority children and youth (1997).

In addition, Bourdieu's practice theory inspired a new strand in educational anthropology known as "cultural production theory" (Levinson & Holland, 1996). Whereas Bourdieu rather cynically suggested the easy reproduction of social structures, cultural production scholars, influenced by the ground-breaking work of Paul Willis and others associated with British cultural studies, have demonstrated that the outcomes of schooling are never predetermined and must be negotiated through the contested process of cultural production. Further, cultural production theorists have opened up Bourdieu's tendency to privilege class. Instead, they look at the intersections and simultaneity of multiple forms of dominance, including race, gender, and nationalism, in everyday cultural practice. For example, Levinson employs practice theory to discuss the cultural game of equality that encourages Mexican secondary school students to develop solidarity across the normal class and social divides (2001).

In this issue, Greg Anderson employs insights from Bourdieu, among other scholars, to argue that the consumption of racialized cultural products at elite educational institutions provides cultural capital to their predominantly white student bodies. Anderson demonstrates that the diversification of the curriculum without a concomitant diversification of faculty and student populations furthers the exclusion of racialized people even as it commodifies their experiences.

Questions about who benefits from the production and consumption of certain types of knowledge have fuelled a fourth influential approach to studies of race and schooling. Critical Race Theory (CRT) evolved since the mid-1970s as “a form of opposition scholarship” concerned with the overt and covert racism facing people of color within educational institutions (Calmore, 1992: p. 2161; see also Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).<sup>1</sup> CRT posits that racism is endemic in society and in education, and that racism has become so deeply engrained in society’s and schooling’s consciousness that it is often invisible. CRT confronts and challenges the liberal pursuit of meritocracy, color-blindness, and incremental change (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Villalpando, 2003; Yosso et al. 2004). While CRT focuses on race and racism these processes “are also viewed at their intersection with other forms of subordination such as gender and class discrimination” (Solorzano, 1998, p. 122). CRT values experiential knowledge as a way to inform thinking and research. As a result, narrative accounts and testimonies are valued as key sources of data by CRT scholars (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Finally, CRT is activist in nature; CRT scholars maintain a commitment to social justice. Embedded in this notion is a “liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 8). Those who rely on CRT “integrate their experiential knowledge, drawn from a shared history as ‘other,’ with their ongoing struggles to transform a world deteriorating under the albatross of racial hegemony” (Barnes, 1990, p. 1865). Scholars utilizing CRT in education explicitly argue that their work must move toward eliminating the influence racism, sexism, and poverty have in the lives of students and faculty (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Parker, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

The growing popularity of Critical Race Theory has generated an intriguing expansion of race theorizing: the development of theoretical approaches specific to the experiences of particular racial/ethnic groups in the United States. So, for example, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) emphasizes issues that affect Latina/o and Chicana/o people in everyday life, including immigration, language, identity, culture, and skin color (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Espinoza, 1990; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Martinez, 1997;

Montoya, 1994; Villalpando, 2003). Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) emphasizes and critiques the nativistic racism embedded in the model minority stereotype, immigration and naturalization, language, and disenfranchisement issues that relate to Asian people in the United States (Chang 1993, 2000).

In this issue, Brayboy introduces an original analytical frame called TribalCrit that specifically addresses the educational experiences of Indigenous peoples. TribalCrit recognizes the unique position of American Indian tribal peoples as both a political and a racial group—a position that, despite its codification in government policy, legal code, and the everyday lives of American Indian communities, remains contested. Further, Brayboy's TribalCrit analytical framework focuses on the educational issues resulting not only from the contemporary, liminal positioning of American Indians but also from hundreds of years of abusive relationships between mainstream educational institutions and American Indian communities.

The need to press beyond the black–white paradigm that too often underlies racial theorizing is stressed by another author in this volume. Castagno examines the experiences of American Indian women at an institution she calls Midwest University (MU). While MU is a left leaning institution that claims to be committed to diversity, its students and staff continue to hold debilitating stereotypes about American Indian women. More importantly, the black–white racial continuum reigns supreme and makes Indian students invisible. The native women in Castagno's article are forced into a nether-region where they are too dark to be white, and not dark enough to be students of color. Castagno reminds us that many American Indian students on college campuses are absent from discussions of diversity and race except when placed as figures from the past. Their present day viability is lost, erased, and hidden.

Finally, one vibrant strand of scholarship on race and schooling examines how and when individuals and institutions discuss issues of race and racism, and the consequences of such race talk on racial formation processes. Researchers have examined how people do and do not talk about race—specifically, in what settings what kind of conversations can and do occur. For example, Pollock (2004) eschewed the usual research question of what a racial category “*meant* in some internal fashion,” in favor of an examination of “*when*, in the institution of schooling, people drew lines around [individual students] that categorized them as race-group members” (p. 10). She found that, while students regularly talked about race in complex ways, teachers and administrators tended to avoid race talk, especially in public, even though private conversations revealed the assumptions they regularly made about race, academic orientation, and educational achievement. Pollock also discovered that the venue deeply

shaped what teachers and administrators could and would say about race. School-level teachers and administrators avoided disaggregating school achievement data by groups. Perhaps they feared such bald statistics would generate negative feelings among members of certain racial groups; but, as a result, the school was not held accountable for failing particular students. At the district level, administrators were likewise cautious about appropriate locations for frank discussions of race and academic achievement. While they regularly compared race-group achievement in official reports and at district meetings, they “typically distributed to the public only the most generalized versions of these data,” and “descriptions of racial achievement patterns typically vanished from district representatives’ talk of achievement the closer they came to conversations with actual teachers” (2001, pp. 5–6).

Astute analyses of race talk also focus on what is omitted from conversations, the silences that are ever-present in these interactions, and what is missing from the discussions. Schultz’s (2003) important work asks educators to consider how listening to what is said and unsaid will illuminate a wider range of conversations. Her anti-racist pedagogy calls for educators to engage in four types of listening: listening to individual students; listening to the whole group; listening to the cultural contexts that students come from and bring with them to the classroom; and listening for silences and silencing practices.

The link between communication (talking and listening) and the expansion of democratic educational spaces is fundamentally questioned by the essays in Boler’s (2004) edited collection. For example, Boler’s chapter asks whether it is possible to create democratic space for marginalized voices while adhering to the progressive tenet of affirming all students. She asks whether relatively privileged students might or should be silenced in order to achieve democratic dialogue. Other chapters warn of the dangers of fetishizing speech, as so often happens in discussions of “giving voice,” and they question what cross-difference dialogue has to offer minoritized or otherwise oppressed students.

In this issue, Katherine Schultz and her colleagues, Tricia Niesz and Patricia Buck examine how race is discussed, written, and then erased in an after-school writing group. When middle school students were asked to articulate their understandings about race, they reframed the conversation as one about racism, conceptualizing racism as individual acts of meanness and exclusion across race lines. In addition, students located their discourses about race in an earlier era. They had few models for talking about racialized experiences outside of the language of racism and a language of the past. Later, when writing for a more public audience, they aligned their discourse more closely with the colorblind discourse of the school. They erased the most explicit dialogue linked to race. Such erasures force us to

more fully consider what lies behind the discussions and the school and schooling climate.

These five frameworks—cultural ecological theory, racial formation theory, practice theory cum cultural production theory, critical race theory, and theoretical work on race talk and silence—have greatly influenced sociocultural studies of race and schooling. Together with discussions of funds of knowledge, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical white studies, they will undoubtedly continue to shape the field.

In the near term, we expect several processes currently underway to influence the development of studies of race and schooling. First, we expect critiques of research methods to flourish. Many scholars—and particularly scholars of color—have become critical of the “epistemological racism” of more traditional research methodologies (Scheurich, 1997; Scheurich & Young, 2002; see also Smith, 1999), and have sought new research models. With their focus on counter-stories and narratives, CRT scholars have found one productive avenue. It is clear that the precarious status of many minoritized populations also requires methodological creativity. To take an extreme but all too common example, the staggering incarceration rates of African American and Latino youth mean that an unprecedented number of them now receive various forms of schooling through the justice system. Learning more about the educational experiences of these young people poses serious methodological challenges.

Second, responding in part to developments in CRT, we expect that scholars may initiate fruitful debates about the role of particular kinds of theory in studies of race and schooling. Theory is often the means through which ethnographic research achieves a certain inferential form of generalizability. As Davies argues, “the conclusions of ethnographic analysis are seen to be generalizable in the context of a particular theoretical debate rather than being primarily concerned to extend them to a larger collectivity” (1991, p. 91). What are the limitations of this traditional, universalist type of theorizing? Do such theories constitute new forms of the old anthropological search for law-like generalizations, or perhaps new metanarratives? Alternately, what are the strengths and limitations of theoretical frames that focus on a particular racialized group, as do *LatCrit*, *AsianCrit*, and *TribalCrit*? How do these new forms of theorizing contribute to or disrupt more traditional and “accepted” theories that have framed issues of race in schooling in the past?

Third, the growing number of immigrant children and youth pose serious questions to scholars of race and schooling. According to Van Hook and Fix, “[f]rom 1970 to 1995, the number of immigrant children ages 5–20 living in the United States more than doubled, from 3.5 to 8.6 million; 40% of this growth took place after 1990. During the same 25-year period, the number of children of U.S. natives declined and the number of immigrant

children grew larger than the number of African-American children” (2000, p. 9). As immigration trends continue to diversify the student bodies in U.S. schools, we expect several research topics to grow in importance. What role do schools play in socializing immigrant children into American racial formation processes? What identifications are students learning to make with racial/ethnic identities, and how do these affect their schooling? What can we learn about the ways in which not only immigrant optimism but what Louie (2001) calls immigrant pessimism, or the expectation of discrimination, shape the educational experiences of these populations? How is the development of transnational, multilingual literacies shaped by social forces? How do competing notions of citizenship among and within immigrants and refugees influence the educational and life experiences of these groups of people?

Finally, the question of how best to educate minoritized students must continue to be central to our research agenda. W.E.B. DuBois argued that the problem of the 20th century would be the color line. Though the “color line” has become more like a prism, incorporating a spectrum of hues, the significance of race in relation to schooling and education has not declined. Obviously, we must avoid any approach to the issue that would, even if inadvertently, locate the blame for school failure within particular populations. Nevertheless, we cannot afford to be “colorblind” or “colormute,” ignoring the problems of cumulative and systemic racism and discrimination. This issue has dogged sociocultural scholars of race and schooling for decades; it remains our greatest challenge.

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## NOTE

1. For a comprehensive overview of the introduction of CRT to education see: Lynn et al. (2002); Parker et al. (1999); Parker et al. (2004); Solórzano & Delgado Bernal (2001), Solórzano & Yosso, (2002).

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