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Johanna C. Massé a, Rosemary J. Perez a & Julie R. Posselt a

a University of Michigan

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Revisiting College Predisposition: Integrating Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Inequality

Johanna C. Massé, Rosemary J. Perez, and Julie R. Posselt

University of Michigan

Student choice models from the higher education literature elucidate the psychosocial factors that are correlated with college enrollment. They do not, however, clarify how these factors interact to cultivate the inclination to pursue postsecondary education. This critical review integrates a Bourdieusian framework with research on academic domain identification and stereotype threat to suggest that the educational system is currently structured to perpetuate racial inequalities by discouraging black and Latino students from developing the predisposition to attend college. Current public policies impose repeated opportunities for stereotype threat to be activated among blacks and Latinos, thereby perpetuating a cycle of academic disidentification. The implications for this integrative framework on higher education research and practice are also discussed.

In this paper, we posit a framework outlining structural origins of unequal college attendance by integrating theory from sociology and psychology. Historically researchers and policymakers have cited cultural deficits in black and Latino communities to explain the college enrollment gap (e.g., Heller, 1966; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Moynihan, 1965). Our analysis adds to emergent challenges of this interpretation by analyzing structural bases of some such socially constructed “deficits” (P. Carter, 2005; Steele, 1997; Yosso, 2005). The majority of students start high school with high educational aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998), and communities of color have long upheld advanced education as central to their visions of social uplift and empowerment (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; St. John, 2003). However, there are structures embedded in schooling and society that lead many black and Latino students to adopt an orientation toward the future in which college is not necessarily normative (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006; Urrieta, 2007).

Caught in a network of competing social forces, many black and Latino students become discouraged about their prospects for further educational opportunities. One explanation for this discouragement is that students of color reject academic culture and opportunity (Ogbu, 1988), yet ethnographic research has repudiated this perspective (P. Carter, 2005). We suggest discouragement happens through two mechanisms. First, school curriculum and college admissions...
narrowly define what counts as valuable social and cultural capital. Prevailing definitions of merit “advantage the already privileged” (Karabel, 2005, p. 407) and discount other forms of “non-elite” social and cultural capital—effectively excluding students who possess them (Freeman, 2006; Stevens, 2007). Freeman describes schools’ work in this regard as cultural annihilation, a process that “severely erodes the cultural identity and educational opportunities of Blacks” (p. 42). Second, in a system reliant on standardized tests for quantitative measures of merit, the impact of stereotypes about intelligence threaten the opportunities that Blacks and Latinos have to demonstrate their capacity for college education (Steele, 1997). From this perspective, the burden of improving college access and advancing a more socially just education system lies not with students but with school leaders and policymakers.

Drawing from conceptualizations of college choice as a three-stage process (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992), we focus our analysis on the earliest phase of college decision-making wherein students develop a predisposition to extend their education beyond high school and view college attendance as a reasonable possibility. The predisposition to attend college is a function of how individuals construct a sense of what is possible within an education system that operates as a gatekeeper to social mobility. Bourdieu’s (1977) model of purposive action under conditions of constraint provides a way of interpreting educational decision-making at a cultural level but is less explicit about the cognitive processes implicated in exercising individual agency. Steele’s (1997) work on stereotype threat complements Bourdieu’s theory for the US context by linking cognition, identity, and action among people of color within the academic domain. While these individual theories have informed structural understandings of educational inequality for years, we propose that previously unexamined intersections of these theories lend additional perspective on why black and Latino students may or may not cultivate an inclination to pursue higher education.

Our work integrating a Bourdieuan sociological perspective and the research on stereotype threat evolved out of our shared interest in how America’s racialized educational context shapes college access and perceptions of opportunity. We desire to understand the ways individuals make personal meaning of broad social values about education (e.g., for whom and what college is for and stereotypes of academic ability) and how such cognitive micro-processes may enable agency in navigating constraints in their decisions about education. Two of us identify as Asian American women and one as a white woman, and we believe that postsecondary education plays a key role in breaking cycles of inequality that have historically oppressed people of color in America. Thus, our analysis assumes that the benefits of higher education, which include but are not limited to human capital development, should be accessible to all people as a lynchpin of a socially just educational system.

A weakness in our analysis is the absence of attention to Native Americans and Asian Americans, two groups that have also been made “Other” within America’s racial hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 1994). While we recognize that Asian Americans and Native Americans are also racialized ethnic groups, our work utilizes the extant literature on stereotype threat, which has primarily examined detrimental effects on black and Latino student achievement. We use the term “underrepresented students” to refer to Blacks and Latinos who are underrepresented in the American higher education system relative to their proportion of the general population, while acknowledging that Native Americans are also numerically underrepresented. Although we do not wish to reproduce essentialist/biological categories of meaning to describe groups of people, our language is necessarily constrained by the disciplinary traditions from which we draw.
HABITUS AND THE INTERPLAY OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL IN SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Habitus and College Predisposition

For the past 30 years, educational researchers have turned to Bourdieu’s model of symbolic violence and capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) to explain how the educational system reproduces inequality intergenerationally. Bourdieu’s conception of constrained yet purposive action “emphasizes structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources” (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 34), particularly in regard to class. For example, upper- and middle-class parents endow their children with the aspiration and material resources to attend college, thereby perpetuating their status as the educated elite (Bourdieu, 1984). At the other end of the class spectrum, low-income and working-class children lack both the perceived entitlement and the financial and informational resources to see college attendance as a rite of passage. (Johnston, 2007; McDonough, 1997). Bourdieu argues that class is both intergenerational and relatively deterministic, for individuals act according to the habitus with which they are raised, thus reproducing the lifestyles and educational attainment of their parents (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990).

Habitus is a critical element of Bourdieu’s theory of how social reproduction operates through the education system. In his later works, Bourdieu (1990) defined habitus as:

A system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (p. 53)

Thus, habitus is a set of internalized dispositions, grounded in personal history and family socialization that subconsciously frames one’s sense of legitimate actions. The dispositions that comprise one’s habitus are largely internalized assumptions about oneself in the social world. While the concept of habitus seems deterministic, Bourdieu allows for agency by linking habitus to behavior within specific fields of interaction, which are socially constructed spaces where individuals struggle to access and preserve power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As sites where social reproduction is negotiated, fields are characterized by the pattern of power relations present in the larger class structure, yet each field operates by specific formal and informal rules. Therefore, to understand the reproduction of inequality in society, we need to understand the ways reproduction occurs on smaller scales in fields of interaction, such as the educational system and the schools that comprise it.

According to Bourdieu, families are the primary generator and constructor of one’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Horvat, 1997). In many schools where college is normative, individual families interact with an entrenched system that encourages conformity to a “hidden” set of cultural expectations derived from a history of favoring white and upper-middle-class interests (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McDonough, 1997). Researchers also debate whether the habitus one acquires through family upbringing is fixed. Laureau (2003) found that while one may adopt new ways of being and take up new aspirations, the habitus obtained in childhood will always feel more comfortable than that acquired later in life. Horvat’s (2001, 2003) research on the interaction of race and class in black females’ transition to college points to the importance of contextual
factors. She found that students’ habitus did not substantively change as they left high school and entered college, even as race and class took on different meanings and salience.

Urrieta (2007) views habitus as more malleable and school structures as potentially facilitating social mobility by affording students the opportunity to shift their orientation toward the future. In studying working-class Chicanos’ educational experiences, he found that some students’ early identification as “smart” led to their placement in academic tracks that presented an opportunity to gain “secondary habitus” (p. 135). Obtaining what he identifies as middle-class habitus (i.e., valuing choice, academic merit, strong personal drive, etc.) provided entree into middle-class social mobility by fostering positive academic identity and success, which translated into their perceiving and actualizing future academic opportunities.

The seeming discrepancy in how “structuring” individual habitus may occur depends, in part, upon when in Bourdieu’s career his definition of habitus is cited. Over time Bourdieu’s conceptualization of habitus broadened to acknowledge the possibility of educational and social attainment beyond one’s birth class (Swartz, 1997). Responding to critiques that the theory of habitus is overly deterministic, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explained:

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! (p. 133)

While action that is inconsistent with one’s habitus is unlikely, individuals are not inexorably static. Therefore, it is possible to transcend one’s birth class, despite odds that are stacked against some individuals more than others (e.g., D. Carter, 2003; Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Urrieta, 2007). Characteristics external to the individual, such as peer groups, help inform how broadly or narrowly an individual internally frames what constitutes a reasonable set of expectations for the future (McDonough, 1997).

Cultural and Social Capital

Bourdieu (1990) argues that one’s social and cultural capital function symbiotically to reinforce one’s habitus, producing actions that are so internalized as to defy rational choice. Cultural capital describes the knowledge of cultural symbols that are generally associated with the dominant (usually upper-) class (Bourdieu, 1977). In Bourdieu’s conceptualization, the behaviors and knowledge associated with cultural capital are not inherently valuable until they are defined as such by the upper-class and are used to allocate opportunities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Historically, American upper-class values have been determined by white, Protestant, heterosexual males—not coincidentally the primary consumers of higher education in America prior to the twentieth century. Social capital describes the way that benefits accrue to individuals through engagement with others who possess desired resources. Bourdieu perceived social capital primarily in terms of its instrumental value, and his conceptualization consists of the relationship between: (a) actual social relationships that facilitate access to others’ resources and (b) the character of the resources themselves, namely their amount and quality. Investment in those relationships is an indirect form of investment in the resources (i.e., capital) of one’s associates and, like cultural capital, social capital is both a product and reflection of one’s social class.
The forms of capital with which one is raised and the dispositions comprising one’s habitus are reproduced intergenerationally. Simply put, children tend to inherit their values and beliefs from their parents. Rather than systematically enabling social opportunity, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that education more typically confers additional capital upon those who already have it. Concurrently, students whose family backgrounds have fostered the development of non-dominant cultural strengths may struggle to navigate a college admissions game that privileges the elite (McDonough, 1997; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005).

Within a single model, habitus, cultural capital, and social capital describe a process of unjust social reproduction that functions at a macroscopic level. We now turn to the psychological literature on stereotype threat for an explanation of one way that racialization contributes to differences in students’ predisposition to college.

ACADEMIC DOMAIN IDENTIFICATION AND THE IMPACT OF STEREOTYPE THREAT

Stereotype threat emerged from social psychology and its theory of domain identification. Scholars often use stereotype threat to explain the inner states of mind and cognitive processes that suppress individual academic performance (Steele, 1997). It has also been hypothesized to contribute to the academic achievement gap between Blacks and Latinos and their white peers (Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Psychologists’ conceptualization of domain bears close resemblance to what Bourdieu called the field of interaction, in that opportunity for advancement in given social context depends on one’s engagement or identification with it (i.e., domain or field). Since domain is contested territory, internal conflict and external competition affect how one perceives the space and determines whether or not engaging in it is worthwhile.

Domain identification theory posits that sustained success in a particular space can only be achieved if individuals internally identify and are willing to engage with the domain. Steele (1997) described the process of domain identification within an educational context:

To sustain school success one must be identified with school achievement in the sense of its being a part of one’s self-definition, a personal identity to which one is self-evaluatively accountable. This accountability—that good self-feelings depend in some part on good achievement—translates into sustained achievement motivation. (p. 613)

In other words, as one achieves success within the broad domain of school and experiences positive feelings associated with this success, one feels an internal drive to continue a high level of achievement in order to preserve self-esteem. The relationships among school success, positive feelings, and self-esteem function as a feedback loop. Over time, the continuous cycling of this loop can strengthen the associations between one’s self-esteem and academic success, ultimately leading one to identify with the domain. However, the strength of this association depends on one’s perception of the potential for continued success given one’s skills, abilities, talents, resources, and sense of belonging in the domain (Steele, 1997). If a positive association with academics is not formed or is severed, the potential for achievement is diminished.

Quantitative investigations of stereotype threat have focused on its situational effects on task-specific performance. According to Smith (2004), a stereotype threat is, “a situational performance...
result of a stereotyped individual’s expectations for success/failure combined with the importance the individual places on doing well” (p. 179). Performance is “couched in how others’ expectations about performance success/failure affect the individual who is the target of those expectations” (p. 179). Essentially, a stereotype threat occurs when individuals fear that poor performance on an evaluative task in a personally relevant domain will confirm negative stereotypes about their identity groups. This fear of confirming negative stereotypes suppresses the ability to perform in the domain, limiting achievement. When repeatedly confronted with stereotype threats, one may disassociate the domain from one’s identity in order to preserve self-esteem (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Steele, 1997).

Blacks and Latinos are particularly vulnerable to stereotype threat in academic environments, given strongly racialized notions of intelligence (Mills, 1997). Scholars assert these negative stereotypes pervade schools, such that they frame national debates about racial differences in I.Q. (Steele, 1997) and shape teachers’ perceptions of the abilities of students of color (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Tatum, 2007). In effect, stereotype threat manifests prevailing societal (mis)perceptions of intellectual inferiority, which impede how underrepresented students respond to academic environments. When coupled with systemic social reproduction in schools, a clear difference between the real and perceived educational opportunities for underrepresented students and their white peers emerges.

In their early work, Steele and Aronson (1995) demonstrated the relevance of race-based stereotype threat on academic performance through a series of quantitative studies of black and white undergraduates. In one study, participants were asked to complete items from the Graduate Record Examination and were told prior to beginning the task that its purpose was either an intellectual diagnostic or a non-diagnostic tool to understand problem solving abilities. Undergraduates in the non-diagnostic condition performed significantly better on the test than those in the diagnostic condition, and white students performed significantly better than black students, with the widest differential between racial groups occurring in the diagnostic condition. These results suggest that presenting a task as a measure of intellectual ability suppressed black students' performance. Moreover, when black undergraduates believed their intelligence could be judged negatively due to race, their underperformance intensified.

In another study, Steele and Aronson (1995) primed black and white undergraduates to think about their racial identity by having a white male experimenter ask them to complete a survey that asked for demographic information, including race. The experimenter then indicated participants would be completing a task that was either diagnostic or non-diagnostic of their verbal abilities. After completing the task, participants completed a questionnaire that was intended to measure the extent to which they believed race had an impact on their performance as a proxy to gauging the influence of stereotype threat on achievement. Steele and Aronson (1995) found that “Blacks in the race-prime condition performed worse than virtually all of the other groups, yet in the no-race prime group condition their performance equaled that of Whites” (p. 807). Further examination of the post-test surveys indicated that Blacks felt the impact of race more than Whites regardless of whether they were primed for race before completing the performance task. Steele and Aronson argue that in academically diagnostic situations, stereotype threat is salient to Blacks regardless of whether race is explicitly primed. By extrapolation, when race is explicitly mentioned in an academic testing venue, the effect of stereotype threat could explain a depression in black students’ performance.
Since Steele and Aronson’s initial studies, other researchers have attempted to uncover factors that affect stereotype threat. Some scholars have suggested that developing a positive black racial identity mitigates individuals’ susceptibility to stereotype threat (Davis, Aronson, & Salinas, 2006). Aronson et al. (2002) found that black undergraduates who viewed intelligence as malleable were less susceptible to stereotype threat than those who saw it as fixed. Although stereotype threat was not eliminated, Blacks who believed that intelligence was alterable identified with school as a domain. They achieved higher grades and reported appreciating and valuing academics more than those who perceived intelligence as static. Similarly, Ryan and Ryan (2005) theorize that the nature of one’s achievement goals mediates the effects of stereotype threat. They speculate that situational cues prompting stereotype threat affect performance-avoidant goals in order to discredit negative stereotypes. In practical terms, negatively stereotyped students may adopt a goal to avoid situations where they may appear to be incompetent according to normative, evaluative standards. By this notion, stereotype threat affects habitus, such that perceptions of possible courses of action become constrained.

The vast majority of the literature examining stereotype threat explores its influence on domain identification via situational disengagement or permanent disidentification, not the factors that precipitate stereotype threat. Quantitative, experimental research has demonstrated that stereotype threat is situation-specific; however, it is hypothesized that chronic exposure to stereotype threat in an educational environment may lead underrepresented students to permanently disidentify with academic achievement in order to preserve self-esteem (Steele, 1997). Domain “disidentification does not offer a costless victory because it undermines the motivation and commitment that are necessary for continued educational achievement. Thus, unlike stereotype threat, disidentification directly lowers motivation and an individual’s own performance expectations further depressing achievement” (Morgan & Mehta, 2004, p. 84). In effect, disidentification reframes the habitus of underrepresented students such that school achievement is no longer seen as a reasonable possibility, triggering a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the choice not to continue on to college is a corollary of habitual academic underperformance.

American education policies have raised the stakes of standardized testing, such that effects of stereotype threat have implications for how educational opportunity is conceptualized. The ramifications of stereotype threat are powerful in the present policy context where underrepresented students face an educational environment where racial stereotypes not only underestimate and devalue their abilities but also regard Whites’ knowledge and academic performance as normative (Steele & Aronson, 1998). Standardized test outcomes shape students’ educational trajectories, both in educational gatekeeping (Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008) and, as research reported here has shown, in shaping their identification with academics. In a self-proclaimed meritocracy, these tests are intended to neutrally assess ability and achievement and to predict future educational performance (Lemann, 2000). Testing “fairness” aside, stereotype threat may contribute to underrepresented students’ achievement gap. Standardized testing, such as that required by No Child Left Behind (2002), places underrepresented students into evaluative situations that repeatedly trigger stereotype threat (Ryan & Ryan, 2005). If unsuccessful over a sustained period of time, they may be more likely to disidentify with the academic domain to preserve self-concept (Major et al., 1998; Osborne, 1997), which in turn reduces their strength of predisposition towards postsecondary education.

We speculate that the compounded effect of stereotype threat on those with multiple stereotyped identities also has a strong influence on habitus. For example, Gonzales et al. (2002) found that
Latina undergraduates performed lower than Latinos, white men, and white women on a numerical and special relations test after being primed for race and gender differences. For underrepresented students who are also women, first-generation, queer, or of low socioeconomic status, interlocking oppressions may further constrict habitus such that the perceived scope of possible futures continues to narrow. Integrating the mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction with the psychosocial effects of domain identification into our understanding of how black and Latino students become predisposed to attend college may illuminate where interventions may be needed.

## REVISITING COLLEGE PREDISPOSITION FOR UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS

### The Interplay Among Habitus, Domain Identification, and College Predisposition

Our review of the literature suggests the substantive differences (see Table 1) between Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction and psychologists’ notion of stereotype threat complement one another to explain how inequality is perpetuated within American schools. Bourdieu’s sociological theorizing provides a strong framework for describing intergenerational class transmission at a

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis for Comparison</th>
<th>Bourdieu</th>
<th>Stereotype Threat (ST)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus of analysis</td>
<td>Elites’ structures to maintain privilege</td>
<td>Outcomes of cognitions within structures among non-elites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of social relations</td>
<td>Class privilege</td>
<td>Race privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths of approach</td>
<td>– Explains macro level class processes</td>
<td>Examines how macro level structures (i.e., stereotypes) affect individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Identifies structural relations that are observed across fields.</td>
<td>– Research constrained to experimental settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses of approach</td>
<td>– Does not acknowledge race.</td>
<td>– Does not explain how people resist ST and how much of observed disparities actually result from ST.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– Individual level processes are poorly articulated</td>
<td>– Assumes, but does not explicate, factors in decision making that are external to the self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation toward self and future</td>
<td>Habitus</td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Field Capital</td>
<td>Domain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats/assets to predisposition</td>
<td>Dominant class defines what capital is valued in accordance with interests that perpetuate their status.</td>
<td>Stereotype/domain identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism</td>
<td>(1) Stereotype is activated as salient (priming)</td>
<td>(2) Threat of conforming to stereotype diminishes performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Repeated experience of ST reduces identification with academic domain</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
INTEGRATING PERSPECTIVES ON INEQUALITY

micro-level (i.e., habitus), while stereotype threat reveals how macro-level societal constructs (i.e., stereotypes) affect individuals. The theories further complement each other in the subjects of their analysis. Bourdieu illuminates the creation and reproduction of social stratification based on class. In contrast, stereotype threat research explores how stereotypes about racialized differences in academic ability negatively affect performance on evaluative tasks for underrepresented minorities.

While both theories represent efforts to link cognition and action, neither sufficiently explains the cognitive processes constraining individuals’ perceived scope of possibilities. However, the areas in which the two theories overlap shed light on the practical ways in which individuals navigate the American educational system, such that they may or may not develop the predisposition to attend college. As previously noted, individual habitus is a distinguishing characteristic that shapes one’s likelihood of continuing education beyond high school. Specifically, habitus comprises broad social norms about college going, identification with academics (which is partly informed by previous academic performance), and known resources, including family finances and social and cultural capital. In the context of college predisposition, accretion of cultural and social capital acts as an asset to college-going. Conversely, if a student does not feel that additional education is sensible for a person like herself, she is unlikely to be inclined toward it.

An individual’s habitus changes by adapting to external constraints and supports within a given field of interaction. Habitus in the academic field may expand or contract as experiences and resources are gained or lost and identification with academics is enhanced or weakened. In one’s habitus, a way of being in the world—and way of being in the academic field of interaction—develops from which college may or may not be seen as a reasonable possibility. Students’ academic domain identification may affect habitus as one is affirmed or dissuaded from scholarly pursuits based on classroom and testing performance. Moreover, the salience of stereotype threats may undermine underrepresented students’ potential for school success by unconsciously depressing academic performance in evaluative situations. As such, school experiences have an impact on one’s habitus by either widening or narrowing the scope of possibility for pursuing postsecondary education.

Stereotypes are a tool of social reproduction in that they are persistent and pervasive, holding meaning across generations (Mills, 1997). Additionally, stereotypes function as subversive mechanisms through which self-concept can be manipulated. Stereotype threat does not address the macro-level implications of stereotypes, per se, but targets how specific preconceived notions of intelligence have relevance for students in the educational domain. Achievement measured by test scores (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and strength of racial identity (Davis et al., 2006) inform the strength of one’s academic domain identification. Students’ perceived self-efficacy in school environments also factors into academic domain identification by shaping perceptions of individual abilities to successfully complete tasks (Bandura, 1977; Stage, Muller, Kinzie, & Simmons, 1998). However, self-efficacy is distinct from domain identification since it is possible for one to see oneself as highly capable in school without rooting self-esteem and self-concept in academic performance.

We do not wish to underestimate the resilience that many underrepresented students display in the face of constraints or the unique strengths they bring to the experience of schooling. When preserved, academic domain identification, for example, may also represent a vital resource that broadens underrepresented students’ scope of future educational possibilities. Students of color enter the educational system with rarely acknowledged forms of social and cultural capital, what Yosso (2005) calls “community cultural wealth,” (p. 70) that operate beneath the dominant class
This subversive acquisition of valuable capital allows individuals to widen the scope of possibilities for attending college despite structural constraints. For example, African American communities have been found to activate social capital that is distinct from socio-historic white institutions but is nonetheless instrumental in promoting strong academic achievement among black students (Morris, 2004). Similarly, household funds of knowledge operate at the nexus of culture and power and provide a critical lens for validating alternative ways of knowing. This kind of community wealth occupies “that space between structure and agency, between the received historical circumstances of a group, and the infinite variations that social agents are able to negotiate within a structure” (González, 2005, p. 43). Acknowledging the contribution that non-dominant cultural paradigms play in the resilience of oppressed groups creates opportunities for educators to consider how these self-same assets can be leveraged as an affordance in working with underrepresented students. Additionally, juxtaposing the strengths that black and Latino communities can bring to bear on educational endeavors with the evidence of stereotype threat strongly undermines the argument that deficient cultures are responsible for ethnic achievement gaps (Steele & Aronson, 1998).

**Strength of College Predisposition**

While research typically discusses students’ enrollment decision as a dichotomous “whether or not” conclusion, we view disposition toward college as a continuum. Students who weakly identify with the academic domain may be less likely to develop a strong predisposition for college since they perceive their probability of success as low. The strength of individuals’ academic domain identification may have an effect on their aspirations by late junior high/early high school, when extant college predisposition develops into the search stage of student choice for those who consider themselves to be college material (Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992). For even if one is less likely to pursue college immediately after high school, it does not preclude their eventual enrollment, a reality reflected in the increased average age of college students and the growth of non-traditionally aged college students (Kazis et al., 2007).

Reframing college predisposition as lifelong inclination provides another means to understand college-going persistence among underrepresented students. Research on lifelong learning has shown that linear educational pathways fail to capture the experience of many students (Pusser et al., 2007). We speculate that once removed from a formal schooling, those with some inclination to attend college may continue to identify with the academic domain since they are less likely to face repeated, evaluative stereotype threats related to their intelligence. Alternatively, they may have additional opportunities to accrue social and cultural capital that may be valued in a college setting. Continued identification with academics and shifts in the capital one possesses may affect one’s college-going habitus. While college attendance may have seemed improbable immediately after high school, it may seem a more reasonable possibility at later points in time.

**IMPLICATIONS**

**Researchers**

Our theoretical reconceptualization of college predisposition creates opportunities for multiple lines of research. While widely deployed as a theoretical framework in qualitative and quantitative
research alike, there are no common criteria for operationalizing Bourdieuan constructs, such as cultural and social capital. Although attempts have been made to correlate cultural capital and habitus to college outcomes using statistical models (e.g., Nora, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005), American scholars have yet to come to consensus about what forms and qualities of capital are valuable in our multicultural society. A strengths-based approach to understanding cultural capital can discern what qualities within non-dominant cultures promote achievement and pave pathways to success (Yosso, 2005). Research with academically successful Latino and black males confirms that opportunities are enhanced not only through social capital generated through relationships with powerful elites but also in peer networks (Harper, 2008; Stanton- Salazar, 2004). Investigating cultural traits specific to successful black and Latino students would allow researchers to gain keener insight into how these communities overcome structural constraints to achieve academic success. Furthermore, additional research is needed to investigate if and how stereotype threat manifests among other underrepresented populations, such as Native Americans and Asian Americans.

The literature on stereotype threat is limited to controlled experiments with college students; therefore, additional research is needed to test the explanatory power of stereotype threat outside of laboratory conditions and on broader populations. Extant literature on stereotype threat leaves open the question of how stereotypes affect individuals’ sense of self beyond task-based scenarios. As such, research is needed to discern the interplay between stereotype threat and other forms of cognition such as self-efficacy, motivation, and attribution. Furthermore, stereotype threat studies hypothesize that individuals disidentify with domains after repeated negative evaluation in order to preserve self-esteem. However, we lack substantive longitudinal research to understand when and how this process occurs for underrepresented students in the academic domain.

Practitioners

Because habitus is shaped in many contexts, it is unclear where specific interventions need to occur. To sustain a meaningful expansion of one’s habitus such that postsecondary education seems possible, a multi-tiered approach may be needed to address conflicting messages that students encounter in their family, schools, and communities. Despite support they may receive in one or more of these contexts, underrepresented students are often caught in the nexus of negative societal assumptions about what comprises “college material.” The higher education community must take more responsibility for creating successful K-16+ bridge programs that promote seamless transitions along all stages of schooling. While many individual colleges and universities have developed outreach programs, the national dialogue about whom college is for has often been initiated by private organizations. Because forces of social reproduction undermine meritocratic educational access, targeted interventions promoting academic domain identification among underrepresented students are necessary to counteract epistemological racism that has historically excluded some groups from developing a college-going orientation. Ideally, partnerships between the K-12 system and higher education institutions can be developed to promote a long-term vision of postsecondary aspiration.

Policy

The research on stereotype threat suggests that high stakes testing takes a disproportionate psychological toll on students who have internalized the burden of acting as representatives of their
race in competitive situations. While we understand that standardized tests have a place in making general assessments of students across populations, more attention must be paid to the possibility that the net result of cumulative test-taking may be a decrease in students’ predisposition to pursue additional education. Standardized tests also reduce the objective chances of high school graduation among low-achieving students of color, as recent research on the California High School Exit exam reveals (Reardon, Atteberry, Arshan, & Kurlander, 2009). As such, it may be beneficial for education policymakers to consider requiring more purposeful, holistic assessments of student learning.

Conceptions of social justice in higher education are not an endpoint, but rather a starting point for a national conversation about our assumptions around college-going. Historically, higher educational policy discourses have been constructed with an eye to multiple, competing, goals for education that rest upon discrepant assumptions about the role higher education should play (Posselt, 2009). Among these goals, the aim of social mobility rightfully draws attention to unequal access, and thus merits a place in dialogues about social justice in education. However, the vision of social mobility through educational attainment is maintained not only as a hope of oppressed communities, but also as insurance among the privileged. Furthermore, structuring education around opportunity for advancement implicitly validates a competitive system that (a) demands prescribed definitions of merit to allocate rewards, (b) is both stratified and stratifying, and (c) serves agendas of social and economic efficiency over democratic equality (Labaree, 1999). Social mobility goals, particularly those measured through the lens of human capital development, are only sometimes congruent with the principle of social justice and are, thus, a questionable basis for considering the relationship between college access and social justice.

CONCLUSION

Maximizing postsecondary educational access is more than a means of creating an equitable occupational structure or competitive national economy. In addition to developing human capital, higher education plays a role in developing dispositions and skills for participation in a diverse democracy (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay, & VanHecke, 2007). Thus, enhancing equitable college access also has the potential to harness America’s democratic potential. This essay presents one way of explaining how deeply entrenched biases in our current educational system create obstacles to academic achievement, which may subsequently limit Blacks’ and Latino/as’ full and equitable participation in society to the detriment of all.

REFERENCES


INTEGRATING PERSPECTIVES ON INEQUALITY


**Johanna C. Massé** is a doctoral student in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on nonlinear postsecondary educational pathways, qualitative research methodologies, and Asian Americans in higher education.

**Rosemary J. Perez** is a doctoral candidate in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include college student development, learning via intergroup dialogues, and professional socialization processes.

**Julie R. Posselt** is a doctoral candidate in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan. Her current research interests center on the sociology of education, including faculty judgment in graduate admissions, stratification in educational choices and opportunities, and the role of education in a diverse democracy.