

Throwing the Baby Out with the Bathwater? Revisiting Debates around Educational Inequalities, Social Capital, and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

I review debates around the persistence of stratified educational outcomes. Three explanatory perspectives on social inequality, including educational inequality, are discussed: the “culture of poverty” perspective, the resistance perspective, and the “cultural wealth” perspective. Recent perspectives that emphasize the need to recognize and validate cultural wealth within marginalized urban communities offer an important counterbalance to viewpoints that highlight perceived deficiencies within such milieus. Cultural wealth scholarship views structural discrimination as the primary force that produces inequalities based on race and class. There is, however, a tendency in progressive scholarship to romanticize such communities and focus predominantly on structural change within schools. Many such scholars view community-based social capital initiatives with suspicion and generally deprioritize the urgent need to expand and diversify social capital within minoritized urban communities. I attempt to illustrate that, while structural forces are important to consider when addressing educational inequalities, overlooking

social capital-related factors will result in marginalized urban communities continuing to suffer disadvantage.

Introduction

In Canada, socioeconomic status and race vexingly continue to be determinants of key educational outcomes. Poor and working-class youth as well as those of particular racialized backgrounds—most pointedly Black and Indigenous students—are more likely than their counterparts to leave school without graduating, wind up in (non-gifted) special education classes, and be suspended or expelled. They are also less likely to pursue postsecondary education (Dei, 2008; Dei et al., 1997; James & Turner, 2017; Shah, 2019). This, of course, mirrors prevailing educational inequalities in the USA (Calarco, 2018; Weir, 2016). The search for causes and solutions has fuelled political and academic polarization. In one corner, there are those who have pointed to perceived social disorganization, maladaptive values and social capital deficits within the families and urban communities of marginalized¹ youth. In the other corner, we have a newer generation of progressive scholars, in sociology and, even more so, education, who argue that mainstream institutions such as schools need to accommodate and engage the unique outlooks and social capital found within marginalized communities as shaped by historical and ongoing oppression (e.g., James, 2012;

¹ As defined by Schiffer and Schatz (2008), “marginalisation describes the position of individuals, groups or populations outside of ‘mainstream society’, living at the margins of those in the center of power, of cultural dominance and economical and social welfare” (quoted in Gosine et al., 2023, p. 25). Colleagues and I have elsewhere added “that the extent to which individuals, groups or populations have inroads into mainstream society, along with access to power and resources, is dictated by intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality and ability” (Gosine et al., 2023, p. 25).

Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005). In the perspective of scholars who fall into the latter camp, schools continue to fail young people who are not White and middle-class.

In this article I review three schools of thought, debated in both the popular culture and scholarly literature, for understanding such race and class-based educational inequalities. Additionally, I discuss the implications of debates on this topic for the formulation of ameliorative solutions. Rather than being pointedly situated in any particular national context, this article presents a general theoretical discussion of debates that pertain to factors that generate and sustain educational inequalities.

The three broad explanatory approaches I review are the “culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1966) perspective, the “resistance” perspective, and the “cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2005) perspective. I do not offer an exhaustive review of the literature. My goal with this paper is to present a modest outline of the key debates on the topic and consider the practical implications of these scholarly discussions. Moreover, the three perspectives that I delineate are by no means neatly bounded or mutually exclusive. Indeed, there are scholars who fit within more than one camp. I aim to provide some broad contextual insight into how today’s politically charged debates around race, class and social inequality have evolved. After providing this context, I discuss how the polarized nature of the present-day debates has led many prominent progressive scholars (e.g., Chapman-Nyaho et al., 2011; Gordon, 2013; Hess, 2019; Hillman, 2016; James, 2019; Yosso, 2005) to view community-based, social capital-oriented approaches to ameliorating educational inequalities with great skepticism. More specifically, in an effort to counter stigmatizing portrayals of marginalized communities propagated by perspectives influenced by the “culture of poverty” thesis, there is a tendency in progressive scholarship to romanticize such communities and focus, almost exclusively, on structural change within schools and other mainstream settings. This has led to many such scholars playing down the need to expand, diversify and strengthen social capital within minoritized communities. In actuality, the often counter-hegemonic social capital

that exists within marginalized communities can be a double-edged sword for young people: on the one hand it is an empowering source of community and a buffer against an oppressive society (Yosso, 2005); on the other hand, it can create an insular world in which a distrust of the dominant society is fostered and opportunities are limited (Gosine, 2021; Reynolds, 2013; Wilson, 1987). Given this reality, I attempt to illustrate in this paper that, while structural impediments are important to consider when addressing educational inequalities, overlooking social capital-related factors will result in marginalized urban communities continuing to suffer disadvantage.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. I argue that, as important as it is to analyze structural sources of inequality, we cannot lose sight of the role that social capital plays in shaping educational outcomes and providing (or blocking) opportunities for mobility. Hence, in the section that follows, I define the different types of social capital and describe how they relate to educational attainment and social mobility. In the third section of the article, I outline three perspectives for understanding social inequality, including educational inequality: the “dysfunctional communities” (or “culture of poverty”) perspective, the resistance perspective, and the cultural wealth perspective. With reference to relevant literature, I illuminate how scholars working within the latter perspective have, in an effort to avoid “blaming the victim,” shifted the focus of analysis from cultural to structural factors – a full-pendulum swing from the “dysfunctional communities” perspective. In the fourth section, I elucidate the concerns of progressive scholars regarding cultural explanations for persisting inequalities, which entail social capital-related explanations. In the penultimate section of the article, I offer a critique of the general progressive dismissal of cultural explanations for inequality. I conclude the article by acknowledging the contributions progressive “cultural wealth” scholars have made to our understanding of inequality while explicating the dangers of the scholarly tendency within this realm of thought to play down cultural factors that sustain unequal

outcomes in education and other spheres of social life. The overall goal of this article is to challenge scholarly polarization on debates around social inequality and encourage more comprehensive analyses less tethered to ideological biases.

Social Capital and Inequality

Social capital is widely acknowledged as being a determinant of inequality. The nature and extent of our social connections invariably influence our capacity to persevere amid adversity and achieve social mobility. This article chronicles the debates surrounding the degree to which this concept is underemphasized or overemphasized as a contributor to inequalities in educational attainment and other socioeconomic outcomes. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19; see also Coleman, 1988). Social capital provides individuals with a sense of community, belonging, and mutual support. Social capital is also a key determinant of educational outcomes and mobility opportunities. Coleman (1988) has demonstrated that social capital is critical to the academic success of youth. Familial socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of children’s educational outcomes. According to Coleman, however, the human capital of parents can only influence children’s educational achievement insofar as parents make themselves available to their offspring as a source of social capital. He also stresses the importance and influence of social networks outside of the family. In order to maximize the life chances and wellbeing of youth, families must be connected to networks and institutions within a wider community that provide a broad and diverse range of social capital. When families are socially embedded in this way, parents and children are privy to more supports, resources and information. Writes Coleman (1988):

Both social capital in the family and social capital outside of it, in the adult community and surrounding the school, showed evidence of considerable value in reducing the probability of dropping out of school. (p. S118–9)

Strong social capital elevates social trust within communities and fosters a quid-pro-quo ethos that enables collective action. As Hauberer (2011) notes, “[t]he relationships among group members are sustained by material and/or symbolic exchanges (e.g., gifts or greeting each other when meeting on the street)” (p. 38). Recurrent and expected exchanges of this sort fortify a network of relationships from which people can extract supports and resources as required given their life circumstances (Hauberer, 2011). As far as social mobility is concerned, Loury (2019) underscores the importance of social capital when he posits that “[o]ppportunity travels along the synapses of these social networks” (p. 5). Social capital theorists (Baycan & Oner, 2022; Small, 2009) point out, however, that not all social networks are created equal. The quality and nature of the social network in which one is embedded dictate the quality and nature of the support, resources and opportunities produced within that network (Small, 2009).

Putnam (2000) distinguishes between two types of social capital: *bonding* and *bridging*. Bonding social capital refers to social bonds cultivated within communities that reinforce a collective sense of loyalty – an intra-group “sociological superglue” (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). These strong ties nurture a community ethic and provide a basis for collaboration. They can also foster insular and exclusionary communities where members are wary of outsiders. Minoritized ethno-racial communities are examples of sites marked by strong bonding social capital. Bridging social capital refers to social connections forged between different social groups and communities (see also Coleman’s [1988] notion of closed social networks). Bridging social capital can soften the “us versus them” orientation inherent to bonding social capital and heterogenize people’s social networks, thereby expanding their outlooks and opportunities. Finally, Putnam is careful to note that the two types of social capital are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, two Black individuals from different socioeconomic strata can bond on the basis of race, but forge bridging ties on the basis of social class.

Where discussions of inequality² are concerned, scholars highlight two important points about social capital. First, social capital is not always or necessarily beneficial or positive (Baycan & Oner, 2022; Putnam, 2000). Some social groups characterized by bonding social capital, such as street gangs or White supremacist organizations, may impregnate members' lives with meaning and a sense of belonging, but ultimately channel their talents and motivations toward destructive ends and lead them down limiting and unfortunate paths. Certain types of bridging social capital can be equally unsavoury. An example would be bridging ties between business leaders and high-ranking politicians, which can result in mutually beneficial but unethical practices (Baycan & Oner, 2022). Second, because bonding social capital is not always conducive to positive life outcomes, too much bonding and insufficient bridging can be detrimental to marginalized youth. Research shows that communities marginalized by intersections of race and class can be very insular and, as such, disconnected from the broader mainstream society (Gosine, 2021; Loury, 2019; Reynolds, 2013; Wilson, 1987). This ultimately limits the opportunities and life chances of young people. As Loury (2019) warns when considering the plight of poor Black Americans, a lack of worthwhile bridging social capital means that youth "are not exposed to the influences, and do not benefit from the resources that foster and facilitate their human development, [and hence] fail to achieve their full human potential" (p. 2). Most scholars of social inequality acknowledge the validity of these points, albeit to varying degrees. Nevertheless, the extent to which social capital contributes to inequalities relative to other

² A reader might note that I employ the term "inequality" rather than "inequity." While both terms denote disparate outcomes, the latter term tends to imply that such disparities are primarily, if not necessarily, attributable to unfair discriminatory treatment (Borgen Magazine, 2017). I deemed "inequality" to be the more appropriate term given that this article aims to encourage readers to also consider cultural sources of educational inequalities.

factors, most notably structural discrimination, is vigorously debated. The fear among more progressive scholars is that an overemphasis on social capital explanations distracts from structural inequities while casting marginalized communities as “culturally deficient, apathetic, dysfunctional, and lacking initiative and moral integrity” (James, 2019, p. 30; see also Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005). Other scholars are wary of an overemphasis on discrimination and systemic bias as explanations for persisting inequalities and emphasize instead problematic and limiting forms of bonding social capital within marginalized communities (Loury, 2019; Sowell, 2005; Wilson, 1987). In the three sections that follow I outline this debate in detail.

Explanations for Persisting Inequalities

“Dysfunctional Communities” Perspective

Early scholarly attempts to explain the role that culture plays in reproducing social inequalities largely defaulted to arguments that critiqued and pathologized marginalized communities. More specifically, these explanations highlighted self-defeating behavioural patterns and values, along with a dearth of worthwhile social and cultural capital, within disenfranchised communities that replicated across generations. While historical structural oppression produced such subcultures, this school of thought argues that maladaptive communal norms and values became so entrenched that they persisted even amid progressive social change (Lewis, 1966; Small et al., 2010). Anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966) branded this perspective into public consciousness when he proposed the “culture of poverty” thesis. Arguing from ethnographic research conducted in the United States, Puerto Rico and Mexico, Lewis maintained that people living in dire poverty lapsed into values and lifestyle choices that were not only inimical to upward mobility, but perpetuated social disorganization and cultural seclusion. Such values and characteristics included irresponsible money management, a lack of community development,

premature sexual exploration, a preponderance of fatherless families, and so on. This culture of poverty, Lewis maintained, was reinforced by “the disengagement, or nonintegration, of the poor with respect to the major institutions of society,” resulting in social isolation that was detrimental to wellbeing and advancement (Lewis, 1966, p. 21; see also Loury, 2019). Illustrating the scholarly tendency of the era to spotlight communal brokenness as the primary reason for persisting inequalities, U.S. politician and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) famously invited attention to the consequences of what he saw as the deterioration of the Black nuclear family. According to Moynihan, inhibiting the political and sociological effectiveness of civil rights legislation was the plight of the Black familial unit, which slavery and ensuing structurally induced racial oppression had relegated to a perpetual state of dysfunction. Amid evolving sensibilities as influenced by the burgeoning civil rights movement of the era, Moynihan’s perspective attracted worry and criticism that he was reinforcing detrimental Black stereotypes (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2018).

Even if the phrase “culture of poverty” is not widely bandied today, the main tenets of Lewis’s thesis continue to enjoy resonance in both academic and mainstream circles. Famed (Black) conservative economist Thomas Sowell has long echoed Lewis’s arguments to explain how Black Americans continue to foster a culture that perpetuates the inequalities that they face. According to Sowell (2005), many of the characteristics of the culture of poverty as identified by Lewis (noted above) continue to characterize poor Black American communities, with Sowell placing particular emphasis on a supposed Black disinclination toward legitimate work, a spurning of education, a propensity for violent criminal transgressions, a seeming incapacity for community and economic development, and a perceived lack of commitment to family and child rearing. Sowell sees this pathological Black American subculture as rooted in White Southern “redneck culture” of the antebellum South, the values, outlooks and behaviours of which have come to demarcate a distinct Black American urban identity. This deficient cultural

orientation is sustained and reinforced over time by, echoing Moynihan, broken families as well as a shortage of adequately resourced communal institutions and local, Black-owned businesses. Lamentably, Sowell argues, this cultural identity is actively fortified as an “authentic” Black identity, thereby erecting a salient boundary between “Black culture” and the dominant society that encompasses socioeconomically successful Blacks. This quest for Black authenticity on the part of poor Black Americans created a divide between themselves and Blacks who are accomplished by dominant culturally endorsed standards, individuals “who might otherwise have been sources of examples, knowledge, and experience that could have been useful to those less fortunate” (Sowell, 2005, p. 58). Sowell further maintains that social policies implemented in the 1960s, intended as ameliorative measures, actually worked to reinforce dysfunctional social patterns by creating a culture of dependency that exacerbated social problems such as unemployment and single motherhood (see also Owens, 2020). While the causes of the latter trend continue to be debated, the reality remains that Blacks Americans are significantly more likely to eschew marriage and common-law relationships and remain single even when social class is held constant, and that trend holds in Canada (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2018).

Sowell’s thinking has inspired and informed a generation of Black conservative academics and political pundits, Coleman Hughes and Candace Owens being but two examples. With social media providing a powerful platform for right-leaning cultural critics, the culture of poverty perspective, while still largely eschewed in academic circles, has enjoyed a revival within mainstream culture. In a 2018 opinion piece published in the online magazine *Quillette*, Hughes plays down the legacy of slavery and historical oppression as an explanation for the yawning wealth gap between White and Black Americans. Hughes (2018) instead identifies poor spending patterns within Black communities to explain a relative lack of wealth accumulation. Similarly, Owens (2020) contends that a victim mentality within the Black community combines with the overabundance of fatherless homes

and a lack of commitment to education to relegate African Americans to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Like most informed by the culture of poverty tradition as well as neoliberal ideology, Hughes and Owens maintain that progressive structural change and government interventions are largely unnecessary, or of limited effectiveness. They stress the need for marginalized communities to look within and critically examine the values, behavioural patterns and institutions that characterize their milieus. In short, according to this line of thinking, communal self-help is the only realistic and viable remedy for ameliorating prevailing inequalities based on intersections of race and class.

Marginalized Communities and Politicized Resistance

A generation of social scientists that followed Lewis and Moynihan continued to consider the role of culture in generating and sustaining social inequalities. However, rather than pathologizing the agency (i.e., the outlooks, identities, choices, and ways of life) exercised by marginalized people, “resistance” scholars contextualized it in a way that justified the resistant identities that such individuals and communities actively constructed. While scholars such as Lewis, Moynihan and Sowell conceded that marginalized cultures were shaped by a history of racial and class oppression, they largely reduced these cultures to anomic dysfunction and hopelessness. “Resistance” scholars (e.g., Bottrell, 2007; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Willis, 1977), by contrast, observed political and adaptive facets to the agency exercised within marginalized communities. These scholars portrayed people marginalized by race and class as constructing oppositional identities in response to the interlocking racism and classism that they experienced at the hands of the dominant society. Put differently, marginalized people who felt alienated from the wider society retreated into a defensively situated subculture where they created empowering identities that inverted the stigmatized portrayals of their communities which circulated in the society at large (Bottrell, 2007). Scholarly practitioners aligned with the politicized resistance school of thought conceded

that the oppositional norms and values that marginalized communities embraced were not conducive to navigating mainstream institutions and achieving vertical mobility. But, amid prevailing structural inequalities, these expressions of agency represented bonding social capital necessary for survival. Moreover, few of these scholars would argue that maladaptive cultural norms and values would replicate across generations notwithstanding social change (Small et al., 2010).

Where cultural analyses of marginalized subcultures are concerned, the politicized resistance perspective was influentially posited in the 1970s by Paul Willis. Willis (1977) observed the anti-academic agency exercised by working-class male secondary school students in England. These young people felt a pronounced alienation from a schooling culture that emphasized middle-class values and outlooks. Rather than depicting working-class young people as lacking the discipline and work ethic necessary to succeed, Willis portrayed youth resistance to schooling as a manifestation of a broader class conflict. These young people experienced a sense of alienation that propelled them to embrace a collectivist disposition that spurred a rejection of the individualistic and competitive ideology that characterized schools. Researchers have found similar cultural tendencies within low-income racialized communities. Fordham and Ogbu (1986), for example, conducted ethnographic research that uncovered a strong oppositional outlook among inner-city Black American youth. Disillusioned by the racism that they experienced within the broader society, Black Americans turned inward and generated resistant forms of bonding social capital that entailed a rejection of the dominant White society, including educational attainment. Black peers who did well in school were socially castigated as “acting White,” illustrating the ways in which the boundaries of this oppositional subculture were policed. Sowell (2005) also identified the “acting White” phenomenon as a contributing factor to Black American educational underachievement, but viewed this “neglect and disdain of education” less as a politicized expression of agency, and more a dysfunctional trait inherited from antebellum Southern Whites (p. 30). Dei et al. (1997) observed a

similar resistant disposition among Black Canadian youth. Like Fordham and Ogbu, and in contrast to Sowell, Dei et al. conceptualized this resistance as a response to the discriminatory obstacles that these young people experienced in school. Dei et al. argue that Black youth who leave school without graduating are, in essence, demonstrating resistance to an inhospitable institution that is failing to meet their needs. Hence, rather than labelling such youth as “drop outs,” they should be viewed as “push outs”: young people rejecting an oppressive, Eurocentric, and middle-class oriented institution in order to protect their social identities and reaffirm their commitment to their communities (Dei et al., 1997). Where right-wing observers such as Sowell and Candace Owens (2020) argued simply that “education is not deemed ‘cool’ by many black students” (p. 147) and identified this as problematic, many resistance theorists maintain that anti-school attitudes have an inherently political dimension.

While early researchers tended to portray resistance as almost ubiquitously oppositional, subsequent scholars have highlighted the complexity and diversity of the bonding social capital generated within marginalized communities. Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001), for example, spotlight variation among Chicana and Chicano students in terms of the agency they exercise in response to oppressive contexts. These scholars identify a spectrum of resistance ranging from reactionary behaviour (oppositional behaviour that is not correlated with a politicized social justice outlook) to transformational resistance (student agency informed by a politicized consciousness and a somewhat clearly delineated social justice agenda). In between these two extremes, the authors posit self-defeating forms of resistance (oppositional behaviour fuelled by experiences of social injustice, but without a clear transformative agenda) and conformist resistance (exercised by students inclined to adhere to the expectations of school which they view as their ticket to upward mobility). Broadly echoing these categories, Carter (2005) draws on her study of low-income Black and Latinx youth to identify three identity options young people tend to embrace: cultural mainstreamers (students who

prioritize upward mobility and therefore conform to the system; see also Fordham, 1988); non-compliant believers (those who, without rejecting education outright, oppose facets of schooling and “White,” middle-class mores generally, hold a deep commitment to their ethno-racial community, and insist on “keeping it real”); and cultural straddlers (students who take school seriously and strategically affiliate with the dominant society *and* their ethno-racial community; put differently they do not forsake their community to achieve social mobility; see also James, 2012). In identifying these different forms of agency exercised by marginalized youth, Carter challenges the essentialism inherent in Fordham and Ogbu’s “acting White” thesis, which she describes as an oversimplified dismissal of “the substantive contributions of ethno-racial cultures and... ignore[s] how heterogeneous the members in these ethno-racial groups are” (p. vii; see also Gosine, 2002). In his study of diverse young people living in a low-income Toronto community, James (2012) invokes Carter’s “cultural straddlers” category when he draws attention to young people who strive for academic success in order to become successful and one day give back to their community. In the words of George Dei (2008), these are examples of youth who “resist aspects of schooling while still working with the tropes of schooling success” (p. 360). In short, contrary to dominant discourses and scholarly narratives that paint homogenized portraits of marginalized subcultures, the reality is that these settings consist of youth who exercise diverse forms of agency and make differing relationships with school and society at large.

Overall, the resistance literature politicizes the agency of marginalized people. This portrayal stands in contrast to the early culture of poverty scholarship which tended to portray them as morally and culturally deficient victims. While culture of poverty scholars argue that poor people frequently lack worthwhile social capital, resistance theorists maintain that marginalized communities often cultivate very strong and empowering resistant forms of bonding social capital. Most resistance theorists concede, however, that the bonding social capital generated within marginalized communities, while it might foster a sense of belonging and identity

affirmation, is not always amenable to success or upward mobility in the broader society. In her study of social capital within poor Black communities in London, England, Reynolds (2013) illustrates the tension youth often experience between allegiance to their community and the pursuit of success within a dominant society that devalues them:

... many of these young people had a very difficult relationship with their schools and, in some cases, this relationship encouraged a belief that institutional routes to success were unavailable to them. Or if such routes were available to them, they felt that they had to choose between aspiring to success through the route of the “institution” (for example, education)—and this was a space where they did not feel valued—or success through the route of “the streets” – and this was a space where they felt that with luck and the right connections they could build respect and achieve status within their communities. (p. 493)

The strong and resistant bonding social capital often cultivated within such communities tends to produce an “us vs. them” outlook and a resultant wariness of the outside world. In the case of marginalized people, this defensively situated bonding capital generally curtails the production of *bridging* social capital: inroads into the dominant society that can expand networks, outlooks, and opportunities for individuals (Gosine, 2021; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Reynolds, 2013). In Portes’s (1998) words, “everyday survival in poor urban communities frequently depends on close interaction with kin and friends in similar situations. The problem is that such ties seldom reach beyond the inner cities” (p. 13–4).

Marginalized Communities as Sites of Cultural Wealth

Recent critically oriented scholars have promoted a further reimagining of marginalized communities. These scholars outrightly reject the deficit thinking of

the culture of poverty proponents and envision minoritized communities as more than inward-oriented, defensively-situated collectivities (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2017; Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005). Building on resistance theory and informed by standpoint theory and critical race theory, this school of thought portrays the social and cultural capital within marginalized communities as unique forms of knowledge and sources of strength that need to be recognized and validated by the dominant culture. Put differently, the knowledge, attitudes, values and social networks within marginalized communities represent more than an oppositional backlash to an oppressive society. According to “cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2005) scholars, disenfranchised people have unique insight into the workings of society and the agency exercised in the margins holds large-scale transformative potential. While culture of poverty researchers, and some resistance adherents, might stress the need for marginalized people to embrace dominant values such as meritocratic individualism, delayed gratification, sacrifice and personal responsibility in order to get ahead, cultural wealth scholars are highly critical of such ideals which they argue uphold illusionary notions of meritocracy and colourblindness (James, 2019; Yosso, 2005). As far as scholars in the cultural wealth camp are concerned, when it comes to mitigating inequality, members of marginalized communities need not reflect on their values or behavioural patterns. The onus is placed on dominant institutions to recognize systemic and interlocking racial and class oppression, embrace antiracist measures, reconsider standardized processes and practices, and acknowledge as well as affirm diverse outlooks and ways of life.

Moll et al. (1992) coined the term “funds of knowledge” to refer to the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). These scholars spotlight the funds of knowledge that exist within socioeconomically marginalized milieus to counter the widespread inclination of educators to pathologize such communities. Individuals draw on their funds of knowledge—which encompasses communal resourcefulness, skills, and social networks—to “survive and thrive”

amid challenging “social and economic circumstances” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). The funds of knowledge approach...

... contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually; perceptions that are well accepted and rarely challenged in the field of education and elsewhere. (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134)

Tara Yosso (2005) broadly and influentially echoed the funds of knowledge perspective when she coined the term “community cultural wealth” to describe the strengths, assets and sources of empowerment within marginalized communities. Such community cultural wealth, according to Yosso, is often overlooked by educators and the dominant society generally. Yosso draws on critical race theory to challenge directly the culture of poverty perspective which portrays marginalized communities as lacking the social and cultural capital necessary for upward mobility. “Such research,” Yosso maintained, “utilizes a deficit analytical lens and places value judgements on communities that often do not have access to White, middle-or-upper class resources” (p. 82). Yosso (2005) illuminates six forms of cultural wealth that, according to her, are widely exhibited within marginalized communities: *aspirational capital* (“the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers”); *linguistic capital* (“intellectual and social skills attained” via the utilization of multiple languages and/or modes of communication); *familial capital* (cultural knowledge, communal memory and “cultural intuition” acquired via family and kin); *social capital* (bonding social capital that encompasses networks of support and communal resources); *navigational capital* (the capacity to traverse White-normed environments often experienced by non-White people as hostile or oppressive); and *resistant capital* (“knowledges and skills” honed by oppositional strategies that challenge oppression and inequality; pp. 77–80). These forms of capital comprise “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by

Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Numerous qualitative studies in Canada and the U.S. (e.g., Emdin, 2010; James, 2012) spotlight many of these forms of cultural wealth within various marginalized communities and echo Yosso’s plea that such communal traits, outlooks, and mores be recognized, validated and engaged within schooling curricula and pedagogy. Referring to Black male youth (BMY), Tabi and Gosine (2018) encapsulate this perspective when they note that scholars such as Yosso...

... urge researchers not to view the lives and communities of disenfranchised and marginalized people as damaged and broken. It is imperative that researchers and educators be aware of, and responsive to, more complete stories of BMY, which often entail resisting the interlocking racial and gendered oppression to which they are subjected. (p. 534)

Critiques of Social Capital–Oriented Interventions

By accentuating the strengths and assets that exist within marginalized communities, the latest generation of progressive scholars have made a concerted effort to push back against older perspectives on racial and class-based inequalities that tended to pathologize the poor and minoritized. In so doing, these progressive, critically oriented scholars (e.g., Chapman–Nyaho et al., 2011; Hillman, 2016; James, 2019; Yosso, 2005) have cast doubt and suspicion on efforts to cultivate different and potentially beneficial forms of social capital within marginalized settings. Despite the demonstrated value of social capital to the lives of minoritized people (discussed below), many critical scholars in the “cultural wealth” camp remain wary of emphasizing social capital cultivation as a key strategy for ameliorating educational inequalities based on intersections of race and class. Progressive critics view this approach as pathologizing communities and deflecting attention from the structural barriers, within school and elsewhere, that they perceive as chiefly responsible for generating and sustaining inequalities. In this perspective, an emphasis on social capital building by way of mentorship and the

provision of role models is ultimately treating the symptom of a viral infection insofar as the strategy fails to address the structural racism that has relegated marginalized youth to society's lower strata (James, 2019). Critics view social capital-building strategies as grounded in a neoliberal ethos and what James (2019) has referred to as "White logic." This hegemonic outlook perpetuates a "colourblind" individualism along with a false notion of equality of opportunity. According to "White" neoliberal logic, if marginalized communities can get their act together and generate the "right" kinds of social and cultural capital, they would be able to take advantage of the opportunities that society has to offer. Pulling their act together invariably entails relinquishing any oppositional disposition – what Yosso refers to as "resistant capital" – that might be shaped by experiences of oppression. In an effort to illustrate how ameliorative strategies based on social capital cultivation distract from structural racism, Chapman-Nyaho et al. (2011) studied a summer youth program in Canada organized by the local police. The aim of the program was to help young people "develop the skills and connections that would help their future career goals" as well as foster communication and understanding between local law enforcement and the community (Chapman-Nyaho et al., 2011, p. 94). Put another way, the program represented an attempt to expand the opportunities of youth by building bridging social capital and social trust between residents and the police. Despite well-intentioned programming objectives and positive outcomes, the researchers viewed this program as a means of co-opting young people and relieving the police of the responsibility of altering its institutional culture and practices. As Chapman-Nyaho et al. conclude, "the program, with its focus on attitudes, behaviour and opportunity, promotes and achieves the kind of reform that never questions structural and systemic inequalities" (p. 81). (One could pose the counterargument that the bridging social capital developed via programs of this sort can open a dialogue between police and communities regarding law enforcement practices and policing culture.) In line with the conclusions of Chapman-Nyaho et al., Hillman (2016) studied the promotional materials of Canadian mentorship programs and

asserted that the ultimate goal of these programs was to ingrain “youth with neoliberal values such as competition, entrepreneurialism, and self-regulation” (p. 364). Hillman contends that the programs studied aimed to inculcate in youth a sense of individualism and resilience while playing down the structural racism that affects their lives.

Ultimately, many progressive scholars view such ameliorative strategies as efforts to regulate young people and compel them to embrace neoliberal values of meritocratic individualism, self-sufficiency, competition, and adherence to authority (Chapman-Nyaho et al., 2011; Gordon, 2013; Hess, 2019; Hillman, 2016; James, 2019). Efforts to mitigate inequalities via the cultivation of social capital that accentuates these values are viewed as portraying marginalized communities as deficient and wanting while, in the process, individualizing inequality. Such ameliorative strategies – which, according to James (2019), entail the deployment of “corrective agents” in the form of mentors and role models – fail to challenge structural oppression and render invisible the strengths, assets, and empowering influences in the lives of marginalized youth. In the view of many progressive observers, the sociological reasoning that informs social capital-oriented interventions argues that the values and traits of marginalized young people must be replaced by more productive and beneficial (read: neoliberal) values and traits that will better equip them to take advantage of dominant opportunity structures. Communal sources of empowerment, such as unique bonding social capital and resistant attitudes whereby young people challenge oppression, are viewed as pathologies rather than strengths (James, 2012; Yosso, 2005). From the standpoint of the dominant society and much mainstream scholarship, strengthened social capital in tune with neoliberal ideals holds the promise of enhancing the resilience of marginalized youth. Hess (2019) problematizes the notion of resilience as a neoliberal trait that encourages individual adaptation to problematic structural circumstances “rather than addressing oppression directly” (p. 488; see also Hillman, 2016). To be sure, while many scholars in the progressive “cultural

wealth” camp are not per se opposed to social capital approaches to addressing inequalities, they are wary of how such “band aid” interventions are framed and the possibility of these initiatives overshadowing the need for broader structural transformation. From this standpoint, it is dominant societal structures that need to be changed, not communities. Webster (2021) encapsulates the stance of this scholarly camp when she argues that embracing neoliberal values is unlikely to pay the same dividends for young people who are marginalized by race and class as it would for youth from privileged backgrounds.

Misguided Critiques?

In spite of progressive critiques of community-based social capital interventions, there is a vast scholarship that illustrates the negative and limiting consequences of a dearth of social capital within marginalized communities, most pointedly a shortage of bridging social capital (e.g., Carter, 2005; Coleman, 1988; Loury, 2019; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Reynolds, 2013; Wilson, 1987). Scholars point out that ample and beneficial social capital improves students’ scores on standardized tests and their educational achievement generally while lowering destructive or undesirable trends, such as rates of youth crime, teen pregnancy, child abuse, and early school leaving (Putnam, 2000). Carter (2005), while acknowledging that marginalized Black and Latinx youth possess adaptive and impressive sources of empowerment within their communities, notes that such young people frequently lack the types of social capital that can help them realize upward mobility and participate productively in the broader society. The potentially self-defeating nature of resistant forms of bonding social capital has been noted by others (Gosine, 2021; Loury, 2019; Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). Because of a lack of access to realistic role models and mentors, most notably university educated professionals and the social connections they can offer, Carter observed that many youth look up to hip hop artists and athletes whom they perceive as having achieved success while eschewing the dominant culturally prescribed path (which often entails obtaining educational credentials) and maintaining an ethno-racial

authenticity (i.e., not being “sell-outs”). It can perhaps go without saying that remote role models of this sort are unlikely to provide young people with the resources and guidance needed to enhance their life chances. While many communities marginalized by race and class possess important forms of bonding capital, they are limited by a lack of bridging social capital and resultant social isolation (Wilson, 1987). As Putnam (2000) has famously noted, bonding social capital is needed to “get by,” but bridging social capital is essential to “get ahead” (p. 23).

Studies have illustrated the value of communal institutions, such as places of worship, childcare centres and non-profit organizations, in helping to cultivate worthwhile forms of social capital within communities (Gosine et al., 2023; Horwitz, 2022; Sharkey et al., 2017; Small, 2009). In addition to providing important supports and services, such organizations serve as hubs where individuals build vital social and organizational ties that link them to people, resources and opportunities beyond their community. Strengthened social capital, in turn, fosters heightened levels of communal social trust and reciprocity in addition to providing inroads into the mainstream society. Given the insular nature of marginalized communities, bridging social capital is a critical outcome of mentoring initiatives that progressive critiques tend to overlook or play down. In a mixed-methods study, Horwitz (2022) found that religious participation promotes academic success among youth, particularly those of working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds. In addition to instilling a sense of restraint, discipline, conscientiousness, along with a collaborative disposition, religious settings provided youth with the opportunity to acquire valuable social capital—mentors and reliable networks of support – that enables academic success at all levels of education. Religious adherence was found to be somewhat of an equalizer for working-class students, as a religious community offered such young people the opportunity to secure resources typically available to more socioeconomically

privileged peers via their communities, families, institutional affiliations, and social networks (Horwitz, 2022).

Where the academic performance and life chances of young people are concerned, research has demonstrated the benefits of non-profit youth programming that offers supports such as academic tutoring and mentoring (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Lane & Id-Deen, 2020; Oreopoulos & Brown, 2017; Rowan & Gosine, 2005). Marginalization is exacerbated by the inability of members of a community to tap into networks that can provide the resources, connections, and guidance needed to become cognizant of worthwhile opportunities and take advantage of them. Non-profit youth programs can furnish this sort of social capital which can help youth navigate structural obstacles (Lane & Id-Deen, 2020). A prominent example of effective youth programming of this sort is the Pathways to Education program in Canada, which has sites in low-income neighborhoods in numerous Canadian cities. By way of tutoring, mentoring, advocacy and financial support provided to young people, evaluation research of Pathways programming has consistently demonstrated improved academic outcomes, graduation rates, and postsecondary enrolments among youth in the communities served (Oreopoulos & Brown, 2017; Rowen & Gosine, 2005).³ Social capital that encompasses advocacy is particularly valuable to poor and working-class youth. Calarco (2018) has demonstrated that the schooling advantages that middle class kids enjoy are largely “negotiated advantages.” Given class-based differences in child socialization where middle-class youth are instilled with a sense of entitlement while working-class kids are generally raised to be more deferential, middle-class

³ I worked full-time at the Pathways Regent Park site in Toronto for one year between 2005 and 2006. Later, while employed as an academic, I undertook research for Pathways Canada.

children more frequently ask teachers for help and are more inclined to negotiate accommodations and concessions in school. Moreover, middle-class parents, who often have a postsecondary education, are better able to advocate for their kids in school compared to working-class parents and do so far more often (Calarco, 2018).

Two aspects of the progressive critique of community-based social capital interventions warrant scrutiny. First is the claim that such interventions are guided by a neoliberal ethos that espouses individualism and competition – values seen as potentially inimical to community (Dei, 2008; Hillman, 2016). Such programs do attempt to instill the sorts of middle-class values that are rewarded within the educational system, notably meritocratic individualism, sacrificing for the future, hard work, and delayed gratification. There is evidence to suggest, however, that non-profit programs do not necessarily promote these values at the expense of community. Research by Gosine et al. (2023) demonstrates the value of non-profit organizations within a broader neoliberal context in which the welfare state has retreated. Gosine et al. found that non-profit organizations provide settings where community members come together, collaborate, and share information and resources. Hence, the cultivation of social capital and community are important auxiliary benefits of such programs insofar as they bring people together and promote mutual aid. This, in turn, serves to heighten local resourcefulness and communal capacity. Such programs, including youth programs, have also been found to nurture the community cultural wealth within communities. This includes strengthening and expanding existing social capital, fostering and harnessing latent talents within the community (e.g., the artistic aptitudes of residents), channeling resistance toward activism and civic engagement, and encouraging people to hold high aspirations and supporting their pursuit of those goals (Dill & Ozer, 2019; Gosine et al., 2023; Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Lane & Id-Deen, 2020). A longitudinal study by Sharkey et al. (2017) found an inverse relationship between the number of non-profit organizations within local jurisdictions and crime rates (including violent crime); in other words, generally speaking, more non-profits

means less crime. This finding is bolstered by the research of Lavecchia et al. (2024), who found that the aforementioned Pathways to Education Program reduced youth crime substantially in a low-income neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada. The reason for this, Sharkey et al. argue, is that non-profits are integral to the production of social capital and trust within communities, which is correlated with expanded opportunities and collective optimism. As Putnam (2000) informs us, “[i]n high-social-capital areas public spaces are cleaner, people are friendlier, and the streets are safer” (p. 307).

There is a second critique of community-based social capital initiatives that is worth addressing, and that is the claim that the logic informing such ventures inherently represents a ‘White’ neoliberalism. I suggest that there is a problematic essentialism implied by such a critique. There is a valid concern about interventions and values being imposed upon communities from the outside. It is imperative that any community venture be devised in collaboration with community stakeholders and residents. Also, as scholars such as Yosso (2005) remind us, it is critical to recognize, understand, and work with local strengths, assets, sources of bonding social capital, and outlooks. At the same time, we must be wary of lapsing into essentialist logic of ‘our values’ versus ‘their (the dominant society’s) values’. In a global world and a diverse, multicultural society marked by hybridity and diasporic identities, it makes little sense to racialize values and outlooks or confine them to particular class locations. While a collectivist ethos has been found to characterize marginalized communities, some within those communities subscribe to individualistic values and dominant success ideals (Carter, 2005; Fordham, 1988; James, 2012; Poteet & Simmons, 2016). Many such youth cultivate strategic and bifurcated identities whereby they maintain an allegiance to their ethnoracial and/or class community amid ongoing efforts to forge wider connections that can enhance their vertical mobility chances (Carter, 2005; Fordham, 1988; Poteet & Simmons, 2016). Racialized middle-class individuals readily subscribe to meritocratic values (Gosine, 2019). In short, race, social class, and gender intersect

in people's lives in unique ways to shape the relationships that they make with middle-class values and hegemonically prescribed goals (i.e., whether people resist these ideals, embrace them, or some combination of both). This makes it sociologically unrealistic to associate values and worldviews with racial and class boundaries in any strict sense. To assume that hegemonic success ideals are inherently White and iniquitously neoliberal, and hence not in the best interests of those marginalized by intersections of race and class, threatens to close off bridging social capital opportunities and limit life chances. A failure to cultivate bridging social capital, which entails engaging novel outlooks and possibilities, can result in the perpetuation of insular communities where opportunities are curtailed.

Conclusion

Right-wing populism in present-day North America (e.g., Hughes, 2018; Owens, 2020) has rekindled 'culture of poverty' explanations for persisting inequalities in educational and socioeconomic outcomes. In this perspective, racism is a thing of the past and dominant institutions, for the most part, are devoid of systemic racial and class biases. Equality of opportunity is there for the taking and lingering inequalities are attributable to morally deficient subcultures. The only strategy for mitigating inequality is equipping these subcultures with the 'right' values and social capital. This growing outlook has been met with muscular resistance from people in the social justice sphere, including progressive scholars in academia. The two culture war factions have largely pushed each other to opposite ends of the political continuum.

In critiquing social capital approaches to addressing educational inequalities rooted in intersections of race and class, progressive scholars in the 'cultural wealth' camp have rightly alerted us to the potential for paternalism and ethnocentrism. They also spotlight ongoing structural obstacles in schools and remind scholars, social workers, community stakeholders, educators and policy makers of the valuable and

empowering strengths, assets, and social capital that exist within marginalized urban communities. These insights undoubtedly need to be engaged and incorporated into ameliorative ventures. The case could be made, however, that the drive to counter ‘culture of poverty’ perspectives has created an intense focus on structural obstacles along with a deep skepticism toward social capital-oriented interventions. This skepticism has led to three tendencies in the ‘cultural wealth’ literature that leave room for doubt. First, there is the questionable inclination to draw a boundary between the culture of marginalized communities and that of the dominant, neoliberal (‘White’) society. This plays down the reality of cultural hybridity along with its potential value as far as enriching the lives of marginalized youth. My second point of contention with this literature is the assertion that community mentoring initiatives necessarily propagate individualistic neoliberal values that are inimical to fostering community and belonging. To the contrary, the evidence suggests that community non-profit programs are integral sites for social capital cultivation – both the bonding and bridging variety. And while there is a need to instil a critical consciousness in young people, convincing them that values such as hard work, sacrifice and delayed gratification are intrinsically ‘White’ beliefs that will not pay off for them threatens to foster defeatist attitudes and distrust of the broader society. Where the influence of scholarship informed by the cultural wealth perspective is concerned, the unqualified validation of self-defeating attitudes and behaviours, and the propagation of an ‘us vs them’ outlook, run the risk of reinforcing the insularity of marginalized subcultures where opportunities are limited. With regard to the latter point, and this is my third point of contention with much of the progressive literature, there is a tendency to play down, if not ignore, the importance of bridging social capital for marginalized youth along with the potential of mentoring initiatives to foster such connections. Engaging the community cultural wealth of marginalized youth while broadening their horizons with worthwhile bridging social capital has been shown to lessen distrust of the dominant society, expand their opportunities, and heighten academic engagement.

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