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## Escaping Poverty and Securing Middle Class Status: How Race and Socioeconomic Status Shape Mobility Prospects for African Americans During the Transition to Adulthood

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### Abstract

This article draws on extant research from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and economics to identify linkages between individual, family, community, and structural factors related to social mobility for African Americans during the transition to adulthood. It considers how race and class together affect opportunities for social mobility through where African Americans live, whom they associate with, and how they are impacted by racial and class-related stigma. Of particular interest is social mobility as accomplished through academic achievement, educational attainment, employment, economic independence, and homeownership. Research on five issues is reviewed and discussed: (a) the unique vulnerabilities of newly upwardly mobile African Americans, (b) wealth as a source of inequality, (c) racism and discrimination, (d) the stigma associated with lower-class status, and (e) social and cultural capital. The article concludes with a summary and directions for future research.

### Keywords

African Americans; transition to adulthood; socioeconomic status; social mobility

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The research literature on poverty and child development is saturated with studies that document the negative effects of poverty on children (for reviews, see Aber, Jones, & Raver, 2007; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1998; McLoyd, Aikens, & Burton, 2006; Seccombe, 2000). The overwhelming consensus is that poverty is a consistent risk factor across multiple domains of development. Although the body of literature on poverty and child development has swelled, most studies have stopped short of following children who experience poverty into adulthood and have not adequately considered the consequences of racial and class stratification (García Coll et al., 1996; O'Connor, 2000). As a result, there is little

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understanding of how individuals escape poverty and how this process may vary depending on race. To address these gaps in the literature, we offer an interdisciplinary discussion of some of the race-related and socioeconomic factors that may constrain and foster upward mobility during African American<sup>1</sup> youths' transition to adulthood.

Compared to individuals who did not grow up poor, adults who grew up in poor families earn less income, complete fewer years of school, and are over three times as likely to be poor as adults (Corcoran, 1995; Heflin & Pattillo, 2006). Studies have found that the link between parental income and adult child economic status remains, even after adult children's education is controlled (Corcoran, 1995). Thus, academic achievement, test scores, and years of schooling do not fully account for the association between parental income and adult attainment (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). In fact, even college graduates from low SES backgrounds have lower earnings and occupational status than college graduates from high SES backgrounds, years after graduation (Walpole, 2003).

Overcoming childhood poverty appears to be an especially difficult feat for African Americans. Recent research has uncovered striking racial differences in the likelihood of upward mobility (Corcoran & Matsudaira, 2005; Isaacs, 2007; Kearney, 2006; Mazumder, 2005). An analysis of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) revealed that 42% of Blacks born in the bottom tenth of the income distribution remained in the same income bracket as adults. Only 17% of Whites showed this same pattern. Blacks were more likely to persist at the bottom of the income distribution than to persist at the top across generations (Hertz, 2005). These findings are particularly troubling, given the large number of Black children who are born into poverty or will experience poverty during childhood (Corcoran, 1995; Heflin & Pattillo, 2006).

To date, more attention has been paid to the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status and poverty than has been paid to economic mobility. We address this gap in the existing literature by identifying linkages between individual, family, community, and structural factors related to social mobility for African Americans. By drawing on extant research from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and economics, we focus on the central question of what factors mediate and moderate the linkages between family background and status attainment during the transition to adulthood. Although this article focuses primarily on why race and social class make a difference during the transition to adulthood, it is necessary to bring in research literature on child and adolescent development, as some of the processes that occur during childhood and adolescence help explain later outcomes.

In sections that follow, we explain the rationale for and utility of exploring socioeconomic heterogeneity among African Americans. We discuss the unique vulnerabilities of newly upwardly mobile African Americans and the reasons why recency of middle class status is an important consideration for research on middle class African Americans. We review the growing body of literature on wealth as a source of inequality and discuss the utility of expanding definitions of SES to include wealth. We also consider how the economic well-

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<sup>1</sup>We use the terms "African American" and "Black" interchangeably.

being of extended family members impacts the financial well-being of African American individuals and households. Next, we consider how racism and discrimination affect access and attainment of economic resources. We then review how negative social class stereotypes, the stigma associated with lower-class status, and classism present obstacles to social mobility through their impact on identity development, psychological well-being, school experiences, and academic achievement. This section is followed by a discussion of parenting strategies that promote mobility and the ways that accumulating social and cultural capital are related to economic mobility. Suggestions for future research are offered throughout and in the final section of the article.

We use García Coll and colleagues' (1996) integrative model for studying developmental competencies in ethnic minority children as a foundation and organizing framework for discussing factors that influence social mobility prospects for African American youth. This model provides a framework for linking macro-level influences to individual-level psychosocial outcomes. More specifically, it emphasizes the importance of considering social position and social stratification as distal contributors to developmental processes. According to this model, the effects of social position operate through macrosystem mechanisms, which include racism and discrimination. Racism and discrimination underlie the racial and economic segregation in American society, and segregation, in turn, influences the contexts in which children are developing and the resources available to them within these contexts. We apply this model by focusing on social position and social stratification and by giving special attention to intersections of race and class.

## Exploring Socioeconomic Heterogeneity among African Americans

Social science research often treats socioeconomic status as a demographic characteristic or a control variable, instead of explicitly analyzing how socioeconomic status contributes to various outcomes (APA Task Force on SES, 2006). Scholars have suggested that greater attention be paid to the factors and processes that mediate and moderate the relation between socioeconomic status and outcomes (Langhout & Rosselli, 2006). In this article, we review studies that utilize both materialist and social class models of SES.

Materialist models focus primarily on income as a source of inequality and are useful for understanding how individual and family economic resources are related to specific outcomes. In contrast, social class models focus on “cultural, structural, and institutional” factors and noneconomic resources that contribute to inequality (APA Task Force on SES, 2006; Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004). Combining materialist and social class models allows individual-level experiences to be situated within the broader opportunity structure and may help uncover the ways in which social class factors mediate and moderate the relation between “objective” measures of SES (e.g., income) and various outcomes (APA Task Force on SES, 2006; Langhout & Rosselli, 2006; Liu et al., 2004).

When socioeconomic status is an integral part of research, it is often considered separate and apart from race (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003), making it difficult to determine how race and class together interact in the lives of people. Some scholars have even pitted race and class against each other, arguing that one or the other is more important in influencing

the life chances and experiences of African Americans (O'Conner, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007; Wilson, 1980). The perspective taken in this article is that both race and class matter and may compound the effects of each other for those with multiple marginalized identities. In this article, we use the concept of intersectionality to explore similarities and differences in the factors that impede and facilitate upward mobility for African Americans across social classes (Crenshaw, 1994).

Intersectionality can be understood as multiple identities that coexist and as intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw, 1994). Examining intersectionality as multiple identities provides a way of exploring how individuals develop identities based on their race and class and the meaning and consequences of these identities. Intersectionality as intersecting oppressions allows for consideration of the similarities and differences in the challenges African Americans of different social classes face and helps us understand how social class positions families and individuals to counteract and respond to these challenges (Day-Vines et al., 2003). As a conceptual tool, intersectionality enables a better appreciation of how racism and economic disadvantage affect African Americans across classes (Day-Vines et al., 2003) and, hence, affords improved understanding of within group variation (Crenshaw, 1994).

A strong case can be made for expanding the focus of research to include African Americans from a wider array of social backgrounds for several reasons. First, research studies that do include African Americans tend to focus exclusively on the poor, even though most African Americans are not poor (Day-Vines et al., 2003; McAdoo, 1992; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999a). The lack of scholarly research on middle class African Americans lessens our ability to understand heterogeneity among African Americans (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Second, a sole focus on poor African Americans does not allow us to discern whether research findings can be generalized to African Americans across the social class spectrum or are limited to certain subgroups of African Americans. Third, certain issues that affect poor and working class African American adolescents and young adults may not affect middle class African American adolescents and young adults to the same extent or at all.

### **The Unique Vulnerability of the Black Middle Class**

African Americans who successfully enter the ranks of the middle class face several challenges to maintaining this status (Hertz 2005; Isaacs, 2007; Kearney 2006; McBrier & Wilson, 2004). Newly middle class African Americans are particularly vulnerable to slipping back to their low-income origins, in part, because they lag behind Whites on many of the major indicators of middle classness (i.e., income, wealth, homeownership, and educational attainment). Middle class African Americans are mostly lower-middle class and are heavily concentrated in government employment and in jobs that provide services to low-income African Americans (McBrier & Wilson, 2004; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999b, 2000). More wage earners contribute to the total household incomes of African Americans, and strikingly, middle class African American families work almost twelve weeks more per year to earn the same income as similar White families (Wheary, 2006).

The number of African Americans considered middle class varies widely depending on what indicators are used. For example, about 30% of African American households earn between

\$35,000 and \$74,999, and about 17% of African Americans over age twenty-five have a four-year college degree (Wheary, 2006). Most studies utilize variants of traditional measures of income, education, and occupation either separately or combined to assess socioeconomic status or as criteria for membership in a particular social class. In some cases, level of education may be a more appropriate indicator of class status for African Americans than it is for other groups because African Americans often do not receive salaries or employment opportunities commensurate with their level of education due to employment and salary discrimination (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Day & Newburger, 2002; Elman & O'Rand, 2004; Grodsky & Pager, 2001; McAdoo, 1992; Pager, 2003; Tomaskovic-Devey, Thomas, & Johnson, 2005). More comprehensive measures of middle class status may make the number of African Americans who fall into this category even smaller (see Wheary, 2005).

Middle class Blacks are also distinguished from other groups by the neighborhoods in which they reside. Middle class Blacks and Whites remain segregated from each other and there is more socioeconomic segregation between Whites than Blacks (Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). Middle class Blacks often live in neighborhoods between the inner-city and the suburbs that have high rates of poverty and other associated problems (Adelman, 2004; Pattillo, 2005; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999a). These neighborhoods tend to have more boarded up houses, more female-headed households, and fewer college graduates than middle class White neighborhoods (Adelman, 2004). In fact, there is often a mismatch between level of education and income of middle class African American families and the types of neighborhoods in which they reside (Hope, 1995).

Another consideration for research involving the Black middle class is variation related to recency of middle class status. Whereas some Black families have been middle class for generations, the recent expansion of the middle class means that considerable numbers of African Americans are first or second-generation middle class (Pettigrew, 1981; Wheary, 2006). Middle class Black adults are over four times more likely than their middle class White counterparts to have grown up poor (Heflin & Pattillo, 2006). They are also much more likely than Whites to have siblings who are poor (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002; Heflin & Pattillo, 2006). African Americans who are newly mobile are particularly likely to provide financial assistance to less advantaged relatives (Charles, Dinwiddie, & Massey, 2004; Heflin & Pattillo, 2006; McAdoo, 1992; Wheary, 2006). Helping disadvantaged relatives financially strains the ability of middle class Blacks to build wealth and may even contribute to the racial wealth gap (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002; Wheary, 2006).

No studies to date have specifically focused on newly middle class African Americans during the transition to adulthood. However, the research reviewed here suggests that the families of origin of middle class African Americans continue to affect their economic well-being, even into adulthood. To obtain more accurate assessments of economic well-being, concepts of SES may need to be expanded beyond the individual and household to include members of the extended family and better capture family obligations (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002). Further, recency of middle class status may be an important variable to consider in studies of middle class African Americans or in racial comparative studies that control for other socioeconomic variables (Pettigrew, 1981). In the following section, we turn to a

discussion of wealth because wealth is critically important in understanding the challenge of upward mobility and the susceptibility to downward mobility for African Americans.

## **The Consequences of Wealth Holdings for African Americans**

Due to a lack of accumulated wealth, even middle class African Americans may be unable to help their children secure middle class status (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Much of the literature on wealth, variously defined as assets, net worth, and ownership of financial products, has focused on delineating racial disparities (Conley, 1999; Darity & Nicholson, 2005; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004). This line of research points to past and current discrimination against African Americans, racial differences in inheritances, and lower levels of Black homeownership as the main sources of these disparities (Avery & Rendall, 2002). Surprisingly little attention has been paid to how disparities in wealth are translated into different outcomes for individuals and families.

### **Wealth and racial inequality**

Scholars have suggested that wealth is a major contributor to the entrenched racial inequality in economic standing that persists in the United States (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Some of the most striking differences in wealth exist between Blacks and Whites. In 2002, White households had a median net worth of \$88,000, over 14 times the median net worth of Black households. Further, between 1996 and 2002, the net worth of White households increased 17%, while the net worth of Black households decreased by 16% (“Study: Wealth Gap,” 2004).

Wealth may afford families unique advantages, including added protection during economic downturns and periods of unemployment or income loss (“Study: Wealth Gap,” 2004). Shapiro (2004) suggests that many parents use wealth to facilitate entry into high quality neighborhoods and schools and to help children get a start in life by paying for college and helping their children become homeowners. Studies that do not consider wealth may underestimate how family characteristics contribute to adult attainment (Orr, 2003). McLoyd and Ceballo (1998) point out that studies comparing Blacks and Whites with the same incomes may attribute differences in outcomes to race, when disparities in wealth actually underlie some of these differences. Thus far, only a small number of studies, reviewed below, have specifically tied wealth to child, adult, and family outcomes.

### **Academic achievement and school outcomes**

The few studies that have focused on wealth as an indicator of SES have found interesting links between wealth and some outcomes. Orr (2003) found that greater wealth was associated with higher mathematics achievement scores for children ages 5 through 14, even after traditional measures of SES were controlled. This relation was partially mediated through cultural capital (Orr, 2003). Other studies have linked family wealth to years of completed schooling, college enrollment, and college completion (Axinn, Duncan, & Thornton, 1997; Conley, 2001). One possible mechanism underlying these relations is that parents may use wealth to finance their children’s college education. Indeed, many parents use second mortgages and home equity loans to help with these expenses (“The Racial

Wealth Advantage,” 1996; “The Stubborn Racial Gap,” 2000). African Americans have less money saved and fewer educational IRAs to pay for their children’s postsecondary education than Whites (Charles, Roscigno, & Torres, 2007; Lusardi, Cossa, & Krupka, 2001).

### **Parental material assistance**

Schoeni and Ross (2005) estimated the amount of material assistance families provide during the transition to adulthood. They found that young adults in the two lowest quartiles receive about \$25,000 in financial assistance from parents between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four and young adults in the top quartile receive about \$70,965. Additionally, they estimated that young adults from higher income families who go to college receive almost four times more financial assistance than their college-going counterparts from lower-income families. Although Schoeni and Ross did not examine racial differences in material assistance, other evidence suggests African American young adults receive less from and provide more financial support to family members (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1991).

### **Inherited wealth and homeownership**

Racial disparities in inheritances and homeownership also have important consequences. In terms of differences in inheritances, Whites have an 8.1 to 1 advantage in mean lifetime inheritances and a 2.7 to 1 advantage in non-inherited wealth, suggesting that inherited wealth may be a more powerful contributor to racial disparities in wealth than wealth earned through other means (Avery & Rendall, 2002). Disparities in homeownership also help perpetuate class-based and racial inequalities in wealth. For individuals in their twenties and thirties, having grown up poor is negatively related to home and account ownership (i.e., savings or checking accounts, money market funds, or savings bonds) (Heflin & Pattillo, 2002). Not only do Whites own more homes than Blacks, but the median value of the home and home equity are less for Black homeowners. Homes owned by Blacks tend to be older, have less square footage, and less lot size per acre. Black families also pay higher interest rates and largely miss out on the 60 billion dollars a year in mortgage interest tax deductions (Charles & Hurst, 2002; “The Racial Wealth Advantage,” 1996; “The Stubborn Racial Gap,” 2000).

Whites also benefit from more financial assistance from parents when purchasing a home. Whereas 27% of White homeowners receive financial assistance from their parents to help cover the down payment on a home, only 8% of Blacks receive such assistance. More Whites than Blacks get their down payment solely from family (15% vs. 6% respectively) and Blacks are much more likely than Whites to get their down payment entirely from their own savings (90% vs. 54%, respectively) (Charles & Hurst, 2002).

Even Black homeowners face a myriad of challenges that make them particularly vulnerable to downward mobility. African Americans are more likely than Whites with similar incomes to use subprime lenders when refinancing their homes, increasing their risk for foreclosure. At least some of this disparity appears to result from the fact that creditworthy Blacks are less likely than creditworthy Whites to get referrals to prime lenders (Dedman, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 2008). Blacks are also more likely to move from nonpoor neighborhoods to poor

neighborhoods than they are likely to leave poor neighborhoods for better quality neighborhoods. The opposite is true for Whites, suggesting that a very small percentage of Whites are downwardly mobile in this regard (Crowder & South, 2005; South & Crowder, 1997; South, Crowder, & Chavez, 2005). Events like unemployment and marital dissolution increase the odds of moving from a nonpoor neighborhood to a poor neighborhood for Blacks and much more so than they do for Whites (South & Crowder, 1997). Limited wealth holdings likely underlie increased susceptibility to downward mobility for Blacks compared to Whites (South et al., 2005). Moreover, vulnerabilities stemming from a paucity of economic resources are likely compounded by structural barriers (e.g., housing discrimination, racial and economic segregation) that limit housing options and steer African Americans into poor areas (Crowder, 2001; Shapiro, 2004; South et al., 2005).

To date, income has been the focus of most studies of the relationship between economic status and a variety of child and adult outcomes throughout the life course. Future studies should explore whether and the extent to which parental wealth is related to income, employment status, and occupational prestige for young adults and whether racial inequalities in parental wealth account for differences among Black and White young adults. These studies will help to determine whether, and in what ways, wealth over and above income plays a role in the intergenerational transmission of class status.

## Racial Discrimination

Just as discrimination has contributed to racial disparities in wealth, past and present-day discrimination has also contributed to a wider array of social and economic disadvantages faced by African Americans. African Americans must contend with discrimination and racism at both the interpersonal and structural level (Jackson et al., 1996; Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2008; Smedley & Smedly, 2005; Williams, 1999). Racism at both levels can present significant barriers to upward mobility in both indirect and direct ways. For example, we know that racial discrimination often compromises employment opportunities for African Americans (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Pager, 2003). We also know that African American adolescents, in particular, report high levels of discrimination in school and other settings (Fisher, Wallace, Fenton, 2000), and that perceived discrimination is a risk factor for compromised psychological well-being, low school achievement, and conduct problems (Brody et al., 2006; Cooper, McLoyd, Wood, & Hardaway, 2008; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). In a three-wave, longitudinal investigation, Brody and colleagues (2006) found that increases in racial discrimination were related to increases in depressive symptoms and conduct problems for African Americans during late childhood and early adolescence. Other longitudinal studies of adolescents have reported similar findings (Dubois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale, & Hardesty, 2002; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, Zimmerman, 2003; Wong et al., 2003).

Personal experiences with discrimination and the associated consequences should be considered within a larger societal context where racism and discrimination are embedded in the labor market (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Pager, 2003), legal system (Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006), education system (Farkas, 2003; Mickelson,



2003), healthcare system (Griffin et al., 2007), and virtually all of our other major systems and institutions. Individual discriminatory attitudes and exclusionary behaviors are in many ways products of institutionalized racism and the existing racial hierarchy.

### **Institutionalized racism**

Institutionalized racism is “the extent to which racism is embedded in the dominant organizations and power structure of society, resulting in distinctive patterns of social disadvantage” (Wade, 1993, p. 543). Institutionalized racism has had its largest impact through economic exclusion and marginalization, such that racial stratification maps onto socioeconomic stratification (Harrison-Hale, McLoyd, & Smedley, 2004; Jones, 2000). Institutionalized racism and its sequelae make it especially important to consider how factors such as social position and racial segregation affect the life chances of African American children and youths (García Coll et al., 1996).

Economists and critical race theorists have conceptualized various types of discrimination and have developed models to describe how discrimination impacts the life chances of African Americans. Loury (2005) asserts that African Americans experience both reward bias and developmental bias. In line with traditional notions of discrimination, reward bias involves recompensing members of different racial groups unequally for the same achievements. Reward bias occurs, for example, when equally qualified African Americans are paid less than Whites for the same jobs. Developmental bias involves precluding a group from realizing their “productive potential,” even when no inherent disparities in competence exist. For example, segregated neighborhoods, schools, and networks limit the ability of young African Americans to develop the human capital necessary to thrive in our society in adulthood. In essence, racism and discrimination not only affect the ability of African Americans to obtain skills, training, and credentials, but also often prevents them from receiving rewards equal to those of their White counterparts when they do have comparable skills and training (Thomas, 2000).

The lock-in model has been used to explain how racial inequalities can persist, even after discriminatory practices have ceased. This model suggests that the early advantages in resources and opportunities White Americans gained through past, exclusionary practices reproduce themselves through positive feedback loops that allow these advantages to continue to accumulate. Racial disparities in family wealth transfers, social networks, and residential locations, resulting from discrimination, are reproduced over time through positive feedback loops and are unlikely to be eliminated without substantial policy intervention (Roithmayr, 2000).

The lock-in model considers discrimination primarily as an issue of the past, giving little attention to how contemporary discrimination also contributes to the persistence of inequality. Yet, as a stigmatized group, African Americans remain the targets of some of the most disparaging negative racial stereotypes and are particularly at risk for discrimination (Bobo, 2001). Studies have documented the persistence of racial stereotypes and have pointed to some of the implications of these negative attitudes and beliefs. For example, racial stigma colors non-Blacks’ attitudes about social policies that they believe may disproportionately benefit African Americans (Loury, 2005). Racial stigma influences

people's perceptions of neighborhoods, such that neighborhoods with more African Americans are perceived to be more chaotic, even when objective measures suggest otherwise (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2005). Endorsement of stereotypes about African Americans is associated with more negative attitudes toward integration and African Americans are least preferred as neighbors (Charles, 2000; Farley, Steeh, Krysan, Jackson, & Reeves, 1994). Indeed, residential segregation is perhaps the biggest reason that schools are segregated, and school segregation has resulted in the concentration of minorities in low-performing economically disadvantaged schools (Orfield, 1996). Also as a result of segregation, African Americans pay higher prices for goods and services, including financial services (McLoyd & Ceballo, 1998).

Studies focusing on adult employment have also highlighted how discrimination continues to contribute to inequality. Recent audit studies reveal that employment discrimination based on race continues to be a widespread practice (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Pager, 2003). It is likely that African American adolescents experience the same types of discrimination that have been demonstrated in audit studies with adults. It is well known that African American youth are less likely to be employed, experience more episodes of joblessness, and have lower earnings than White youth (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000; Fuligni & Hardway, 2004). One study found that, although Black adolescents were applying for more jobs than Whites, they were less likely to actually obtain employment, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Entwisle et al., 2000).

Unemployment and discouragement in job search are linked to both attributions of personal blame and psychological distress among African American youth. There is also evidence that youth who blame personal limitations rather than external labor market barriers as the major cause of their failure are less active in their job search (Bowman, 1990). To the extent that employment discrimination against adolescents is documented, it remains difficult to directly connect systematic racial discrimination to specific, individual-level outcomes. Instead, discrimination at this level may be more readily linked to racial disparities in mental health, employment outcomes, economic resources, and access to mental health treatment. Analytic techniques, such as multilevel modeling, hold promise for linking social structural factors, like discrimination, to individual level outcomes (O'Connor et al., 2007).

### **Social class and racial discrimination**

Experiences of racism and discrimination may vary depending on social class (Pettigrew, 1981; Thomas, 1993). For example, studies have found that higher SES African American adolescents report more incidents of discrimination than their low SES counterparts. African American adolescents of higher SES backgrounds are hypothesized to reside and go to school in more racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods than their lower SES counterparts, making these encounters more likely (Brody et al., 2006; Sellers et al., 2006). Thus, although African Americans of all social backgrounds are likely to experience racism and discrimination, there may be differences in how and where individuals encounter racism and their ability to respond to it.

There also may be important class differences in the ways that African American parents are able to respond to racism and discrimination on behalf of their children (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Compared to poor and working class parents, middle class parents across races are more likely to interact with school personnel with a level of ease and comfort, be knowledgeable about how the educational system functions, and understand how to effectively be involved in their children's education (Lareau, 1987). Therefore, middle class Black parents may not only intervene more often when their children experience discrimination, but they may also be more likely to intervene in ways that are considered acceptable within the school setting (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Thus, in some instances class power may mediate racial injustice or provide protection from discrimination in some contexts (hooks, 2000; Lacy, 2002).

## **The Psychological Consequences of Stereotypes, Stigma, and Classism**

Individuals who are both African American and economically disadvantaged are doubly stigmatized based on negative perceptions of individuals in both groups. More is known about how race-related stigma impacts people's lives than is known about the impact of class related stigma. Whereas race is largely thought to be "out of one's control" or immutable, economic status is widely viewed as something that can be transcended. In a society that places a high value on individualism and meritocracy, it is not surprising that both children and adults tend to attribute poverty to individual failings and culture as opposed to structural factors (Chafel, 1997; Cozzarelli, Wilkenson, & Tagler, 2001).

### **Stereotypes, stigma, and identity development**

Insights from the field of social psychology point to general negative attitudes about the poor and help us understand how the poor are characterized in society. The few studies that have investigated children's knowledge of socioeconomic status and attitudes about the poor demonstrate that children are aware of economic status and endorse a wide range of negative stereotypes about the poor (i.e., the poor are unclean, immoral, and prone to criminal behavior), including the belief that poor children are worse at academics than rich children (Weinger, 1998; Woods, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2004). Some of the beliefs children and adolescents hold about the poor are likely shaped by media images that often give a distorted picture of the poor. For example, one study found that African Americans were depicted in 62% of stories about the poor, at a time when African Americans comprised about 30% of the poor (Gilens, 1996).

Negative societal messages about being poor and individual explanations for poverty may work together to circumscribe identity exploration for poor adolescents by shaping how they view themselves concurrently and what they can become in the future (Phillips & Pittman, 2003). The fact that middle class children have higher career aspirations and expectations than poor and working class children provides support for this notion (Cook et al., 1996). With the exception of the work of Phillips and Pittman (2003), the extent to which poverty may impact identity development has not been explored in the literature. Future research should examine how individual and societal beliefs about one's social position influence various domains of development.

## Classism

Very little is known about how poor children and adolescents understand their class status or how they experience and respond to classism. Measures that assess attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to social class may help give insight into these issues (APA Task Force on SES, 2006). Research suggests that the prospect of being negatively stereotyped based on class impedes student test performance (Croizet & Claire, 1998). This type of research is particularly interesting given that poor African Americans must contend with stereotypes about both race and social class (Woods et al., 2004), and that the threat of both race and class stereotyping have been separately linked to underperformance on intellectual tests. A question left unanswered is whether the effects of stereotype threat are compounded for students who are both African American and poor.

In recent years, progress has been made in defining and understanding classism and finding ways to measure it (Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007; Liu et al., 2004; Lott, 2002). For example, a small number of studies have examined how class status and classism are related to the school experiences and well-being of college students (Langhout & Rosselli, 2006; Ostrove & Long, 2006). Other studies have provided more indirect evidence that indicators of children's economic status may negatively influence their school performance and tests scores through negative teacher perceptions and unequal treatment in school (Figlio, 2005). Thus far, few studies have examined how psychological processes and characteristics influence upward mobility. However, despite the lack of attention given to this area of research, it is highly plausible that many of the environmental factors that influence mobility have their impact through psychological variables.

## Social Class and the Accumulation of Social and Cultural Capital

As discussed, race and social class often make individuals susceptible to various forms of discrimination. Part of the reason for this discrimination is that the skills, resources, and culture that low-income, African Americans bring to institutional settings are often not valued, making teachers and employers less likely to invest in members of this group. Individuals in low-status groups also have less powerful social networks and experience fewer rewards for the types of cultural capital they possess (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In the following sections, we explore how displays of culture and class mediate the relation between race, SES, and opportunity. We focus on social capital in the form of parents' skills, resources, and investments in children, as well as, parent and child networks and community resources. We also discuss how members of children's social networks can help them build the type of cultural capital that is rewarded and associated with mobility in institutional settings.

## Parental involvement in school

A number of studies have found that parental involvement in school is related to children's school success and even college attendance (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006). However, psychological studies of parenting strategies related to upward mobility and successful youth outcomes have tended not to focus on how class-linked parenting practices are tied to academic achievement.

Ethnographic studies reveal how differences in class culture influence family-school relationships and are related to disparate educational outcomes for children. Lareau (1987) found differences in how middle class and working class families interact with the educational system on behalf of their children in one working class and one middle class elementary school. Middle class parents, who were often as educated or more educated than their children's schoolteachers, were more likely than working class parents to see themselves as equals with teachers and to view their relationship as a partnership. Working class parents were far less likely to initiate contact with teachers and tended to let responsibility for their children's education rest in the hands of teachers and other school officials, expecting learning to take place primarily on school grounds and not at home. Parents who responded positively to the idea of a home-school partnership were able to accumulate advantages for their children more than those who did not, in part because teachers expected all parents to contribute equally to their children's education.

An examination of the literature reveals that poor and working class parents of high achievers take what can be characterized as middle class approaches to school (parent-teacher and parent-school relations). These studies suggest that parents who are proactive and interact with the school on the school's terms have the most successful children. Parents of academically successful children are particularly effective at being advocates for their children at school, monitoring their children's progress throughout the school year, and maintaining ongoing communication with school personnel (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Jarrett, 1995).

School involvement is often complicated for poor and working class parents. Overall, these parents tend to be less trusting of schools and school personnel, making them more reluctant to approach the school as freely as middle class parents (Furstenberg, 1993; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Lareau, 2002). Other evidence suggests that low-income parents may be disrespected and disregarded by teachers, who assume that these parents lack interest in their children's education (Lott, 2001). Other barriers such as inflexible work schedules and lack of economic resources, reliable child-care, and transportation, affect the ability of poor and working class parents to be involved in their children's schooling (Lareau, 1987).

### **Extracurricular activities**

In addition to parental involvement in school, how parents manage their children's activities outside of school and home is also related to child outcomes and potential for upward mobility (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Parents of upwardly mobile children tend to provide their children with opportunities that are typical for middle class children (i.e., involvement in sports, music, art, clubs, and various organizations). Involvement in these types of activities is related to school success as well as the development of cultural and social capital, both of which have value within and outside of academic institutions.

Lareau's (2002) ethnographic study of families of children ages 8–10 provides insight into day-to-day social class linked parenting behaviors that are related to the transmission of advantages and disadvantages from parents to children. She found that middle class parents engaged in "concerted cultivation" for the expressed purposes of allowing their children to

develop certain skills and competencies. Middle class children participated in activities that were organized and instructed by adults that parents believed would contribute to their children's social and academic development by providing exposure, expanding worldviews, and teaching life skills. Working class and poor parents relied more on "the accomplishment of natural growth," whereby children matured through free play, engaged in fewer adult-organized activities, and had greater influence on how their time was spent.

Some of the strategies typically utilized by middle class parents have also been shown to be effective for poor and working class parents. Jarrett's (1995) review of qualitative studies of family factors related to upward mobility among poor African American families indicated that parents of socially mobile children tend to use the following strategies to buffer their children from the negative effects of poverty: developing networks of adults that provide support and resources to children; building strategic alliances with mobility enhancing institutions and organizations; actively involving their children in adult-sponsored activities; and monitoring their children's behavior very closely.

Community involvement and participation in adult-structured activities have been linked to academic achievement and college completion, even after adjusting for self-selection factors (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Larson, 2000; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003). More work is needed to understand the processes through which children benefit from participation in extracurricular activities (Larson, 2000). Mahoney, Cairns, and Farmer's (2003) work suggests that participation in extracurricular activities may foster interpersonal competence and raise educational expectations. Other work suggests that children who participate in extracurricular activities may also develop of initiative, associate with more academically oriented peers, and build valuable social and cultural capital, all of which can have a positive influence on academic achievement (Charles et al., 2007; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Larson, 2000; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999).

Poor and working class parents who seek socioeconomic mobility for their children are often challenged with trying to extend opportunities to their children that they may not have personally experienced (Dill, 1980). As with involvement in school, these parents face a variety of barriers that restrict opportunities for their children to be involved in recreational and extracurricular activities. The cost of many of these activities is prohibitive (Lareau, 2002). Poor and working class neighborhoods also have fewer institutional resources for children compared to middle class neighborhoods (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Lareau, 1987; Furstenberg, 1993).

### **Social networks and institutional agents**

Through involvement in recreational and extracurricular activities, children are able to increase their social capital by interacting with agents of socialization outside of the home that allow them access to knowledge, tangible resources, and opportunities (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Social capital is defined here as "class-linked personal contacts or network ties that can be crucial to organizational and professional advancement" (Useem & Karabel, 1986). Social capital varies by one's position in the social structure, with the most valuable forms

of social capital being ties to middle- and upper-class persons and networks (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

The barriers and exclusion that are inherent in the concept of social capital pose problems for working-class minorities (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Poor and working class minorities, who may differ culturally, linguistically, and in numerous other ways, face the challenge of establishing relationships with individuals with more power and higher status (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). The most valued networks and connections are established more readily for those individuals who have been socialized in a White, middle class context. Class, culture, and language are barriers that make entry and advancement in mainstream institutions difficult for working class minorities.

### **Institutional agents**

A framework proffered by Stanton-Salazar (1997) highlights the importance of social capital for the advancement of poor and working class minority youth in institutional settings. Stanton-Salazar (1997) asserts that powerful contact people, who he calls institutional agents, are “individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly or to negotiate the transmission of institutional resources.” Far from being merely supporters and role models, institutional agents pass on resources and provide children with access to various opportunities (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). One of the most important forms of support and knowledge institutional agents provide is insight into “instructionally acceptable” means of self-presentation, communication, and interaction in various institutional settings (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Parents may facilitate children’s access to institutional agents. Poor and working class parents who involve their children in structured activities may be maximizing their children’s opportunities to form relationships with institutional agents and to develop the most valued forms of cultural capital. These types of “out of class” experiences may be especially important for poor children residing in areas of concentrated poverty as a means of contact with mainstream society and exposure to opportunities outside of their neighborhoods.

### **Negotiating race and class boundaries**

The challenge for poor and working class minority youth is developing the ability to seamlessly navigate different cultural and class contexts. The cultural capital minority youth possess is not always valued in mainstream society or in middle class institutions (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). For example Burton, Obedallah, and Allison (1996) point out that the skills and competencies developed by inner city African American adolescents are rarely recognized in research literature or in the larger society. This lack of recognition is a byproduct of the focus on problem behaviors in these groups and a devaluation of skills and competencies developed in certain cultural realms.

### **Cultural discontinuities**

Boykin’s triple quandary theory is useful in understanding why contextual discontinuities exist. According to this theory, African Americans participate in mainstream, minority, and

Black cultural realms of experience. Boykin and colleagues assert that very different frames of mind, attitudes, and behaviors are required to function in each realm. In fact, Boykin argues that some of the psychological and behavioral tools necessary for participation in the Black cultural realm are at odds with the tools required for participation in the mainstream realm (Boykin, 1986).

This kind of cultural incongruity between contexts has been discussed in terms of discontinuities between the home and school environment. Cultural discontinuities may impact home-school relationships such that teachers and parents do not appreciate each others' child management strategies (Wright & Smith, 1998). Further, child behaviors and interactions styles that are acceptable in the home environment or community may not be acceptable and may be misinterpreted in school settings (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Wright & Smith, 1998).

Cultural discontinuities may also cause problems at work. Using interviews with employers, Wilson (1996) illuminates how employers have overwhelmingly negative views of low-income Black workers. Wilson hypothesizes that these workers may lack both "hard skills" (i.e., basic literacy, language, and math skills) and "soft skills" (i.e., appropriate self-presentation, demeanor, attitude, and work appropriate personality). He asserts that "soft" skills are linked to culture, and that for inner-city Black residents, these skills are developed in difficult neighborhood contexts that have different customs and expectations than most workplace settings.

### **Strategies for functioning in different class and cultural contexts**

Among the challenges confronting African American youth are reconciling the cultural differences between contexts and developing strategies that allow them to function in a variety of different environments. Another challenge involves finding ways to strive for success in mainstream America, while holding on to ways of thinking that are consistent with Black cultural orientations and values (Boykin, 1986). Little is known about how African American parents socialize their children to succeed in multiple realms and develop the type of flexibility to seamlessly navigate multiple cultural and class contexts (Boykin & Toms, 1985).

Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) described what they term a *minority culture of mobility* whereby middle class minorities strategically manage "economic mobility in the context of discrimination and group disadvantage, and respond to distinctive problems that usually accompany minority middle-class status." Specifically, they point to problems associated with interacting with the White majority and minorities occupying other class positions. Neckerman et al. suggest that middle class Africans manage the often conflicting demands of achieving mainstream success and remaining loyal and connected to other African Americans through informal networks and organizations and by dynamically employing different linguistic and behavioral patterns, depending on the race and social class of the individual or group with whom they are interacting.

Similarly, Lacy (2004) proposed a strategic assimilation framework that describes how middle class Black parents function in both Black and White worlds and attempt to foster



this ability in their children. Although these parents “participate in the political, educational, and economic mainstream” they are “reluctant to relinquish ties to the Black world where they maintain and nurture racial identity” (p. 913). These parents encouraged their children to utilize the White world for its economic opportunity and the Black world for social purposes.

The frameworks proposed by Neckerman et al. (1999) and Lacy (2004) suggest that code switching, or changing patterns of behaving and speaking depending on the realm in which one is functioning at the time, may be one means of navigating educational and employment settings dominated by Whites (Cross, Smith, & Payne, 2002). Other work suggests that emphasizing different aspects of identity may also help in the transition between Black and White environments. Lacy (2002) observed that middle class Blacks sometimes distinguish themselves from other Blacks by emphasizing their class status and minimizing their racial identity in interactions with Whites. Future research should address class differences in the extent to which African Americans participate in each realm and how African American parents socialize their children to participate in different cultural realms.

## Summary and Directions for Future Research

Historical and present-day institutional racism and discrimination have contributed greatly to the disadvantaged status of African Americans. The effects of past racial discrimination and economic marginalization are seen in the high rates of poverty and in the difficulty each generation has in assuring that the next generation achieves greater success. African Americans face especially tough challenges to upward mobility and are particularly susceptible to downward mobility (Hertz, 2005; McBrier & Wilson, 2004; South & Crowder, 1997). The research reviewed here highlights some of the factors that contribute to upward mobility. It suggests that parenting practices and structured activities can be used to foster the accumulation of social and cultural capital to facilitate upward mobility. It further suggests that cultural, economic, and social resources both impede and facilitate mobility.

This article also points to some future directions for studies of social mobility. Research is needed to help us understand how family structure and the timing, duration, and depth of poverty impact social mobility, in light of evidence that family structure affects social mobility and given that African Americans are more likely to experience more extreme poverty and longer spells of poverty compared to Whites (Biblarz & Raftery, 1993; Wilson, 2007).

Also needed are studies that further elaborate and define socioeconomic status. Given the vast racial disparities in wealth, researchers should expand definitions of socioeconomic status to include wealth. Important economic differences in wealth remain unaccounted for when only traditional socioeconomic variables are considered (McLoyd & Ceballo, 1998; Pettigrew, 1981). Research should move beyond outlining racial differences in wealth holdings and move toward gaining a better understanding of how wealth affects opportunities and life chances. This line of research also suggests that we should look beyond individual and household economic well-being to determine how the financial well-being of the extended family may impact the individual and household. To this point, most

characterizations of the transition to adulthood have not adequately considered the role that family economic resources play in the transition to adult roles nor have they adequately captured the experiences of ethnic minority youth or youth from working class or lower class backgrounds (Arnett, 2000).

Further exploring variability within African Americans as a group would provide a more holistic picture of African American children and families. Past research that has examined intersections of race and class has primarily focused on poor and working class African Americans. Although middle class African Americans are generally in a more advantaged economic position than their poor and working class African American counterparts, this group faces its own unique challenges and remains economically and socially disadvantaged compared to middle class Whites. Much remains to be learned about the complexities of how discrimination affects people who come from different class backgrounds and reside in a variety of different contexts.

This review points to the need for multidisciplinary approaches to understanding social mobility and the critical importance of high quality longitudinal data. It also highlights the need for future studies that investigate the consequences of economic disadvantage faced by Blacks of all classes, how culture and social ties facilitate or hinder upward, and the unique challenges and advantages faced by middle class Blacks. Systematic, multilevel examinations of these issues would greatly enhance our understanding of African Americans as a diverse group. García Coll and colleagues' (1996) model proved useful in thinking about the issues discussed in this article; other examinations may also benefit from drawing on this model.

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