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Few researchers have considered the ways in which educational theories sustain negative inter-dynamic patterns between the school system and many minority group children. This article suggests that the theories with which many teacher trainees are equipped perpetuate dysfunctional causal explanations of minority underachievement and fail to provide the motivation necessary to effect change.

# Psychological Theory in Educational Change: A Solution or Cause of the Problem

Kimberly Kinsler

## INTRODUCTION

The national report of the Quality Education for Minorities Project (1990) recently indicated that the problems many minority children bring to and face in the classroom—racism, poverty, and language barriers—are not adequately addressed in today's schools. While a number of researchers have written on the ways in which classroom procedures conflict with the cognitive and interaction styles to which many of these students are socialized (Anderson, 1988; Hale-Benson, 1986), few theorists have considered the ways in which the educational theories with which teacher trainees are equipped sustain these negative inter-dynamic patterns. In child development and educational psychology courses, teacher candidates are given a body of theory with which to understand, control, and ultimately change student behaviors in the areas of academic performance and psychosocial development. In exploring the hypothesis that these theories do little to dispel dysfunctional causal explanations of minority underachievement, I briefly review major universal and specific theories pervasively taught in these courses in terms of their ability to address variables commonly associated with poor school performance.

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## THEORIES IN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

In child development and educational psychology courses, discussions of learning and psychosocial development are typically organized around grand universal theories and more narrow specific theories. Universal theories seek to systematize, describe, and explain the phenomena of a broad domain for all individuals (e.g., cognitive development); specific theories seek to address the operation of less encompassing phenomena which may qualify more global explanations (e.g., motivation).

### Universal Explanatory Theories

The power and relevance of universal theories lie in their potential for generalization, i.e., their capacity to explain and predict phenomena across a wide range of situations and groups of individuals. Such theories focus on general patterns of behavior and development, i.e., change which is common between individuals, and de-emphasize "insignificant" differences. Thus, by their very nature, universal theories are not designed to explain cultural variations in development. Nonetheless, in their descriptive characterizations of normal individuals and the mechanisms postulated for change and aberration, these theories should be equally valid and generalizable to most individuals, regardless of group membership.

Five universal theories are pervasively taught in child development and educational psychology courses: psychoanalytic theory, psychosocial theory, conditioning theory, social learning theory, and genetic epistemology. Their presentation is usually structured in terms of the three domains of mind. Thus, psychoanalytic and psychosocial theories are discussed under the affective domain; conditioning and social learning theories are taught within the behavioral domain; and genetic epistemology is covered under the cognitive domain.

### Theories in the Affective Domain

**Psychoanalytic Theory:** While Freud's theory is regarded in many circles as anachronistic and heavily bound to the culture and the time in which he wrote, it is still taught as the primary means for understanding emotional and personality development. With its stress on personal impulse control, emotional maladjustment is viewed as the inability of the individual to properly constrain and direct primitive internal urges. Personality problems may occur as the result of inadequate or excessive release of sexual energy at various stages in the child's development. As parents are largely responsible for determining the early release of this energy, causality for maladaptive behavior is placed not only in the self, but in the affective interaction between the child and the parents. To the extent that most teacher trainees are exposed to Freud, the impact of forces such as race, SES, and culture are *non sequiturs*.

**Psychosocial Theory:** Erikson expanded upon Freudian theory by placing greater emphasis on the role of society in personality formation. Development is asserted to involve predictable and characteristic conflicts between the individual and society, (re)presented in the form of significant others, e.g., parents, teachers, and peers.

In the early stages of psychosocial development, emotional maladjustment is regarded as the result of parenting practices that conflict with the needs of the child. While based on cross cultural research, Erikson's optimal parenting practices are strongly biased in favor of those used by middle class Europeans and Americans, i.e., authoritative practices. At a later stage of development (i.e., industry versus inferiority), emotional distress can result from the child's inability to meet societal demands, especially in the



form of school, and/or parents' rigid insistence upon success in this arena. Here, Erikson assumes a linear progression from the home to the school, i.e., a uni-cultural transition in which conflict is primarily in terms of a mismatch between the individual's areas of strength and school demands (e.g., the artistic versus the logico-mathematical domains), rather than differences between culturally-based world views and/or interaction styles. During adolescence, teen rebellion is regarded as a search for identity in which mainstream values may be temporarily rejected.

At this stage, Erikson assumes that the child seeks an individual identity separate from his/her parents and their world view. Society nor its institutions are regarded as necessarily hostile nor desirous of depriving the child of his/her new identity. However, contrary to Erikson's theory, evidence indicates that, for many African-American and other minority students, the school has engaged in protracted and systematic efforts at their deculturalization (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990), and that many of these teens in seeking their identity have moved toward their familial culture and away from the institutions and values of those who would deny it. Thus, at several crucial stages in psychosocial development, Erikson's assumption of a middle class Euro-American standard renders his theory inappropriate to explain such development in minority youths.

Humanism, the methodological adaptation of affective theory, advocates the externalization and sharing of feelings and beliefs in the school setting. Strongly nurtured are individualism and a respect for interpersonal differences, e.g., students are encouraged to eschew blind group conformity. However, this view is not without its drawbacks, for the unquestioning advocacy of personal independence may interfere with an understanding of the beneficial aspects of being grounded in one's culture and the recognition that, for some group members, this bond constitutes a major part of their world view. Moreover, while providing a mechanism to engage these issues, the theories upon which this approach is based ill-equips teachers to address these conflicts once they are raised. It should also be noted that in the 1980s, humanism lost popularity in the field and, consequently, a number of texts removed or greatly reduced chapters on this topic.

### Theories in the Behavioral Domain

**Conditioning Theory:** In addressing issues of individual or group difference, the strengths of conditioning theory also constitute its weakness. In disassociating itself, except in the most general of ways, from qualitative aspects of the individual and the environment, it provides a sterile understanding of the factors that affect learning. Consistent with this model, a set of principles are postulated that hold true for all organisms, including pigeons and rats! Learning is viewed as the result of the creation of bonds that are stamped in or out by the environmental consequences of organismic actions. Accordingly, maladaptive behavior is regarded as the learning of inappropriate responses which can be unlearned without recourse to mentalistic concepts such as feelings and personal identity. While the use of such principles are effective, for example, in teaching children to walk quietly in the halls, research indicates that the indiscriminate use of behaviorally-oriented classroom management techniques may run counter to the world views of certain non Western cultures which reject the conscious manipulation of one individual by another (Jordan & Tharp, 1979). More importantly, the unquestioning use of these techniques to change student behavior without any understanding of its affective repercussions both in and outside the school raises serious ethical issues.

**Social Learning Theory:** Social Learning Theory, by infusing Conditioning Theory with more mentalistic concepts, provides a richer vehicle for understanding the acquisition of behaviors and attitudes that distinguish one group from another. Their principle of observational learning well accounts for group differences in interaction patterns. Moreover, the concept of situational specificity, which asserts that children can learn to behave in one way in one situation (e.g., the home) and another way in another context (e.g., the school), should inform teachers that children need not give up their familial world view to respond in ways appropriate to the classroom situation. However, textbook examples of school applications for these principles generally fail to consider SES and cultural differences—except in terms of the acquisition of dialects. While it is possible for teacher trainees to spontaneously generalize relevant behavioral concepts to the specifics of minority underachievement, they must do so on their own—despite increasing research which indicates that the transfer of information must be taught.

Social learning theorists also have postulated a mechanism for explaining achievement motivation. The determining variables are the individual's history of success and failure with the task, the specific environment's history for dispensing rewards and punishment for success and failure, and the value of the task to the individual (Bandura, 1986). Typically de-emphasized in texts and classroom discussions, this latter variable is crucial to understanding achievement motivation in African-American and other minority students. Texts seldom address the reactions to academic achievement by those outside the immediate learning environment (e.g., peers who have rejected the system) and personal expectations for long term rewards (e.g., job success). For most teacher trainees, the negative influence of these factors on minority academic achievement is poorly understood.

### Theories in the Cognitive Domain

**Genetic Epistemology:** In Piaget's theory, the impact of environmental variation on cognitive development is very limited. It can affect the timing of stage attainment—not whether a stage is constructed nor its characterization. Contrary evidence has been found, however. In many age appropriate adults, researchers have found Piaget's last stage of development not in evidence or manifest at a rate well below the figures that would allow for the postulation of a universal stage. In fact, studies indicate that its appearance may be heavily influenced by environmental factors, particularly exposure to Western forms of school (Cole & Scribner, 1974); and even in individuals with such experience, its appearance is affected by factors such as one's course of study, e.g., science versus non-science majors (White & Festenberg, 1978). Some theorists, thus, conjecture that abstract formal reasoning may be an artifact not only of Euro-American society, but of its school system (LHC 1982, 1983). While some educational psychology texts mention these research challenges to Piaget's theory, implications related to cultural bias in the telos of development and school as the transmitter of a Euro-American world views are almost always omitted.

### Universal Theories and Minority Achievement

To the extent that children are more alike than they are different, the economy of universal theories cannot be denied. However, the qualifications to the above universal theories challenge the wisdom of indiscriminately generalizing many of these principles and postulates to minority children. Moreover, researchers in the field are increasingly



acknowledging that most of these theories were formulated and normed on sometimes very small samples of middle class Europeans and/or Americans (Berger, 1986). Nonetheless, in texts these theories are presented with few caveats related to the limits of their applicability to other groups. Where they exist, they are typically confined to the introductory chapter and almost never appear in the context of reporting the theories. Hence by default, the implications of universality and generalization remain intact.

As a meaningful understanding of minority underachievement is not to be found in universal theories due to the premises upon which they are founded and the cultural biases in their construction, specific theories in their intent and structure are for this purpose. That is, they postulate variables and operations which modify the manifestation of individual knowledge and ability.

### Specific Explanatory Theories

Child development and educational psychology texts have traditionally covered issues related to minority school achievement in chapters devoted to individual differences and intelligence. In explaining these topics, two general theoretical approaches may be presented: deficit and cultural difference models.

#### Deficit Models

Deficit models assert that minority group members are deficient, or deficit, in their ability to successfully perform the tasks that school environments demand. Initially, causality was placed in the gene pools of various minority groups; later explanations sought causality in cultural factors associated with their socialization. Each view is briefly discussed below.

**Genetic Inferiority Theory:** Many genetic inferiority theorists based their beliefs on the assumption that I.Q. tests assessed an innately determined intellectual ability and cited as evidence the consistently lower mean I.Q. scores of African-Americans relative to those of Euro-Americans. This view has been discredited and, accordingly, many educational psychology textbooks offer research on intergroup adoption studies and test bias to show that these I.Q. score differences may be accounted for by environmental variation (e.g., Scarr & Weinberg, 1976). At the same time, some texts still assert that I.Q. test performance and general reasoning ability are largely determined by genetic factors. For example, Good and Brophy (1990) state that "(s)chools are less successful in developing Level II skills in part because Level II skills have a stronger genetic component than Level I skills. . . . Level II skills cannot be taught directly" (p. 593). Thus, rather than dispel dysfunctional beliefs, these conflicting messages do more to confuse and/or support the notion of the genetic determination of intelligence and its close correlate, academic performance.

**Cultural Deficit Theory:** There are two versions of this view. Early formulations asserted that factors associated with the language codes, child-rearing practices and home environments of many ethnic and socio-economic minorities resulted in their children's inability to do well in school; later formulations shifted the emphasis from ethnically-oriented cultural groups to SES-oriented groups. Textbooks now consistently refer to the "disadvantaged," to which they attribute all the negative variables previously cited in old deficit model research conducted during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, for example, in defining characteristics of the disadvantaged, Blehler and Snowman (1990) cite Hess and Shipman's (1965) assertion that lower class parents are often inattentive and unresponsive to their children, use im-

poverished language, and run disorganized homes; and both this text and Good and Brophy (1990) claim that they lack the knowledge that would enable their children to do well in school. Seldom stated with these presentations are the two fallacious assumptions upon which they are based: one, that socialization and child rearing practices can be hierarchically ordered, and two, that the practices of white middle class Europeans and Americans are at the top of this hierarchy and constitute an objective model, or "standard" against which other cultures should be judged. Moreover, these portrayals of the disadvantaged fail to distinguish the effects of poverty from cultural beliefs. By focusing on what these groups lack relative to a Euro-American standard, this view negates the strengths of these cultures and their world views.

Almost all child development and educational psychology texts cite deficit explanatory models, however, far fewer texts also reflect the more recent shift in the field toward a cultural difference approach.

#### Cultural Difference Models

There are six cultural difference theories which seek to acknowledge the apparent disparities between cultures while minimizing evaluative judgments. They differ from each other in the central variables around which conflict is engendered, e.g., cultural misunderstandings, motivation, language, and socio-politics (Jordan & Tharp, 1979). When this model is offered in texts, cultural and language misunderstandings are most often cited. While, admittedly, an improvement over deficit approaches, textbook reporting of these theories have one major shortcoming: they tend to negate history. That is, omitted from discussions of conflicts between the cultures of the school and the child are causal analyses of how these conflicts have led to the current intractable situation. If significant variables in the present dilemma are the system's efforts to deculturalize African-Americans and other minority groups and their subsequent rejection of this oppression (Ogbu, 1978, 1985; Quality Education for Minorities, 1990), by ignoring this historical reality teachers and the school system are left without a mechanism to account for this state of affairs. Moreover, by adopting the view that previous actions were the *natural consequences* of a lack of knowledge of the other cultures, the position exonerates teachers, the schools, and the mainstream society of unfair treatment and prejudice. As teachers cannot be expected to know the world views and cultural particulars of all peoples, the motivation for change also is diminished.

#### Specific Theories and Minority Achievement

Specific explanatory models have improved in their ability to provide a more accurate explanation of minority achievement, although biased implications and significant gaps in knowledge remain. In light of the inextricable relationship between race, culture and SES in the United States, the continued emphasis in some texts on an SES-cultural deficit model tends to perpetuate rather than to dispel negative attitudes toward the socialization practices used in many minority members' homes. Moreover, the traditional placement in texts of discussions of the impact of culture on academic achievement with discussions of cognitive and emotional retardation gives the message that cultural factors are associated with aberrations. The present state of specific theories and their descriptions in texts thus leaves teacher trainees blind to the socio-political significance of the classroom teacher and of their pivotal role in reversing this process. As minorities will be the majority of individuals living in the United States by 2075, and al-



ready are the majority in 22 of this nation's 25 largest central city school districts (Quality Education for Minorities, 1990), specific theories and textbooks can no longer treat the effects of culture on academic achievement as aberrations, for teachers soon will have to address these factors as the norm.

### Psychological Theory as a Vehicle for Change

If the purpose of theory dissemination in teacher education is to facilitate change as well as to instill a more accurate understanding of the factors that influence learning and academic performance in minority group children, current psychological theories and textbook treatments do more to sustain than to alleviate existing misconceptions. Universal theories, while trivializing cultural differences, are largely inadequate at encompassing variables associated with its manifestations. Specific theories have either actively blamed the victim or sought to ignore the consequences of the system's previous errors. As products of this instruction, teacher trainees are left bankrupt, not only of knowledge, but of the tools needed to address this serious problem.

It is my belief that to improve this situation the system's efforts to deculturalize African-Americans and other minority group members must be understood and acknowledged. Without this awareness, minority individuals' rejection of the system cannot be understood. This information also can provide an understanding of the processes and the motivation needed to change these oppressive practices. Similarly, African-Americans and other minority individuals must acknowledge their rejection of the system and the self destruction that is its product. Only with the acceptance of mutual responsibility can there be a knowledgeable dedication to the rectification of these errors and change. In light of the above discussion, the following recommendations are offered to guide theory and instruction for teacher trainees.

1. Both universal and specific theories provided to teacher trainees should be validated in a true cross-cultural arena or the limits of their ability for generalization strongly stated.

2. Texts and teacher trainers should acknowledge the previously oppressive and biased ways in which many African-American and other minority students were denied their culture and a Western world view was forced upon them.

3. Teacher trainees need to be made aware of their role as socializing agents and transmitters of a world view that is often contrary to those of many minority children.

4. Teacher trainees should be helped to understand that Western conceptualizations and attitudes are not the logical and necessary telos of affective, behavioral, and cognitive development, nor are they inherently more advanced, nor constitute an objective standard of excellence.

5. Teacher trainees should understand that unless all children are educated to become valued and contributing members of society, the nation as a whole will falter and fail.

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