Social Capital, Cultural Values, Immigration, and Academic Achievement: The Host Country Context and Contradictory Consequences

Carl L. Bankston, III
Tulane University

Social-capital explanations of school outcomes, particularly of the school outcomes of immigrant children and children of immigrants, have come into wide use in recent years. These explanations attempt to account for individual or group variations in school performance by viewing the family and community relations that surround children as forms of investments that yield payoffs in schools. These family and community relations are seen as specific to immigrant groups, or “ethnicity as social capital” (Bankston, Caldas, and Zhou 1997). I believe that although this ethnicity-as-social-capital approach can be a valuable one, it runs the risk of overlooking the complex and contradictory nature of the association between immigrant social relations and the adaptation of immigrant children and children of immigrants. Normative relations among immigrants and their children are not inherent ethnic properties brought from homelands, but the results of responses to the challenges and deprivations of the host country. In addition, social ties that may pay off in one way (say, school success) may constitute liabilities in other ways. For example, the same ties among children, parents, and communities that support strong school performance may also result in estrangement from peers and social discrimination for youths from immigrant communities.

The use of “capital” as an explanation of the school achievement of immigrant children and children of immigrants can be seen as a version of an “input” approach to schooling. The term input refers to the influences on academic outcomes that students bring with them to school, while the term process refers to the influences of schools as institutions on students. Process factors are, understandably, the center of attention of school reformers who are concerned with problems such as the unequal distribution of resources among schools. However, a concentration on school characteristics, such as resources, teacher training and experience, class sizes, and curricula, yield an incomplete picture if, as some researchers have suggested (see, e.g., Caldas 1993), school characteristics account for little variation in student outcomes. Process factors can be particularly unsatisfying as explanations of the differences between the school achievement of children of immigrants and other children, since the performance of children of immigrants is often superior to that of other students, even when youths from immigrant communities attend relatively disadvantaged schools (Zhou and Logan 2003). The single process factor that may be relevant is the possibility that teachers perceive and treat children of some backgrounds differently from others. Teachers’ perceptions of students may even rival some of the input factors in their impact on students’ performance, but it is still necessary to explain where teachers’ perceptions originate.

James Coleman was concerned with ways in which family background may shape students’ achievement. Moving beyond an emphasis on family socioeconomic status in the Coleman report (Coleman et al. 1966), he argued that certain forms of structured social relations produce advantageous outcomes and could thus be seen as “capital.” Specifically, emotionally intense, bounded networks among parents and other adults surrounding children, for example, enable adults “to establish norms and reinforce each other’s sanctioning of the children” (Coleman...
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1990:318). Following this line of thinking, scholars have posited that children from some immigrant groups are successful in American schools because they come from families and communities with close, emotionally intense, bounded networks. However, if tight, strongly tied networks per se constituted assets for children, it would not matter what particular norms were reinforced by those networks. As defined by Coleman, then, social capital cannot be purely a matter of the structure of relations among individuals, but must involve values, beliefs, and expectations that are maintained and transmitted within a group by social structures.

Min Zhou and I have studied how a relatively high average level of achievement among Vietnamese American students has been maintained in recent years by cultural values that are conducive to achievement and by bounded social networks that maintain these values (Zhou and Bankston 1998). Respect for elders, cooperation, and acceptance of authority are not simply acknowledged but are practiced as a result of the mesh of ethnic social relations surrounding children of Vietnamese descent in the United States. However, two points must be emphasized about these linkages. First, these relationship patterns are not just Vietnamese social relations; they are Vietnamese immigrant relations. Vietnamese American communities do not reproduce Vietnamese villages or neighborhoods on American soil but form structures in response to the pressures of the new country. Individuals in these communities interpret their structures in terms of the ideas that they have about life in their former country (Kibria 1993).

The cultural values of this largely immigrant ethnic group also draw upon home-country traditions as these traditions are reinterpreted following immigration and resettlement. For the Vietnamese as a refugee group, the epic of exile has been particularly important in shaping how adults think about their cultural backgrounds. The cooperative, respectful attitudes that Vietnamese American families emphasize for young people are self-conscious efforts to recapture an idealized version of the traditions of the lost homeland.

For the investment of social relations to yield a profit, there must be an interaction between those relations and a set of cultural norms. In the case of Vietnamese American students, tight family and community social relations support beliefs about upward mobility, shaped by exile and resettlement, that are essential to school success. Furthermore, the cultural content of social capital can help us see how the “input factor” of social relations outside the school can become a “process factor” by influencing teachers’ of Vietnamese American students. Teachers develop positive generalizations about Vietnamese students, which may become stereotypes, but these generalizations are products of experience with young people who are conforming to selective, idealized sets of cultural values that are maintained by close social ties among a specific set of adults and young people. Teachers represent one point of investment of social and cultural assets. Cultivating positive responses of teachers as a group yields a profit.

Paradoxically, in this view of social capital and cultural values, assets result from past and current liabilities. The lack of a place in the host society’s mainstream leads Vietnamese and other newcomers to form closely linked social structures. Distance from the distant homeland contributes to the transmission of idealized cultural values. Finally, the marginality of new arrivals means that their expectations for the future are relatively open. Vietnamese parents may have high ambitions for their children and beliefs that their children can fulfill those ambitions precisely because these communities have little experience of children inheriting their parents’ statuses.

There is an unfortunate side to the process of the formation of immigrant social and cultural assets, I believe. Vietnamese students and other new immigrant youths succeed in American schools by forming closed pockets that protect them from strong influence by the social structures, habits, and expectations of students who are growing up in disadvantaged segments of American society. Thus, the notion of social capital does not blend well with utopian aspirations for a perfect equality of educational outcomes, with all winners and no losers.

Another disadvantageous aspect of social
capital as an investment of cultural values through social relations is that social capital provides only specific payoffs, some at considerable expense. The interaction between immigrants’ beliefs and social relations may lead to higher grade point averages but still fail to produce psychological well-being. The tight, controlling ethnic networks that encourage success in schools may strain relations between immigrant parents and American-born children (Bankston and Zhou 2002; Zhou and Bankston 2001). Students who subscribe to behavioral patterns that are endorsed by an ethnic immigrant group may suffer rejection by peers and social discrimination. Financial capital can be invested in a wide variety of ways, but social capital has a much narrower range.

If social capital can help us to understand academic achievement among the children of some immigrant groups, such as the Vietnamese, it leaves open the question of why there is variation among immigrant groups. There are, for example, notable differences in the average school performance of Asians (about 25 percent of contemporary immigrants) and Hispanics (about 50 percent of contemporary immigrants). While Asians tend to outperform the native-born white population, Hispanics lag behind native-born whites and have disturbingly high dropout rates. These patterns hold, despite variations among different Asian national origin-groups and among Hispanic national-origin groups.

Following the logic of the argument I have presented, I suggest that Hispanics, particularly the large Mexican American population, may be affected by a specific type of integration into American society. Many people who cross the southern border of the United States, with or without documentation, are newcomers, but there is also a long-established pattern of labor migration to and from the United States. Even more significant, the United States has a large and visible U.S.-born Hispanic youth culture that offers sets of social relations that compete with those that characterize relations between recent immigrant Hispanic youths and their elders.

Explanations of the school achievement of particular groups should not isolate the cultural characteristics of these groups, the social structures of groups, or the location of groups within the host society. Instead, theories need to probe how culture, social structures, and socioeconomic positions combine in complex ways to produce outcomes that are often unexpected and even paradoxical.

The ultimate question about social capital and schooling is whether this framework remains a useful way of thinking about educational outcomes. I believe it is useful as long as we keep in mind the problematic nature of the term social capital itself. Social capital is not an unqualified good. Social relations that create productive outcomes may nevertheless be products of unfortunate, even tragic, historic events. The social capital of a Vietnamese community is a result, at least in part, of a history of warfare, flight, and exile, much as social capital provided by the African American church is partly the result of a history of discrimination.

The concept is further clouded by the fact that it is not always easy to judge whether or not a given set of relations constitute “capital,” an investment that may yield a desirable outcome. The outcome often depends on how a given structure of social relations and a set of beliefs and values fit with each other and with a particular area of investment. Vietnamese ethnicity may be a form of capital in promoting school outcomes because the ethnic social relations and their connected cultural values are consistent with school success. Vietnamese ethnicity may not be a positive form of capital in relation to other forms of adaptation, such as psychological well-being. Given the problematic character of the concept, I think that the most useful direction for future research on social capital would be an effort to specify circumstances under which ethnic capital pays off but also to identify the costs and sacrifices that are entailed.

REFERENCES


**Carl L. Bankston III, Ph.D.**, is Professor of Sociology, Director of Graduate Studies in Sociology, and Codirector of the Asian Studies Program at Tulane University. His chief research interests include international migration, sociology of education, race and ethnicity, and sociology of religion. Bankston’s most recently published book (coauthored with Stephen J. Caldas), is *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana*. He is currently working with Katharine Donato and Melissa Stainbeck on a book about migrant labor in the oil industry. Address all correspondence to Carl L. Bankston, III, Department of Sociology, 220 Newcomb Hall, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118; e-mail: cbankst@tulane.edu.