The Process of Racial Resegregation in Housing and Schools: The Sociology of Reputation

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Abstract

The United States has a long history of racial and ethnic segregation in housing patterns and public school enrollment as well as efforts to dismantle this segregation. This essay discusses what we have learned in the United States about how difficult it is to halt the patterns of housing and school segregation even as our nation becomes more diverse, racial attitudes are reportedly improving, and the twentieth century urban-suburban racial distinctions disappear. To explain the process of resegregation that occurs repeatedly, the author developed a new interdisciplinary framework to foster a deeper understanding of how racialized perceptions of places or neighborhoods and the schools embedded within them perpetuates segregation despite changing demographics, attitudes and metro migrations across urban-suburban lines. The sociology of reputation, the bias of crowds, and the choices of home buyers with the most capital amid the existing separate and unequal structures are the bodies of research the author draws upon to help us see familiar segregation patterns anew.

EXISTING RESEARCH ON SEGREGATION AND WHAT IS MISSING

Most research on racial segregation in housing and schools within the United States examines the *degree and outcomes* of racial segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wells and Frankenberg, 2007) or school and housing *choices* that often result in increased racial and socioeconomic segregation as more affluent and white parents use powerful social networks to guide their preferences (Holme, 2002; Wells *et al.,* 2014). While both lines of inquiry are important, what has been missing in the literature is an exploration of the *reinforcing* relationship between the individual choices and the segregated places and schools. In other words, rather than thinking of the housing and school choice process as a way those with the most options—namely affluent Whites—make individual decisions with input from their networks,

we must examine these choices as socially constructed within a racialized context in which otherwise viable choices are framed as unthinkable.

THE PARADOX OF THE SIMULTANEOUS DRIVE FOR DIVERSITY AND RESEGREGATION

There are three main factors in the recent US history that should, theoretically, lead our country toward *less* racial/ethnic segregation in housing and public schools and not more:

1. *Demographics*: The United States is becoming increasingly racially/ethnically diverse, and this increased diversity is even more dramatic among the school-age population, now less than 50% White, non-Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).
2. *Metro Migrations*: Coinciding with the demographic trend is a profound shift in who lives where. More low-income families of color have been moving to once-all-White suburbs, just as more Whites are moving back into gentrifying areas of cities their grandparents fled decades ago (Ehrenhalt, 2012). Hence, both suburban and urban spaces overall have become more racially and ethnically diverse, creating more opportunities for sustainable racially and socioeconomically integrated communities and schools.
3. *Racial Attitudes*: A growing proportion of our post-Civil Rights society values diverse environments—at least in the abstract (Wells *et al.,* 2009). Americans of all racial and ethnic groups are more likely to say they accept cultural differences and view diversity in social situations as a positive (Krysan & Faison, 2011). These attitudinal changes are particularly pronounced among Whites, who generally have more choices about where to live and send their children to school (Alba & Nee, 2005; Louie, 2005).

Taken together, these three factors strongly suggest that we should see more racially diverse schools and communities today than in the past. In fact, the research on residential patterns and school segregation trends, however, tells us a different story—one that is contradictory and complex as a temporary, fragile diversity occurs at the initial stage of neighborhood change followed by a process of resegregation as Whites flee changing suburbs and people of color are displaced from gentrifying areas of cities.

The pervasiveness of racial segregation in the United States, therefore, is best understood in the context of the three factors noted above and evidence that they have indeed helped to create more racially diverse neighborhoods in the last few decades (Ellen, Horn, & O'Regan, 2012; Glaeser & Vigdor,

2012). But at the same time, most of these neighborhoods are incredibly unstable, and thus, they quickly resegregate (DeSena & Shortell, 2012; Hyra, 2015; Wells *et al.*, 2014).

So the question is why, in the context of more favorable conditions for meaningful integration, does diversity not "stick"? The evidence suggests two overlapping factors: (i) Resegregation is fostered, supported, and rationalized by racialized perceptions of what constitutes a "good" neighborhood and a "good" school and (ii) The housing and school choices of those with the most status—namely the white and affluent home buyers—both drive the process of resegregation and are most sensitive to these racialized perceptions of what is "good."

In the next two sections of this essay, the author proposes a new framework for explaining this pernicious resegregation process as well as the hypersensitivity of the most privileged home buyers to the resulting status hierarchies of neighborhoods and schools that are embedded in segregated structures.

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF RACIAL RESEGREGATION: PERCEPTIONS OF PLACE AND PEOPLE

To better understand the how and why of racial resegregation, the author draws from two related but previously separate theoretical frameworks, the sociology of reputation (Caplow, 1964; Strathdee, 2009), and the bias of crowds (Payne, Vuletich, & Lundberg, 2017) to understand the socially constructed nature of race, place, and education.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF REPUTATION

The sociology of reputation argues that the status of a place or institution, or the reputed understanding of the "quality" or "desirability" of neighborhoods and schools, is correlated with the race and class of the students and residents within them, even after controlling for several other "objective" indicators. Thus, places and institutions such as schools have reputations that vary depending on who is associated with them. The idea of organizational reputation as co-determined by the status of its members or students is also not new (Caplow, 1964). According to Caplow (1964), membership and affiliations have an iterative relationship with organizational status because the prestige of an organization is strongly affected by its alliances with other high-status organizations and by the prestige its members import from other contexts. However, as Strathdee (2009) points out, sociologists of education have rarely examined the concept of reputation as it relates to "elite" educational institutions, which results in a lack of clarity about what is driving the formation of reputation in our field.

In other words, reputations are socially constructed within and in the service of social stratification (Caplow, 1964), meaning that they are based on racial and ethnic biases that are shared and made more meaningful within the context of a particular housing market or a set of school choices. Most notably, the reputations of communities, schools, or universities are not, as we often assume them to be, based entirely—or even primarily—on objective criteria that would make the honor, prestige, and status that comes with a good reputation "earned" or "well-deserved" (Weber, 1978). Hence, the prestige and status of a neighborhood or a school varies dramatically in terms of the social status—but not necessarily the intelligence or ability—of WHO lives there and WHICH students enroll.

This strong correlation between high-status people and high-status institutions or places is reinforced by these so-called objective measures or tangible distinctions between these institutions or places that favor those with the most money or the valued cultural capital. In fact, most of these "objective" measures (e.g., "tangible" factors related to resources, academic outcomes, and property values) are defined in a way that privileges those affiliated with the highest status people (Caplow, 1964; Koretz, 2008; Schneider, 2017; Tienken & Zhao, 2013). But recent research demonstrates that even when these tangible factors are controlled for, the differential status of people, based on race, ethnicity, and SES, in particular, strongly correlates with the status and thus the "*reputation*" of place or an organization such as a school with which they associate (Caplow, 1964; Strathdee, 2009; Wells *et al.,* 2014). No matter how supportive neighbors in a mostly Black community are of each other or how phenomenal teachers in a school serving low-income students of color may be, these places and institutions—one usually nested within the other—are rarely, if ever, deemed to be highly reputable or even "good."

Ranking Schools and Stratifying Students In recent years, the ranking of educational institutions online and in the popular press has created explicit status hierarchies based primarily on narrow outcome measures such as standardized test scores that make schools hypersensitive to their positions. All accredited law schools, for example, have been ranked by *US News and World Report* every year since 1993, making these annual lists an organizational reality. Research on the law schools' response to these rankings has shown they adjust their behavior to increase their ranking, which helps them attract "high-quality" students and faculty members, as measured by ranking indicators of quality. As a result, law schools have increased their spending on merit-based scholarships as they attempt to "buy" top students (Sauder, 2005). These so-called top or most desirable students—those whose

credentials augment the law school's ranking—then, in turn, are attracted to the highest ranked schools.

This example of the twenty-first-century law schools speaks to Caplow's (1964) argument about the power of the most prestigious organizations to influence how the standards of achievement are measured in a field. The institutions with the most prestige also have the clearest advantage in maintaining their prestige, which contributes to some degree to an "aggrandizement effect" or the overestimation of an organization's prestige by its own members. This, in turn, exaggerates the value of membership and reduces the attractiveness' of outside affiliations (Caplow, 1964). The size of organizations such as private clubs and honorary societies is thus inversely correlated with standing, while scarcity of access or exclusivity may be positively correlated with an organization's prestige, as those who lack access desire to be associated with the organization or school (Shenker and Yuchtman-Yaar, 1997).

The systematic exclusion, therefore, of lower-status people from high prestige, reputable organizations or communities and the unwillingness of high-status individuals to associate with low prestige institutions is a central but ill-defined concept within sociology since Weber (1978) wrote about status dimension of social stratification in *Economy and Society*. According to Shenker and Yuchtman-Yaar (1997), with the exception of Caplow (1964), the idea "that one's status may be co-determined by the organizations he/she is affiliated with is a point all but neglected in the sociology literature."

And yet, empirical research that supports this codeterminant relationship between the status or reputation of a neighborhood and the status of the people who live there dates as far back as the 1960s (Useem, Useem, & Gibson, 1960) and has been supplemented by more recent studies on housing segregation and white flight (Farley et al., 1978; Massey & Denton, 1993). This research on how race and place get constructed, and how Whites, in particular, tend to have skewed perspectives on the racial makeup of their communities, also relates to recent research on segregated settlement patterns in gentrifying cities (DeSena & Shortell, 2012; Mason, Morlock, & Pisano, 2012). What these studies tell us is that reputations of places are socially constructed—or as Griswold (1992) notes, reputations exist largely within residents' imaginations. "Place" as a *collective memory* perspective suggests that neighborhood reputation is socially constructed through the meaning that residents make of where they live (Zelner, 2015). In this way, spatial theorists help us understand the concept of sociology of reputation as it relates to different places and how they are constructed through their symbolic meaning, their resources or lack thereof and the people who live within them (Gotham, 2003; Harvey, 2009). In this respect, Wells (2015) and Wells et al. (2014, 2017) found that White suburban homebuyers perceive communities

that are becoming racially and ethnically diverse more negatively even when there are no tangible differences between those and other predominantly White communities. This implicit bias of place, we learned, was in large measure correlated with the status of the students in public schools associated with those places (Wells *et al.,* 2014).

The Bias of Crowds and the Social Construction of Reputations

This sociology of reputation argument as it relates to the perception of place and a hierarchical understanding of the value of different people associated with those places connects in important ways to a social-psychological argument known as *implicit bias*, which examines how "relatively unconscious and relatively automatic features of prejudiced judgment" affect social behavior. This concept of implicit bias is increasingly used in the legal field, particularly in the criminal justice literature, and in popular press reports on racial profiling and police brutality in recent years. And while the implicit bias concept has not often been applied to research on school and housing choice, the author argues that it often results in White homebuyers devaluing more racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods and schools even when there are no tangible differences between those places and others with more White residents (Wells, 2015).

And more recently, a new area of implicit bias research has found that implicit bias is "situational"—meaning that people with similar backgrounds and experiences develop different degrees of inter-racial implicit bias depending on the context in which they live and interact with people of different backgrounds. This research finding, labeled the "bias of crowds," concludes that when contexts are more equal and just, people are less likely to hold implicit biases or to be the victims of them (Payne *et al.,* 2017).

Together, the theories of sociology of reputation and the bias of crowds support a growing body of research evidence that finds that such socially constructed understandings of the reputation and thus desirability of a "good" school are heavily influenced by biased perceptions of the demographics of the students enrolled. In other words, predominantly white and affluent schools and neighborhoods are perceived to be "better than" other less-white or less-affluent schools even when the data imply otherwise (see Saporito, 1998 and Saporito & Hanley, 2014).

The process, therefore, by which a once predominantly white and middle-class community and school district with a "good" reputation becomes "not-so-good" and eventually "bad" as the racial makeup of the student body changes—even before the loss of tangible material resources that usually follows—is a process we must identify before we can address resegregation. In some of these school districts in the first phases of these

demographic transitions, the tangible factors, including funding, curricular offerings, teaching staff, and the student outcomes change very little initially. But as the skin color of the student population changes, the reputation of the district declines regardless, taking with it the property values (Wells *et al.,* 2014). Indeed, the author and her research team found that the percent of Black students enrolled in public schools in a given school district could lower the property values of otherwise similar houses by as much as $50,000 depending on which side of the school district boundary line it was on (Wells *et al.,* 2014). Such declines in property values lead to an eventual decline factors as well.

INDIVIDUAL CHOICES AMID STATUS HIERARCHIES

As noted earlier, racial segregation is reproduced when implicit biases of places and schools based on the race of the people within them solidify their socially constructed reputations to mold decisions that individuals make about where to live and where to send their children to schools. In these moments of demographic transition in both urban and suburban contexts, homebuyers—particularly those with the most economic and social capital—make these decisions, often based primarily on the reputation of a school or district as constructed by their peers and social networks. In this way, home buying choices in a suburban county that is fragmented and divided into multiple, tiny municipalities and school districts, easily resolidifies the practice of making race-based classifications of schools as "good" or "bad," fueling a self-fulfilling prophecy discussed above in which districts undergoing demographic changes are deemed less desirable, leading to a decline in property values, followed by a shrinking tax base and a loss in tangible or materials factors in schools. And the cycle of racial segregation repeats (Wells *et al.,* 2014).

  In this section, the author examines the critical moment within that cycle—when home-buyers make implicitly biased choices based on socially constructed and racialized reputations of schools and communities or perceptions of place that both correlate with the race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status of the people who live there. Her research found that these reputations and perceptions are not always accurate are not always accurate in terms of objective measures of tangible factors—for example, quality of housing or academic outcomes.

STATUS OF PLACE; STATUS OF PEOPLE; STATUS OF SCHOOLS: CHOOSING CLASSMATES AND NEIGHBORS

Based on the arguments presented so far, we can reconsider the housing and school choice process as far from rational in an economic sense (Wells,

1993). While the decisions people make about where they live and send their children to school are imbedded in material realities, including location of jobs, their income and wealth, and real estate availability, these decisions are also about status hierarchies, including racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. The old real estate mantra of "location, location, location," is a spatial marker of not just tangible factors (e.g., the size of the lots and houses or the quality of construction) but it also applies to who lives there and thus, how high status those associated with this community are (Wells *et al.,* 2014).

Basically, the evidence tells us that choosing neighborhoods is about choosing your neighbors because the people who live in a given community convey their status, prestige, and reputation (or lack thereof) on their neighborhood, and by association, their neighbors. If race is indeed a master status as Blumer (1958) claimed, with Blacks at the bottom of the socially constructed hierarchy, then perceptions of neighborhoods with many Black residents will too often be bad regardless of the conditions. These constructions of places provide a larger context for school and neighborhood choices and effects subsequent status-conscious housing choices.

But this phenomenon is not entirely new. In fact, a post WWII study of 75 "middle-management men," their neighborhood choices and their stress levels related to where they live and with whom they associate, found that as men (presumably white men, although it is not stated directly) advance in their careers, make more money and gain higher executive positions, they become increasingly aware of and concerned about who their neighbors are (Useem *et al.,* 1960). In fact, as these men gain status professionally, there are fewer "*appropriate neighborhoods* [emphasis added] in which they believe they can live" (p. 73). Furthermore, they are most likely to reside near those perceived to be peers in the business world. The authors (Useem *et al.,* 1960) find that living in "appropriate neighborhoods" shape men's self-esteem and identity. In other words, it is bad for these men's self-esteem to live in a neighborhood with lower-status neighbors. Since the 1960s, the social science research that examines neighborhood choice and segregation has built—directly and indirectly—on these conceptions of status, prestige, and reputation as they relate to race, class, and home choices. The research on school choices, however, has been less directly tied to this evidence.

Ranking Schools and Stratifying Students: School Choices The codetermined relationship between the reputation of a school and the status of the students and families associated with it affects school choices in at least three overlapping ways:

1. White parents with high-status educational credentials are most likely to say they prefer racially diverse schools for their children, and more

likely to care about the perceived reputation of the schools their children attend (Sikkink & Emerson, 2008; Sewell, 1992).

2. More affluent, highly educated, and usually White parents are strongly influenced by their tight social networks on issues of school reputation and status (Holme, 2002; Horvat & Lewis, 2013; Lareau and Goyette, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). "School quality" and thus the reputation of schools is constructed by social groups (Wells, 2015).

3. And finally, there is a negative correlation between White parents' perceptions of school quality or reputation and the percentage of students of color enrolled (Karsten, Ledoux, Roeleveld, Felix, & Elshof, 2003; Roda & Wells, 2013; Saporito, 1998). For instance, Billingham and Hunt (2016), who studied the effects of school racial composition and several nonracial school characteristics on white parents' school choices, found that the proportion of black students in a hypothetical school has a consistent and significant inverse association with the likelihood of white parents enrolling their children in that school, even after controlling for many school quality factors. Similarly, Saporito (1998) found that white parents choosing schools avoided with large numbers of African American students schools, even those located in more affluent neighborhoods because they equated the lower status of African Americans in the United States with the status of the schools that enrolled them. They did not want their children associated with those schools no matter what information they had on the impact of the school on children's achievement or safety.

Indeed, education research suggests that many of the most affluent White parents only take their embrace of "diversity" so far. In fact, the research shows that even when parents consider diversity to be a benefit, they still tend to choose schools that are predominantly White, oftentimes citing measures of school quality as the most important factor in making their decisions (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013).

This contradiction is in part explained by increasing inequality and narrow definitions of "school quality" that too often align with demographic characteristics of schools. Even for parents who say they prefer diverse schools, these structural challenges make finding and choosing these schools less likely. In addition, affluent parents, who often espouse progressive racial attitudes, regularly choose nondiverse schools due to their concerns about the inter-generational transmission of status to their children and their own implicit biases about the relationship between race and school quality (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2012; Wells *et al.*, 2009).

When taken together, these factors add up to more racial and social class segregation as those families with the most choices opt out of more racially

and socioeconomically diverse schools, perpetuating the cycle of segregation and resegregation.

CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING THE BIASES OF REPUTATIONS

This essay demonstrates the ways in which race, place, and schools are constructed in a manner that leads to more racial segregation and inequality. These social constructions of "good" places help us understand of how parents and home buyers make sense of different neighborhood and school options and thus, how racial segregation is reproduced time and time again, despite the factors outlined above that suggest our society should be moving in the other direction.

It seems quite evident, therefore, that even when we do find diverse communities and public schools, they are often fragile, unstable, and in the process of resegregating. Studying the *process* of resegregation is important to understanding how we might stop or reverse it as our nation becomes increasingly diverse.

Indeed, we have evidence that this process *can* be reversed with a great deal of effort. For instance, strategically designed real estate campaigns to promote diverse neighborhoods and local policies to manage choice options generally have good results in addressing housing segregation. Furthermore, we know that public schools can foster racial literacy among their students and parents and create classrooms that enable students to learn empathy and care across racial and ethnic boundaries. Such educational policies and practices when combined with housing strategies to address biases toward neighborhoods that have unearned bad reputations because of the race and thus status of who does and does not live there can make a difference in how home buyers define "good" schools and communities.

The takeaway here is that experiences matter and can alter racialized perceptions of places and schools. Recognizing that reputations and choices are socially constructed enables us to envision how they can be reconstructed.

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