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# School choice and racial segregation in US schools: The role of parents' education

David Sikkink and Michael O. Emerson

## Abstract

We draw on recent developments in the sociology of race and ethnicity and theories of the duality of social structure to explain how the formation of 'educational identities' interacts with racial stratification to shape the school choices of highly educated whites in the United States. Analysis of the 1996 National Household Education Survey shows that the racial composition of schools plays an important role in the schooling choices of highly educated whites. As the per cent black in a residential area increases, whites are more likely to select alternative, higher-percentage-white schooling for their children. Importantly, this effect is amplified for highly educated whites (but not highly educated blacks). Ironically, then, despite many positive effects of formal education on racial attitudes, increased education for whites leads to greater negative sensitivity to blacks in public schools, which may in turn have the unintended effect of increasing school segregation and racial inequality.

**Keywords:** Education; racial segregation; United States; whites; blacks; schools.

The relationship between school choice and race in the United States has a long and often dismal history. Though more liberal racial attitudes among whites (Schuman, Steeh and Bobo 1985; Steeh and Schuman 1992; Tuch and Hughes 1996; Brooks 2000; Sears, Sidanius and Bobo 2000) may have changed the context in which school choices are made, it would not be surprising if new pathways to public school segregation have emerged (see Rabin 1997). This changing social context calls for new theories of the mechanisms through which individual social characteristics interact with school choice opportunities to affect racial segregation within schools.

We contribute to the literature on school choice and racial segregation by focusing on social characteristics that are associated with 'white flight' in the context of expanding school choice and more liberal racial attitudes. Most of the early literature focused on whether desegregation plans in the United States were associated with white flight (Coleman, Kelly and Moore 1975; Clotfelter 1976, 1979; Wilson 1985), rather than on who was most likely to be sensitive to interracial contact in public schools. The latter becomes more important as school choice expands – including the expansion of within-district choice plans in the public school sector (Schneider, Teske and Marschall 2000; Kahlenberg 2001). Under school choice, where new opportunities for whites to avoid racial minorities in public schools may emerge, who is most likely to take into account public school racial distributions in making schooling decisions? We focus this paper on the role of educational level of parents, in part because the more educated should most strongly reflect the overall trend in the US toward more liberal racial attitudes (Hyman and Wright 1979; Weil 1985; Schaefer 1996). Several studies of school choosers do exist (Sandy 1989; Lankford and Wyckoff 1992; Schmidt 1992; Lankford, Lee and Wyckoff 1995; Henig 1996; Martinez, Godwin and Kermerer 1996; Witte and Thom 1996; Smrekar and Goldring 1999; Fairlie and Resch 2002), and most confirm that parent educational level is positively associated with school choice (Levin 1998). But none have provided a systematic analysis with nationally representative data on the role of parent education in the choice process – accounting for public and private forms of school choice and the interaction between educational level and the racial context of local public schools – and most do not analyse school choice behaviour for blacks. In addition, we provide an analysis of the relation between private school choice and segregation, which is often assumed but not analysed in the white flight literature (Clotfelter 2001).

The need to understand the current relationship between school choice and racial distributions takes on added importance in light of the re-segregation of public schools in recent decades (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Clotfelter 2001; Orfield 2001), which is likely to have strong negative outcomes for students (Clotfelter 1999; Roscigno 1998, 2000). Some school choice studies have attempted to account for racial distributions in schools in shaping individual-level school choice (Long and Toma 1988; Lankford, Lee and Wyckoff 1995; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Schneider, Teske and Marschall 2000; Peterson, Campbell and West 2002), but the studies have been based on local samples and/or have reported conflicting findings on the effect of school racial distributions. In this paper, we show one mechanism through which school choice may contribute to re-segregation: the place and meaning of schooling for children in the

lives of the more educated Americans, which, in interaction with forms of institutional racism in American society, channel highly educated whites (but not highly educated blacks) to opt out of public schools that have a high percentage of black students. Court decisions that open the door to greater segregation and grass roots efforts to reconnect schools and (highly segregated) neighbourhoods have opened the door to more segregated schools (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Orfield 2001). We suggest that differences among whites in orientations to schooling for children, which are rooted in identities that vary by educational level, interact with changing structures of racism to shape both the choice of more segregated schools for children and the broader political movement toward policies that are re-segregating public schools.

### **Social structure and race**

We bring together literature in sociology of education and race and ethnicity to develop theories of the relationship between school choice and racial distributions in public schools. According to research in race and ethnic relations, racially based practices are not only the result of overt prejudice or some free-floating, irrational revulsion from blacks. Instead, the racial practices that create and maintain racial division in the US: '1) are increasingly covert, (2) are embedded in the normal operations of institutions, 3) avoid direct racial terminology, and 4) are invisible to most Whites' (Bonilla-Silva 1997, p. 476). Racialization of society, this research argues, is embedded within the normal, everyday operation of institutions, and thus individuals need not intend for their actions to contribute to racial divides and inequality, even if they do so (Wellman 1977; Emerson and Smith 2000, ch. 1). We connect this pattern of racialization to issues of school choice in the US.

Further, the relation between education, race, and school choice cannot be limited to analysis of cultural orientations or of stratification systems in isolation. We must consider the reciprocal relationship between identity and systems of stratification. We build on the insights of social theorists that insist on the dual nature of social structure as both resource and schema (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1986; Sewell 1992). Schemas, the 'generalized procedures in the enactment/reproduction of social life', interact with resources, which include anything that serves as a source of power in social interaction. Along with natural objects, resources include knowledge and emotional commitments that can be used to enhance or maintain power. Schemas are not actual but virtual,<sup>1</sup> and include elements of social life such as rules of etiquette, recipes for group action, and other basic cultural orienta-

tions. Sets of schemas and resources constitute structures when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time (Sewell 1992).

Previous research on education and schooling choices focuses on what Sewell would call the resources (or that which is commonly referred to as aspects of institutional racism) that lead to segregated schools (Ball 1993; Wells and Crain 1997; Reardon and Yun 2001, 2002), or on the schemas embodied in notions of racial prejudice or tolerance that guide school choices (Wilson 1985; James 1989). But school choice studies rarely analyse how school choice practices depend on the interaction of schemas and resources (see Ball 2003 for exception), and therefore do not account for the duality of social structure. Rather than viewing school choices as a simple outcome of preferences, as portrayed in the rational choice literature (Long and Toma 1988; Chubb and Moe 1990; Schneider, Teske and Marschall 2000), or the result of attitudes toward racial difference; or as determined by the 'structures of racism' (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Oakes 1985; Kerckhoff 1993; Cookson 1994), we examine how among highly educated parents schemas interact with 'resources' of racism to shape schooling choices in a way that may reproduce school segregation. As we argue below, levels of education shape parents' notions of what must be done to ensure that their children are not hindered from achieving the 'good life' (Bellah 1991), which is defined largely in terms of economic and social position. Moreover, educational attainment of parents leads to a search for 'quality' education as a necessary outcome of identity maintenance strategies. These schemas interact with resources, such as the role of education degrees as status markers, the character of networks of highly educated whites and blacks, and racial resources that connect school status with racial composition of public schools.<sup>2</sup>

### *Education as resource: the context of school choices*

In research on education and stratification, educational attainment is well understood as a resource (Sewell, Hauser and Featherman 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Karabel and Halsey 1977; Kerckhoff 2001), in Sewell's sense, which, as we argue in later sections, sets the social context in which parent's cultural orientations toward schooling shape school choices. Education is an important form of currency in systems of social stratification; it opens up avenues for social mobility (Collins 1979; Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry 1996). Educational credentials allow one to achieve, on average, occupations with promising career ladders and greater autonomy, and higher incomes. Education is a key means to social mobility partly because it constitutes a status *in and of itself* (Meyer 1977).<sup>3</sup> One could argue that education is one of the most important forms of cultural capital

(DiMaggio 1982; Bourdieu 1984) in the structures of inequality in the US. This durable resource provides an important context in which most Americans are led to attempt to maximize a child's life chances by seeking out a 'quality' education.

How is a 'quality' education determined? Here we need to account for an additional resource that shapes school choices: that is, the stratification of schools by race. School 'quality' in the system of school stratification is seen as inversely related to per cent black student enrolment in a school.<sup>4</sup> Evidence for this is supplied by research on a school choice programme, which found that 'the racial composition of the school overpowers the process for white applicants. After some schools are excluded on the basis of race, white parents then appear to broaden their focus to include more criteria' (Saporito and Lareau 1999, p. 435).<sup>5</sup> For white Americans, the higher the percentage African American, the lower the status of that school (and likely the greater the perceived competition for valued resources, such as types of classes and extracurricular activities offered). This racial stratification of schools sets the context for school decisions by Americans of all races (James 1989; Armor 1995; Lankford and Wyckoff 2001).

However, as we argue below, this factor determines whites' school choices more than blacks' choices because of differences in residential location and information available within social networks regarding the quality of schools with a high percentage black. Especially among whites, regardless of educational level, race is used as an indicator of a whole host of school problems (Rosigno 1998), such as violence, drugs, discipline problems, and the overall learning environment. And in the US stratification system, attending a predominately black school may be viewed as hindering the transmission of social and cultural capital, because, for example, these schools may hurt their college applications.

Finally, education provides a context for school choices through the effect of educational attainment on social network homogeneity. Because the strongest predictors of friendship networks are propinquity and similarity (e.g., similar levels of education) (Verbrugge 1977; Hallinan and Williams 1989; McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001), individual networks of the educated are increasingly populated with those of higher educational status, but are still segregated by race.

In sum, educational attainment as a resource within the US stratification system is a source of status for individuals and families, and creates social network homogeneity by education. Further, in the system of stratification in the US, blackness is associated with lower school status.

*Education as schema: the formation of educational identities*

School choice practices are not entirely determined by the resource side of social structures, but depend on educational schemas as well. One important schema that shapes school choice practices is the construction of 'education identities' through the pursuit of educational degrees.<sup>6</sup> Achieving a higher level of education involves an increasing investment – in time, effort, and money – which creates an interest in the identity (and status) conferred by educational institutions. This identity includes a stake in the value of educational credentials; a belief that the sacrifice in achieving education is meaningful – that education matters. Not that higher education is generally a 'master' identity; identities remain multiple and conflicting (Calhoun 1995). But whoever else a person is, he or she is also a college graduate, or a PhD. And higher educational institutions tend to foster an educational identity through community building, intercollegiate athletic competition, alumni events and rituals, such as initiation and graduation ceremonies. For both blacks and whites, the formation of educational identities through experiences within educational institutions creates a tight association between providing a 'good education' for their children and maintaining integrity of self.

A second cultural orientation, through which parents closely connect child flourishing and school opportunities, is the schema that links education and socioeconomic mobility. From the standpoint of the parent, education is granted legitimacy – education is worth pursuing and indeed 'must' be pursued – because it is believed to open up opportunities for status mobility (Apple 1986). Not to secure the best education for children, in this view, would potentially limit the child's future success. The socializing effect of the educational process starts early as families and students negotiate the higher education status hierarchy. Through the process of choosing a list of schools to send applications, studying for entrance examinations, discussing the pros and cons of different higher education options, individuals tend to acquire and reinforce the view that education is of value because it affords opportunities for social mobility.

**Education, race, and schooling choice**

How does the educational level of parents shape school choices within the particular social structure outlined above? In this section, we show how schemas and resources interact to shape the schooling decisions of the more educated differently than the less educated, and then show how these processes vary across blacks and whites.

*Differences by educational level*

First, the relationship between parent educational attainment and school choice decisions depends on the formation of educational identities. Central to our argument is that the higher the level of education, the greater role that education plays in individual identity formation. For both blacks and whites, then, educational identities among the highly educated, compared to the less educated, make school choices an expression of self. This extends to the schema that links education and mobility, which is more strongly reinforced among more highly educated parents and their children. This reason for the pursuit of education leads the more highly educated parent to have higher expectations that education can and should lead to status mobility compared to less educated parents, and thus to see lower quality education for their children as a potential threat to their child's life chances. In the terms of Coleman and Hoffer (1987), the more highly educated are more likely to have a 'privatized' conception of schooling for children, in which school choices depend more heavily on personal or family self-interest rather than public or communal goods, such as participating in public schools as an expression of a collective identity generated within a community (Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore 1982; Sikkink 1999).

More highly educated parents, then, are more focused on the implications of 'school quality' on life chances for their children. The highly educated are more concerned to pass along forms of cultural capital to their children through schooling, and to encounter the expectation among their peers that they should know and care about the benefits of a 'quality' education. As individuals achieve greater education, they confront societal expectations that school status should correspond with educational status.

The particular way that the more educated understand life chances and schools leads them – all else being equal – to make school choices in favour of less integrated schools because school status is strongly related to the presence of African Americans. Schemas regarding education and mobility, and educational identities interact with racial stratification of schools to constrain the more educated to be more sensitive to the per cent black in the local public school. Education as a form of status and educational identities combine to create a boundary between the highly educated and black adolescent culture (see Binder 1993). While whites of all educational levels are likely to share this distance from black culture, highly educated whites are more likely to be concerned with status 'pollution' should their children attend schools with high concentrations of black students.<sup>7</sup> White parents tend to avoid high concentrations of minorities in public schools for fear that their child will not 'fit in' (Saporito and Lareau 1999); and

highly educated parents, because of educational identities built through investment in educational status (identity *and* interest), express this concern at lower levels of per cent black in public schools. Those with higher education are more likely to choose more segregated schools in part to ensure that the life chances of their children are in their view not hindered by association with lower status schools and people, and to remain consistent with the sense of who they are as educated parents.

In addition, social networks organized along educational lines increase the probability that parents will choose an alternative to the local public school. Because networks are structured by education, the more highly educated have access to different sources of information about primary and secondary schools than the less educated. Because of their position in a network of highly educated individuals, the highly educated tend to be more aware of high status schools.

In sum, educational attainment among parents carries a motive for paying attention to school status, creates the networks in which information about school status is available, and provides the knowledge of where to get information on schools and how to understand and use it.

### *Racial differences*

The argument above focuses on the general effect of educational attainment of blacks and whites. The fact that education shapes school choices within a particular racialized context leads to differences in the effect of education across race.

One important difference is that the social networks of highly educated blacks include weak ties to people who know well and can evaluate fairly the academic quality and opportunities at schools with a high percentage black student body. Highly educated whites lack the weak ties (Granovetter 1973) that allow access to information within distant networks. Thus highly educated whites' assessments of school status is shaped not only by the fact that school status is perceived to be related negatively to per cent black, but also because they lack the weak ties to information sources that would challenge simplistic assessments based on racial distributions. For highly educated whites, social networks increase access to information about school status in general, while the racial stratification of social networks limits the accuracy of more educated white parents' information about the schools that are predominantly black but relatively strong academically.

In contrast, blacks are able to evaluate schools without using per cent black as an indicator of school quality. They are able in practice to differentiate per cent black in a school with other school quality

factors. However, class distinctions do matter for blacks, and interact with educational differences. More educated blacks tend to move to transition zones within metropolitan areas that are between neighbourhoods with high concentrations of blacks and outlying neighbourhoods with high concentrations of whites (Alba and Logan 1993; Logan, Alba and Leung 1996; Alba, Logan and Stults 2000).<sup>8</sup> In addition, highly educated blacks are well aware that white suburban schools tend to have better educational resources, and are therefore more likely to move into transition zones. Because of residential location, highly educated blacks are more likely than less educated blacks to live in areas with racially mixed local public schools. These transition zones, since they are on the edge of high concentrations of whites, have been targets of public school desegregation plans, and are zoned into integrated school catchments. This increases the likelihood that highly educated blacks have their children in a relatively integrated local public school.

In sum, highly educated blacks are aware that predominantly white schools are on average stronger academically, and that in a racially stratified hierarchy of schools, predominantly white schools convey higher status. But highly educated blacks have more freedom to evaluate quality schools regardless of the racial make-up of the school. We would not expect to find that highly educated blacks are abandoning public schools because they live in an area that has a high per cent black population; nor would their decision to remove children from the public school be driven by the desire for 'white' schools.

## **Hypotheses**

More highly educated parents, responding to concerns that their children have a 'good life', are more apprehensive than less educated parents about the quality of education for their children. This concern would increase the likelihood that highly educated parents choose an alternative to the local public school, and that they would tend to choose a school that happens to have a high percentage of white students. This process has created concern over the last thirty years that highly educated parents would abandon the public schools, and further increase racial segregation in schools as more educated parents seek the 'best' education for their children.

We have argued that parents' educational attainment further heightens racial segregation in schools because decisions about schooling for children are made within a highly racialized school status hierarchy. Because of the combination of educational identities, the relationship of blackness and school quality, racially segregated networks, and a social stratification system in which education is a

form of status, highly educated whites are likely to contribute to racially segregated schools through their extra sensitivity to racial distributions in schools.

We hypothesize that:

1. Higher educational attainment among whites will be associated with having their children in schools with a greater proportion white. Highly educated compared to less educated blacks will be associated with having their children in schools that have relatively fewer blacks.
2. Highly educated blacks and whites will have a greater likelihood of choosing alternative schools for their children, rather than attending the local, assigned public school.
3. For highly educated whites, the likelihood of choosing alternative schools will be positively related to the percentage black in public schools. Highly educated blacks, however, will not be more likely to choose alternative schools as the per cent black in the public school increases. In other words, in the *choice* of local (assigned) public school versus other types of schools, highly educated whites will be more sensitive to the percentage black in neighbourhoods and schools than will less educated whites. This will not be the case for blacks.
4. Blacks who choose some alternative to the local public school will not by that choice increase segregation in schools, since these alternative schools will not tend to have a lower percentage black than the local public school. In contrast, alternative school choice among whites will be associated with attending a more segregated school.

### **Data and methods**

We use the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, which is a national telephone survey of the non-institutionalized civilian population with detailed information on family school choices and educational level, as well as information on the respondent's zip code of residence (US Department of Education 1997). US zip codes are mail zones, combining contiguous neighbourhoods and contained within local political borders. Although towns of under 5,000 people may only have one zip code, larger communities are divided into multiple zip codes. Unlike many high quality individual-level studies of school choice (e.g., Lankford, Lee and Wyckoff 1995) and school-level studies (Clotfelter 2001), the NHES dataset allows us to capture public (i.e., magnet schools, open enrolment, etc.) *and* private school choice, and includes information on church attendance. For our

analysis of education and schooling choice, we use the Parent and Family Involvement in Education and Civic Involvement data file, which contains 20,792 completed interviews with parents having children aged 3 through 20 and in grade 12 or below. Since the church attendance variable is available only for families with children from 6th to 12th grade, we limit our sample to this age group ( $N = 5,327$  for whites and 971 for non-Hispanic blacks). For both files, zip-code-level census data were merged with the household-level data to include information on neighbourhood characteristics. Simultaneous equation regression analysis is used to predict both the decision to opt out of the local public school and the resulting racial make-up of the chosen school. Models are run separately for blacks and non-Hispanic whites.

### *Measures*

The dependent variables for this analysis are dichotomous measures of alternative school choice and the ethnicity of the child's school. Alternative schooling may mean selecting a public school other than the local, assigned public school, such as under open enrolment policies or magnet schools. Or it may mean taking children out of public schools altogether, opting for private or home schooling. The school choice measure is the respondent's report of the type of school attended by a randomly selected child in the family. If the respondent reports that the child attends public school, then a follow-up question determines whether the child attends the assigned, local public school or not. If not, the case is placed in the public school of choice category. All private schools and the public schools of choice are coded '1' on the dependent variable and all local public school parents are coded '0'.

The measure of racial distribution of the child's school is based on a question that asks respondents about the per cent of students in the school that are the same race as the child. The three response categories are less than 25 per cent, 25 per cent to 75 per cent, and over 75 per cent. We recoded this variable into a binary variable that is '1' if the school is 75 per cent or more the same race as the child, and '0' otherwise.

We expect that whites in general will be more likely to select alternative schooling for their children in areas with a higher percentage black. But according to our hypothesis, this choice pattern should be even stronger for highly educated whites. In our models, education is measured on a 5-point scale with categories for less than high school, high school graduate, vocational-technical degree or some college, college graduate, and more than college graduate. The variable we use indicates the highest educational level of the parent(s) in the

**Table 1.** *Descriptive statistics for variables*

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
<b>Household characteristics</b>				
Not attend local public school	0.0	1.0	0.13	
Education – A40parent(s) highest	1.0	5.0	3.14	1.19
Household income	1.0	11.0	7.66	2.98
Traditional family	0.0	1.0	0.76	
Number of siblings	0.0	12.0	1.44	1.14
Highest age of parents	17.0	80.0	43.17	6.65
Frequency of religious attendance	1.0	5.0	3.64	1.51
<b>Neighbourhood characteristics (zip code of residence)</b>				
Per cent black	0.0	98.0	5.85	10.92
Per cent Asian	0.0	83.4	1.84	3.84
Per cent Hispanic	0.0	99.0	6.25	13.25
Northeast	0.0	1.0	0.24	
Southeast	0.0	1.0	0.30	
Central	0.0	1.0	0.27	
Community size (1 = rural; 8 = very large city)	1.0	8.0	5.98	2.23
Median household income	0.0	112019.0	32402.96	12234.68
Per cent own home	0.0	100.0	70.51	13.85
Per cent living in same house in 1985	3.0	100.0	54.69	11.34

*Source: National Household Education Survey, 1996*

family. Contextual variables are based on the respondent's report of their zip code of residence. Missing values are estimated based on the telephone number of the respondent. In the models below, we control for non-white representation in the zip code – the percentage black and Latino. We also include controls for the percentage poor and the percentage owning their own homes in the zip code, community size, and region. Since public school funding depends largely on property taxes and higher SES areas are likely to have the political and human resources to ensure that local public schools are strong, the variables for per cent in poverty, median housing values, and home ownership in a zip code provide some indication of the quality and resources available in the local public schools.

## **Findings**

### *Schooling choices for children*

Our first model (Table 2) shows the results for the white sample of a path model that predicts: 1) the choice to send one's child to some type of school besides the local (assigned) public school, and 2) whether the chosen school consists of 75 per cent or more white students. Since the endogenous variables are dichotomous, we used a probit regression technique and maximum likelihood estimation in the statistical package, Mplus.

The findings predicting school choice (first column in Table 2) for whites show, not surprisingly, that parent education is a strong predictor of school choice. Among the other findings, older and more frequent church attending parents are positively related to school choice. Those living in the west are less likely than those in any of the other regions to exercise school choice. Urban residents are more likely to use school choice, probably because of increased availability of choices and a weaker community-public school bond in urban areas. Residents of areas with higher per cent home ownership, which most likely reflects school quality, are less likely to opt out of the local public school.

The most interesting finding regards the interaction term, which is the highest education of the parent(s) multiplied by the percentage black in the zip code of residence. A separate model (not shown) that did not include the interaction term confirmed the expected positive relationship between per cent black in the neighbourhood and school choice (see Reardon and Yun 2002). That this relationship is highly significant is of interest because no other racial minority group has this effect on whites, and many whites have exercised school choice by moving from (or not moving into) areas in which public schools have a high percentage black (Clotfelter 2001). We find in Model 1 that the interaction term is positive and statistically significant, which is consistent with the theory that more educated whites are more sensitive to the percentage black in the local public school than are less educated whites. Net of other variables, the likelihood of choosing alternative schooling as the percentage black in the zip code rises *increases* as education increases. Table 3 graphs the relative change in probability of being a school chooser by the percentage black in the zip code, net of the other variables in the model. The most dramatic difference is between 0 per cent black and 25 per cent black: while the probability that the lowest educated group will opt out of public school increases .05 across this range, the probability that those with more than a college degree increases almost .15. Thus, on average, the greater the education of the white parents, the greater the likelihood

**Table 2.** Path model predicting choice of non-local public school and ethnicity of students in school

	Model 1: White sample				Model 2: Black sample			
	Not attend local public school		High percent white in school		Not attend local public school		High percent black in school	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
<b>Not attend local public school</b>			0.213	0.022***			0.000	0.061
Education – parents highest	0.133	0.024***	0.023	0.019	0.267	0.176	–0.202	0.074**
Household income	0.001	0.009	0.031	0.007***	0.071	0.039^	–0.047	0.017**
Age of oldest parent	0.013	0.004***	–0.002	0.003	0.020	0.009*	0.003	0.004
Traditional family	0.075	0.063	0.075	0.040^	–0.161	0.267	0.015	0.090
Number of siblings	0.040	0.018*	–0.032	0.014*	–0.140	0.088	–0.085	0.029**
Religious attendance	0.197	0.016***	–0.024	0.012*	0.007	0.088	–0.068	0.034*
<b>Racial distribution (zip code)</b>								
Percent black	0.000	0.006	–0.047	0.005***	0.010	0.010	0.018	0.004***
Percent Asian	–0.015	0.009^	–0.017	0.007**	0.007	0.044	–0.019	0.026
Percent Hispanic	0.005	0.003^	–0.041	0.003***	–0.004	0.014	–0.002	0.004
<b>Neighbourhood context</b>								
Northeast	0.274	0.077***	0.249	0.058***	–0.284	0.479	–0.026	0.232
Southeast	0.199	0.073**	–0.140	0.054**	–0.411	0.435	0.017	0.231
Central	0.263	0.075***	0.288	0.056***	0.160	0.450	–0.096	0.242

**Table 2** (Continued)

	Model 1: White sample				Model 2: Black sample			
	Not attend local public school		High percent white in school		Not attend local public school		High percent black in school	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Rural residence	-0.093	0.010***	0.037	0.009***	-0.027	0.044	-0.029	0.016^
Median housing value	0.000	0.000***	0.000	0.000***	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000**
Percent own home	-0.014	0.002***	0.011	0.002***	0.000	0.008	0.000	0.004
Percent same house in 1985	0.008	0.002***	-0.003	0.002^	0.006	0.014	0.004	0.006
Education X Percent black	0.005	0.002**			-0.002	0.003		
Sample size	5327				971			
R-square	0.260		0.370		0.230		0.320	

\*\*\*p < .001 \*\*p < .01 \*p < .05 ^p < .1

Source: National Household Education Survey, 1996

**Table 3.** Data calculations for interaction effects

	probit	logit (1.7X)	exp logit			
Education-parents highest	0.133	0.2261	1.253701	5.00		
Number of siblings	0.040	0.068	1.070365	1.44	1.44	0.097912
Age of oldest parent	0.013	0.0221	1.022346	43.17	43.17	0.954136
Percent black	0.000 ns	0	1	30.00	0.00	0
Percent Asian	-0.015 ns	-0.0255	0.974822	1.84	0.00	0
Percent Hispanic	0.005 ns	0.0085	1.008536	6.25	0.00	0
Traditional family	0.075 ns	0.1275	1.135985	0.76	0.00	0
Religious Attendance	0.197	0.3349	1.397801	3.64	3.64	1.217438
Household income	0.001 ns	0.0017	1.001701	7.66	0.00	0
Northeast	0.274	0.4658	1.593288	0.24	0.00	0
Southeast	0.199	0.3383	1.402561	0.30	0.00	0
Central	0.263	0.4471	1.563771	0.27	0.00	0
Community size (1 =very large city; 8 =rural area)	-0.093	-0.1581	0.853764	5.98	5.98	-0.94591
Median housing value	0.000	0	1	32402.96	32402.96	0
Percent own home	-0.014	-0.0238	0.976481	70.51	70.51	-1.67803
Percent same house in 1985	0.008	0.0136	1.013693	54.69	54.69	0.743732
Education X Percent black	0.005	0.0085	1.008536	0.389276		
pct black in neighborhood						
Educ						
5.8      15      30						
0.0085    0.0085    0.0085						
Pct. Blk.: 5.8	1	0.2261	0.664676	0.742876	0.870376	
Pct. Blk.: 15	2	0.2261	0.940076	1.096476	1.351476	
Pct. Blk.: 30	3	0.2261	1.215476	1.450076	1.832576	
	4	0.2261	1.490876	1.803676	2.313676	
	5	0.2261	1.766276	2.157276	2.794776	
	1	No dipl.	0.66031	0.677624	0.704824	
	2	High school	0.719115	0.749599	0.794371	
	3	HS plus	0.771266	0.81001	0.862068	
	4	College	0.81621	0.858596	0.910003	
	5	College plus	0.853994	0.896347	0.942393	

**Table 3** (Continued)

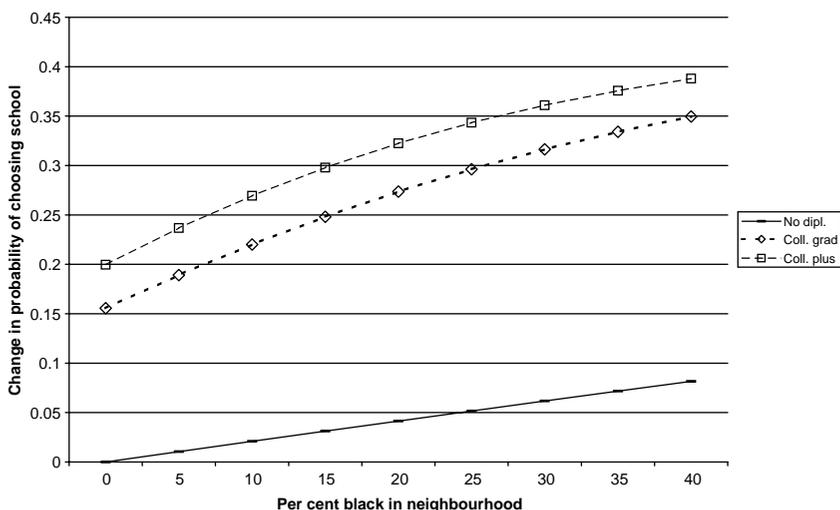
Educ		0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55
		0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085	0.0085
1	0.2261	0.2261	0.2686	0.3111	0.3536	0.3961	0.4386	0.4811	0.5236	0.5661	0.6086	0.6511	0.6936
2	0.2261	0.4522	0.5372	0.6222	0.7072	0.7922	0.8772	0.9622	1.0472	1.1322	1.2172	1.3022	1.3872
3	0.2261	0.6783	0.8058	0.9333	1.0608	1.1883	1.3158	1.4433	1.5708	1.6983	1.8258	1.9533	2.0808
4	0.2261	0.9044	1.0744	1.2444	1.4144	1.5844	1.7544	1.9244	2.0944	2.2644	2.4344	2.6044	2.7744
5	0.2261	1.1305	1.343	1.5555	1.768	1.9805	2.193	2.4055	2.618	2.8305	3.043	3.2555	3.468
1		0.55628542	0.566749	0.577154	0.58749	0.59775	0.607925	0.618008	0.627989	0.637863	0.647621	0.657258	0.666767
2		0.61116218	0.631161	0.650719	0.669782	0.688304	0.706242	0.723562	0.740237	0.756245	0.77157	0.786205	0.800145
3		0.66335917	0.691214	0.717744	0.742843	0.766437	0.788482	0.808965	0.827898	0.845313	0.861261	0.875806	0.889023
4		0.71185286	0.745433	0.776329	0.804459	0.829827	0.852507	0.872628	0.890358	0.905885	0.919413	0.931144	0.941277
5		0.75593116	0.792983	0.825707	0.854209	0.878734	0.899619	0.917246	0.932011	0.944302	0.954479	0.96287	0.969763
1		0	0.010464	0.020868	0.031205	0.041465	0.05164	0.061722	0.071704	0.081577	0.091336	0.100973	0.110482
2		0.05487675	0.074875	0.094433	0.113497	0.132018	0.149956	0.167277	0.183951	0.199959	0.215285	0.22992	0.243859
3		0.10707375	0.134928	0.161459	0.186558	0.210151	0.232197	0.25268	0.271612	0.289027	0.304975	0.319521	0.332738
4		0.15556744	0.189147	0.220044	0.248174	0.273541	0.296221	0.316343	0.334072	0.3496	0.363128	0.374859	0.384991
5		0.19964574	0.236697	0.269421	0.297923	0.322449	0.343334	0.36096	0.375726	0.388016	0.398194	0.406585	0.413478

that they respond to a high percentage black in the surrounding area by removing their child from the assigned public school.

The second equation in Model 1, which shows the correlates of attending a school with a mostly white student body, shows that for whites the choice of alternative school is strongly associated with attending a school that is mostly white (Taeuber and James 1982; Betts and Fairlie 2001; Reardon and Yun 2002). Since school choice is associated with more segregated schools, then, we see a mechanism through which the children of highly educated whites end up in more homogenous schools, even net of the typically smaller proportion African American in their residential area. Note that these findings are conservative estimates of the effect of percentage black, since it is well known that many whites make residential choices that ensure that the available public schools do not have a high percentage black (Clotfelter 2001).

The first column in Model 2 shows the correlates of school choice for blacks. These results show that educational level of parents is not significantly associated with alternative school choice among blacks. Neither the main effect nor the interaction with per cent black in the neighbourhood is significantly associated with school choice for blacks.<sup>9</sup> And, while the coefficient for the main effect of education is relatively large in this model, a separate analysis (not shown) revealed that when the interaction term is dropped, education is surprisingly still not significantly related to school choice in the black sample. Again, this may reflect the spatial location of highly educated blacks,

**Figure 1.** *Plot of interaction of education per cent black on school choice*



which tend to be zoned into outer ring public schools (to reduce racial segregation of these schools) that are perceived to be of higher quality.

The second equation, which predicts whether the chosen school is 75 per cent or more black, shows that the choice of an alternative school is not associated with attending a school that is mostly black. Education and income are negatively associated with attending a predominantly black school. This is consistent with the claim that blacks with greater means move into transition zones away from poorer areas of the central city in which most schools serving black neighbourhoods are nearly all black. This is consistent with our expectation that, in contrast to highly educated whites, highly educated blacks are not more sensitive to the percentage black in local public schools.

## **Discussion**

In advanced industrial societies education is a central avenue for achieving and maintaining status. Participation in higher education shapes individual identities, social networks, and expectations toward higher status schools for children. The presence of racial minorities, especially African Americans, is associated with lower school status. Thus, parental education leads to greater segregation in schools because of the interaction of a system of status hierarchies and identity formation within educational institutions, including changes in social networks and expectations.

From these theoretical directions, we hypothesized that highly educated whites, compared to less educated whites, would be more likely to have their children in racially homogenous schools; and that in choosing schools for their children, highly educated whites would be more affected by the percentage black in the surrounding area than would less educated whites. Our findings are consistent with these claims. In schooling for their children, highly educated whites are more likely to have their children in homogenous schools than are less educated whites, even when controlling for the smaller percentage non-white living in their zip code. Part of the reason for this outcome appears to be that highly educated whites, compared to less educated whites, are more likely to choose alternative schooling for their children as the percentage African American in the surrounding area increases.

Due to data limitations, however, we were forced to use zip codes when smaller units of analysis, such as US government defined census tracts or block groups may be more appropriate levels to test the relationship between per cent black and school choice. More complete controls would also aid in understanding the process that leads to more homogenous schools for educated whites. For example, direct

measures of school quality – especially if they were measured separately from variables highly associated with racial composition – would allow a more nuanced testing of what exactly educated whites are reacting to when they remove their children from high percentage black schools. Previous work on schooling decisions, however, suggests that race overpowers concern for school quality. Controls for occupation (a variable not available to us in our household-level data) would allow a more complete testing of the paths by which education leads to more segregated neighbourhoods. Time series data would allow for more complete and accurate examination of the process of segregation by educational status. Despite these shortcomings, the findings on highly educated whites' sensitivity to the percentage black in a school are quite powerful, given that we provide a conservative test – only capturing that part of highly educated whites sensitivity to blacks when making school choices that is expressed *after* residential choices have been made. The results suggest that education among whites does not have a positive effect on reducing school segregation, at least to the extent that schooling choices influence school segregation.

## **Conclusion**

Deeply implicated in individual life chances, school segregation by race has been the focus of researchers and policy makers, and a core area of conflict among Americans. Racial segregation over the past decade in primary and secondary schools has continued to rise, returning black–white segregation to early 1970s levels (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Orfield 2001). While previous research on 'white flight' showed the extent of white reaction to desegregated schools, the expansion of school choice options focuses attention on the characteristics of those who decide to opt out of the local public school. One underlying factor in school segregation, which may become more important in the new social context, is the role of educational levels of parents. The particular orientation to schooling among the more educated, which operates in a social environment organized by race, tends to contribute to school segregation through school choices for children. In effect, segregation breeds segregation – especially through its interaction with the cultural orientations toward schooling among the more highly educated parents. School racial distributions strongly shape school choices (Saporito and Lareau 1999), and thus racial distributions set the context for maintaining school segregation because they provide the basis for evaluating school choice options.

Parent concerns for the social and economic chances of children are played out in the context of a racialized society (Bonilla-Silva

1997; Emerson and Smith 2000), which places structural limits on the ability of highly educated whites (but not blacks) to choose integrated schools. In national surveys, whites – and especially more educated whites – report an interest in having their children in racially-integrated schools (Emerson and Sikkink 1997; Tuch, Sigelman and MacDonald 1999). Still, racially tolerant attitudes among individuals are unlikely to determine school choices directly, but are constrained within racialized social structures.<sup>10</sup> While racially tolerant attitudes may be effective in improving race relations in other spheres of life (cf. Jackman and Muha 1984), parents are unlikely to put their children in schooling institutions that are perceived as potential threats to the life chances of their children (Warr and Ellison 2000). And more educated parents, whether black or white, tend to evaluate threats differently than less educated parents. Potential threats to the flourishing of the child, in the view of the highly educated, are tightly connected to a ‘quality’ educational experience, and, therefore, specific schools.

Formal education, especially within the context of a racialized society in which educational status is correlated with race, shapes the ability of educated individuals to act on their more liberal racial attitudes. Whites – and especially highly educated whites – are embedded in social networks that lack strong or weak ties to networks with accurate information about racially integrated schools. Highly educated whites, who have constructed ‘educational identities’, are sensitive to educational stratification systems in which school status is highly correlated with high proportions of minorities, especially high proportions of blacks. Social structure, this analysis reminds us, shapes action through the interaction of schemas and resources (Sewell 1992). Education does not free people from this structure; in fact, education increases people’s investment in status hierarchies, and their ability to successfully negotiate them. In this context, education may actually heighten segregation levels.

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### **Notes**

1. Sewell explains that schemas are virtual in the sense that they ‘cannot be reduced to their existence in any particular practice or any particular location in time and space’ (1992, p. 8).
2. We divide our presentation into sections on schemas and resources for analytical purposes only. In social life, these aspects of social structure are not in fact so easily

separated. In the following sections, we point out where the analytical distinction breaks down.

3. One anecdote is illustrative: the apparently increasing use of the phrase, 'educated classes', in newspapers and radio news programmes may reflect the increasing role of education in US stratification.

4. For the moment, we ignore the fact that this educational social structure is both a resource, in the sense that it is concretely embodied in the location and appearance of schools and in a well-known hierarchy of schools in a given urban or rural area (even to the point of being written down, in the case of college admission officers (Stevens 2001)), *and* is also the enactment of the widely shared sets of equivalences (i.e., schema) in American society between white and black, higher and lower, mind and body, safe and dangerous, and good and poor.

5. Similarly in whites' evaluation of neighbourhoods, it is well known that the presence of African Americans is believed by whites to reduce home values, as well as the overall status of a neighbourhood (Massey and Denton 1993; Farley and Frey 1994; Harris 1999).

6. Sewell (1992) is not clear about the relation between the concept of identity, the sense of who you are, and the concepts of schema and resource. Perhaps the best way to conceive of identities is as social structures that are formed through the interaction of schemas and resources. In this article, however, we emphasize the aspects of identity that correspond with Sewell's concept of schema. Educational identities, in our view, are a particular configuration of assumptions, habits of speech and gesture, conventions, aesthetic norms, and recipes for group action – all of which Sewell mentions as examples of his conception of schema.

7. See Emerson, Yancey and Chai (2001) on the association among whites between having children, and unwillingness to consider buying a house in an area that has a high percentage of blacks. This appears consistent with the claim that whites are concerned that their children not interact with low status blacks.

8. In the 1996 National Household Education Survey, blacks with more than a college education live in zip codes that are on average 34 per cent black, while blacks with less than a high school education live on average in zip codes with 48 per cent black.

9. In separate models (not shown), we found that this applies to the interaction of education with per cent white in the neighbourhood as well. That is, there is no evidence in the black sample of an interaction effect between education and per cent white on school choice.

10. Attitude and behaviour are tenuously linked (Schuman and Presser 1976), and this is in part due to the fact that everyday life practices follow not from resources or schemas alone, but the interaction between them. The association between attitudes and outcomes (such as the level of segregation) is highly complex and typically weak (Jaynes and Williams 1989; Clark 1992; Farley and Frey 1994), and can even be contradictory (Jackman and Crane 1986; Massey and Gross 1991).

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