Social Identity Theories in Education

There is a large body of research in studies of schooling, particularly ethnographic case studies, which posits that collective action among students undermines engagement in school and contributes to educational inequality. Perhaps the most well-known examples are research which hypothesizes a ‘burden of acting white’ among minorities (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), and Willis’ (1977) study of hell-raising among working-class British youth. Although those are the most frequently cited examples, Cohen (1955) advanced a similar hypothesis with regard to delinquent behavior more generally decades earlier. At the heart of this research are questions about how peer-group interaction and intra-group process affect educational outcomes. Although not explicitly referenced as such, studies which posit a link between collective action among various student groups and disengagement are applications of social identity theory to the study of student engagement.

In this paper I review studies of engagement from a social identity theory perspective. I consider three social identities in particular: race/ethnic identity, social class identity, and track-based identities. To what extent can collective action explain why some student groups are less engaged than others? I find that apart from track-based identities, educational research does not suggest that the disengagement of low-status youth can be frequently attributed to a social-identity mechanism. Competing explanations for disengagement have not yet been ruled out, and further studies of the relationship between classroom and peer-group context and engagement are needed. I conclude by posing the hypothesis that while further empirical research is needed, track-based identities in particular are highly salient, and thus likely to influence peer group behavior and consequently engagement.

Value, Attachment, and Engagement

Engagement refers both to affective dimensions of classroom experience, such as a student’s interest in school, or appreciation of a particular task, as well as behaviors, such as participating in classroom discourse and completing assignments (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). The sources of student engagement, or its obverse, disengagement, are diverse. Multiple aspects of both students and schools are implicated in problems of disengagement. The social identity theories of engagement in education that I will review here are not comprehensive meta-theoretical conceptualizations of engagement. Instead, they posit a link between student identities and one predictor of engagement in particular, attachment to school in the broadest sense; whether a student has pro-, or anti-school attitudes.¹

Attachment, or identification with school, may have multiple sources itself. Social identity theory places special emphasis on whether or not students value formal education. When students value the process of school, they believe that the process of schooling is a worthwhile endeavor. Alternately, some students may believe that school is fundamentally at odds with what they value, that it is a waste of time. Social identity

¹ I refer to engagement frequently throughout the paper rather than the more proximate concept of attachment or identification with school because that is what researchers are ultimately interested in.
theories in education place emphasis on the origin of student value systems with respect to schools and the educational process.

A closely related concept to valuing school is having a sense of “belonging” to school (Finn, 1989). The participation-identification model posits that belonging and valuing combine to form a students overall identification with school (Finn, 1989). Social identity theory places emphasis on student value systems, with a sense of belonging stemming from that underlying alignment. In other words, students feel that they do not belong because they have “chosen” an alternative system of values.

Whether or not ‘valuing’ and ‘belonging’ can be separated in theory or in practice, there is widespread theoretical agreement that attachment to school is linked to more concrete participation in school activities, including classroom behavior, decision making, participation in extra-curricular activities, etc (Finn, 1989). If a student’s behavior in class were inconsistent with her value system she would experience an unpleasant state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959). Attachment to school is not the same construct as student engagement; there are many factors that can affect a student’s level of engagement in a class. Even if one values school success, it is difficult to be engaged if one is hungry all the time, or has any number of other more pressing concerns. Yet, anti-school attitudes certainly manifest themselves in lower levels of engagement. Thus, social identity theory might be used to understand one important predictor of engagement.

An Example of Social Identity Theory in Education: Differentiation-Polarization Theory

The differentiation-polarization theory of Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1966) provides a social identity theory of behavior among low-track students, suggesting that peer group interactions exacerbate anti-school behavior. I will reference differentiation-polarization theory in explaining the more general framework of social identity theory, and thus provide a brief overview of its logic here.

Because low track students are labeled as low achieving by the school system, they need to look elsewhere for a positive self-image. As they develop alternatives to school achievement, such as accomplishments in athletics, working on cars, and being a sought after date on the weekend, they develop group dynamics which support their chosen alternative methods of obtaining this positive self-image. Students are much more likely to be friends with other students in the same track (Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998) and they sanction their peers who show any pro-school attitudes or behaviors. Developing alternative sources of success, and really believing in them, requires collective effort, and is undermined by individuals who conform to the school’s definition of success. Over time, student attitudes in different track classrooms become polarized, with anti-school attitudes being concentrated primarily among low track students. The students in the case studies of Hargreaves and Lacey, and later Ball (1981) did not have anti-school attitudes entirely because of their low track placements, and many low track students had positive attitudes towards school, but these researchers concluded that tracking greatly polarized the differences in attitudes and behavior between high and low track students. I will review the empirical evidence on the relationship between tracking and engagement after introducing social identity theory.
The Minimal Group Paradigm—an Experimental Basis for Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory was developed by European social psychologists (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) in the 1970’s as a theory of intergroup conflict, and in response to Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT) (Sherif et al, 1961; Campbell, 1965). In his now famous Robber’s Cove experiment, Sherif showed that real conflicts of interests between groups, that is, opposing goals, are a powerful source of conflict, producing strong negative bias towards outgroup members. In the case of the campers at Robber’s Cove, realistic conflict between the “Eagles” and the “Rattlers” during summer-camp games created strong animosity, even hatred. The research that led to the formulation of social identity theory grew out of an effort to understand the relation between identities as ingroup members, and consequent behavior toward outgroup members. In particular, to address the question, where does group conflict come from in the absence of opposing goals?

In experimental lab settings, Henri Tajfel and colleagues (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971) explored the hypothesis that the mere classification of individuals into distinct groups, even in the absence of competing interests, leads to group bias. In his early research, which formed the basis of what is now called the “minimal group paradigm,” Tajfel gave 14-15 year olds a task, asking them to estimate the number of dots on a page. The participants were then categorized randomly, but were told by the experimenters that that people are known to be either over-or under-estimators on this contrived dot task. He discovered that social categorization in and of itself appears to generate intergroup conflict. This was particularly true when groups are determined along a status dimension, which in the original minimal group studies was manipulated by telling participants they were accurate or inaccurate on the dot estimation task. This generalization about the effects of social categorization is consistent with the research on tracking. In the ethnographic research used to develop differentiation-polarization theory, one of the robust findings was that track placements generated a great deal of conflict between students in different tracks, with low track students growing to resent high track students over-time. A particularly interesting finding emerged in Ball’s (1981) case study which was highly consistent with both RCT and Tajfel’s work on social categorization; track-based conflict was reduced when students participated on athletic teams together where they had both a collective identity and shared goals.

The early research on the effects of social categorization on ingroup/outgroup bias links the status assignment of a group with the behavior of the group member toward out-group members. But what about the behavior of group members more generally in a status hierarchy, that is, how do group members deal with their status assignment?

The basis of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) is that individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity. The concept that individuals strive to maintain a positive self-concept is central to both psychological and sociological conceptions of the self (Covington & Berry, 1976; Goffman, 1963). Tajfel and Turner extended this logic to groups. Social identity theory states that if social groups or categories are differentiated along a status dimension, then low status group members will be driven to correct their low status, either individually or collectively. Of course, for social identity theory to be relevant to an individual, he or she must identify with the group. For better or for worse, the individuals must feel they belong to the group. In the
minimal group paradigm, even the flimsiest criterion for group identity is accepted by individuals when presented by an authoritative experimenter. However, not just any social differentiation will provoke a response, the social differentiation of the group must also have evaluative significance. In the case of tracking, the evaluative dimension is academic ability. Rosenbaum (1976) contended that the students in his case study who were in the low track had in fact internalized the school’s conception of them as inferior in academic ability. Low track students tended to think they deserved their track placements, and many students even thought that they themselves had chosen their track, despite the fact that student choice played almost no formal role in track placements at Grayton High. However, it need not be the case that low status individuals have internalized their evaluation; as the minimal group experiments showed, for social identity to influence behavior they only need to recognize that they have in fact been evaluated and assigned low status.

Assuming individuals recognize that they are members of a group, and also recognize the evaluative dimension that determines which groups have high and low status, the social identity framework focuses on three alternatives that low status group members have for achieving a positive social identity. First, low status group members can engage in individual mobility, trying to move themselves out of the low status group and into the high status group. Low status members can also engage in social creativity, which consists of one of three approaches: 1) comparing the ingroup to the outgroup on some new dimension, 2) changing the outgroup with which the ingroup is compared, or 3) changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group. Finally, low status groups can try direct competition usurping the high status of the outgroup on the relevant evaluative dimension.

Individual mobility is a desirable choice, since this option will increase the individual’s status on a presumably valued dimension if successful. For example, if a student with low status focuses his or her efforts on performing well in school and getting good grades, then they may be able to shed their low status identity eventually. Even if they do not achieve this goal, they will still have better grades to show for their effort. The direct competition option is not particularly relevant to the school setting, since adults have all the power. The most important insight of social identity theory is that social creativity is a viable option for addressing low-status group membership.

Social Creativity: Comparing the Ingroup to the Outgroup on Some New Dimension

It is the first form of social creativity that educational researchers have documented, comparing the ingroup to the outgroup on some new dimension. Writing many years before the fundamental basis for social identity theory was established using laboratory experiments, Cohen (1955) brilliantly described this form of social creativity with respect to delinquent youth;

“Status problems are problems of achieving respect in the eye’s of one’s fellows. Our ability to achieve status depends on the criteria of status applied by our fellows, that is, the standards or norms they go by in evaluating people. These criteria are an aspect of

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2 These three approaches described in italics are listed using Tajfel & Turner’s exact phrasing. However, the term “social creativity” is my own over-arching term for this category of responses to low status.
their cultural frames of reference. If we lack the characteristics or capacities which give status in terms of these criteria, we are beset by one of the most typical and yet distressing problems of human adjustment. One solution is for individuals who share such problems to gravitate toward one another and jointly establish new norms, new criteria of status which define as meritorious the characteristics they do posses, the kind of conduct of which they are capable. It is clearly necessary for each participant, if the innovation is to solve his status problem, that these new criteria be shared with others, that the solution be a group and not a private solution.”

Differentiation-polarization theory for example, highlights this form of social creativity among low track students. Low track students reject the notion that academic success is important, focusing instead on other sources of positive self-esteem. Like all forms of social creativity, comparing the ingroup to the outgroup on new dimensions requires collective action. It requires a group effort to develop new norms of pride and success, and to enforce these norms by sanctioning members who show interest in the school’s definition of success (Hechter, 1987). This benefits the low track students cognitively, preserving their positive social identity, but it does nothing for their academic standing or eventual labor market success. In an ethnographic study of delinquent youth in New York City, Sullivan (1989) suggested that the initial boost offered by social creativity eventually wears off; as youth age and have bad labor market experiences, their perceptions of success change. Similarly, in a longitudinal analysis of delinquent youth, Hagan (1997) found that indicators of delinquency did not cause distress in high school, or even in the first years of employment, but did eventually manifest themselves in midlife. This particular form of social creativity is a short-run approach to dealing with low-status that may ultimately be harmful to individuals.

Social identity theory helps us to understand that the development of negative attitudes towards school, and the social norms and peer-group processes that support these negative attitudes, is consistent with the behavior of low-status group members in general. Of course, the theory as such was actually pre-dated by a great deal of research, educational research in particular, outlining a similar explanation for behavior of low-status individuals—Tajfel and Turner’s insights were not entirely novel. For example, Deutsch and Gerard’s (1955) normative perspective on conformity is based on two of the main assumptions underlying social identity theory, that individuals seek social approval from group members, and that adherence to norms is affected by intragroup processes (eg. monitoring conditions). Nor does social identity theory entirely explain the importance of peer group affiliation in adolescence, which serves diverse social functions in addition to identity formation (Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986).

However, social identity theory does provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the behavior of low-status individuals, and provides experimental confirmation of the power of social identities. Social creativity is a generalized social phenomenon that can take one of several forms, some of which are detrimental in the long run. In the case of education, behaviors that are hurtful to a student’s chances of success in school help him or her maintain a positive social identity in the face of the low academic status. Social identity theory makes the disengagement of low-status students seem logical rather than irrational. In the next section I review empirical research on the
relationship between various social identities and engagement in school. First however, I briefly review evidence on the salience of peer-effects more generally.

The General Contagion of Adolescent Behavior

Studies of the influence of peers in the school setting suggest that adolescents are indeed susceptible to peer influence, and thus potentially, to the monitoring and sanctioning processes that support social creativity. Peer influence has been identified both in observational studies of student behavior, and in survey research on social-psychological determinants of school success and student decision making. In McFarland’s (2001) observational study of disruptive behavior, he found a small but statistically significant association between the disruptive behavior of a student’s friends, and the likelihood of subsequent disruptive behavior. Felmlee, Eder, and Tsui’s (1985) observational research suggests an even stronger contagion effect; inattentive behavior by a reading group member (not necessarily even a friend) increased the likelihood of subsequent inattention by 317% percent. Hallinan & Williams (1990) documented a relationship between friendship and students’ college expectations and enrollment in the HS&B data, one friend’s expectations and decisions to attend college influenced the other. In the ADDHealth data, having friends with higher levels of academic achievement and school attachment decrease the likelihood of poor school outcomes, and the peer-effect constituted a stronger effect than any other demographic or academic factor (Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003).

Studies of the general contagion of peer behavior illustrate the susceptibility of students to peer influence, and hence, that social creativity effects could be quite powerful when in place. However merely demonstrating that peers influence each others’ behavior does not illuminate the extent to which a social creativity effect is responsible for student disengagement because the source of misbehavior cannot necessarily be traced to students’ social identity. For example, when high-achieving students engage in inattentive and disruptive behavior, it may often be due to boredom created by inadequately challenging instruction.

Social Class and Student Engagement

In the early 1970’s Paul Willis (1977) [1981] conducted an ethnographic case study of a set of 12 working class boys, the “Lads,” from a working class school in Great Britain. The boys were selected because they were part of the same friendship group, and in contrast to many other students at “Hammertown Boys School,” they had a well-defined oppositional culture, they eschewed the school’s achievement ideology, and just generally raised hell. The Lads reject the notion that education provides opportunities, or is worthwhile. Consistent with social identity theory, the lads rely on social creativity to reshape their social norms. Central to this successful effort at social creativity is their projection of manual labor as masculine, and schoolwork as feminine, and the deriding of

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3 A one standard deviation increase in friends’ resistance increased the likelihood of disruptive behavior by 12% (McFarland, 2001, p. 658).
4 The dependent variable was an index of six binary items (repeated last grade, low GPA, homework problems, suspension, expulsion, and truancy).
any students who do well in school. Rejection of schooling among the Lads thus sits at
the intersection of both their social class identity and gender identity, and is highly
successful. In the Lads’ case, social creativity helps preserve their positive social
identity; the fact that they end up as shop-workers as their fathers before them seems on
the surface to be a willing (and masculinity-affirming) choice.

Unlike differentiation-polarization theory, which focuses on the role of streaming
(tracking), Willis focused on the role of culture, in particular young persons’ identity as
working class youth, in shaping their group’s oppositional alignment. The Lads
themselves did not talk about their working class origins, or how this affected their
attitudes towards school. However, as they discussed their anti-school attitudes, they
talked concurrently about their futures, envisioning themselves as members of the
working class (Willis, 1981, chap. 4). Data from the Lads’ parents indicated that the
culture of the lads in school was similar to their parents’ culture on the shop floor (Willis,
1981, chap. 3). Willis also provided evidence that the Lads’ social group was closed to
anti-school members of the middle class in nearby neighborhoods, implying it is
distinctly working class (Willis, 1981, pp. 57-58). While there was little direct evidence
presented, Willis made a convincing case that the basis of the Lads’ group identity vis-a-
vie the school was rooted in their identity as working class youth.

Not every student at Hammertown had an anti-school attitude. Willis did not
survey the attitudes of the entire student body, but one gets the impression that in fact the
majority of the students, all of whom were working class, primarily chose the individual
mobility option. Education does in fact provide an opportunity for social mobility, and
most students probably took it. But, his ethnography illustrates that some lower class
students opt instead for social creativity. The resulting anti-school attitudes and behavior
permeate every aspect of schooling, from classroom behavior, to field trips, to after-
school forays in vandalism and substance abuse. We cannot say for certain why these
particular students used social creativity to maintain positive social identities, but other
case studies, like those in Detroit (Eckert, 1989) and Toronto (McLaren, 1986)
discovered similar forms of social creativity. The implication is that this scenario could,
under the right, albeit unknown circumstances manifest itself wherever lower class
students attend school. In an analysis of labor market opportunity, Bellair and Roscigno
(2000) found that labor markets dominated by low-wage service-sector employment and
unemployment also had increased delinquency among youth. Also, Davies (1995)
provided empirical support for resistance theories in Canadian high schools, showing that
delinquency and other forms of disengagement were more likely among lower class
youth. Davies considered his findings to be only weak support for resistance theory. But
resistance theory does not posit that all lower class students will be disengaged, only that
social creativity will exacerbate disengagement among some lower class students.

The ethnographic research on negative forms of social creativity among working-
class youth are convincing because they illustrate peer-group processes in action. First,
the researcher literally observes the monitoring and sanctioning of pro-school behavior.
Second, the effects on student behavior in these case studies are often profound. The
anti-school ideologies of these peer groups are incredibly well-elicited. Third, the
positive effects of social creativity for low-status youth—increased social acceptance and
self-worth—are apparent (Eckert, 1989).
But are these processes widespread? How do levels of engagement among low-SES students compare to those of high-SES students in large-scale studies. Moreover, is there evidence that disengagement is associated with social class per se. A competing explanation is that lower levels of achievement among low-SES students explains levels of engagement. Theories of achievement motivation suggest that low-achieving students have an incentive to become disengaged in order to maintain a positive sense of self worth (Covington & Berry, 1976). Thus, disengagement among low-SES students could be attributed not to collective action, but to an individual social-psychological incentive to engage in failure-avoiding behaviors. Do studies of social class and engagement which control for prior achievement find that low-SES students are more likely to be disengaged? Is there quantitative evidence that peer-group processes exacerbate problems of engagement among low-SES students?

A number of large-scale studies have investigated engagement and related constructs (effort, participation, task completion), controlling for differences in achievement among students. A few studies report null effects of social class on engagement (Shernoff & Schmidt, in press; Shouse, Schneider, & Plank, 1992), but most studies find a positive effect of social class on engagement (Author, in press; Carbonaro, 2005; Marks, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1995). Poverty or (low-SES more generally) is widely conceptualized as a ‘risk factor’ for disengagement (Finn, 1993).

The residual effect of social class represents potential social creativity effects among low-ses peer groups. However, other individual factors, such as students’ expectations of educational success, might be the cause of the social class effect on engagement rather than collective action among students. A recent study by Author (in press) provides further evidence on the potential for social creativity effects.

Variation in the effects of social class across classrooms. Author (in press) reasoned that evidence of social creativity effects on engagement might be found by examining the link between the social composition of classrooms, and individual students’ levels of engagement. If the monitoring and sanctioning of peer behavior contributes to disengagement, than there might be a relationship between the composition of a classroom and the engagement of low-SES students. When low-SES students are in classrooms which are predominantly low-SES, their engagement might be lower than if they were in a class with fewer Low-SES peers. Using observational data from the Partnership for Literacy study on participation in classroom discourse and student effort on assignments in 117 middle school classrooms, Author (in press) found that SES was associated with participation and effort after controlling for students’ achievement in the fall. However, examining the interaction between the social class composition of the class and levels of engagement, Author (in press) found that low-SES students were no more likely to be disengaged when they were in predominantly low-SES classrooms.

Race/Ethnicity and Student Engagement

In a series of books and articles beginning in the 1970’s, John Ogbu and colleagues have argued that black students are prone to developing anti-school attitudes and hence, disengagement. The relative disadvantage of blacks, coupled with their racial identity, is hypothesized to lead to reduced attachment to school (Ogbu, 1990; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Comparisons made between blacks, who are involuntary minorities, and
voluntary minority groups, like the Punjabi Sikhs (Gibson, 1987) highlight black American’s oppositional frame of reference. An important element of this multifaceted argument highlights peer-group norms and interactions. Ogbu theorized that black youth sanction peers who show interest in school by labeling school attachment as “white.” Although not typically discussed as such, the “Burden of Acting White” hypothesis then, is a social-identity theory of reduced student engagement similar to the research on peer-group behavior among working-class youth but focusing on racial identity instead.5

Ogbu’s theory is certainly plausible; particularly because racial group identities are highly salient.6 But the mere fact that there is a burden of acting white among some black students reveals that they can and do focus on individual mobility rather than social creativity. Moreover, a sizeable body of research now exists which suggests that among black students, peer group processes that create a burden of acting white are either not widespread, or not very powerful. Early research on the attitudes of blacks toward schooling found that in fact blacks have not lost faith in education as a means to social mobility (Patchen, 1982; Mickelson, 1984; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Crichlow, 1986). Mickelson (1990) began to explain the paradox between faith in schooling and low achievement by noting that concrete attitudes toward school, those more closely related to a black student’s particular family and peer influences, were much more negative than their abstract attitudes.

But evidence from recent large-scale quantitative research shows that black students are not in fact any more likely to have anti-school attitudes than whites (Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Hallinan & Williams, 1990), although teachers do perceive black students as putting forth less effort (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). There is also indirect evidence that among black peer groups, high performing students are not sanctioned as Ogbu’s theory contends. Several researchers have investigated this issue in the NELS88 data, where a number of questions were asked about student popularity. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) found that being thought of as a good student was positively related to popularity, especially among black students. Cook and Ludwig (1997) investigated whether students who received mostly A’s, or participated in an honor society reported being less popular. Among both black and whites students, high achievement led to increased popularity, and in many cases, even more so among black students. At predominantly black schools, participation in honors society had a particularly strong positive effect on popularity, even among members of the opposite sex. Finally, Roseigno (1998) reports that black students are less likely to have peers who are adverse towards educational success than whites.

In the first quantitative evaluation of his own theory using data from 16 high schools, Ogbu and Simons (1994) asked black students directly if they felt anti-school pressure from their peers. They found that black students are ambivalent about using education for social mobility; they believe it is possible and feel little direct pressure from their peers to detach from school, but are also sensitive to prejudice and notice that

5 Cook and Ludwig (1997) provide an overview of how “The Burden of Acting White” fits into Ogbu’s larger body of research on race and schooling, as well as the use of this logic in the popular media.

6 Oddly though, in studies of peer-contagion, same race peers are not significantly more influential than other-race peers (Hallinan & Williams, 1990)
success in school carries a more general negative stigma in the black population as a whole.\(^7\) To summarize, quantitative research provides little support for the notion that black students are less attached to school, let alone that there is a burden of acting white.

Several qualitative studies of peer-group interactions among blacks illustrates why many black students maintain a positive overall approach to schooling, despite the fact that they must overcome negative teacher perceptions of behavior (Tyson, 2003), low-track placements (Gamoran & Mare, 1989), and other barriers to success. Macleod (1987) attributed the pro-school attitudes of the “Brothers,” an impoverished African-American peer-group, to an alternate, more positive form of social creativity, changing the out-group with which they compare themselves. MacLeod found that these youth compared themselves not with whites, and other more advantaged groups, but with their parents’ generation. Even though their chances of success (and current status) were low relative to advantaged white students, they pursued success in school because it was clear to them that their chances of success were considerably greater than that of their parents’ generation.

While not denying the existence of negative peer pressure among black students, Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that it was offset by equally strong peer networks supportive of school success. Similarly, in a study of peer group interactions among African-Americans in elite, predominantly white schools, Datnow and Cooper (1998) found that some friends outside of school rejected school success, but friends within school mostly supported each others’ academic success. Carter (2005) found that while minorities do sometimes label behavior as “acting white” in an effort to foster solidarity and cultural pride, this is not primarily a distinction attached to academic behaviors; the goal seldom appears to be to sanction someone with educational aspirations. Similarly, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) reported that disparagement of high-achieving students was not particularly racialized; only a small fraction of black students were targeted as “acting white,” and there was little effect of this treatment on their course enrollments. Both quantitative and qualitative research suggests that despite the very real barriers to school success, the majority of black students embrace academic achievement.

### Differentiation-Polarization Theory

Early studies of the polarization of high- and low-track students’ attitudes took the form of detailed observational studies of students’ experiences in rigidly tracked comprehensive high schools. In addition to studies by Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1966), studies by Ball (1981) and Abraham (1989) pointed to the effects of peer-group interaction in the behavior of low-track students. Eder’s observational research of elementary school reading groups was consistent with earlier qualitative studies. Felmlee & Eder (1983) found for example that students in low-ability reading groups became inattentive at rates about 50% higher than high-ability students. Eder traced the higher rates of inattention in part to peer-group processes. Disruptive behavior by a reading group member tends to increase the likelihood of subsequent disruptive behavior, but

\(^7\) Ogbu & Simons’s (1994) sample only included black students, so direct comparisons with whites are not possible.
students are more susceptible to this contagion effect in low-ability groups (Felmlee, Eder, & Tsui, 1985).

With a few exceptions (e.g., Wiatrowski et al., 1982) research on tracking finds that low-track students are more likely to be disengaged than high-track students (Carbonaro, 2005; Gamoran et al., 1995; Oakes, 1985; Metz, 1978; Kelly, 1976; Rosenbaum, 1976; Shafer & Olexa, 1971). In an analysis of the HS&B data controlling for selection bias, and a review of previous research, Berends (1995) found small but consistent negative effects of tracking on college expectations, disciplinary problems, and engagement in the last two years of high school. Berends (1995) concluded, “These findings are consistent with the differentiation-polarization hypothesis about tracking and streaming postulated by previous research, both qualitative and quantitative.”

Paralleling the findings on engagement, the robust conclusion of tracking research on student attitudes toward schools is that by the time students reach high school, the negative effects of low status assignments manifest themselves in the way students think and behave in school settings. Being in low track classrooms disenfranchises students, and this in turn leads to a lower probability of moving into more academic courses, and of pursuing further education. Data from High School and Beyond (HS&B) suggest that a student’s expectations (Vanfossen, Jones, & Spade, 1987; Jones, Vanfossen, & Ensminger, 1995) and aspirations (Lee & Bryk, 1988) are closely related to track placement. The reduced aspirations of low track students are clearly evident in dropout rates. Students in the low tracks have higher probabilities of dropping out in part because they have lower achievement, a less resource rich family background, and other unmeasured traits that affect track placement. In other words, they do not necessarily drop out because they are low track students per se. But, track placement itself exerts a strong independent effect on dropping out, stronger even than its effect on achievement alone (Gamoran & Mare, 1989).

The research findings on tracking and engagement are consistent with differentiation-polarization theory, in the sense that tracking is causally related to engagement. Moreover the qualitative studies of low-track peer groups suggest a social identity explanation. Eder’s close observational research also suggests that peer group processes are at work, low-track students appear to be more susceptible to joining in the off-task behavior of their peers. However, two competing explanations exist for disengagement among low-track students; the penalty for off-task or disruptive behavior differ across tracks, as does the nature of instruction.

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8 In their quantitative analysis of 1,620 male students, they found no evidence that tracking contributed to delinquent behavior, once prior delinquency was accounted for. Their analysis had two major methodological flaws though. First, 18.7% of the students left the study between their sophomore and senior years, when delinquent behavior was measured as an outcome. If the most delinquent youth dropped out of school or otherwise did not participate, they might have missed track effects due to attrition bias. Second, they considered track effects very late in the schooling process. Presumably, by sophomore year, anti-school attitudes are already well developed, and ceiling effects preclude any great increase in the disparity between high and low track students’ attitudes.

9 Felmlee & Eder do not discuss the peer-group effect from a social-identity perspective. They do however contrast a similar explanation, differential norms regarding behavior, with an explanation that focuses on the content of low-track instruction (Felmlee & Eder, 1985; p. 224).
First, the consequence for disengagement among low- and high-track students varies considerably. Low-track students may simply be making a rational decision to not invest time and energy in a system that has already labeled them as low achieving. Because of the weak connection between school and work among those who earn only a high school diploma in the U.S., it really does not matter much whether one is a C student or a D student, or whether one excels in low track classes that are not college preparatory (Rosenbaum, 2001). Moreover, there is little opportunity for upward mobility out of the low-track. In Lucas’ study of the High School and Beyond data, only 11.8% of sophomores experienced a net upward mobility in Math by their senior year, while 21.3% did so in English (Lucas, 1999, Table 5.2). The lack of opportunity for low track students erodes the authority of the teacher to induce school participation. By tracking students across periods of the day, Schwartz (1981) discovered that even high track students act out and engage in off-task behavior in non-academic courses. High and low-track students underlying propensity to be engaged may not be so different if the incentive structure were more even.

Second, the nature of the instruction itself in low-track classrooms may be disengaging. For example, Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) detail the rote nature of low-track teachers’ approach to English instruction. Within the broad category of “seat-work” or “Q&A,” Low-track classrooms engaged in activities such as filling in the blanks, answering true-false questions, and working on punctuation and grammar far more than high-track classrooms. One of the risks of such a highly structured approach, and the general preoccupation with order in low-track classrooms is that students may find instruction less interesting and meaningful (Page, 1991; Metz, 1978). Another risk of such instruction is that it is likely to be “fragmented.” In English classrooms, intertextuality, the process of alluding to another text during a textual analysis, or linking texts in order to better understand the literary elements of a text is an important element of literature instruction (Fairclough, 1992). Page (1991) and Caughlan and Author (2004) found lower incidences of intertextuality in low-track classrooms, which contributed to a lack of coherence across lessons. Another important element of literature instruction that was missing in the low-track classroom was the linking of literature to students’ lives, including their imagined future life as students, members of the workforce, and heads of households (Caughlan & Author, 2004). Using the National Longitudinal Survey (base year 1988), Carbonaro (2005) found that high-track students had higher levels of effort, in part because of beliefs that they were competent, and because of more intellectually stimulating instruction.

Research suggests that low-track students are in fact much more likely to be disengaged than high-track students. The low levels of engagement among low-track students might be attributed in part to social creativity and peer-group processes, and Eder’s research comes closest to confirming such an effect. But further evidence on peer-group processes in tracked settings is needed.


**Discussion**

*Summary of Research Findings*

In case studies of social class, race/ethnicity, and tracking, researchers have found a link between students’ social identities and student engagement. Moreover, these studies can frequently be understood as social identity theories of behavior; where peer groups engage in social creativity, realigning their value system away from success in school, in order to maintain a positive social identity. In close ethnographic research in schools, researchers are able to identify social creativity, because they can verify both that anti-school norms are present in a peer group, as well as the monitoring and sanctioning behavior used to support those norms.

But identifying social creativity effects in large-scale studies is considerably more difficult. First, researchers must establish whether there is a bivariate relationship between a particular social identity and student engagement. If there are little or no differences in engagement associated with a social identity in the basic descriptive sense, than it is unlikely that social creativity is a particularly problematic source of disengagement. Indeed, when a low-status group does not have anti-school attitudes this may suggest, in line with MacLeod’s findings, that a positive form of social creativity is in place. If differences in engagement are found, then further studies of peer effects on engagement are needed. Do peer group processes support an anti-school alignment?

When researchers compare the attitudes and engagement of black students to whites, without adjusting for any other factors, they find no evidence that black students are more likely to have oppositional attitudes, or to be disengaged.

Most research shows that students from low SES backgrounds have moderately lower levels of engagement, and students in low-track classrooms have substantially lower levels of engagement. Do studies of peer-group interactions among low-SES and low-track students support a social identity theory explanation for this disengagement?

Unfortunately, few large-scale studies of peer-group interactions have been conducted concerning the effects of social class and track-based identities. Author (In press) investigated the relationship between the SES effect on engagement and the social class composition of classrooms, an attempt to establish, albeit indirectly, potential social creativity effects, but found no relationship. Felmlee & Eder’s research on the contagion of disruptive behavior in low-ability reading groups certainly suggests a possible social creativity effect, but alternative explanations could not be ruled out. There have been several large-scale studies of popularity and friendship among black students in an attempt to document the mechanism of disengagement among black students, but no negative peer pressure was documented, perhaps simply because black students are no more likely to be disengaged to begin with. Studies using methods similar to those employed by Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey (1998), Roscigno (1998), and Cook and Ludwig (1997) are needed of low-SES and low-track students. The overall findings are integrated in Table 1.

< Table 1 about here >

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10 In light of lower levels of achievement, a history of blocked access to opportunity, and the competitive environment of schooling, researchers have begun to think of the engagement of black students as *paradoxical* (Shernoff & Schmdit, in press).
The Salience of Track-Based Identities

While there is little evidence currently available to suggest that the much lower levels of engagement among low-track students are primarily due to negative forms of social creativity, I believe it is likely that a significant proportion of low-track students are members of peer groups with a normative framework that does not value success in school. Three bodies of research support that hypothesis, (a) the convincing ethnographies of oppositional peer groups reviewed previously, (b) experimental research on the perceived legitimacy of status assignments, and (c) experimental research on the permeability of group boundaries. In this section I discuss reasons (b) and (c) below.

Social creativity effects are presumably mediated by the salience of an individuals’ social identity. If an individual identifies strongly with a group, they will be more highly susceptible to social norms. Consistent with this hypothesis, there is some indirect evidence from social-psychological experiments, that the perceived legitimacy of the individual’s assignment to a status group may influence the response of low status group members. When the perceived legitimacy of the individual’s assignment is high, low status members are more likely to identify strongly with the low status group and favor them on allocation tasks (Ellemers, Wilke, & Van Knippenberg (1993). In other words, an individuals’ behavior is more heavily influenced by a social identity when that identity is highly salient, than when it is a peripheral aspect of their overall sense of self. In a meta-analysis of 37 papers, Mullen, Brown, and Smith (1992) found that individuals in low-status groups identify more strongly with their group in real-life groups than in experimental groups. This may be because in real-life groups, status assignment is perceived to be more ‘legitimate,’ there is generally little doubt for example, as to which gender an individual is. In contrast, in experimental research, the assignment to groups often has no legitimacy beyond that of the influence of the experimenter, because the group assignments are random, and based on a bogus task. Indeed, the participants can often tell that the task is unfair (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987, 1991). And yet, remarkably, participants’ behavior is almost always affected by group membership, even a bogus experimental one.

A strong sense of identity with the group is a precondition for any collective action. By engaging in social creativity, an individual effectively hinders their own individual chances for upward mobility. An individual is unlikely to hurt their chances of success in life if they do not really identify with an anti-school group. In schools, students are assigned to curricular tracks on a variety of criteria, including performance on standardized tests, grades, prior course taking, teacher recommendations, and sometimes other criteria, such as a writing sample in English and Language arts (, 2007). Even though research shows that the achievement distributions of tracks are overlapping (Hallinan, 1992), assignment is still based on a set of criteria students often perceive as legitimate (Rosenbaum, 1976). Thus, while a students’ placement is in reality only moderately based on their actual level of achievement, track placements have the appearance of being highly legitimate. Educational psychologists have documented that children develop a school-related sense of efficacy at a very young age (Stipek & Maclver, 1989; Smith, Davidson, & France, 1987), and that over time, negative evaluations become more common (Ruble & Frey, 1987). Track assignments, which
supposedly carry the weight of the students’ prior academic record, are likely to be perceived as highly legitimate.

If legitimate assignment criteria make the social creativity option more likely to occur, the opposite is true of permeable group boundaries, which make the individual mobility option more likely to occur. Wright, Taylor, and Moghaddam (1990) found that when the openness of the high status group is experimentally manipulated, even the slightest opportunity for individual mobility will be taken, particularly if the low status group member is closer to the high status group on the evaluative dimension. They also found that higher levels of permeability led to a greater perception of legitimacy. Thus, for low status members who are quite distant from the high status group on the evaluative dimension, permeability might actually increase their group identification and propensity for social creativity.

While some schools have little upward track mobility (Rosenbaum, 1976), at least in principle, track boundaries are usually permeable. Students can, in theory, move from one track to another, experiencing both upward or downward mobility. Indeed, most schools offer some opportunity for upward mobility, even if certain restrictions apply (Lucas, 2007). For example, in the High School and Beyond data, 11.8% of 1980 sophomores experienced a net upward mobility in Math by their senior year, and 21.3% did so in English (Lucas, 1999, Table 5.2).

If, low-track identities are both perceived to be legitimate and impermeable, than they are a likely source of anti-school norms, as low-track students seek to cope with an institutionally conferred and supported low-status identity. If, on the other hand, students believe the boundaries between the high and low-track to be permeable, which is the official stance of most schools, and is reflected in non-trivial rates of upward mobility, than experimental research implies that a fraction of low-track students, the lowest performing ones, are most susceptible to negative forms of social creativity. Of course, research done in laboratory settings does not allow us to judge at what levels of permeability and legitimacy there is a tipping point toward or away from social creativity in real-life settings. But as institutional identities that are likely to be perceived as legitimate, it seems likely that some low-track peer groups realign their value system in order to maintain a positive social identity, and that this process of social creativity is ultimately detrimental to their school success.

**Conclusion**

Social identity theory is a potentially powerful tool for explaining differential levels of engagement among student groups. It seems particularly likely that low-track students frequently engage in negative forms of social creativity that involve anti-school norms, a process with erodes their chances of success in school. Research is needed to identify the schooling contexts which make negative forms of social creativity among low-track students and others less likely to occur.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Ethnographic Evidence of Social Creativity</th>
<th>Bivariate Association with Engagement</th>
<th>Quantitative Evidence of Peer Group Effects</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Social Class</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Not enough evidence$^b$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnic</td>
<td>Mixed$^a$</td>
<td>Nill</td>
<td>Nill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Not enough evidence$^c$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ In addition to the initial research on “the burden of acting white” others have found positive forms of social creativity (MacLeod, 1987) and resilient pro-school alignments (e.g. Horvat & Lewis, 2003).

$^b$ But see Author (in press).

$^c$ But see Felmlee and Eder (1983).
References

Author (in press). Race, social class, and student engagement in middle school English classrooms. *Social Science Research*.


