



# ☆ Who has the advantage? Race and sex differences in returns to social capital at home and at school



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## ABSTRACT

A growing body of literature suggests that social capital is a valuable resource for children and youth, and that returns to that capital can increase academic success. However, relatively little is known about whether youth from different backgrounds build social capital in the same way and whether they receive the same returns to that capital. We examine the creation of and returns to social capital in family and school settings on academic achievement, measured as standardized test scores, for white boys, black boys, white girls, and black girls who were seniors in high school in the United States. Our findings suggest that while youth in different groups build social capital in largely the same way, differences exist by race and sex as to how family social capital affects academic achievement. Girls obtain greater returns to family social capital than do boys, but no group receives significant returns to school social capital after controlling for individual- and school-level characteristics.

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## 1. Introduction

A long tradition of research has demonstrated powerful advantages in the U.S. educational system for students from traditionally privileged groups (cf. Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bloome, 2014; Bobbit-Zeher, 2007; Downey & Pribesh, 2004). For example, female students remain at a disadvantage in terms of access to and participation in STEM training and fields (Chen, 2013; Riegel-Crumb & Moore, 2014), whereas the black-white gap in standardized testing persists (Davis-Kean & Jager, 2014; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). However, in recent decades, girls and women have come to outpace boys and men in educational attainment (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013), differences that likely lie at least partly in achievement processes. Progress across racial and ethnic groups has not been as rapid, and has certainly not reached a tipping point like gender has where students from traditionally privileged groups are outperformed by groups with lower ascribed status.

In this paper, we analyze the puzzle of explaining differences in academic achievement between boys and girls and between white and black students. We introduce a relatively neglected explanation for these differences by asking to what extent social capital in the home and the school are created in the same ways and used in the same ways across these groups of students. Using a nationally representative data set and structural equation modeling, we first examine whether students in these groups (white boys and girls; black boys and girls) accrue social capital at home and at school in the same ways. We then turn to models predicting academic achievement to examine whether students in these groups receive the same returns to social capital.

Although we derive our central arguments from the social capital literature, our investigation may also fit more broadly under recent treatments of intersectionality (Choo & Ferree 2010; Collins, 2000; Shields, 2008). In the context of our quantitative research, such arguments suggest that looking at the effects of race and gender additively can miss unique forms of disadvantage or discrimination that those who occupy two or more disadvantaged statuses may experience. Our approach will reveal, for example, whether black girls experience non-additive forms of disadvantage relative to white girls, black boys or both. We will be able to determine whether such disadvantage involves lack of access to social capital, difficulties using it effectively in pursuing aca-

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ademic achievement, or both. In contrast, we would be unable to address these issues by focusing on race and gender in separate investigations.

## 2. Background

Sommers (2013) argues that schools have become tailored to girls' learning styles and preferences, and that schools' movements to "boy-averse" structures have had deleterious effects on male achievement and attainment. Some scholars, however, argue that this perspective overstates the effects of schools on academic outcomes, and that differences between boys and girls in families account for much of the differences between boys' and girls' attainment and achievement (cf. Farkas, 2003). For example, DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) note that mothers and fathers parent their children differently depending on child gender. They also argue that father absence, a growing feature of many households, is more consequential for boys than for girls (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Does this mean that girls have an advantage in educational achievement because of what happens at home, or what happens at school? Might it be that girls form stronger social relationships at school, which then promote stronger achievement? Or, does there remain a "boy problem" at school (Grant, 2014) that results in gender differences in achievement?

Questions similar to those concerning sex differences in educational achievement and attainment can also be posed concerning racial differences. For example, some research has outlined important differences in educational opportunities and experiences for minority students (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Tyson, 2011), which would suggest the source of such inequities is centered in the schools themselves. However, another perspective places mechanisms of inequality across racial groups in the home. For example, black students are more likely than other students to be living with single mothers (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013), while Asian and Latina/o students are more likely to speak a language other than English in the home (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015), both family circumstances that are strongly associated with educational outcomes (cf. McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013; Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Some research also suggests that cognitive differences across children from different racial backgrounds exist when these children enter school, shifting focus to families (Farkas, 2003), and that schools are limited in their abilities to change these trajectories (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010). There is also continued conversation regarding whether race is of declining significance in attainment processes (Wilson, 2003). Although these latter arguments generally refer to occupational attainment, education, as a major precursor of occupation, is clearly relevant. At the same time, gender differences in educational attainment within racial groups (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013) suggest we should investigate race and sex simultaneously to address what might be different processes of achievement by subgroup.

All of these studies neglect issues of gender variation in how social bonds at home and at school may differentially impact boys' and girls' chances of academic success. They also fail to address how social capital formation and use may vary by race. To fill this gap, we introduce a relatively neglected explanation for differences across ascriptive status groups: potential differences in a) the ways social capital is built both at home and at school, and b) and in the returns to family and school social capital across groups. We continue a tradition that uses social capital theory to organize investigations concerning the role of ascription, social processes, and educational achievement (Portes, 2000; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994). Given the ways previous research has exposed the entanglement of race, sex, and academic achievement, we expect that the ways social capital

operates in different settings will be sensitive to ascribed characteristics.

## 3. Educational attainment for boys and girls and for black students and white students

Much early research on sex inequalities in educational opportunities and attainment focused on obstacles for girls. Even today, research suggests that teachers give fewer comments and less useful feedback to girls (Liu, 2006; Sadker & Sadker, 2010) and have more negative feelings toward female students who challenge their authority (Renold & Allan, 2006). In terms of attainment, gaps still remain between male and female students in terms of participation in STEM courses, starting in high school (Riegel-Crumb & Moore, 2014) and continuing through selection of a college major (Wang, 2013) and the acquisition of higher degrees (National Science Foundation, 2013), even after controlling for ability and previous performance (Riegel-Crumb, King, Grodsky, & Muller, 2012).

In more recent decades, however, patterns of female advantage have emerged in some components of educational achievement and attainment. For example, girls receive better grades than do boys, and female students are more likely to graduate from both high school and college than are male students (DiPrete & Buchman, 2013). Such patterns have led some scholars to ask whether modern schooling is ill-suited for boys' interests and skills (Sommers, 2013). For example, DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) argue that girls show greater attachment to school than do boys; they also exert more effort and have skills better suited to the school environment. Over time, these factors become mutually reinforcing and contribute to attainment differentials. Grant (2014) shows that, historically, schools have dealt with their "boy problems" via both excluding some boys from middle-class educational settings and adapting public schools to boys' interests by including athletics and vocational training, activities that were expected to keep boys more engaged.

Similar research has focused on disparate educational opportunities and attainment across racial and ethnic groups, but for the most part traditionally disadvantaged groups continue to lag behind. While levels of Asian-American educational attainment are high, and there has been progress regarding African-American educational attainment (Kao & Thompson, 2003), race differences persist in educational access, achievement, and attainment. A classic example is the persistence of a black-white gap in standardized testing (Jencks & Phillips, 1998); while recent research has shown that as much as half of this gap is due to abilities and skills children bring to school, half of the gap remains unexplained, perhaps attributable to inequities in schools and beyond (Farkas, 2003; Davis-Kean & Jager, 2014). Similar patterns exist for post-secondary educational attainment (cf. Zhan & Sherraden, 2011). Although financial capital and possibly cultural capital are important (Lareau, 2011), they do not entirely explain these gaps.

We suggest another approach to explaining differences in educational achievement across these groups: social capital. Previous research has shown that for children and adolescents, social capital is associated with academic achievement (Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Grubb, 2009; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013), but little attention has been given to whether students from different demographic groups have the same access to and receive the same returns to social capital. Given the current debates concerning the sources of inequities in academic opportunities, experiences, and outcomes, we argue that both families and schools may be consequential in explaining these differences.

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