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Moving Up: Communities, Institutions, and Plural Societies

Francisco M. Hernández* and Debra J. Bolton, Ph.D.**

*U.S. Army**

*Kansas State University***

Abstract

The 2010 Census estimated that the United States will become a minority-majority country by 2043. Acting Census Director, Thomas L. Mesenbourg, noted that steady immigration, increased interracial marriages, and continued trends will move “the United States to become a plurality nation, where the non-Hispanic white population remains the largest single group, but no group is in the majority.” While population diversification is reason for applause, the continued disparities in social and economic classes and educational attainment among minority groups are causes for concern. Pluralistic values can lessen the minoritization of any one group (Kruvant, 2015). Cultural capital shapes the intrinsic components of a values system. Unlike human capital, which is often correlated with the attainment of education, cultural capital largely corresponds to upbringing (Bourdieu, 1986). These dramatic increases in the US “minority” populations demand that this human ecosystem practice full integration of its components. The central force driving individual, community, and institutional roles and responsibilities is the interpretation of pluralistic values that shape and characterize participation in society. When looking at educational institutions as resources for increasing social connectedness and community engagement, the onus is shared by individuals and institutions to cooperate, adapt, participate, contribute, and have mutual trust within the ecological system for optimal outcomes (Ostrom, 2009). As U.S. society becomes more ethnically pluralistic, the ability of individuals, communities, and educational institutions to function within the social system will become more dependent on abilities to gain access to relevant education and adapt to a pluralistic society.

Keywords: pluralistic values, human capital, social capital, cultural capital, development, education, social mobility, economic growth

Introduction

Following the 2010 census, the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) estimated that the United States will become a minority-majority country by 2043. The Census Bureau Acting Director, Thomas L. Mesenbourg, said with increased interracial marriages and continuing demographic trends, “the United States will become a plurality nation, where the non-Hispanic white population remains the largest single group, but no group is in the majority” (U.S. Census, 2012). Though ethnic diversification is reason for applause, the continued disparities in social and economic classes and educational attainment inequalities amongst race groups is cause for concern.

Market and economic analyses continue to find an accelerated growth of the rich-poor divide, which is quickly becoming the defining political issue of our time. Census (2014) data show that 36% of non-Whites are members of the economic lower-class as compared to 16% of non-Hispanic Whites. Additional data shows that Whites comprise a disproportionately higher percentage of the economic middle-class and above, account for the majority of higher income earners, and are comparatively less likely to drop out of high school. The attainment of higher and tertiary education diplomas, certificates, and degrees shows further inequality amongst Whites and non-Hispanic Whites. Additional data from the U.S. Department of Education (2012) find that 15% of minorities achieve these educational qualifications compared to 32% of Whites (U.S. Census, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The statistical trends in socioeconomic classes must be addressed and discussed, not merely in national or political circles, but also at individual and community levels and amongst educational institutions.

This paper discusses three influencers and their roles and responsibilities in delivering desirable outcomes leading to socioeconomic mobility: (a) the individual, (b) the community, and (c) the educational institution.

Correlating Human, Social, and Cultural Capital to Socio-Economic Growth

Economists and sociologists have long presented various theories on the correlations of education and human capital and its larger socio-economic impacts (Putnam, 2000; Flora and Flora, 2015; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). 1992 Nobel Laureate, Gary Becker, popularized human capital and its relationship with economic growth theory in the early 1960s. Becker discussed how market discrimination is partially driven by the inability of the lower class to attain and provide marketable skills through proper education. He said that self-fulfilling beliefs of minorities and prejudices held by politicians, employers, teachers, and other influential groups lead to underinvesting in education, training and work skills that contribute to economic mobility. Dozi and Valdivia (2008) suggested that there are structures in place that bar minority classes from attaining higher income, education, and those skills necessary to build human capital. Those barriers, personal and institutional, often include unfamiliarity with education systems, language, overcrowding in urban and rural schools, slow acculturation, low-quality education in poor areas, and discrimination. In order to share responsibility, we must recognize the barriers in place that prevent underrepresented groups from building human capital.

In Trends in Global Development, U.S. Ambassador James Michel (2014) said successful human capital development strategies must target lower income demographic groups, as well as underrepresented populations and communities, providing the required technical skills that lead to market inclusion in economic value chains. Equipping the workforce of economically depressed communities with marketable job skills is a strategic concern for the development, growth, and outlooks of those most affected by the growing economic divide separating our society (Hernandez & Wright, 2015).

As individuals and communities’ social connectedness and community engagements increase, i.e., they build higher social capital, they

also enjoy an improved quality of life (Putnam, 2000a, Flora & Flora, 2015; and Becker, 2008). When looking at educational institutions, specifically higher education, as a resource to provide opportunities to increase social and human capitals, individuals and institutions must share the onus for equal access by underrepresented groups (Ostrom, 2009). When academic institutions offer diverse learning opportunities, they can better promote individual networking, social bonding and trust, social inclusion, and diversity, thereby increasing opportunities for individual networking to improve equality and economic growth opportunities (Bolton & Dick, 2013). Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (2009) discussed the importance of individual-to-individual interactions over time in building trust, learning appropriate cultural norms and values, and disproving stereotypical assumptions, leading to increases in social connectedness.

Social research in minority-majority rural communities found that non-Whites equated the attainment of education with the ability to live better lives (Bolton & Dick, 2013). Roderick (2000), and Dozi and Valdivia (2008) argued that educational attainment is a historical push and pull factor for immigrating to the United States from other countries. Non-Whites encounter barriers to educational attainment and within economic markets that are often not encountered by Whites (Bolton & Dick, 2013). Cornelia Butler-Flora and Jan Flora (2015) observed that minorities could capitalize on their human and cultural capital assets as they seek to increase their social capital. Could we change the tide along with the growing population diversification, so that being non-White can be seen as an asset rather than a barrier?

The Case for a Values System to Eliminate Social and Economic Barriers

The population of the United States has changed dramatically over the past 50 years, as well as society's tolerance and acceptance of different ethnic groups. However, for any system or institution to function effectively within its ecosystem, it requires more than tolerance and acceptance of its

components. Individual participation and buy-in are critical to the sustainability of initiatives and development opportunities. One of the more dynamic and inclusive systems in American society today, the U.S. Army, functions as efficiently as it does, in part because of individual, as well as institutional, buy-in. Its organizational core values — Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage — enable the system to function, simultaneously meeting growing global challenges. Since 2005, the Core Values are what define the characteristics of being a Soldier and become a part of their everyday lives (U.S. Department of the Army, 2015). Economic class, social group, and ethnicity are not considered the driving factors of the system, but rather draw upon its core values to ensure the organizational objectives are accomplished. The key takeaway is to acknowledge that the organization functions, and more importantly, individual opportunities are achieved through the continuous integration and participation in the system. Other organizations and systems, including philanthropic, profit, and not-for-profit organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Creative Associates International, Inc., and the American Red Cross, operations and functions are based upon defined core values. Today, there are no recognizable, or definitively defined, "American values" for a pluralistic society (Kruvant, 2015).

Defining Values in a Plural Society

In that regard, the central component driving individual, community, and institutional roles and responsibilities is the interpretation, or lack thereof, of the pluralistic values that shape and characterize participation in society. As American society continues to shift into a minority-majority population, notable principles to consider in determining core values and outlining stakeholders' roles and responsibilities with regard to human, social, and cultural capitals growth supporting upward socioeconomic mobility are as follows:

Individual

- Recognize that as the population becomes more pluralistic, identification as an ethnically pluralistic member of society is an asset (Kruvant, 2015);
- Capitalize on educational opportunities to deepen human capital and increase social bonding amongst culturally diverse groups (Michel, 2014);
- Pursue growth of human capital, because it enables individuals to assume positions of greater responsibility and influence within organizations and society, thereby increasing social capital (Flora & Flora, 2012);
- Promote the development of organizational and institutional policies to use improved social capital to lead to inclusive and diverse communities with enriched community capitals (Flora and Flora, 2008); and
- Use pluralistic values to bridge social and other community capitals, community-to-community, to network, increase, and improve upward socioeconomic mobility opportunities in previously marginalized areas (Kruvant, 2015).

Community

- Seek educational and employment opportunities for lower socioeconomic community members, as well as identify those community members with high human capital and the potential to bridge social divides;
- Form social and service support structures that have business impacts for lower socioeconomic groups, providing linkages to market value chains and creating economic opportunities for individual and community advancement;
- Mentor members of the lower socioeconomic groups who are capitalizing on opportunities to increase human and social capitals, move into leadership positions, and create opportunities to bridge social and economic barriers; and
- Honor and share cultural traditions.

Educational Institution

- Present educational opportunities to minorities based on economic market needs and in areas with opportunities for advancement;
- Provide curricula and programs that promote positive cross-cultural interactions and exchanges amongst student populations;
- Offer diverse learning opportunities that enable individuals to expand cultural capital and networking opportunities; and
- Facilitate introduction of minority graduates into needed economic value chains.

Recommendation for the Future

As American society becomes more ethnically pluralistic, the ability of individuals, communities, and educational institutions to function within the socioecologic system will become increasingly more dependent on their abilities to build and maintain trust, improve interconnectedness, and remain adaptable to changing social, economic, and political landscapes. Integration of values systems supportive of a pluralistic society will help eliminate barriers that have, and continue to, hinder socioeconomic growth and mobility. Programs and initiatives targeting these socioeconomic challenges must be developed, funded, and implemented with the buy-in of individuals, communities, and institutions. They must also work to increase government and private sector participation/investment, to improve the likelihood of sustainability, and provide long-term meaningful impacts to those working toward socioeconomic progression.

Coordinating initiatives and activities, guided by definitive socially-pluralistic values and sustainable processes, is central to meeting the challenges presented by a growing rich-poor divide. Organized approaches to meet those challenges also increases the likelihood of success by limiting the implementation of programs not working in direct or indirect support of those initiatives to increase opportunities for economic and social mobility, namely through the development of human, social, and cultural capitals.

Implications

As we move into a plural society over the next 30 years, it is of vital importance for pluralistic society members to integrate into socio-economic value chains and function as part of a holistic system. The ability to adopt values, inclusive of all its participants and supportive of the larger socio-ecological system, will help ensure a greater understanding of other members of society and the intrinsic value of their human, social, and cultural capitals. As more multi-ethnic individuals and families increasingly self-identify as assets within a changing ethnic and population landscape, the minoritization of individuals and communities that has constantly plagued American society should diminish. Likewise, institutions can provide adaptive educational opportunities to meet cultural, social, and economic changes, facilitating the next generations' betterment.

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