

# **Neighborhood Cultural Heterogeneity and the College Aspirations of Low-Income Students of Color**

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## **Abstract**

*For decades, higher education has concerned itself with understanding the complex pathways to college for low-income students of color in general, and those in urban contexts in particular. This paper applies the concept of neighborhood cultural heterogeneity, defined as the presence of a wide array of competing and conflicting cultural models, to explore college aspirations and enrollment among low-income, urban youth of color. The findings, based on a five-month ethnography involving low-income students of color in a Los Angeles neighborhood, highlight diverse positive and negative neighborhood-informed messages regarding college-going.*

**Keywords:** neighborhood, cultural heterogeneity, college, urban, culture, adolescents, students of color, higher education, race, poverty, social context

The discourse around low-income youth of color is often framed by problematic urban poverty tropes and stereotypes: decaying neighborhoods, lack of family support, deteriorating schools filled with students labeled “at risk,” deviant influences, and bleak futures (Fauth, 2004; Gorski, 2008; Matias & Liou, 2015). Some who might subscribe to these portrayals suggest that students in these neighborhoods hold oppositional identities such that getting good grades means “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer, 2006; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). The generalized conclusions that extend from these depictions dismiss variability in students’ interpretation and exhibition of culture.

However, over the last several years scholars have begun to dispute homogenous and deficit cultural paradigms, suggesting that “dominant theories that presuppose anti-school stances as a central feature of specific minority cultures mask the diversity of ideological and cultural perspectives within these groups” (Carter, 2005, p. 75). Thus “cultural heterogeneity” has emerged as an important concept that enables exposure of cultural frames within low-income and racially minoritized<sup>1</sup> groups.

I argue that rather than being characterized as having “oppositional” or “ghetto-specific” cultures, urban neighborhoods might instead be framed by the idea of cultural heterogeneity. I view cultural heterogeneity as the array of diverse interpretations, values, and actions within a specific community. Accordingly, I first consider the difficulty of using culture to understand urban poverty and in doing so I address culture as an analytical tool. I then examine cultural heterogeneity as an explanatory framework. Subsequently, I offer an ethnographic case study that uses cultural heterogeneity as a conceptual lens to explore the college aspirations of six low-income high school seniors of color living in the same inner-city neighborhood. I conclude with practical implications and new directions related to the study’s key findings and insights.

### **The Dilemma of Exploring Urban Poverty**

One of the challenges in understanding the conditions of poverty is distinguishing between social structure and culture. On the one hand, some have argued that social structure is determinative in predicting student outcomes (Wilson, 1987; 2010). From this perspective, the social structures in which individuals are embedded largely predict how students will perform in school, if they will go to college, and where they will go (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008). Culture, from a structural viewpoint is an intermediary or endogenous variable that accounts for only a minimal amount of explanation. On the other hand, scholars have suggested that one’s culture, loosely defined, creates norms of behavior that place individuals on a trajectory for success or failure (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lewis, 1969; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Those who grow up in poverty share a culture, argue some, which extends beyond economic shortfalls and falls

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<sup>1</sup> This term reflects an understanding of racial “minority” status as that which is socially constructed in specific societal contexts (Stewart, 2013).

into forms of norms and behaviors that render residents incapable of moving out of it (Lewis, 1959; 1969).

Curiously, perceptions about the impact of structure and culture come from a diversity of perspectives that often reach the same conclusions. A traditional Marxist analysis, for example, might be that structure creates little possibility for human agency. Change within social structures is virtually impossible (Ortner, 1984; Sewell, 2005). Others may suggest that social structures are irrelevant and placing an emphasis on fixing social structures does nothing to reduce poverty or improve those who are poor (Liebow, 1967; Stack, 1970). Similarly, some will suggest that those who are poor share a culture of poverty (Borjas, 2001; Ellwood, 1988; Lewis, 1969) and others will highlight that symbolic forms of capital are cultural in nature and it is those determinants that keep people poor (Bourdieu 1973; 1986). In effect, for one reason or another, either structure or culture seems to be so powerful that change is often seen as impossible.

My focus differs in two respects. First, I assume that individuals are members of cultural groups that function within a variety of social structures. How one's background, identity, and culture(s) are positioned in different social structures is critical for understanding how privilege and inequities operate and persist. Second, I suggest that although structure surely plays a large role in privileging some and harming others, structure is not always determinative. In what follows, I first consider a definition of culture as well as the strengths and weaknesses of employing cultural heterogeneity as an analytic tool in understanding educational trajectories, underserved communities, and urban neighborhoods.

### **Culture**

How might one think of culture? Obviously, a simple answer has proven elusive to anthropologists and sociologists alike for over a century. Culture has been defined as a list of artifacts (e.g., clothes, food, gifts), a description of the functions of different activities (e.g., rituals), an analysis of the structural relations of a group's activities (e.g., weddings, initiations), and narrative analyses of what, how, and why groups communicate (Lamont & Small, 2008). Swidler (1986) provides the image of culture as a "tool kit" of stories, rituals, habits, skills, world-views, and styles from which people construct strategies of action used in varying configurations in their life. A person may simultaneously be a member of multiple groups, each with its own particular shared conceptual schemes (Harwood, Schoelmerich, & Schulze, 2000). Thus, a cultural community may be viewed not as a bounded, static entity, but as a group of individuals who co-construct a shared reality in one or more domains of life and its related discourse and activities (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). I use the complexity and conundrum of culture to foreground the meaning of cultural heterogeneity and how I employ the term in this text.

### **Using Cultural Heterogeneity**

I work from a perspective of culture that is complex and fluid (Carter, 2005) rather than one-dimensional. Following David Harding (2009), I define cultural heterogeneity in the following way: "The presence of a wide array of competing

cultural models, some of which are "[neighborhood] specific" (p. 3). The youth in such neighborhoods have a variety of cultural scripts from which they might learn, draw from, and act in order to make sense of their worlds. The result, I posit, is that rather than follow a uniform path to adulthood, adolescents of color in low-income neighborhoods face a plethora of decisions as they make their way through school.

By suggesting that students have a variety of cultural scripts to learn from and follow, I reject the idea that singular forces exist in a neighborhood such that individuals have no alternative other than to follow one path. John Ogbu's studies, for example, speak of "oppositional cultures" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) which assume that students of color will interpret academic success as an attribute of white school children and of consequence will adopt alternative, frequently anti-social, behaviors. Oscar Lewis (1959) similarly assumed that individuals within a given poor community adopted behaviors that were similar and pervasive and resulted in reproductive actions that stymied personal and communal well-being. Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural and social capital also asserted that poor neighborhoods lacked the ability to stitch together networks that might enable people to climb out of poverty (Bourdieu, 1973; 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Although there is much to consider within each perspective, I take issue with the idea, especially in the twenty-first century, that individuals interpret reality in a unilinear and deficit fashion. Studies by Small (2004) and Harding (2009; 2010), for example, find little support for the notion of a collective "ghetto" culture shared universally by residents living in poverty. Their work also shows important within-neighborhood differences in cultural frames. By extension, they suggest that studies of racial differences in poverty that seek homogenous, values-based explanations are unlikely to yield significant findings. Students in poor communities not only have a variety of actors and organizations that impact their lives, but technology also enables them to create virtual relationships that impact their understanding of the world in ways that were impossible only a handful of years ago. The result is that social and cultural isolation theory (Rankin & Quane, 2000; Tigges, Browne, & Green, 1998; Wilson, 1987; 1996) is a less-compelling analysis of the current conditions that exist in poor communities.

The view of cultural heterogeneity I propose makes use of scholarship that suggests that cultural models, or scripts, exist that help a community's members make sense of the world. The challenge, then, becomes less that everyone interprets the world in lockstep fashion, but instead that a repertoire of behaviors is at work which makes understanding action confusing (Harding, 2009). Thus, cultural heterogeneity is a more inclusive and protean understanding of the cultural dynamics in a neighborhood. Some in a community, for example, may develop disdain for schools as sites of suffering and oppression, while others may see educational environments as consistent with their own cultural background. The point of this analysis is not that one or another culture writ large is "good" or "bad," but rather that ascertaining college-going trajectories requires understanding the cultural fluidity that currently exists in twenty-first-century low-income urban neighborhoods.

According to Harding (2009), multiple factors explain why adolescents in disadvantaged neighborhoods are exposed to a more heterogeneous array of cultural ideas regarding schooling than adolescents in more advantaged neighborhoods. Disadvantaged neighborhoods contain a diversity of individuals with different occupational statuses, incomes, and education levels as well as different levels of reliance on public assistance, involvement in crime, and so on. Furthermore, in addition to local observations, networks, and interactions, adolescents are exposed to cultural models through larger social institutions such as the media, religion, and politics. Carter (2005) notes, for example, that youth draw role models from television and radio. Low-income youth do not solely rely on what is available in their immediate community to make decisions, and moreover they also exercise discernment when making choices based on what is in their environment. Newman (1999), for example, argues that youth can observe the negative consequences of dropping out of school, reliance on public assistance, or involvement in crime by family members and neighbors, and decide not to repeat those behaviors.

Recent scholarship also suggests that a great amount of cultural heterogeneity presents challenges in a neighborhood. One consequence of greater cultural heterogeneity is that there will be less information about how to follow a particular decision or strategy to completion (Harding, 2009). Where there is a diversity of cultural models, there is scarce knowledge on how to pursue one educational trajectory. For example, when fewer neighbors have successfully enrolled in college, how to go about doing so will be less clearly defined and less information will be available about how the admissions and financial aid processes work (Harding, 2009; Iloh, forthcoming). In contrast, low heterogeneity neighborhoods may present fewer barriers to pursuing one's initial educational goals.

The importance of understanding cultural heterogeneity revolves around the country's concern for increasing access to college for low-income youth and communities of color. Surely, one needs the correct analytic tools to diagnose a particular problem if solutions are to be useful. A view of a culture as broken, oppositional, or unified, for example, suggests different steps that might be taken than if a culture is heterogeneous and youth have multiple scripts to call upon to help make sense of their lives. My assumption is that in culturally heterogeneous neighborhoods, adolescents' decision pathways are less clear than in culturally homogenous environments.

Thus, cultural heterogeneity still facilitates interpretation of the cultural beliefs, traditions, values, practices, and narratives in a neighborhood (Hannerz, 1969; Harding & Hepburn, 2014). However, rather than assume (or find) singular interpretations of the reality of a culture, the assumption is that such sites will be diverse. Although the term "cultural heterogeneity" is relatively under-utilized in studies of education, the idea has existed for over a generation. Elliot Liebow (1967) for example, in his classic study of street-corner men, highlights the variety of adaptive scripts they employed to survive. The ethnography of Bettylou Valentine (1978) challenged mainstream stereotypes about blacks in the inner city and

illustrated that much of the heterogeneity in this community was reflected in the creative and varied ways residents did the best they could to respond to a limited resource pool; they were controlled by a wider society that did not have to face the same structural threats to their existence. Valentine and her family spent five years living in "Blackston," a predominately black and poor large northern city. She concluded that massive changes in society were needed to combat the extreme poverty, bureaucratic negligence, and pervasive racial discrimination (Newman, 1980) that was the backdrop for manifold scripts for survival. Each of these studies moved away from a monochromatic portrayal of life in a low-income urban neighborhood even if they did not focus on the educational strategies of the neighborhood's youth.

My assumption is that cultural heterogeneity may be significant in the strategies youth employ in making decisions about education in general and college-going in particular. Carter's (2005; 2006) work has been of particular importance in documenting how Latino and African-American youth in New York have a variety of repertoires they call upon to make decisions about their lives. What follows is a brief description of the three categories Carter developed to classify students: cultural mainstreamers, noncompliant believers, and cultural straddlers.

Carter (2006) describes cultural mainstreamers as students that accept the ideology that members of a nondominant group should be culturally, socially, economically, and politically assimilated, yet they can be racially and ethnically aware. In contrast, the noncompliant believers are critical of the systemic inequalities that they perceive the school to uphold; yet, the term noncompliant does not necessarily signify either an anti-school mentality or distaste for high achievement, which most oppositional culture frameworks suggest (Carter, 2006). Culturally, noncompliant believers choose to embrace their own class and ethnospecific styles, tastes, and codes and opt not to conform to mainstream (marked as "white") and middle-class ways of being (Carter, 2006). The cultural straddlers bridge the gap between the cultural mainstreamers and the noncompliant believers. They are strategic navigators, ranging from students who "play the game" and embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community to those who vocally criticize the schools' ideology while still achieving well academically (Carter, 2006). Some of these cultural straddlers move back and forth among different cultural environments, strategically alternating and turning cultural codes on and off, while others appear to identify with their multiple social identities and spheres simultaneously (Carter, 2006).

In creating this typology, Carter shows that a master narrative does not sufficiently capture the culture and educational behaviors of African-American and Latino students. Similarly, David Harding's (2010) study of 60 adolescent males across three Boston neighborhoods provides useful insight into how different actors interpret and make sense of their lives. Harding's point is not that everyone sees, thinks, and acts alike; rather, that their pathways are particularly unclear. Harding argues that adolescents in poor neighborhoods experience a cultural environment in which both mainstream and alternative cultural models are supported (p. 5). Thus, rather than perceiving students in poor neighborhoods as simply adopting an

“oppositional” culture, Harding asserts that it is the competing messages they receive that causes confusion. Heterogeneity thereby has the potential of being a useful framework to help scholars understand how and why students make the choices they do.

This study extends the work of Carter (2005), Harding (2009; 2010), and others (Lamont & Small, 2008) and focuses specifically on the idea of neighborhood cultural heterogeneity with regard to the college aspirations of low-income, racially minoritized urban youth. To investigate this, I use cultural heterogeneity to unpack neighborhood influences on students, rather than using the school as the site of analysis. I utilize a framework that sees difference rather than similarity as a cultural norm. Since individuals can and do resort to different repertoires in the course of action, this perspective makes it possible to understand what to outsiders may appear as inconsistencies.

## **Methods**

This study was a preliminary investigation into the idea of cultural heterogeneity. I spent five months in one low-income neighborhood in the inner city of Los Angeles, California. During that time, I employed an ethnography that included individual interviews, focus groups, and neighborhood observations with six low-income, college-bound, students of color. In doing so, my goal was to analyze the educational and social behaviors of students who reside in the same low-income neighborhood. Each of the six students in the study participated in several individual interviews and multiple focus groups. I used the same interview protocol for all of the primary interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that pertain to each participant’s perception of their neighborhood, cultural identity, and college attitudes. Each interview and focus group lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a location convenient to the participants, and audio-recorded with the permission of study participants. I also shared the findings with the interviewees not only for “member checks” but also as additional data insofar as the findings provoked further commentary and discussion on the part of the interviewees.

By utilizing neighborhood observations, I was able to gather data on how participants directly interacted with the environment in which they live. In addition, I conducted interviews during neighborhood visits in order to investigate student perceptions of the neighborhood and how that relates to college-going. The conversations that took place between participants and myself were audio-recorded and transcribed. In some neighborhood observations, I met the participants’ parents, went to places that students spent leisurely time, followed them to places they socialize and study, and utilized the public transportation they used to travel about their surroundings. During the observations participants also pointed out features of interest in their neighborhood, which oftentimes included territorial graffiti, alleys, stores and shops that they frequented. The notes and audio recordings that were taken during the neighborhood observations were triangulated with individual interview and focus group data. In total, I spent approximately 60 hours in the field collecting informal and formal observational data.

**Prolonged Engagement**

Ethnographic research primarily involves the collection and analysis of descriptive sociocultural data from a single social group, society, organization, or several closely related societies through first-hand and long-term involvement (Agar, 1980; Cousin, 2009; Iloh, 2016; Iloh & Tierney, 2014). In advancing cultural heterogeneity, it is important that scholars recognize that the findings I discovered did not appear overnight; even as a preliminary study I spent five months in the neighborhood. Such an observation may be counter to the current pressures and constraints of research where the faster a study can be done and published, the better. In bringing to life students' experiences and exploring the saliency of cultural heterogeneity, spending a short duration interviewing and observing students—what Ray Rist (1980) once called “blitzkrieg ethnography”—is not ideal or feasible to attain these results. This is not a mere problem of credible data mining or saturation, but more an issue of building trustworthiness, which was critical to this study. Many of the students' most personal and painful experiences were shared only as a result of their knowing that I cared about their stories and them as students, something that likely cannot be accomplished in a limited duration of time.

**Setting and Participants**

The six participants in this study were all low-income black or Latinx high-school seniors (see Tables 1 and 2). There was one male and five female participants; each has been given a pseudonym to protect their identities. At the time the study began, all of the students were participants in a college preparation program that launched in the beginning of their senior year in high school. This mentoring program is an action-based intensive mentoring model where faculty, staff, and students from a college and local college access professionals guide high school seniors through the college and financial aid application processes. By using a sample of students who were participants in this college mentoring initiative, I was able to interview and go on neighborhood observations with students who were planning to attend college and could speak to the development of their college aspirations. Through partnership with the mentoring program as well as student and parent consent, I was also able to gain background data to qualify students' household income status as well as other variables of interest. By the end of the study, all six participants had made decisions about where to attend college.

**Table 1. Personal characteristics of study participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Household Income</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>US Citizen</b>
Fred	\$47,000	African	Male	18	Yes
Annaliese	\$40,000	Latina	Female	18	Yes
Gina	\$35,000	African American	Female	17	Yes
Monica	\$35,000	African American	Female	17	Yes
Bianca	\$40,000	Latina	Female	18	No
Kelly	\$16,732	African American	Female	18	Yes
Maria	\$40,000	Latina	Female	18	Yes

**Table 2. Educational characteristics of study participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>High School GPA</b>	<b>Father's Highest Level of Education</b>	<b>Mother's Highest Level of Education</b>	<b>College of Choice</b>
Fred	4.00	Middle School	High School	Public Four-Year Institution
Annaliese	3.00	Middle School	Middle School	Community College
Gina	3.00	Elementary School	Some College	Community College
Monica	3.71	Elementary School	Some College	Public Four-Year Institution
Bianca	3.98	Elementary School	High School	Public Four-Year Institution
Kelly	3.29	High School	High School	Public Four-Year Institution
Maria	4.05	Some High School	Some High School	Public Four-Year Institution

**Results**

This section draws from the interviews, focus groups, and neighborhood observations to provide data describing how students traversed their neighborhood and how they situate their cultural and educational beliefs as a result. Two themes emerged from the data regarding neighborhood cultural heterogeneity and college aspirations. The first is how students’ identity was framed by their experiences in their neighborhood. The second theme pertains to the cultural attributes of the neighborhood.

Below, I first present synopses of the six student participants. I share statements from each of the six students that illustrate how they situate the culture of their neighborhood and how this has framed their own identity and views of education. Following, I showcase quotes that highlight students' varying interpretations of the cultural resources and barriers within their neighborhood.

### **Fred**

When I first met Fred, he stood out as a strong-willed and opinionated 18-year-old. He shared how he and his parents moved to the U.S. from Ghana when he was 10 and how this has made a profound impact on how he interpreted the low-income neighborhood in which he has resided ever since. Fred often shared in individual interviews that he does not feel or desire any clash between his own culture and the routes he needs to take to pursue his goals. He shared that his ability to accomplish these goals rests on whether people in his environment share his color-blind ideology. "If you don't draw a line, I don't have anything to cross. If people try to box me in as only a black student, that's all they will see."

Fred, during several interviews, commented on his disdain for people who associate with others based solely on race or nationality. "In African communities, we want to be bunched up together. I hate that. I try to live my life outside of the boundaries of minorities. I just see people as people. I don't see race."

At the conclusion of the study, Fred shared how just being in college will supply him with racial diversity in his peer group and the mentors he has greatly needed.

*I think my friends in college will be more diverse. They will have different aspects and different views. Through having diverse friends, I can put a whole picture together. In college, I am going to need a mentor. It doesn't seem like too many people in my neighborhood went to college. When I graduated from high school they were all happy but they still didn't know much about college.*

### **Kelly**

Kelly, one of the quieter students in the group, always had much more to say during individual interviews or personal neighborhood observations. Most of the ways in which she made sense of her neighborhood and the college terrain was by the people closest to her: her family and friends. She confided during a couple of individual interviews that there was a clear difference between her educational goals and that of her family and peers. However, she would like to use these distinct goals to one day serve her neighborhood. "I see my friends and family and not to say they aren't doing anything but I just know there is more. I would serve in my neighborhood as a pediatrician so I could give back to the neighborhood and community."

Kelly maintained during the study that her peers in the neighborhood were important to her, but as interviews progressed she began to share her awareness of the opportunities she will have just by making friends in college. During one of the

last individual interviews she disclosed, "I think I will have friends who are more advanced. They will be in college so they must have a purpose."

Kelly remained proud of who she is and where she comes from, often recognizing the hidden gems dispersed throughout her neighborhood. She shared in another individual interview, "A lot of schools just don't appreciate what people in my neighborhood have to offer, but we have a lot to offer actually."

### **Gina**

Gina, twin sister to Monica, would describe herself as "confident and outgoing in any environment she is in." She shared in a focus group amongst her peers, how much education and her neighborhood cultivated her solid outlook and identity.

*Since I was little there was just no choice. You just have to go to college. I don't want a job, I want a career. In the neighborhood, I would get a job, but it will never equate to the measures that a career can.*

Gina often reflected on the resources provided by other black women in her neighborhood, even if the mainstream would view that same resource as deficient. She believes her family was the platform for her educational aspirations, rather than a detriment. During one individual interview, she shared:

*People would not think I was made for college.... I was raised in a single-parent home with my mother, a strong black woman. I have strength and courage because I was raised with it. I am proud to be a black woman. However, my family and neighborhood is filled with strong black women, regardless of how media portrays us.*

Gina shared throughout the study how her race plays a significant role in how she navigates environments, especially within the school ecosystem.

*Being of color helps to identify who you are in my neighborhood. It helps to show where I came from in society. I just have to be conscious in order to be productive in society. Being minorities, we see firsthand what will happen if we don't take school seriously. I see my mom, and in society's eyes she doesn't have the tools needed to advance. I have a chance that she and many people in my neighborhood will never have.*

### **Maria**

During my time getting to know Maria, I learned not only how she felt about her neighborhood, but we also frequently got a chance to interact with members of her family, who she discussed often. Maria confided that she at times has to disavow her Mexican culture in order to stay motivated in her own educational beliefs.

*Being of color has its disadvantages. My dad still believes women belong in the kitchen. When I talk to other Mexican families about college they don't see it as important. They don't see you getting a job as different from going to college.*

Maria often rejected the ideologies that were communicated in school and her surroundings about the “realities” of being a young Latina. It was this rejection that became a source of her strong work ethic. During a neighborhood visit where we sat under her favorite tree, she shared:

*I got resentful about some people in my neighborhood when I see people stereotyping me as a Latina girl who is bound to get pregnant. This has motivated me to change the way people see Latina girls. I can do anything, you know?*

### **Annaliese**

Annaliese was one of the more vocal students about how college and her life in her neighborhood appear to be two completely different worlds, and she has to switch between them. During an emotional individual interview, she shared some of the beliefs behind this dissonance. “I am going to college to better myself. My mom tried to finish but got pregnant. I want to help her out. In college, I am expecting to read 20 pages a night and I don’t feel prepared.”

Annaliese also shared during a neighborhood observation, “I know so many girls who should be getting ready to do what I am going to do in college. People here just are not given as many chances and we recognize that it is unfair.” Most of Annaliese’s comments ended up being directed back to painful memories of living in her neighborhood, some of which were so horrifying for her, she asked that they be withheld from discussion in any publication. “Sometimes I fight becoming negative, but living here can make you hard. When I cry I feel human again. I look forward to a sense of peace in college finally.”

### **Monica**

Monica, Gina’s twin sister, described herself as “the creative one” amongst her peer group and someone who was always able to make lemons out of lemonade. Through her I learned a great deal about the range of beliefs about identity that her neighborhood can cultivate. Monica shared during one individual interview,

*My neighborhood presents freedom and constraints in how I can express myself. College will give me the opportunity to be something new. Here sometimes I feel like there is a box around what I can be, even though I love what this neighborhood has made me.*

Students also commented on how people in their neighborhood were pushed out rather than them not being good enough for college. Monica shared, “People from my ‘hood, they are smart enough to be in college but there is a lot of racism and bias. I know my friends in the ‘hood could be there with me, too.” She believes that this living environment has made her much more unique and claims, “I want to share with the world the beautiful woman my ‘hood has shaped. I am one of the few people who is proud to say that this place, as crazy as it is, has helped me become better.”

## The Cultural Attributes of Neighborhoods

### **Strengths**

During neighborhood visits, individual interviews, and focus groups, students pointed out many of the positive attributes of their neighborhoods. These positive influences ranged from family contributions to inspiration from neighborhood residents.

Monica made a statement during one focus group that elicited many nods and responses of agreement from other participants. "This is my 'hood. What else can I say? It's all I know and it taught me a lot about being tough and dealing with problems. I am going to miss this place when I go off to college." Fred elaborated on this sentiment by stating, "I spent a lot of time alone because of my neighborhood which gave me time to focus on my goals and develop a plan of action to reach my dreams." Annaliese shared that within this neighborhood, "I was able to find friends who supported me all the way until college and many of them are in this room." Maria added, "My neighborhood did expose me to a few people my age who were on the same track as me." Gina agreed and shared, "I look at a lot of my friends in the neighborhood, especially the Latino ones, and I am really encouraged by them. They stay on it even if sometimes their family doesn't support their education."

Kelly later shared how residents she didn't know made a profound impact on her ability to achieve in school.

*People in my neighborhood will see me walking with my backpack and they will tell me to stay in school and keep doing what I am doing. Even though I don't know them I appreciate them wanting me to succeed. I think people are happy when they see someone furthering their education here.*

Monica was one of the stronger advocates of the benefits her neighborhood had to offer. During many sessions, she pointed out how specific individuals within the neighborhood helped develop her talents as a student. During individual interviews and during a neighborhood visit she shared lessons she learned from drug dealers.

*I learned how to work hard in school by applying 'the daily grind and hustle' of drug dealers in the neighborhood. Every morning they get up and they are on their grind, doing what they have to do, and in many ways, it is like what I had to do in high school and what I will have to keep doing in college.*

Gina, Monica's twin, shared a somewhat positive reflection of what her neighborhood provided. One comment that she consistently made during all interviews was how motivating it was to live there. "I would say my neighborhood is inspiring. I see my surroundings and I know I want better than this and I just have to work harder. I know people here want better for me too."

**Challenges**

When participants mentioned challenges in the neighborhood, this ranged in degree of severity. Some shared having a great fear of being mugged while others discussed the daily annoyance of neighborhood noise. Overall students shared the numerous barriers their neighborhood presented to their academic success, social life, and overall safety.

Maria and Annaliese throughout the course of the study were the most candid about the dangers of living in this space. When asked how she would describe the neighborhood, Maria responded, "My neighborhood is unattractive, dangerous, and gloomy. I try to pretend my neighborhood is somewhere peaceful. But in the back of my head I am always wondering what happens if someone pops out of nowhere holding a knife." Annaliese often shared a plethora of insight on the criminal and violent activity that happens regularly. "You can't really go outside. The latest you can be out is 6:00 or 7:00 p.m." She then later mentioned in an individual interview that, "Bums are everywhere. The bums are always asking for money. You might be scared and feeling like they can attack. Recently someone was murdered."

During neighborhood visits Fred, Gina, and Monica both warned me to leave early and avoid certain places because of the dangers they presented. During one neighborhood visit, Monica and Gina shared, "We live here but you should probably take the bus back to where you live now. It can get sketchy really fast here and someone is always looking to start trouble." Fred mentioned during an individual neighborhood visit why he avoids walking down his street at all costs. "Just down my street once it gets past 5:00 p.m. bad things go down over there. I don't bother to even walk down there because I know it isn't going to be good." He cautioned us not to go past the territory of his house after the neighborhood observation for our own safety.

Kelly, after hearing similar sentiments from peers during a focus group, also shared how the less severe topic of neighborhood noise contributes to its problematic living conditions. "This place is always noisy and it is hard to focus. There are usually rowdy kids and babies crying. You hear sirens a lot. It is a lot going on here." Annaliese chimed in, "It's noisy and dirty, too. I wrote a letter to the mayor explaining that we need a cross-sign for traffic and the honking but I never heard back." During one focus group interview, Fred shared why he spends most of his time outside of the neighborhood and why most of his friends don't live there. "There just isn't really much to do. There is always a lot of loud construction. I used to have a nice view of the city before they started building a new shopping center."

**Analysis**

What might one make of such findings? Scholars of anthropology, education, and sociology alike might work to interrogate homogenous depictions of students of color from low-income areas while conducting further investigations that look at cultural heterogeneity. This analysis showcases that even with six students there is great variability in how one shared neighborhood environment impacted their

educational values, beliefs, and their perception of how attainable their goals are. Knowing this, as well as the results of other studies (e.g., Carter, 2005), it would be useful to develop further the ways cultural heterogeneity works as an analytical framework and the ways it does not. The findings highlight that while there were some unfavorable aspects to living in their neighborhood, participants garnered important life lessons and inspiration from it as well. This illustrates that deficit framing often masks the positive impact of neighborhoods often considered disadvantaged in serving as a unique social space to prepare for college.

### **The Low-Income Neighborhood as Both a Positive and Negative Influence**

The majority of students, to varying degrees, believed that behind its poverty, their neighborhood had positive attributes along with challenges. The environment equipped them with tools to survive and succeed in college by way of providing support, teaching them "street" smarts, and building up their resiliency. To be sure, students believed that many parts of the neighborhood were also barriers to their educational success. This included problematic residents, drug dealing, poor food choices, noisy children, police brutality, and reoccurring violence. Some shared that going to college might enable them to depart from the negative influences of the neighborhood. Further, while many students did not mind their neighborhood, almost all participants limited the time they spent within it. When asked where they spend their leisure time, most students described going to places well outside the neighborhood for fun and relaxation.

Many students mentioned that their peers were very supportive, even if college was not a part of their career trajectory. Numerous friends supported their work ethic and were proud that they were going to college and doing something positive with their life. Other students attested not to having many friends in their neighborhood. Fred, for example, believed he only had one friend in the neighborhood. Maria commented on how she spent most of her time in the tiny apartment where her family resides and wanted to spend as little time engaging with other neighborhood youth as possible.

### **Framing Identity**

Several students discussed having positive identities reinforced through messages of education as a form of personal betterment from family, peers, and neighborhood residents, countering the idea that one must "act white" to succeed. Because of this, some students suggested that they were driven to be successful so they could come back to their neighborhood as a role model and be a source of financial support for their families and friends. Some positive support came from unusual sources, including neighbors they believed to live a street lifestyle, but who often mentioned how proud of them they were to be getting out of the neighborhood. While students appreciated this encouragement, many noted that they will seek or want a mentor in college who has more technical information regarding higher education.

Students also varied in terms of how their racial identity impacted their self-perceptions and motivation for success. Some found that stereotypes of their race motivated them to "prove people wrong." Others believed that their racial identity

enhanced their goals for college attainment and still others did not believe their race was a factor at all. Although some of the comments from these students fall into Carter's (2005; 2006) categories, the frames fit loosely and are far from theoretical straitjackets. Monica may be in a unique and powerful category all her own. Only Fred, for example, might be seen as closer to a cultural mainstreamer, whereas Annaliese and Kelly were more cultural straddlers. However, Gina and Maria's comments fit two categories—noncompliant believers and cultural straddlers.

### **Practical Implications and New Directions**

The findings of this study have implications for practitioners, policymakers, K-12 educational spaces, colleges and universities with goals of increasing college participation for low-income youth of color. Each year hundreds of thousands of low-income students of color face barriers to college access and success (The White House, 2014). Rather than getting a coherent set of services, these students receive supports that are often fragmented and late, occurring in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2016). Accordingly, it may be important to invest in embedding college-going information and resources in spaces within the neighborhood, rather than viewing educational spaces as the only social institutions that may or may not have such reinforcements. This includes potentially adding college-going information and resources to grocery stores, laundromats, apartment complexes, churches, corner stores, malls, and other spaces youth might frequently spend time in and around their neighborhood. Such information can be displayed in the form of pamphlets, boards, wall art, interactive displays, and posters, to name a few. This creates rich contexts where there is reinforcement for college aspirations in multiple aspects of adolescents' ecosystems, particularly within their neighborhood.

While this study does not assert that students in more advantaged neighborhoods do not encounter any cultural heterogeneity, the findings of this study illustrate the unique kinds of cultural heterogeneity found in a low-income neighborhood in a major city in the United States. Assessment of adolescents' college-going aspirations, knowledge, and resources can help us better understand and serve low-income youth of color in culturally heterogeneous neighborhoods as they ascend to college. In addition to utilizing data that has already been collected, it will be important for practitioners in both K-12 and college settings (particularly those concerned with enrolling these students) to routinely collect new information in relation to college knowledge and perspectives for youth of color in low-income neighborhoods. Such assessment might include surveys and interviews to understand the experiences of such prospective college students (Iloh 2017; Iloh, 2018). In some cases, colleges might invest in understanding whether their campus is perceived as accessible to low-income youth of color. While institutions of higher learning may not have policies restricting racially minoritized and low-income learners from enrolling, the extent to which students feel welcome or likely to be accepted at that campus is an entirely different matter. Administrators and practitioners can utilize these interviews and other instruments to develop data-driven processes and practices to better attract, serve and support prospective and current low-income youth on their campus. This assessment might also serve as

mechanisms to identify financial and social barriers for prospective students, particularly for those that are susceptible to enrolling but never showing up or those who may have college options but cannot finance their attendance. The ultimate goal of this assessment is to provide consistent opportunities for educational environments to engage youth as experts of their own experiences with rich insights necessary to help educational spaces across the P-20 pipeline provide more equitable conditions for low-income students and students of color.

### **Future Research**

Social influence was a frequent theme in the research findings. Accordingly, future research and practice directions could focus on social networks for their importance in shaping college-going aspirations, especially when network members lack conventional college information (Iloh, forthcoming). Although this study did not directly examine computer-mediated contexts, in the twenty-first century, it seems reasonable to include these contexts in the definition of youth's microsystems since they are sites where interactions may provoke or retard specific behaviors (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). Accordingly, future explorations could investigate how social media and digital spaces change the ways that participants perceive their college aspirations or even engage in the college-going process. It may be the case that social media reconciles or further complicates narratives for youth already encountering multiple narratives in a culturally heterogeneous neighborhood. New interventions might also explore the ways in which apps and social media can especially support low-income youth of color in low-income neighborhoods by providing content that further encourages and expands their college aspirations, information, and participation.

### **Conclusion**

The work presented here is a portion of a puzzle with many pieces. I sought to (1) examine cultural heterogeneity as an explanatory framework, and (2) analyze the educational and social context of students who reside in the same low-income neighborhood. The results of this study support my initial inclination that cultural heterogeneity is a viable framework for understanding the college aspirations of low-income students of color and is worthy of further investigation. Participants had multiple interpretations of identity and their neighborhood, rather than perceiving everyone as acting in similar fashion—as proponents of the culture of poverty might have us believe. Future studies can further explore the diversity of reactions, trajectories and messages in low-income and racially minoritized communities and neighborhoods regarding participation in postsecondary education.

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