Vying for Status: Youth Culture and Academic Achievement among Children of Immigrants in London and New York City

Natasha K. Warikoo
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Sociology, Harvard University
Lecturer in US Studies, Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London

Abstract: Through a careful consideration and emphasis on culture, this paper demonstrates the lack of utility of theories of oppositional culture and downward assimilation in describing the trajectories of disadvantaged immigrant second generation youth. The paper compares low income second generation teenagers (US- and UK-born children of immigrants) in London and New York City by using school ethnographic, interview (n=130), and survey (n=191) data. Finding that youth in both cities express positive attitudes toward school and education; strong preferences for African American-inspired hip-hop music and styles; and the need to act tough and maintain self-pride, the paper concludes that Nondominant Cultural Capital (NDCC) is a better concept to explain minority urban youth culture (Carter, 2005). NDCC is a form of capital that buys youth symbolic status in their peer social world, much like Bourdieu’s cultural capital buys symbolic status within dominant society. Most youth are constantly looking to gain status among their peers, and NDCC is what buys them status. NDCC is based on the socio-cultural world that urban youth embody, and, like other types of cultures, it includes a set of rules behavior, taste preferences, and interactional styles. This youth culture is not constructed in opposition to dominant school norms, but rather outside of them. The most successful teenagers are those who are able to succeed academically as well as within their peer world of NDCC. Indeed, this, rather than rejecting mainstream society and norms, is what most youth say they strive for.