

Sampson, William Alfred. (2007). *Race, Class, and Family Intervention: Engaging Parents and Families for Academic Success*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Pp. iii + 155 \$25 ISBN 1-57886-629-4

**Reviewed by Robbie J. Steward
Michigan State University**

April 4, 2008

The title, *Race, Class, and Family Intervention: Engaging Parents and Families for Academic Success*, suggests the possibility of enhanced academic performance with the most at-risk students through direct intervention with black and Latino families living at a level considered poverty in the US. The list of scholars who acclaimed this contribution to the literature as exemplary included James Comer (Child Psychiatry—Yale University), Thomas Cook (Policy Research—Northwestern University), and Javier Tapia (Education—University of Wisconsin), all nationally renowned leaders in their respective disciplines located in programs at tier-one research institutions of higher education. These two qualities alone would certainly tweak the curiosity of all current and future educators, counselors, therapists, social workers, and policymakers. However, this book is much more than what the title indicates. Sampson provides a step-by-step overview of the methods and results of a well-designed, comprehensive, and labor-intensive qualitative research endeavor. His description of the process and outcomes exposes the limitations of efforts in education reform and reveals lifestyles in a manner that will enhance readers' understanding of the tight link that connects parental behaviors with outcomes in children's academic involvement and performance. The author provides individualized treatment plans based on observations of each of the children and their respective family systems, which are excellent samples for all parents and school staff who wish to improve children's academic performance. The text is noteworthy for practitioners and researchers alike in that it also presents one realistic example of qualitative research methods designed with the overarching intent of making a positive difference for the target population. The overview includes the concessions and shifts required of researchers given the intricacies involved in the study of individuals within their natural life settings. Given the critical nature of the content and the potential widespread influence of this researcher's story, I strongly recommend this textbook as required reading for undergraduate and graduate programs in psychology, school and community counseling, social work, religious studies, educational policy, political science, child and family therapy, teacher education, and educational administration. I also encourage high school teachers to consider this text as required reading in courses such as psychology, social studies, and debate classes as well. In the following sections, I provide an overview of what I believe to be the most critical aspects of the text to prepare readers for the adventure that Sampson details in this exposé' of the family contribution to academic failure and academic success of children.

The general observation that influenced my list of who would most benefit from this text is that the description of the process and outcomes of this study is concretely and succinctly described in language so basic to be easily understood by most high school students. The reading level frees readers to reflect on the content and immerse themselves in the process of observation and data collection from four African American and three Latino American families who were identified as poor and who also included children who were not performing well academically.

The study was designed to determine the degree to which parental behaviors could be changed to improve children's educational achievement. Observers were initially placed in participants' homes for 7 weeks, for 2-4 hours each week, to determine what parents did and did not do to prepare children for school. After this observation period, parents were trained for 7 months to increase their understanding of behaviors that have been found essential to facilitating children's academic success. The training addressed four specific domains: family processes (amount of interaction, type of interaction, parental intervention, discipline, responsibilities, and division of labor); home environment (space, noise, study arrangements, facilities within the home, books); values and attitudes (self-esteem, importance of education, importance of self-control, expectations, and ability to delay gratification); and, educational processes (homework arrangement, role of the parents in the schoolwork of the child, value of education

to the child and parent, grades of the child). (p. 9) , A final observation period was used to determine the longevity of the training and the outcome on the children's academic involvement and performance. Observers were in the homes of the participating families for a total of 18 months. Sampson's use of language and writing style allow readers to visualize the children, their living environments, and their parents.

There was no softening or camouflaging the data collected; the facts are presented in the results section using observers' exact words. Although periodically throughout the discussion of the findings, Sampson does infuse his conclusions and worldview as explanations for some of the behaviors observed, he owns his view and respectfully addresses alternative perspectives . Although other writers claim to be culturally sensitive and respectful of alternative viewpoints, Sampson seems to be one of those unique authors and researchers who assumes ownership for his conclusions, discusses the implications and degree of feasibility of adherence to his viewpoint, and at least entertains the notion of a different reaction from readers. This sensitivity is evident from the introduction of the text in which he discusses the sensitivity of broaching the topic of race and class in research to his attention to gender in the selection of the participants (i.e., 3 girls and 5 boys), to his careful discussion of the findings. Readers, who wish to serve as social change agents in work with individual families and communities that would benefit from knowing the connection between family system and academic success, will be better informed about the possible points of intervention. In addition, all will have heightened awareness of potential reasons for persisting negative outcomes in spite of well-designed, school-only focused interventions. In an era of accountability, this should be mandated reading for all who wish to become the most effective parents and who are committed to making a difference in educational reform.

The above comments address--reasons that I believe the author's effort is to be respected and considered essential in the education of prospective parents and those who are committed to working with them and their children. Attending to all strategies and interventions that are empirically associated with securing the future of a social structure in which there is a strong representation of well-educated, fully functioning individuals from all racial/ethnic groups is noteworthy and imperative if we are to maintain a stable social structure. This research work is one such effort to facilitate our understanding of avenues toward optimal success. However, there are some cautionary notes that must be considered that I will discuss next.

First, the title is somewhat misleading in that the book does not identify unique paths toward academic success based on family's race and class as the title might suggest. The author acknowledges that there is, in fact, really no such thing as "middle-class" values (p. 129), purporting that all middle-class families do not behave in the manner in which the families in this study were instructed. Although this language is infused throughout the text, there seems to be some hesitation to identify the proposed set of parental behaviors and characteristics of home-climate structure as those that facilitate children's academic success regardless of economic status. This is most evident given the diverse experiences reported within the study among a population of families, who have been identified as "living in poverty" (i.e., marital status of parents, employment status of parents, cleanliness and organization of life setting, parents' attention to children, degree of structure and stability in daily activities, etc.). Although all of the families were said to have "survival as foremost in their minds" due to their shared socio-economic status (p.128), the author reported, but did not examine or discuss variables, which were unrelated to 'survival'(e.g., television in every room, scheduling priorities that did not consider their children's academic commitment, requiring children's primary care of other children and maintenance of household, absence of discipline in parenting skills, and household noise levels contributing to children's distractibility), that differentiated families and their children's academic lives. Some parents, more so than others, attended to survival in ways that were more conducive to their child's overall academic and emotional well-being. Nevertheless, the author seems to vacillate between acknowledging this within group diversity and then in another section using socio-economic status as a prevailing explanation for higher academic failure within this population of families of color. Failure to specifically attend to this within group diversity reinforces the notion of a fatalistic view of "poverty" that I believe the author intended to avoid. In addition, the absence of a discussion of these differences within the presentation of the results did not allow readers to more clearly identify the characteristics of families that were influenced by the interventions from those that were not. Although the author did not directly do so, the information presented provides a context in which readers can be prompted to critique the findings in such a manner that will allow greater insight about the data than the author himself did.

Second, related to the assumption regarding lower-class families, was the somewhat unspoken assumption that poor children of color hold some distinct and unique connection with academic failure more so than all others. Although the author did note that even those children of color from economically privileged homes have been found to have lower academic success than White peers within the same communities (p. x), in terms of balanced perspective, there was no mention of the large number of poor, White students who fail academically in comparison to their White peers. The absence of discussion of this group leaves a critical hole in the introduction that may substantiate the fallacious thinking that this researcher's training of parents was based primarily on White values, when in fact, there is evidence to support the notion, even in the author's words, that characteristics associated with effective parenting and academically successful children are found within populations across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Readers must be reminded that the author's primary interest is the study of poor children of color and, consequently, he attended strictly to the literature that specifically addresses this population and provides a rationale for his study. With this in mind, all are cautioned to avoid the error of directly associating academic failure only with poor children of color. White, poor and economically advantaged children of all racial and ethnic groups fail academically, too, and possibly for many of the same family-related reasons noted within the text.

Third, the use of the phrase 'children of color' in reference to Latino and Black Americans without any reference to racial identity may be presumptuous to some degree given that some individuals of Latin descent identify racially as Caucasian. Given the focus of the study, the experiences of these children in school and within their communities may have varied significantly based on how the families self-identify. Distinct differences between more recent immigrants and indigenous 'minority' populations may have also influenced the authors' observations. Without this information, the author may have inadvertently succumbed to the fallacy that he assigned to others' past research by assuming collectivism among racial/ethnic minorities, when in terms of racial identity, there are within-group differences that influence family history, cultural worldview, and day-to-day experiences within communities and the general populace. These identity issues may be critical factors that affect familial attitudes about education/school and children's academic involvement.

Fourth, for prospective researchers, although the study does provide a structure for developing a design that has the potential to make a difference in the lives of others and that has the potential to influence policy, the much needed recommendations for future research is missing. Also, there are some practices and somewhat glaring omissions that might be addressed in future research. For example, the invitation for participation in the research was framed to prospective participants in a manner that could have influenced the outcome. The parents were told that they were selected to participate in studies that the researchers hoped would shed light on the practices used by poor, nonwhite families to help their children do better in school, and that this effort would probably not help them, but that it may help others like them. (p. 4)

I wonder about the effect of the negative skew of these words on the final outcome. Words are powerful and this introduction could have had some influence on what the participants expected from the contact with the researchers and consequently, their response to the training. There was also no description of the observers' demographic background information (i.e., age, race/ethnicity, SES background, education/training, etc.). Given the sensitive nature of the study of the influence of race and socioeconomic status and the degree of intimacy and trust required in effective interviews with children and parents, this information would have been essential and critical for replication, especially in qualitative research. Another point is that although the author takes great care to describe the communities in which the participants resided, this information is not attended to in presenting and discussing findings. This would have very important to address given that families were located in distinctively different community settings in terms of prevalence of poverty, school standardized test scores, degree of racial/ethnic diversity, and representation of high school graduates. These are only a few examples of some of the basic information points omitted. I believe future efforts to replicate this important work must address these points and readers are encouraged to carefully critique the content in order to draw conclusions of greater depth from the detailed findings provided in the text.

The final cautionary point is the author's persistent advocacy of the inclusion of this family-intervention program for the purpose of improving academic success in spite of the limited positive outcome of this long-term, extensive, and considerably expensive treatment plan. Readers were not provided insight into the reasons for some individuals' resistance to parental training and the author did not identify parental characteristics of those more open and amenable to such training. I concur with the author that family dynamics do significantly influence children's

academic performance; however, we also must clearly delineate the variables associated with resistance to family interventions evident in this study that occurred in spite of the long-term and extensive nature of the contact. There is a dire need to link success in school and family interventions, nevertheless, it is essential that we identify ways to do so that are cost-efficient and feasible. The findings suggest that this link is important, however, the author leaves the readers hanging in terms of identifying a modified and streamlined means of implementing a family intervention that is do-able in terms of time commitment and expense. Given the documentation of the detailed attention to the life environment and long-term connections with the children and their parent(s), the content that would direct future work in this area is presented, but not analyzed to the degree necessary within the text. This absence of analysis makes for an excellent text to stimulate readers' speculation and critical analysis of the data for themselves. A search for the answers to these missing data points and the exploration of the implications for future treatment plans must occur if more effective empirically-supported interventions are to ensue. Sampson's research certainly provides a springboard for future research that examines the critical link between family intervention and children's academic success.

About the Reviewer

Robbie J. Steward, a Fellow in the American Psychological Association (APA), is Director of the MA Counseling program and Professor in the Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology & Special Education at Michigan State University. She is currently examining the influence of counselor-trainees' cognitive-psychological-emotional characteristics on their development of counseling competence. Her research interests include and scholarship addresses multicultural counseling training, counseling supervision, and the identification of non-cognitive variables that influence urban students' academic success in K-12 settings.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.