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White Kids: Identity Construction, Critical Mass, and Symbolic Exclusion in High School Cliques and other Groups

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Abstract

This ethnographic study explored to what extent white students were able to critically understand the significance of their racial identity in more diverse demographic settings. It further looked at the discourse the students used to describe themselves, their cliques, and other groups with regard to race and racial identities. The participants in this study were students at two public urban high schools in the same district, one where white students have a substantial critical mass but are not the majority and one in which they comprise a small minority. Interview and observation data were analyzed through thematic coding. The emerging themes coded for included boundary work, symbolic exclusion, group rigidity and group options, critical mass, and white consciousness.

Keywords: Identity Construction, Symbolic Exclusion, Boundary Work, Critical Mass, Cliques, Racial Groups, Public Urban High School

Research on race and ethnicity in the U.S. has increasingly turned its focus to the “invisible” identity, the norm: the identity of white Americans. Findings show that most whites are socialized to view themselves as “normal” individuals and as “colorblind,” claiming they do not perceive race in social interactions (Gallagher, 1997, Lewis, 2003; McDermott & Samson, 2005; Twine & Gallagher, 2008; Waters, 2009). These studies give evidence that many white Americans are oblivious to the implications and impact their race has on society. However, recent studies (Feagin, Vera, & Bature, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Waters, 1990) are limited because they have only analyzed participants within a predominantly white environment, such as corporate America and higher education—settings that have a history of gatekeeping and discriminating against people of color. Thus, it is understandable that participants of these studies have a limited understanding of their racial identity and white privilege, as Orfield (2001) hypothesized, because they are members of the most highly isolated racial group as a result of being socialized and raised in homogeneous environments.

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This ethnographic study explored whether the colorblind perspective exists in more diverse demographics. We studied two public high school campuses, one where the white student population is 48% and one where whites comprise 9% of the student population. We also examined the lines along which cliques or friendship groups are formed and the degree to which students are aware of racial identities and the composition of their group and other groups. In so doing, we asked the following research questions: (a) Comparing the two schools, how are white students organizing themselves into social groups, and how do school demographics influence their organization? (b) How are students identifying their social groups? (c) Under what demographic and social circumstances are white students aware of their racial identity and with what sorts of attitudes? Empirically, we explored the social and demographic situations in which white students are conscious of their racial identity. We hypothesized that with increased diversity in the schools—meaning fewer whites—white students would have a greater or heightened consciousness of their racial identity because they would have more frequent interactions with different racial groups and cultures. This study helps us to understand the circumstances under which these students have a greater awareness of their social power.

The article is organized as follows: we first describe the theoretical framework, the settings and participants, and the methods of data collection and analysis. The findings section discusses boundary work, symbolic exclusion, border rigidity and group options, and, finally, critical mass and white consciousness. The boundary work section examines the terminology students use to describe their identity and group membership. The border rigidity and group options section discusses how the campus as a whole responds to racial issues and identity. The white consciousness section focuses on the degree to which students from the different campuses are aware of their racial identity and its impact on their daily lives.

Theoretical Framework

Focusing on the expression of racial identity by young white students at the high school level, this ethnographic study analyzes the discourses students used to describe their school, clique(s), and self. Cliques are formed to facilitate racial identity construction, mark differences with others, and similarities among in-group members (Thomas, 2009). Indeed, researchers (Cohen, 1977; Smith & Moore, 2000) have found that the greatest factor contributing to group homogeneity is homophilic selection: the tendency to choose clique or group members that are the most similar to oneself. Cliques can be found in many institutional settings and, as earlier noted, are a mechanism people use to negotiate their surroundings and identities (Adler & Adler, 1998; Spaulding & Bolin, 1950). In addition, critical mass theory (Marwell, Oliver, & Pahl, 1988) is essential in understanding the structure, mobility, and power of cliques and other groups as well as racial identity construction at schools. The foundation of critical mass theory rests heavily on the idea that a group's ability to influence others depends on the size of a group's population and its capacity to exchange ideas. Dahlerup (2006) found that it took a certain minimum representation for a minority group to have the ability to influence its community. Critical mass theory has traditionally been applied to social movements or political representation. It is also commonly employed in institutional discussions regarding retention and recruitment efforts in marginalized communities. In our study,

the concept of critical mass was applied in the microcommunities of high schools to facilitate an understanding of how group size can affect attitudes about race. Group size *is* significant; as Marwell et al. (1988) noted, the greater the size and relative number of social ties within a group, the more successful the group is in securing its needs. Consequently, groups that are very small and that lack resources and representation employ the few social ties they have to protect themselves. When groups lack a critical mass they are disabled from influencing others and making any movement or change on their own behalf. Thus, this theory will be helpful in understanding how demographics play a role in group and identity formation at different schools and how racial demographics impact white students, especially their racial awareness and consciousness.

Researchers have found that young white Americans rarely think about their racial identity or the social consequences of their identities (Feagin et al., 2001; Grover, 1997; Twine & Gallagher, 2008). Because their own advantages are often not obvious to them, most whites espouse a commitment to color blindness (Chesler, Peet, & Sevig, 2003), meaning they often assert that they do not recognize race and that they treat everyone fairly (Lewis, 2003). The colorblind mentality may be an attempt at trying to appear progressive and race neutral, but this approach is detrimental because it ignores the historical, institutional, and systemic racial oppression and discrimination of people of color.

In addition, some scholars have found that white Americans have difficulties perceiving the racial composition of their own social networks (Chester, Pete, & Sevig, 2003; Gallagher, 1997; Mahoney, 1997; Waters, 1990). Consequently, they think of themselves as neutral and everyone else as different. The frequent inability to perceive themselves as a racial group is well illustrated in the cafeteria phenomenon, which describes how many white students cannot see their own group as a racial group, yet may object to a group of all black students sitting together (Tatum, 2003). Further, as Mahoney (1997) explained, “because the dominant norms of whiteness are not visible to them, whites are free to see themselves as ‘individuals’” (p. 331) rather than as members of a racial group.

Another way in which white Americans stray from confronting their racial identity is by choosing to identify with one of their European ethnicities rather than the racial category of white or Caucasian. Their ability to choose an ethnic identity is essentially exercising a privilege to label one’s self (Waters, 1990, 2009). Choosing an ethnic identity oftentimes is a defensive tactic as students seem to “selectively resurrect their ethnicity through ‘immigrant tales’ mainly when they feel white privilege is being contested” (Gallagher, 1997). Accordingly, voluntary ethnic identity makes it difficult for young whites to understand the issues or challenges facing communities of color (Waters, 1990). As a result, when white students are selecting an ethnicity they are also employing “selective forgetting” (Waters, 1990), leaving out ethnic backgrounds that they find less appealing, which again demonstrates a level of privilege that is taken for granted. Thus, Gallagher (1997) and Waters (1990) found that white Americans not only replaced ethnicity for race, but they did it as a way to avoid the recognition of white racial privilege. These studies reveal some of the mechanisms that socially construct race, such as ethnic options and selective forgetting, which show that racial lines can be drawn, ignored, and chosen through selective identities.

In addition to these tactics, researchers have demonstrated that the social construction of race may be affected by cultural cues (Bryson, 1996; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). For example, Bryson (1996) described how symbolic boundaries could be defined by attitudes toward cultural cues. Her discussion about symbolic exclusion drew from Bourdieu's (1984) theories about taste, that is, that taste for cultural goods is first and foremost defined by distaste. Tastes are effective boundaries because they feel natural to a group; therefore anything different seems unnatural and intolerable, which makes it easier to draw a boundary against the other taste. Bryson (1996), therefore, focused on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic exclusion, which relies on the dislike of cultural goods to form boundaries. She described the difference between cultural exclusion and social exclusion in this way: "Whereas social exclusion refers to the monopolization of human interactions, symbolic exclusion depicts the subjective process that orders those social interactions—taste" (Bryson, 1996, p.885). She further showed that racists have a high incidence of dislike for music that is disproportionately liked by people of color, and in this case musical dislikes project a social group's boundary by separating them from the group of people they are excluding through musical cultural cues. Though we do not equate the musical identity of high school cliques with racism, likes and dislikes are important in explaining the boundary work of the cliques who use cultural cues to explain membership and signal racial boundaries. According to Bourdieu (1991) and Gamson (1997), symbolic exclusion is routinely deployed in social interactions. These findings are helpful in understanding how students use cultural cues to create social boundaries and identity.

All the studies included in the theoretical framework recognize that race is a social construct. The construction of race is demonstrated by the way certain groups of people, and whites in particular, feel that race can be ignored, or assert that it does not apply to them while assigning a racial identity to others (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). However, these studies also speak to the reality of race and its consequences. The construction of race happens at both macro and micro levels, including within public education. Thus, in an era when scholars have consistently found that white Americans are asserting themselves as "colorblind" in a society that is highly racially stratified, it is of interest to understand, within the micro-organization of high schools, when, if, and how racial boundaries are being created and maintained, especially within predominantly white cliques.

Overview of the Study

The participants in this ethnographic study were students at two public urban high schools in the same Northern Californian district: one where white students had a substantial critical mass but were not the majority (48%), which for the purpose of this study will be referred to as 48th Street High School, and one in which they comprised a small minority (9.3%), which will be called 9th Street High School. It was important to choose schools with these demographics for two reasons. First, it informed the hypothesis as to whether increased diversity produces greater awareness of white identity. Second, most whiteness studies focus on populations that are highly and almost exclusively white (Gallagher, 1997; Lewis, 2003; McDermott & Samson, 2005; Twine & Gallagher, 2008; Waters, 2009). This ethnography went beyond previous studies by examining white racial

awareness in a moderately white environment, in which they were still the largest group but not completely isolated (48th Street High School), and an environment in which white students were the minority (9th Street High School).

The study was conducted during the 2006-2007 academic year in two high schools in a large urban Northern Californian city known for its racial and ethnic diversity. Ninth Street High School and 48th Street High School were deliberately selected from among the other schools in the city because they fit our criteria: they shared the same school district, there was no difference in socioeconomic status, and they had very different racial demographics (see Table 1). We took the unique approach of selecting a school with a moderate and minimal white population so that we could add to the literature on whiteness, which has traditionally focused on highly white populations.

Table 1
Racial demographics of the two high schools

School	Native American	Asian	Hispanic or Latino	Black	White	TOTAL
9th Street	18 (.9%)	657 (32.0%)	626 (30.4%)	564 (27.4%)	192 (9.3%)	2,057
48th Street	23 (1.6%)	135 (9.3%)	311 (21.5%)	284 (19.6%)	695 (48.0%)	1,448

The participants in the study were 41 high school juniors and seniors (and a few sophomores), ranging in age from 15 to 18. We conducted both one-on-one interviews and group interviews. As will be discussed in the methods section, both white students and students of color were interviewed in order to understand the context of the school, the organization and context of the cliques, and the context of the white students' opinions, thought processes, and discourse. At each school white students and students of color from a variety of backgrounds and cliques were interviewed (for information on the groups, their locations, and their demography, see Appendix 1).

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The data were qualitative and consisted of 41 interviews and 52 lunchtime observations at both high schools, which were collected over a seven-month period from October to April during the 2006-2007 academic year. Most interviews were 15 minutes long. The observations were conducted for an hour at a time at least two times per week. At 9th Street High we were able to obtain a randomly selected list of juniors and seniors, and we were granted permission to pull the students out of class for one-on-one interviews. At 48th Street High such permission was not granted, and therefore we had to select participants during lunchtime. All interviews were voluntary.

Interview questions were semi-structured to allow for conversations and insights from students, but they had enough structure that it was possible to compare across interviews. The participants were told that we were trying to learn more about the organization of cliques and other groups at their high school. Both schools had closed campuses, meaning that students could not leave during the lunch hour, and this allowed for more in-depth observations. At 9th Street we observed student interactions in the

bleachers, where mostly white students ate lunch, and the cafeteria, where students of color sat. At 48th Street, observations were conducted in the quad, an open space between the office and gym. Students sat on benches in the middle, on the hill west of the office, and under the building awnings. Notes were taken of cliques' racial composition based on the racial self-identification of the students, how the groups interacted, if there were territories, and how permeable or rigid the boundaries were. Both high schools granted research permission, and policies and procedures for conducting research involving human subjects were followed.

There are several issues to be mindful of with regards to the methods of data collection. At 48th Street High, where we were only permitted to interview during lunchtime, students were aware that their friends were trying to overhear the interview, and often friends would join in on the conversation, which may have led the interviewees to be more self-conscious in their interview. On the other hand, these interviews in the form of group conversations did allow for more naturally occurring discourse.

Data were analyzed through open, thematic coding to understand the social meaning of the discourse the students used in describing their social cliques, groups and personal identities. The coded themes included boundary work and symbolic exclusion, group rigidity, critical mass, and white consciousness. These frameworks will be discussed at length in the findings section. While coding, special attention was paid to the social meaning of students' responses because social structures are found within and enforced through language (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 2001; Lueck, 2006; Lueck & Wilson, 2010; Lueck & Wilson, 2011). It is through the students' discourse about themselves, their own group, other cliques, and the other school that it became clear how boundary work occurs and whether it happens along racial lines.

The first step of the coding process was transcribing the recorded interviews. The authors then looked for recurring patterns and themes in the interview and observation data. Patterns and themes were then assigned a number whereby each occurrence of that theme was assigned the same number. Patterns and parallels were also analyzed with regard to the observation data. The themes and parallels are discussed at length in the findings section below.

White Kids: Identity Construction, Critical Mass, and Symbolic Exclusion

In analyzing students' discourse as described above, we found both similarities and differences between the groups of students at the two schools. The first common finding at both campuses was the existence of a clique with the same self-given name, the "rockers," mostly composed of white students who tended to wear black and listen to rock music. The second common trend was the use of cultural cues, especially music, by students at both schools to define cliques and social groups. The most striking difference between the two campuses was that the students at 9th Street were more cognizant of the role of race in friendships and had rigid social groups. In the sections that follow, we elucidate how these patterns played out at the two schools.

Boundary Work and Symbolic Exclusion: "We Are Different From Them Because We Don't Listen to Rap"

Boundary work is essential to clique identity formation; groups exist on the basis of

who does and does not belong. This section seeks to explore how boundaries and group identities were created and maintained by students through their discourse, performance, preferences, and physical locations. Specifically, how did they explain and show membership, and what do the names mean to the members and non-members?

Despite the drastically different demographics of the schools, one of the first findings at both schools was a homogeneous (with a few exceptions) white racial group called rockers. At both schools, members of this clique had similar dress codes, such as dark clothes, piercings, and dyed hair, and they had a specific place where they met for lunch. At 9th Street it was the bleachers, and at 48th Street it was the hill west of the office. Under further investigation, we found that despite their identical name and dress code, there were many differences between 9th Street and 48th Street rockers in the way they constructed boundaries and in their attitude toward their racial identity, which can be explained by the difference in their school demographics.

At 9th Street High, most of the white students hung out with or identified as rockers. Of the seven randomly selected white students that were interviewed, six were rockers or ate lunch with the rockers. The seventh was a self-proclaimed “loner.” Rockers at 9th Street hung out on the bleachers, nearly 100 feet from the cafeteria where the rest of the students hung out. As an African American student indicated, “They are hecka separated from everyone else.” Observations revealed that the 9th Street rockers were nearly all white, and only a handful were students of color. It was also observed that being a rocker was performed more overtly at 9th Street High, with more piercings, dyed hair, and dark clothes.

At 48th Street High, there were homogeneous white groups in addition to the rockers, but there were also more white students. The rockers at 48th were known to hang out on “rocker hill,” the hill at the top of the quad. On average, 25 white students were observed eating lunch there, making them one of the largest homogeneous groups. Some students of color floated in and out of the group or were regulars, but consistently the group was overwhelmingly white. Like the rockers at 9th Street, their classmates viewed them as “crazy” and “weird,” indicating that these students would never be able to assimilate or to be accepted into the wider school culture. However, the performance of being a rocker was less emphasized at 48th Street; there was less dyed hair and fewer piercings, but they did usually wear black clothes or band t-shirts. At 48th Street High, there were many racially blended groups, something not often observed at 9th Street High. Consistently during visits, several groups of racially mixed friends were observed exiting class and eating lunch together. In addition, fewer students at 48th Street responded that race played a role in their school or friendship groups. While both schools had students of many races and ethnicities, we noted that the discourse around race often centered on black and white students. For example, 9th Street High had more Latino and particularly Asian students than 48th Street, with 8% more Latino students and 20% more Asian students. Yet students at both schools consistently made comments about the difference in the two schools’ black populations, not the drastic difference in Asian students, which demonstrates that students have been socialized to look at race as a black versus white binary opposition.

In particular, we found an absence of coding for Asian and Latino groups. When students talked about other groups at their school they named the typical groups one

would expect: jocks, cheerleaders, and nerds. However, at both schools students also identified two racial groups, Asians and Latinos. Sometimes black groups were also racially identified, but African American groups were usually coded as hip-hoppers or jocks, or various other nonracial names, and seldom were white groups called white; rather they were identified as rockers or other nonracial names. Each school had a variety of black groups and, in the case of 48th Street, a variety of white groups, but at both schools there were no non-racial and non-ethnic names for homogeneous Latino and Asian cliques. We heard of a few smaller Asian groups at 9th Street, but they were labeled with ethnic names—the Polynesian group and the Hmong group. In addition, they did not have any self-assigned names or a non-ethnic name, which shows the Asian population was again often overlooked by the students because they were left out of or did not have the social capital to identify themselves as anything other than their ethnicity. For example, in interviews Hmong students described themselves as Hmong, and Polynesian students described themselves as Polynesian, ethnic identities that were reinforced within the schools.

In our interviews at both schools we found that students were using cultural cues as a means for symbolic exclusion. For example, during an interview at 48th Street a white student was asked why he thought his group of friends ended up being all white. His reason for not having black friends was that he did not like hip-hop. His reasoning aligns with Bryson's (1996) theory in that the border between his group and an African American group is maintained by dislikes:

I guess, mmm, the general thing is uh we don't really listen to hip-hop and I think hip hop has a big influence in the way that some people, a lot of the people, think. We're just, and hip-hop's been generally black, so I guess we're not into that so, so that's kinda uh, I don't know. . . . It makes me sound racist again, but black people are listening to hip-hop and we're not so that is kinda why we don't mix.

This phenomenon of boundary construction was happening at both schools. In about one-fourth of the interviews, there were specific comments regarding rap and hip-hop. For instance, at 9th Street a white rocker commented, "We are different from them because we don't listen to rap." The "them" she referred to were black students because she was using rap, a symbol of black culture, to identify a group in non-racial terms. In addition *their* music is cited as the deterrent, not the fact that she listens to rock. At 48th a racially mixed group of students told us about rapper cliques. When a student was asked to describe the rapper cliques, one response was, "African little thugs." Thus it seems students were linking rap to a specific racial group. Students of color seemed to code for white students with the same frequency that rap and hip-hop were used to code for black students (e.g., coding white students with rock music). But can music really account for these students not having friendships or other relationships outside of the group? From our observations it seems that there were more complex reasons than music behind the patterns of exclusivity. Rather, music was employed because it is a symbolic way for students to make sense of the complex racial divisions of their groups. Further, students, especially white students, might have been using music as a cultural cue to explain exclusion while appearing to be race neutral by using musical genres rather than overt

racial terms (Lewis, 2003). This pattern occurred more frequently at 9th Street High.

Throughout our study it became clear that the clique named “rockers” was also a cultural cue for whiteness. As evident by their name, rockers defined themselves not by race, but by their assumed interest in rock music. Yet from their conversations it seemed that they were employing symbolic discourse to code for white membership. For example, in a handful of interviews with white students at 9th Street High, they would say things such as “I would fit in better at 48th Street High” or allude to the possibility that there would be more people with whom they would get along. When the rockers at 9th Street were asked about 48th Street, they often remarked, “Oh, the white school.” Students of color at 9th Street also recognized that rockers did not really “fit in” at their school. A Polynesian student stated:

If the rockers went to the other school they would hecka fit in, since here, where most of the kids listen to rap and stuff like that and R&B, they really don’t fit in. . . . Cause we have more of an urban vibe . . . it’s more like a black community.

However, it was observed that the rocker group at 48th Street was actually either the same size or smaller than the rocker group at 9th Street. Further, from our observations we found that 48th Street rockers were also viewed as outcasts, meaning that they were excluded from other groups and did not have group options. Therefore, this 9th Street student, who only knew whites as rockers, was alluding to the fact that there were more white students at 48th Street, and she thus concluded they would fit in better.

Some students did not conform to these overall patterns, but even these exceptions seemed to reflect racial context and the expected conflict between rock and rap. For example, one white rocker at 9th Street explained that he had friends that rap a little, and he went on to say, “I listen to rap and rock and with our friends, there is no discrimination between that.” Though on the surface the intent of his comment was to show broad music taste, using the word “discrimination,” a racially charged word, suggests that he was still thinking of music in racial terms. Consequently, it seems he was trying to cue that he does not discriminate between the racial identities of his friends.

The way students described group membership and how they described the other groups translated race through cultural cues such as music and relative “ghettoness,” a term used at both schools to code for students of color. For example, a 9th Street rocker said, “There is a big difference here between the ghettoness of some kids here and the whiteness of us. We’re totally white.” A white student at 48th Street said, “Whatever you want to say, [9th Street is] more African American, more ghetto than over here.” These cultural cues arose when students described their own group, other groups, and when they compared the schools. Although the students may not have clearly understood how racialized and discriminatory their discourse was, the presence of these cultural cues reveals that most students were aware of the racial basis and differences of the cliques at both schools.

Border Rigidity and Group Options: “Fights Only Happen If You Try to Fit In”

In the previous section, we discussed how students constructed boundaries both to identify themselves, their relationships, and their membership. We found that the rigidity

of group boundaries, however, varied at the two schools.

Interviews revealed how rigid the groups were at 9th Street. A Samoan student was asked if he felt race was an issue at the school. He responded, "Fights only happen if you try to fit in. If you came to this school and pretended to be someone you are not, you are going to get into trouble." Since this was a response to a question about race, his response indicated that if students tried to fit in with a racial group other than their own, there would be conflict. Group rigidity at 9th Street was also manifested in extracurricular activities. A white rocker indicated:

See a girl who was white, she tried out last year [for the dance team], and they liked her, they liked what she did, but she wouldn't look right. So that's what the issues come down to. I guess there are people who have racism issues.

The idea of "fitting in" racially was expressed several times. Another student also argued that groups mix, but they mix as groups, meaning a Latino group and a group of black students may share a lunch table, but as two separate groups by chance eating at the same table, not as a mix of individuals. Observations of the cafeteria confirmed this description. For example, there were tables with both Latino and African American students, but they were separated with one group on each end. Student comments and seating patterns revealed that race plays a significant role in group membership at 9th Street.

We found 48th Street School to have less rigid group boundaries. Our interview with a student we call Trevor illuminated the difference between the two schools' group permeability. Trevor attended 48th School prior to attending 9th Street. As a student at 9th Street, he hung out at the bleachers with the rockers. However, as an African American student, the rockers called him "Token," a name that was assigned to him from Comedy Central's *South Park*, referencing him as one of the African American members of the group. His interviews highlight how permeable the groups' boundaries were, especially with regard to race.

One day during an interview at the rockers' bleachers, we specifically sought to interview some of the students of color at the bleachers. We selected a small group of three who were having a conversation. The group consisted of two African American students, one being Trevor, and a white rocker. When the group was asked if they were part of the rockers they agreed they were part of that clique. However, when asked if they themselves were rockers only the white student quickly said yes. Trevor and the other African American student seemed suddenly more confused. Trevor reluctantly said, "Not necessarily." The other African American student said, "I guess so," and seemed confused even though he was performing being a rocker by wearing long, black, wide-leg pants with chains and a black t-shirt with a rock band name printed on it. Their reluctance to answer indicated that they were confused as to whether or not they could fully identify as a member of the group because they did not fit the criteria of being white, the typical rocker profile.

A longer interview with Trevor illustrated that clique boundaries at 9th Street were comparatively more rigid than those at 48th Street School. At 48th Street, Trevor was not a rocker, he was a floater, meaning he hung out with several groups: the skaters, the rockers, and unnamed groups. However, now at 9th Street, his associations were

narrowed; he stuck to the rocker group and did not float anymore because he did not feel comfortable, and the rigid group socialization did not leave room to move between groups:

Forty-eighth is much more open-minded I guess, they don't really care much, like, it's hard to explain. Um, I hung out with a lot more people there because they don't really care. I guess these are the only few people I hang out with here.

Trevor's reflection was supported both by observations and other interviews. During the closed-campus lunch at both schools, cliques occupied clear territories, particularly at 9th Street, where cliques had rigid definitions of lunchtime seating areas. One African American student from 9th Street described the situation:

Like everybody knows, like my table, like automatically when we go into the cafeteria we go to our table. Like we call it our table. A lot of people have their own table. . . . You like already know that's your table, so nobody really goes to it.

Yet at 48th Street, it was often difficult to find the same handful of students during lunch because they hung out with a different group every day. Groups did have regular places at 48th, such as rocker hill, stoner hill, the basketball courts, etc. As one student said, "There's like, people have certain places to sit. Like every day they sit in the same spot." But at the same time most of the 48th Street students felt that everyone got along pretty well, and students seemed to feel comfortable circulating around those spaces and within the main quad area as well. These interviews and data illustrated that the presence of floaters is another indicator of group rigidity at each school, and that 9th Street's groups had more rigid boundaries because they had fewer floaters.

A second indicator of 9th Street's rigid group membership was the practice of naming cliques. At 48th Street, traditional clique names were primarily used, such as jock, rockers, stoners, etc., names that had been bestowed upon the group by peers and demonstrated a shared interest. But several students, white rockers in particular, argued that they did not associate with just one group. One white student who usually sat on rocker hill said, "I have friends everywhere." Thus, students at 48th Street did not feel compelled to have a solidified identity. When an African American student at 48th Street was asked what clique he belonged to, his response was, "Everything but a rocker." Besides the fact that he did not desire to be associated with the rockers, he did not feel the need to tie himself down to one group and he probably felt welcomed at more than one group. Similarly, when a member of the social clique known as the stoners was asked to describe her friends, she responded, "We are everyone, rockers, emos, skaters, stoners . . ." Thus, this group had minimal boundaries and did not assign their group a specific identity or name. These interviews show that students at 48th Street had mostly permeable friendship groups.

Groups at 9th Street had a more solidified clique identity, which was demonstrated through the various self-given clique names. There was a greater variety of clique names beyond the traditional and descriptive names at 48th Street. At 9th Street, students identified with self-given titles, such as the "beast mauve," "stunner family," "fab," "crest

mauve,” and “nutty babies” (see Appendix 1). Most of these groups were African American and the names were only really known by students of color; none of the rockers told us the names of these cliques. This is significant because according to the students these group names were neither racial nor representative of a shared interest. Group names were created for the sake of constructing a boundary only.

But there is still the question of why 9th Street had more groups with names (many of them consisting of black students), and why they were self-labeling. This could be because African American students are used to being labeled within society, so it is empowering to create their own names at a school in which they have a critical mass. Having a critical mass allowed the students to influence and shape the culture at the school and create their own organizations of people. Cornell and Hartmann (1998) believe that identity construction is not passive: “People assert identities. They do this within the constraints that circumstances allow, according to their own interpretations of their interests, and with the resources they have at their command” (p. 150). In addition, the process of renaming is essential to African American culture, and scholars of African American studies have found that the renaming process is an act of empowerment (Osumare, 2007). Therefore, it seems that in this community, in which black students had critical mass, they were able to take on traditional naming practices. In contrast, white students at 9th Street had very few options when choosing group membership. They had limited choices because they operated within a school culture that fostered “sticking to your own kind,” and, because the rockers were the only white group, white students had two choices: being a rocker or a loner. Several white students mentioned that they hung out with the rockers even though they identified as a metal head or liked jazz. When asked why, one student said, “I hang out in the general area because some of my friends are rockers.” This indicates that white students at 9th Street, even when they did not identify as rockers, choose to be with them, likely because they do not have the cultural cues to join any other group. However, at 48th Street white students had many more options because they had critical mass, and their groups were not as rigid. They could be rockers, skaters, stoners, scene kids, and a variety of unnamed racially mixed groups.

White Consciousness, “Like the Ones with Tight-Ass Pants and the Flip-Flops”

In addition to examining students' boundary work, we sought to explore how students were recognizing and understanding racial identity. At 48th Street High, white students in the racially diverse groups recognized the diversity in their group, whereas the homogeneous white groups did not seem to notice or did not want to acknowledge their homogeneity. Members of mixed groups were aware of the diversity within their group and the lack of mixing in homogeneous groups. Often the mixed groups would talk about the diversity of their group without the prompting of a question. A white student from stoner hill proudly stated, without being prompted: “We are the most diverse group on campus. We are everyone.” Another white student from the mixed group also described his group using one word: “diverse.” In contrast, the homogeneous groups at 48th Street did not express notions of racial identity, but ironically saw it in other groups. The scene clique, which was all white, had about fourteen members and said they did not see race playing a role in friendship groups. Similarly, a rocker we call Seth, asserted in his interview that he did not believe in labels, that they “restrict and restrain us,” which

showed that he did not want to discuss or reflect on his group's composition. Another student from rocker hill argued that race did not play a role in friendship groups, but then came back after his interview saying, "I forgot to tell you about the Asian kids!" These remarks relate to the cafeteria phenomenon (Tatum, 2003), when members of a homogeneous white group can identify the racial composition of other groups but cannot or do not critically think about their own group's racial composition.

The rockers at 9th Street High, however, seemed to be much more aware of their whiteness. When a student in the group was asked what clique she was interacting with, she responded, "the white group." While not all rockers would agree with calling the rockers "the white group," especially since the group had nonwhite membership, most of the rockers, in their one-on-one interviews, did recognize the racial dimension of cliques. For example, one rocker remarked, "You hang out with the people who like the same music," then added in a very soft tone as if she was embarrassed to note it, "the same race or stuff. . . ." Her change of tone indicated that she was not comfortable talking about race, and that she was perhaps embarrassed by how segregated the groups were. There were a few rockers who did not acknowledge the overall homogeneity of the group. Incidentally, two of the white students who did not indicate recognition of racial stratification also self-identified as metal head and jazz rather than rocker. Their choice to ignore the homogeneous composition of the rockers is demonstrated by their attempt to differentiate their identity among the other white students by identifying with other cultural cues. Yet, overall, 9th Street rockers did notice the role of race in their own friendship groups, whereas 48th Street's homogeneous groups did not reflect on their own group's racial composition.

The white members of the 9th Street rockers had a heightened awareness of a perceived lack of power due to their small numbers and their status. As Lewis (2003) argued, "studies about race are always studies of power and struggles for material resources" (p. 616). The rockers in interviews frequently noted that they felt picked on due to their small size. One rocker said, "Well most of the people think they can do whatever they want to us and we won't do anything back because there are so many of them." Rockers at 9th Street frequently called 48th Street High School the "white school," demonstrating that they were aware of the lack of white students like them at their school. Another white rocker used the "us" versus "them" language when describing an incident with other students saying, "You know what *they* did though, over at our little area where we hang out, *they* took ketchup packets and put 'F rockers' over there. Yeah, *they* don't like us very much." When asked whom they were referring to, the response once again was, "Like the black people." The student's description of a conflict between white and black students demonstrated the polarity of the racial groups and how she believed that the "black people" at her school felt, which we assume would be overwhelming to the white student group given their small size.

In addition to feeling disliked and powerless, the rockers at 9th Street also expressed that they were feeling like outcasts. For example, when the students were interviewed about the members of color within the rocker clique, the explanation was that they were outcasts, too. One student explained, "There are a lot of people who come here because we are somewhat social outcasts. It is hard for us to talk to people sometimes because I'm gay." Another explanation for the rockers of color was the socially constructed behavior

“to act white” to meet expectations influenced by the wider society. Thus, within the “white group,” students aimed for critical mass and collective action to have a better representation with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Their group served as a stronghold for outcasts and a sanctuary against external threats from the school’s majority groups. “Students of color acting white,” was a socially constructed behavior within the group that helped ease tensions and power relations within the group to increase their solidarity and collective action. As pointed out by Marwell and Oliver (1993), it is crucial to be aware of power relations and differences in heterogeneous cliques.

The white students at 48th Street, especially those in homogeneous groups, did not engage in dialogue as quickly or openly about racial issues as the 9th Street rockers, and we found white students in homogenous groups at 48th Street more often demonstrating the colorblind mentality that has been discussed in previous whiteness studies (Chesler et al., 2003; Lewis, 2003). A white student from the all-white scene group at 48th Street High said she was just a “normal kid going to school.” Thus, she is benefiting from the privilege of having an invisible identity (Mahoney, 1997). Interestingly another student at first said that there were diverse groups at her school, but then she added, “I don’t see the barrier between black and white.” It was as though she recognized racial groups and patterns, but then corrected herself in an effort to give a socially desirable answer. Neither student, however, mentioned the homogeneity of their own group, demonstrating their inability to reflect about themselves or the choices in friendships that they made.

In addition to colorblindness, one white student from a mixed group at 48th Street employed ethnic options to avoid being labeled as “white” by identifying as Danish. After further questioning he revealed that his father was Irish. When he was asked why he did not tell everyone he was also Irish, he said he does only “when they ask what are you really?” This indicates that he is choosing his ethnic identity and “selectively forgetting” another, a privilege his black and Latino friends do not have (Waters, 1990). He chose an ethnic identity for himself, but he gave racial identities to his friends of color by saying, “I hang out with skaters, I hang out with black people, with the rockers . . . basically everything.” Further, he might be taking on this ethnic identity because he did not want to be identified as a “white boy,” an identity he described in a distasteful tone and as a contrast to himself. For instance, he said he did not identify as white, “Cause when I think of a white boy, and what all my friends call white boys, it’s like the ones with tight-ass pants, and the flip-flops, and spike your hair hella gay.” We argue he was so adamant about not being a “white boy” and wanted everyone to know he was Danish because he did not want to trigger cultural cues of whiteness. To avoid this, he invoked an ethnic label. His symbolic ethnicity made it difficult for this white student to understand the political and social struggles of people of color whose ethnicities are not flexible and symbolic. As Waters (1990) pointed out, the lives of people of color are strongly influenced by national origin and race, regardless of how they choose to identify themselves racially and ethnically, whereas whites may elect or not elect ethnic options and may engage in selective forgetting.

Another student at 48th Street revealed similar selective forgetting when it came to his heritage. A white rocker said, “I am just a mix of French, and Hungarian, and English, and German, and all things white just thrown into a big pot.” With hesitation he added, “I think I have a little bit of Portuguese in me, but not enough to make me stand out.” Upon

further questioning he linked this Portuguese heritage to “un-normal” behavior, saying:

Well, my mother and my grandfather have a bit of Portuguese in them and uh, well my mom is pretty crazy. They, they really like to, especially my mother, she really likes to publicly humiliate me, as I am sure all parents do, but she like takes it to the extreme sometimes, and I compare her to my grandpa, and I am like, well, they are both Portuguese, I guess. Or maybe they share, or there is some kind of gene that holds this craziness, I don't know.

He quickly identified with the ethnicities he found “normal,” but tried to distance himself from an identity he classified as “crazy.” Further, he thought these traits were genetic. As Waters (1990) stated, “Americans who have a symbolic ethnicity continue to think of ethnicity—as well as race—as being biologically rooted” (p. 167), which is a belief that makes it all the more difficult for students to understand the social construction of race and power as well as inequality within this process. In this way, racial oppression and ethnic discrimination are reinforced as biologically rooted, physically inherited and fixed, with no possibilities for change towards equity and social justice. Again, whites enjoy the option to distance themselves from certain identities but constrain the identity construction of students of color.

The white students in the mixed groups, however, did seem to recognize diversity. A white student at 48th Street from a mixed group said he did think about being white. He said, “You kinda have to watch what you say around black people, you know, you kinda have to watch what you say around the Mexicans, in terms of race.” He demonstrated that at some level he understood that, as a white person, things that he said could offend specific groups. He also was one of the few students to stray from the black and white binary. He included Latino students in his discussion of being careful about what he says.

Two students from 48th Street in their interviews began to address white privilege, one from a mixed group, and one from a homogeneous group. In his longer interview, Seth gave a classic colorblind response, but he gave a surprising response when asked if he ever thought about being white:

Not especially, but if I were not white I would think about it a lot more. . . . Most white people don't identify with other white people as a culture; it's not really a thing we deal with. Because like most white people don't know where their ethnic origins come from, they say ‘oh I'm Irish, I'm a quarter German,’ but they don't really stay close to that tie.

Although he was applying a colorblind approach earlier by saying he did not perceive differences, he was beginning to grasp the concept of white privilege. He recognized that because he was white he did not have to think about being white. Therefore, even though he was unable to identify with being white, he understood why he was having this trouble.

Overall, students at 9th Street perceived race as an important social factor in their daily lives more frequently than students at 48th Street; however, at 9th Street, white students viewed their white identity more defensively. We believe that this is because they were part of a population that did not reach the threshold for critical mass, and they

often felt like outcasts because of their small size. Their recognition of their small numbers and marginal status is evident in their comments about not feeling safe. Consequently they perceived themselves as being mistreated, without the capacity to stand up for themselves. This was in contrast to the white students at 48th Street who did have critical mass as 48% of the population; they were not marginalized, so they had more freedom to select friends, and they did not feel isolated when they were in the classroom. The degree to which white students were aware of their white identity and its impact on other students depended on whether they were in a homogeneous or diverse group. The students at 48th Street who understood the importance of their white identity and were able to describe their race in non-defensive terms. We believe that this can partially be explained by the critical mass of white students at 48th Street who were not as marginalized as the students at 9th Street; students at 48th Street had more freedom to select groups, and they did not feel isolated when they were in the classroom.

Conclusion

Critically analyzing the discourse about clique and personal identity from students in more diverse settings provides new and unique findings about group boundaries, symbolic exclusion, and the role of critical mass in identity construction. Yet most significantly, the discourse about group identity and race relations at these schools also indicated the degree to which students understood their own racial identity and the identities of others. These students, and their cliques or groups, represent exaggerated forms of social conformity based on stereotypic images of race, gender, class, and intellectual ability, through which these adolescents try out and negotiate power in terms of different identities.

Students' thinking was often blurry when it came to the distinctions between race and ethnicity. They would also often subscribe to the common American misunderstandings about race and biology; they saw group values and boundaries as fixed and rigid entities, and they believed that behavior and identity emerged directly from biology and therefore could not change across time and space.

Students at both campuses used cultural cues to explain the membership of their group, such as using music to cue for particular racial groups. These cues described the groups and reinforced the boundaries by indicating characteristics required for membership, such as rap or rock. As Bourdieu (1991) and Fairclough (2001) stressed, social structures are found and enforced through language. Similarly, Bryson (1996) pointed out that the dislike of certain cultural cues creates symbolic boundaries. Therefore, a group can be defined as "rockers" or as "not like rockers." While these dislikes are an imperative part of boundary work, it is important to understand why the students were using these cues to describe themselves. We believe part of the rationale behind using cultural cues is a motivation to give socially desirable answers. The findings indicated that students learned that it is not socially desirable to talk about race openly, leading them to employ cultural cues. In addition, much of the racialized discourse was focused on a black and white dichotomy, with hardly any discussions of Latino and Asian groups. This suggests that students have learned to think about race in a black and white binary. It further illustrates that racial tensions are still alive in schools today, even in

diverse schools, but the current language used to describe, or to avoid describing, race relations is now more complex and covert.

While interviewing students of color was important for understanding the social dynamics of the schools, the focus of this paper was on white students. Some of the findings were consistent with the findings of traditional whiteness studies, especially in homogeneous groups at 48th Street. Although this study showed that the colorblind phenomenon can be found in diverse settings, it seems to occur less frequently as the density of white students decreases. The pattern of 9th Street white students having a greater awareness of their white identity fits with the previous literature. As Feagin and Vera (1995) found in their own studies, “Relatively few whites think reflectively about their whiteness except when it is forced on them by encounters with or challenges from black America” (p. 139). The opportunity for “encounters” with students of color again is illuminated by critical mass theory. Many of the white students at 9th Street High were brought into awareness of their white racial identity because their interactions with people who are different from them occurred frequently, since only 9% of the students were white. As a consequence of feeling like the minority, they understood that they had less power due to a lack of critical mass, which influenced choices in their identity, their resources, and their numbers to mobilize against conflict, all of which were reflected in their responses. Consequently, they sought a homogeneous group to combat the feelings of isolation they felt in the classroom and in the broader school environment.

In addition, the same patterns of colorblindness and lack of white racial awareness (Lewis, 2003; Feagin & Vera, 1995) emerged during our interviews; however, this mentality was noted less frequently within the more racially diverse school and within more racially diverse cliques. This finding aligns with our hypothesis that racial identity awareness increases with increased racial diversity, and is supported by other research (Moore, 2002). Moore (2002), who studied children’s summer camps, found that white children in more racially diverse camps had a wider range of racial membership and a more fluid understanding of race. But our study indicates that there is a tipping point at which racial awareness can become so heightened that racial identity for whites can become defensive, and that point is contingent on the size and the power of the racial group. Further, the tipping point appears to be when a group is an extreme minority population and lacks critical mass.

Our theoretical framework of critical mass theory addresses the significance of group size, power, and interaction. As previous whiteness studies have shown (Lewis, 2003; Perry, 2003; Waters, 1990), when white groups are too large they do not recognize their own racial identity. In contrast, this study shows that when a white group is a drastic minority, as is the case at 9th Street High, they are very aware of their racial identity, bond together, and have minimal cross-racial friendships. Thus, from a combination of these findings, we theorize that when there is more racial diversity and empowerment for out-groups, more cross-racial friendships occur. Sociologists Quillian and Campbell (2003) also expect this very outcome. They call this phenomenon “propinquity,” which complements the concept of critical mass. Combining both theories helps to explain the behaviors of the 9th Street rockers. As a group they lacked critical mass and tended to group together with other social outcasts at their school to consolidate power. Within this group, which consists of white students and also some gay and lesbian students with

different racial identities, the students aimed for collective action and solidarity along the lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation. The group also served as a sanctuary against external threats from the school's majority groups based on collective action. As previous research shows (Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1985, 1989), one of the major aims of collective action and collective identity is to gain recognition and acceptance for stigmatized identities. Bernstein (1997) further showed that both the deconstruction of identity categories and their expression on the collective level serve as a political strategy with instrumental and cultural goals.

The findings of this study are significant in that they add to the literature of whiteness studies by broadening the demographic ranges in which white identity can be studied and the complexities that arise when the majority is not white. This study shows the social power of race, demonstrating that race has far-reaching consequences for the way we organize ourselves and think about our identity.

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Appendix 1

Cliques and other groups at 9th Street High and 48th Street High

9th Street High School		
Clique name	Demography	Location
Rockers	95% White	Bleachers
Polynesian Group	Polynesian	Cafeteria
"Laid back" football players	African-American	Cafeteria
Stunner boys/ stunner family	African-American	Cafeteria
Jocks	African-American	Cafeteria
Rapper	African-American	Cafeteria
Beast Mauve	African-American	Cafeteria
Crest Mauve	African-American	Cafeteria
Nutty Babies	Polynesian and African-American	Cafeteria
Fab	African-American	Cafeteria
Thunder Clique	African-American	Cafeteria
Nanner Mob	*	Cafeteria
Heights	*	Cafeteria
Cheerleaders	African-American	Cafeteria
Latino Group/ Mexicans	Latino	*
Ghetto Asians	Asian	Cafeteria
Asian Group/ Conservative Asians	Asian	Cafeteria
Hmong	Hmong	*

48th Street High School		
Clique name	Demography	Location
Rockers	White	The hill
Stoners	White	The side of the hill
Scene Clique	White	The bench below rocker hill
Nerds	White	Hallway near the computer room

Mixed group	Diverse	Side of the building
Basketball players	Mostly African-American	The quad
Rappers	Mostly African-American	Different locations in school
Hip Hop Clique	Mostly African-American	Hallways
Asians	Asian	*
Latinos	Mexican and Latino	Hallway
Jocks	Diverse	The quad and sport locations
Football players	Diverse	The quad
Cheerleaders	Diverse	The quad
Floater	Diverse	Multiple locations

Note. All cliques were identified through student interviews and observations.

* Undetermined or not enough evidence to determine.