Running Head: RACE, CLASS, AND IDENTITY IN THE LIVES OF URBAN YOUTH

Being Other, Finding Self:

Race, Class, and Identity in the Lives of Urban Youth

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Abstract

This paper examines the process of identity construction for adolescents living at the intersection of historically marginalized social categories. Data is drawn from four years of fieldwork at a predominantly African American after-school program near an urban housing project. Interviews and photography projects were conducted with 17 youth ages 12-17. The image of the "project kid" emerged in youths' understandings of themselves as seen by society. They articulate a need for a model of identity development that goes beyond singular categorizations of race, gender, and class. Their stories reveal that the intersection of race and class affects identity in ways best explored through qualitative research.

Individual identity is in part an intrapsychic activity, but it takes place within a larger sociocultural framework. Understanding my available opportunities within society and knowing how I am perceived by others influences my own sense of self. Thus, we define ourselves not only by who we are, but also by who we are not. In social psychology, this is studied in terms of in-group attachment and out-group bias (Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, & Hart-Johnson, 2003; Tajfel, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tarrant et al., 2001). In the humanities, the "Other," an image against which we create our own sense of self, has been used to explore the construction of gender, race, and national identities.[i] In 21st-century America, the inner-city serves as a site for the construction of an Other that incorporates both race and class. This influences the daily experiences of urban youth, shaping the ways in which they construct identities and envision themselves in the adult world. This has theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, we do not know enough about the ways in which race, class, and gender work together to shape self-concept. Without this understanding, we cannot adequately address the developmental needs of youth living at the intersection of multiple, historically oppressed, social categories. For these youth, social position must be at the center of developmental theories (Coll, Crnic, Lamberty, Wasik, & et al., 1996), as the "context of oppression" influences their self-development (Quintana & Segura-Herrera, 2003).

This paper reports on findings from a qualitative study of adolescents living in an urban housing project. It examines the effects on identity of being Othered and addresses the ways in which dichotomous social categories do not adequately articulate the identity building process of youth who are Othered on multiple axes of power. The participants articulate a need for a model of identity development that goes beyond singular categorizations of race, gender, and social

class. They voice with great prowess how they are constructed as Others by outside society and the ways in which this construction rests on more than race or class alone. Their voices call for acknowledgement of the complex roles which race, class, and gender play in young lives and for more qualitative research to examine the inter-braiding of social categories in young lives.

The role of the Other

Identity development takes place in a social context. It depends on both our own self-image and others' images of us. Individual identity is bounded by cultural norms, circumscribed by the identities recognized as valid by society and one's position within it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; di Leonardo & Lancaster, 1997; Hall, 1989). Yet our sense of self also depends on whom we see as our own Other. Knowledge of the Other simultaneously creates both the Other and the self, making each dependent on the other for recognition and validation (Fanon, 1967; Said, 1978). This type of Othering has long been implicated in American race relations. W.E.B. DuBois (1940) asserted that the individual freedom prized by western Whites is based on the degradation of others. The fact that the notion of race excludes whiteness (Whites "don't have" race; Haymes, 1995) points to its oppositional nature and dependence on the Other for existence.

The discourse of Other tends to assume a universal group identity. Such assumptions of identities based on a single social category ignore within-group differences in social positioning (Celious & Osyerman, 2001; Diamond & Hartsock, 1998; Pringle & Watson, 1998; Sapiro, 1998). Recent sociological work on race, class, and gender identities suggests that between-group differences cannot be removed from social practice. Racial, class, and gender identities are located not in any definition of the social category, but in the relations between people of different categories (Bottero & Irwin, 2003). Psychologists, too, have begun to recognize that

social positioning, as influenced by race, class, and gender, has both direct and indirect effects on child development (Coll et al., 1996). America's urban landscapes, a site for the construction of the modern Other, are melting pots of social identities which blend race, class, ethnicity, and gender, creating conflated experiences and categories of difference that defy singular definition.[ii]

Most social psychology research inadequately captures the experience of being a member of multiple social groups simultaneously. Group identity theories assume discrimination between "me" and "not-me" to be the most basic conceptual level on which humans operate (Rosenthal, 2001). We identify categories on which we separate ourselves from and link ourselves to others and act on the basis of those group memberships (Tajfel, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Some work has addressed multiple group identifications, but most have focused on priming and inhibiting categories or predicting patterns of discrimination in labs (Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995; Miller, Urban, & Vanman, 1998; Vanbeselaere, 1987). To understand the effects of overlapping identities in daily life, naturalistic studies are needed.

Studies of racial and ethnic identity point to the ways in which being a member of a minority group changes the process of identity development, leading to different needs, stages, and outcomes (Coll et al., 1996; Cross, 1991, 2004; Cross & Strauss, 1998; Eccles, 2001, 2004; Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Tarver, 1988; Quintana, 1998; Rotheram-Borus & Wyche, 1994; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Discrimination and awareness of stereotypes affect minority youths' psychosocial adjustment and academic performance (Dubois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale, & Hardesty, 2002; McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Quintana & Segura-Herrera, 2003; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Ethnic and racial identity, identification, and pride have been positively linked to increased self-esteem,

improved psychological adjustment, and academic achievement, serving as a buffer against the effects of discrimination (Chavous et al., 2003; Dubois et al., 2002; Wong et al., 2003).

Such models tend to assume that social identities operate independently. Yet class and race both influence the daily lives of minority youth in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Recent work on the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement found that, in contrast to the "acting White" theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1988), positive identification with one's minority racial group improved academic motivation. The authors suggest that this variation from prior studies may be due to the socioeconomic make-up of the sample (Wong et al., 2003). Research on racial identification of multiracial adolescents has demonstrated that racial identity changes over time and may be influenced by socioeconomic status (Herman, 2004). But despite a call for more ecological models of development that examine the interactive systems of racism, classism, and sexism (Coll et al., 1996), there is still a dearth of empirical work that studies the processes of these overlapping contexts.

Many studies of ethnic identity development include low-income populations. Yet almost no studies examine poverty per se as an influence on identity or address how available opportunity structures influence identity (Phillips & Pittman, 2003). A few qualitative studies have examined the intersection of multiple social categories, including race and class. They tend to conclude that one category becomes primary in daily activity and self-construal (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996; Waters, 1996). They do not address the ways in which individuals interweave categories across contexts to develop fluid identities that take into account multiple subject positions. These are important processes to understand, especially if positive racial identity is a promotive and protective factor for minority youth (Wong et al., 2003).

This Study

In order to understand the processes by which race and class shape adolescents' identities and to examine the influences of local contexts on these processes, I undertook a qualitative study of the adolescent members of a youth organization located near an urban housing project. I chose qualitative methods to capture the in-depth process of self-construction within a specific site. I combined four years of participant-observation with focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and photography projects to examine various aspects of identity construction.

Site

The East Side Boys and Girls Club[iii] is a squat, brick building on the outskirts of a housing project in a large, mid-western city. The building is not spacious but has a variety of activity areas. The hallways are filled with laughter, shouts, and scampering feet. Despite occasional conflicts, the overarching atmosphere is one of positive energy. The club is a casual and fluid environment in which youth are mostly free to choose their activities, although there are behavior and dress codes which are enforced by staff and youth alike.

Most club members live in the nearby projects. The apartment buildings are in better condition than much public housing, but it is still not a very safe place at night. Three local gangs operate in the area. Nearby are railroad yards and single-family houses. The neighborhood feels isolated, far away from the city center despite its geographical closeness. Conversations with kids confirm this impression, indicating the infrequency with which they leave the neighborhood.

Sample

The larger ethnographic sample includes all youth and staff present at East Side over my four years there. The interview sample consists of 17 youth ages 12-18, 9 females and 8 males.

Seven of the youth were between the ages of 12 and 14 and ten of the youth were 15 or older at

the time of their first interview. During the first interview I asked youth to define their race or

ethnicity. I did not provide a checklist of words from which to choose, allowing youth to use

whatever words they came up with on their own. Ten youth described their race/ethnicity as

Black or African American, two as African American and Hispanic, two as African American

plus two other ethnicities, and one each as Hispanic, White, and Other.[iv] Fourteen youth live in

the housing project near the club. The remaining three have close ties to it. All youth are active

club members who have been coming to the club for a number of years and/or come regularly.

I did not randomly select youth for this study. Because I am interested in how the Boys &

Girls Club is used as a setting for identity work, it is important to have participants who attend

regularly and/or have been coming to East Side for a long time. I attempted to enlist youth who

may have been under my radar through staff recommendations, but I had an easier time

recruiting youth who I already knew. This may have biased the sample. Yet it is possible that I

elicited more nuanced information from youth with whom I had established relationships.

<div align="center">Measures</div>

I used four methods: focus groups, interviews, photography, and participant-observation.

Focus Groups

I conducted two focus groups, one with youth 12-14 and one with youth 15 and older.

Data from the focus groups were used to develop the interviews.

Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 17 sample youth. Topics

explored included youths' self-concepts, experiences at the club, expectations for their futures,

and perceptions and experiences of prejudice. The only non-open ended questions were Likert-type scales asking about generalized perceptions and personal experiences of discrimination based on race or ethnicity, class, and gender. Neighborhood was used as a proxy for class, as my observations suggested that the boundary of the housing project was a salient marker for youth. Each scale was followed by open-ended questions to uncover the meaning of the responses.

Most interviews lasted 45-60 minutes. Participants received a gift certificate after each interview. Interviews were generally conducted in private rooms with only the participant and myself present. All 17 youth completed the first interview; 14 completed the second interview.

Photo Projects

I gave each youth a disposable camera. With half the roll they were to photograph things from a list I provided, including people they're close to, something representing what they want to be in the future, and their favorite things in the club. The rest of the film could be used for pictures of anything they felt would tell me more about them. The second interview drew on the photos for its content. Youth were given a set of the photos and an album to keep.

Participant-Observation

I was engaged in participant-observation at East Side for four years. For three years, one or two research assistants also conducted fieldwork. All field notes were used as data, giving context to the time-located interviews and photos. Many of the interview participants appeared in field notes throughout the four years. Interviews and conversations with staff were also included.

Analysis

Given my interest in the construction of race and class, it is certain that my own positionality influenced my interactions with the participants. I cannot factor out my own

subjectivity, and considered it deeply in my data collection and analysis (Deutsch, 2004). My

long history with East Side did ensure that youth were familiar with me. I had known some

participants for nearly four years by the time of their interviews. Overall, I feel that I built up a

cache of trust and rapport with the majority of youth and staff which enhanced my research. Yet

I cannot discount that my positionality influenced the questions I asked and the answers I

received. My research process was informed by consideration of these issues.

The analytic process for this project was iterative. Qualitative research is a constant

interplay of theory, data collection, analysis, and ideas (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Walsh, 1998).

The interviews were based on issues that emerged during my field work, focus groups, and pilot

interviews, as well as the study's overarching research questions. As I conducted interviews I

paid close attention to emerging topics, on which I then probed during subsequent interviews and

field observations. Following completion of data collection I read the interview transcripts and

field notes for content and themes, exploring continuities and differences within and between

youth. I drew on grounded theory's constant comparison method to test those themes across data

sources (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Walsh, 1998). At times I used more

specific coding techniques. I approached data analysis as both revealing and exploding:

uncovering themes within the data on the general topic of identity construction and splitting open

those issues to examine their meanings within the local context and the larger social realm.

<div align="center">Results and Discussion</div>

The teens at East Side have a deep understanding of the ways in which society constructs

them as Others. Their self-constructions are in dialogue with these images; their experiences are

not captured by racial or ethnic identification alone. Rather, the adolescents attribute personal

encounters with discrimination to a combination of race, class, and gender. At East Side youth can negotiate stereotypes, forming a safe community within which they can resist dominant discourse and see themselves as subjects rather than objects (Haymes, 1995; hooks, 1990).

<u>"Project kids"</u>

One of the central ways in which youth report themselves as recognized by society is as kids from the projects. BJ, a 15-year old African American female, demonstrates through her photography project the way in which she and her peers are in dialogue with this construction of themselves. One of BJ's photographs is of a bird flying in the sky. When I ask her why she took this photograph, she says the following:

> I just, cause you wouldn't usually see, people think of the projects as bad and that you wouldn't see any birds or anything over here so that's why I took that.

BJ expresses a keen awareness of society's vision of housing projects. She exerts her own agency in engaging with that discourse to disprove the stereotype and demonstrate her personal experience of self in the projects. In taking this photograph, BJ is attempting to "break the gaze" of others (Luttrell, 2003). She creates a counter narrative of growing up in the projects that directly replies to dominant social discourses (Luttrell, 2003; Villenas, 2001).

Other youth mirror this awareness of people's images of their neighborhood. Bob says that, although he has never been treated differently because of his neighborhood, he believes this is only because people don't know where he lives. "But I think if they did know where I lived they'd have a different opinion at first of me. [Why is that?] Because a lot of people tend to, even though they may not say so, make judgments based on appearance or background." In addition to pointing out how youth expect people to perceive them based on where they live, Bob also

highlights the conflation of race and class in the United States. Bob is White, and not instantly "recognized" by others as being from the projects. This allows him to escape that social identity, and associated discrimination, in a way that his Black peers cannot (Wong et al., 2003).

African American boys from East Side are especially aware of being identified outside of the neighborhood as kids "from the ghetto."

It'll be like, me and a few of my friends we'll go outside the neighborhood to get away and relax and people be like lookin' at us and say they from the ghetto, think we've got no manners. Some people think all the people from here don't know how to act. – Kelly, 16-year old Black male

Like I can go to a classy place and I don't know if it's racist or where we come from and, not to be racist, but a little Caucasian kid will ask his mom why is this person from the projects up there with change. Like people from the projects never got change in their pockets. [How often does this happen?] Every...it depends on places I go. If I go to classy place it will happen. – Antonio, 14-year old Black male

The boys recognize their bodies as socially marked.[v] They have developed an understanding of the intersubjectivities of their identities (Howarth, 2002), recognizing that their identities sometimes have very little to do with their own sense of self but, rather, with how others recognize them (Hall, 1989). Their neighborhood carries with it a relationship to society that they must negotiate in their own interactions with the world.

It is not only boys who experience being characterized as "from the projects." Kay, a 16-year old Black female, says that "people used to think I was ignorant cause I grew up over here. [How does that make you feel?] I don't care. I'm used to it." Being seen as ignorant is natural for

Kay. Whether or not Kay accepts this representation, it is part of her subconscious image of herself in the world, an image against which she can either resist or accommodate (Hemmings, 2000). This choice, resistance or accommodation, is a common paradox for East Side teens, changing the ecological context of development (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).

Sean, East Side's program director, recognizes this. He does "experiments" when he takes taxis to and from the club. "I'll ask the taxi driver what does he think when I give him the address," Sean says. "They usually say they think they're going to get robbed." Some drivers refused to drive into the projects or come to the club. Sean takes this information back to the kids. He does in part to make the youth aware of the images they give off, reminding them how certain clothing styles signify particular meanings to some adults, especially in the projects. In doing so, he points to the way in which identity lies at the intersection of the individual and society, making individual presentation of self socially relevant (Adamson, Hartman, & Lyxell, 1999; Fine, 1994) in that it feeds back into cultural and political images of youth. Yuth are often faced with the resistance/accommodation choice at school (Fordham, 1996; Wong et al., 2003), but within the club youth can resist these images.

Discursive Resistance

Because we exist within a system of language which gives words historical and social meaning, our discourse of identity is partially bound by that language (Hall, 1989). The language of self-definition is learned through interaction with culture and others. Teens at East Side exert their own agency in reconstructing the image of the "project kid" through using the dominant discourse as a form of joking. By acknowledging and using cultural images in their own activity, East Side youth claim the power of self-definition and use language to respond to others'

misrepresentations of them (Gee & Crawford, 1998; Heilman, 1998). The following excerpt

from my field notes demonstrates one way in which youth use discourse. They make explicit

their own awareness of the construction of their identities by outsiders and play with that image

while testing my position as an outsider.

> "Hey, hey, you know Shelby [a young female staff member from the neighborhood] runs
>
> with a King,"[vi] Sammy said looking at me and making the finger sign of the Latin Kings.
>
> "I don't believe that," I said. Sammy looked surprised. "You know what a King is?" he
>
> asked me. "Why do you think that I wouldn't?" I responded. "Really? You know the
>
> Kings?...Oh, oh you must be a queen. Were you a queen? You run with them?" he asked
>
> me…Sammy repeated that Shelby's man is a King. BJ was laughing and saying "yeah,
>
> yeah, he's right!"… And Eric was nodding his head and laughing as well. "Will you all
>
> cut it out? You giving me a bad name," Shelby said. "It's true it's true! Her man's…a
>
> King," Sammy said making the hand gesture for the Kings. "I mean, he's Black, but he's
>
> a King. I'm a King," he said. I rolled my eyes at him. "I don't believe you." "Nah, he's
>
> true, [Shelby's man's] a King. He's in lockdown. He's Shelby's man. She used to run
>
> with him," BJ said. "Yeah, yeah, she's gangbanging." Shelby opened her mouth and eyes
>
> wide and shook her head, letting out her breath as she did. "Would you all cut it? You
>
> giving me a bad name here. Come on," Shelby said…

For the next half hour Sammy asks every kid who comes into the room who and "what" is

Shelby's man. Each kid names him and says he is a King. Many kids do the Kings' hand gesture

as they answer. I eventually tell Shelby I think she is losing ground.

[Shelby] shrugged and smiled. "I mean, he's a friend of mine, yeah. But I don't gangbang. That's not me." Sammy shook his head…"They run drugs and you did too. You smoke," Sammy said, grinning. Shelby shook her head. "You know I don't do that. I'm always in here telling you all not to do drugs. Don't get involved with all that. You know that I'm always telling you to stay away from that," Shelby said shaking her head…"Yeah, you know, she's from the projects so you know she's gotta gang bang and do drugs, right?" Sammy said to me…Shelby stood up and said, in an overly serious tone, "I am not from the projects," then she started laughing.

During this interaction, the image of the teen from the projects is constructed and reconstructed a number of times. Sammy tests my views on the subject and is surprised that I know about gangs. All the youth express familiarity with the local gang and know their gestures and colors. Sammy, Eric, and BJ use stereotypes of teens from the projects as a means of teasing and testing both each other and outsiders. Shelby protests the image and jokes about her relationship with the projects, stating "I am not from the projects" as a final defense.

The word "ghetto" is used frequently as a negative descriptive by teens. One afternoon Kelly, a 16-year old Black male, walks into the computer room and starts talking about a science fair they had at his high school. He laughs and shakes his head, complaining about the quality of the fair. "We had a ghetto fair in school today. It was so projectish." Although he lives in "the projects" Kelly uses the words "projectish" and "ghetto" as good-natured insults. In doing so, he both reclaims the word and reconstructs the meaning, maintaining its negative valiance. In another interaction, Moonie, a 12-year old Hispanic girl, expresses a need to change her "ghetto" behavior when she learns the purpose of one of the research assistants.

"What do you do?" [Moonie] asked. "Research," I said. "On us?" she asked. "Yeah, the

kids, the staff, the club – what makes it good, bad, or better…that kind of stuff," I said.

"NO you don't!" she said. I nodded. "Ooh, and I been acting so ghetto around you!" she

said. "I got to change my behavior. I can't act ghetto in the ghetto no more," she said.

Moonie expresses a concern about how her behavior will be "written up" by the researcher. Her

anxiety over her "ghetto" behavior both supports a stereotypical use of the word, thereby

constructing an Other juxtaposed to her self. But it also demonstrates an attempt to resist the

construction of "project kids" by others, in that she does not want to portray "bad" behavior to

the researcher, who she suspects will construct her as a "ghetto kid." Playing with the terms

"ghetto" and "projects" engages youth with dominant discourse about their neighborhood. Yet

such conversations also distance the teens from other local youth. This type of social distancing

is a common strategy for self-protection in the face of stereotypes (Eidelman & Biernat, 2003;

Howarth, 2002) as well as a means for self-definition.

Discourse is one means of resistance. Attempting to escape the context is another way of

fighting social misrepresentation. Three males and one female mention "getting out of the

projects" as a goal or as part of their definition of success. Four boys and one girl report owning

a house as a goal or a sign of success. As living in low income housing is by default not owning

your own home, getting out of the projects must be part of their plans. Boys mention getting out

of the projects as a future goal more frequently than girls. This is likely related to more boys than

girls reporting being treated differently because of where they live (63% versus 22%).

The boys' experiences of being recognized as "project kids," and their transference of

these experiences into goals, indicate the ways in which youth negotiate the social implications

of their physical presence. We often talk of girls' bodies as having particular social meanings, but minority boys' bodies are inscribed with meaning as well. The fact that East Side boys are more likely to report prejudice based on gender and to describe incidents of being recognized as "from the projects," may be linked to findings that poverty has more negative effects on African American boys than girls (Spencer, Dobbs, & Swanson, 1988). The social reading of minority teens' bodies can lead to both aspirations to escape and anxiety of leaving the projects. Leaving the projects requires negotiations of others' representations of them, both Blacks and Whites.

The confluence of race and class as categories defining experience

Nearly all youth report experiences of being treated differently outside the club. They switch between attributing discrimination to neighborhood or race, creating a fluidity of identity that incorporates both race and class as defining contexts. Peaches, a 16-year old African American female, talks of negative experiences she and her peers have with authority figures.

> [O]ne day…we went to a park, a group of us, and [the police] were kind of picking on us cause we were the same color and there was a fight down the street and they thought we were involved. And this police, I don't know her color, I guess she was White, she told us we had to leave the park. We were gonna leave anyway but she called back-up and this policeman drove up and said "would all you Black niggas get out of the park" and he said he was gonna arrest us. And he took all our ID's and me and my friends got in trouble for nothing. And I don't really like my school cause people there are racist. Teachers too, even some of the Black ones…But now I just do what I'm told and stay out of trouble.

Although she does not mention class as an influencing factor, the "racism" of "even some of the Black [teachers]" may make it more difficult for her to achieve the type of positive racial identification that could moderate such effects (Dubois et al., 2002; Wong et al., 2003).

A number of the boys discuss personal experiences of racism, all of which occur outside the projects. Each of them articulates the way in which he reacts to and resists these incidents.

> We was at the pool and this boy was playing with a tennis ball and I asked if I could play and he said 'No cause you're a nigga' and I said 'huh?' and he said 'You heard. Cause you're a nigga' and I hit him in the eye. – Greg, 12-year old Black, Irish & Indian male

> I was in the suburbs. We went to skate and swim thing. I saw a lady, she said she didn't but I asked for a root beer float and I saw her spit in it. I asked for the manager. She said she was the manager. I asked for my money back and she said, put up a sign that said no refunds. I just walked away. Haven't had a root beer float since. – Antonio, 14-year old Black male

> Once when I was in 7th grade we had a substitute teacher and me and her exchanged words and she called me a nigger. [Was she White?] yea. [Did you tell anyone?] I reacted. I was locked up. [Did anything happen to her?] She was fired. [How did it make you feel?] I was proud to be an African American. – Lorenzo, 17-year old African American male

In each of these instances the boy asserts himself in the face of discrimination. Greg does so physically, Antonio economically, Lorenzo with both pride and anger. In Greg and Lorenzo's cases, race is the motivating factor for the incident. In Antonio's case, it is less clear. He tells this story in response to a question about racial prejudice. Yet his mention of the suburbs maps race

onto class-based geography. This calls into question the validity of quantitative measures of

perceived racial prejudice without follow-up into the meaning of events. Many youth move

between attributing instances of discrimination to race or class, even within the same example.

This fluidity, being both from public housing and Black, and shifting between linking

experiences to one or both contexts, is common. On scales measuring general perceptions of race

and neighborhood based prejudice, neighborhood appears more salient. Yet when asked about

personal experiences of discrimination, ten youth say they have been treated differently because

of their race and eight say they have been treated differently because of their neighborhood. The

majority of boys report personal instances of both race and neighborhood based discrimination.

The majority of girls do not. All the boys except for the one White boy report being treated

differently because of their race. Again, the social marking of boys' bodies is evident.

The fact that youth report less generalized racial prejudice but more personal experiences

of racial discrimination may reflect an acknowledgement of their positioning within the racial

system, being urban, poor, and Black. Recent research on contexts of adolescent development

demonstrates the influence of personal experiences, as opposed to general perceptions, of

discrimination on outcomes (Eccles, 2004). It may be that East Side youth do not think that

Blacks in general face high levels of discrimination but view their own experiences of prejudice

as based on the confluence of race and neighborhood. Although there is some overlap between

perceived prejudice by race and by class, they are not identical. It is not the case that some

participants were simply more prone to perceiving prejudice. Experiences of prejudice based on

race and neighborhood are distinct yet linked. Race and class intertwine, complicating our

notions of singular social categories. The divergence between the quantitative measures and

youth's open-ended discussions of race and neighborhood prejudice indicates the importance of

qualitative studies of these constructs that allow us to get at meaning as well as frequency.

Daniel, a biracial boy who had moved out of the projects, talks explicitly about the ways

in which people characterize youth who live in low income housing. He also reveals his own

agency in fighting those stereotypes and his ability to find a safe space at East Side.

> People judge you because of the neighborhood you live in. People were scared to come
>
> here cause of the way it looks…People judge, there are stereotypes, like people see you
>
> different than if you were living in Malibu or something. [What would you say to those
>
> people?] Don't judge a book by its cover. [Does it happen at the club?] Not that I know
>
> of. Cause everybody's the same. Everybody grew up in the same community so you can't
>
> really stereotype anyone like that. [What about at school?] Yea. Not everyday but you see
>
> it once in a while. Teachers act differently. Probably my freshman year on emergency
>
> cards teachers see the address and say "oh you live over there" and they think you won't
>
> succeed. But you get As and Bs and prove 'em wrong. They think you don't care about
>
> your life. Like I told my teacher, if I didn't care do you think I'd be here?...[people] think
>
> you don't have morals, think you're a bad kid because of the neighborhood you live in.

Daniel not only articulates an awareness of how other people sometimes view him because of

where he grew up, but he confronts that stereotype through his own actions. Daniel does not feel

stereotyped at East Side because of the common background of the members and staff.

The separation of "project kids" from the racial group creates an experience of prejudice

that resists group identification. "Black" and "African American" are categories with which the

teens identify, but their discourse is influenced by their neighborhood location. Whereas research

has focused on the effects of racial identification and stereotypes on academic expectations and performance (McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Wong et al., 2003), the East Side youth talk about how people judge their abilities because they live in the housing project. Their experiences demonstrate how stereotypes of both race and class bleed down from the macrosystem into the micro levels of our environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990), infiltrating individual consciousness.

Other youth also talk about how people at East Side are "like them." Yet they do not report race as being relevant to their experiences at the club. The teens do not seem to ascribe any meaning to race outside of discrimination. This may be in part because I am White, a racial outsider. Youth may not feel comfortable talking to me about what being Black means to them. Yet it may also be due to the high levels of discrimination that youth relate to the mixture of race and neighborhood, making association with African American culture at large perhaps less salient. The conflation of race and racism recognizes Cornel West's (1993) observation that race has no common meaning outside of its relationship with potential prejudice. It was the conflation of race and class that created shared experiences for these teens.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

The teens at East Side are subject to many stereotypes by the outside world. In the process of their own self-construction, youth must engage with others' images of them. They both resist and reconstruct the image of the "urban teen" in their own activities and discourse. They resist the construction of themselves as Other and do not allow others' representations to define them. Yet they also reconstruct the image in their own creation of Others against whom they define themselves.

The East Side teens demonstrate how race and class work together to shape experience. These social categories cannot necessarily be separated, each with an independent effect. Given the ways in which youth talk about their lives and identities, attempting to control for one or the other category to examine its "true" effect on development seems remarkably removed from real world experiences. Gender also shapes youths' experiences of the race/class system, creating yet another axis of power around which their lives revolve. These findings demonstrate the need for a deeper understanding of the processes of identity in relation to social structure. As Coll and colleagues (1996) suggested close to a decade ago, it is the interactive effects of social categories, through social positioning and segregation, that leads to different contexts of development for minority and low-income youth. We need a consideration of identity that goes beyond measuring stages or outcomes. It is seldom one social category alone that shapes experience and identity but rather the confluence of multiple categories that determines social positioning. If we are to engage in research that uncovers healthy processes of development, we must be willing to examine the role of social structure in creating the contexts in which development takes place. This requires in-depth qualitative inquiry into the ways in which race and class are enacted in daily activity and local environments.

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Footnotes

[i] See, for example, Edward Said's <u>Orientalism</u> (Said, 1978) which describes how western, White colonial powers defined themselves in relation to the eastern, exotic Other.

[ii] Although sexuality is also a site of construction of the Other, it did not emerge as separate from gender, and gendered sexuality, within my participants' narratives and, therefore, I do not discuss it as a separate site of difference.

[iii] The names of all organizations and individuals, with the exception of myself, have been changed to protect their anonymity.

[iv] In describing youth herein, I use whatever term they used to define themselves.

[v] I would like to thank Wendy Luttrell for providing me with the notion of the social marking of boys' bodies. Her comments on a paper investigating the construction of gender helped point me to the idea of boys' bodies as being read by others' in similar ways to how girls' bodies are discussed as being culturally enscripted.

[vi] The Latin Kings is a gang that is active in the neighborhood of the club.