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## Other People's Racism: Race, Rednecks, and Riots in a Southern High School

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### Abstract

This article uses data drawn from nine months of fieldwork and student, teacher, and administrator interviews at a southern high school to analyze school racial conflict and the construction of racism. We find that institutional inequalities that stratify students by race and class are routinely ignored by school actors who, we argue, use the presence of so-called redneck students to plausibly deny racism while furthering the standard definition of racism as blatant prejudice and an individual trait. The historical prominence of rednecks as a southern cultural identity augments these claims, leading to an implicit division of school actors into friendly/nonracist and unfriendly/racist and allowing school actors to set boundaries on the meaning of racism. Yet these rhetorical practices and the institutional structures they mask contributed to racial tensions, culminating in a race riot during our time at the school.

### Keywords

race; high schools; tracking; qualitative; racism

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The week of February 5, 2007, may have been like any other at North Carolina's Cordington High School had it not been for the race riot. According to student and teacher accounts, it began early in the week when a black student overheard a white "redneck" student say, "Let's go lynch some 'n\*\*\*\*\*s.'" <sup>1</sup> Subsequently, rumors spread, first that the redneck students were planning to jump a black student in the hallway and then that a black male was going to bring a gun to school. Sheriff's deputies were called in, and teachers were put on high alert. As stories of a major fight between rednecks and blacks and plans to "shoot up the school" circulated, tensions mounted. School officials attempted to quell fears by identifying and punishing the students involved in the incident (both redneck and black students) and using the automated telephone messaging system to inform parents that the incident had been resolved and everything was "under control." Still, three days after the initial incident, on the Friday on which the rumored confrontation between blacks and whites was to occur, more than half the students skipped school or were kept home by their parents. Although there was no evidence that any physical fights or violence actually occurred on or away from school grounds as a result of the incident, it was nonetheless

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#### AUTHORS' NOTE

A previous version of this article was presented at the 2009 American Sociological Association annual meeting. Authors are listed in alphabetical order to indicate equality of contribution.

<sup>1</sup>Accounts varied, but all contained reference to the redneck's use of the n-word.

variously referred to by students and faculty during informal conversations and interviews as a “riot,” “race riot,” “redneck riot,” and “brawl.”

This incident, which occurred while we were conducting a study examining how law and authority affect school actors at more than 20 schools, brought into stark relief the unfinished business of racial reconciliation in the South. The southern United States is an important region in which to study race relations among youth and school racial conflict. Racial confrontations occur regularly in schools across the country, but the one that occurred in North Carolina involved symbols of racism and racial violence and intimidation tied to the Old South. Nor was it the only incident of racial unrest we heard about during our research. At another North Carolina high school, we learned from students and administrators about a race riot (this one with actual fighting) triggered by tensions about Confederate clothing worn by rednecks (as they were called by other students and faculty alike) and counter-Confederate clothing (declaring that the South will never rise again) worn by blacks in response.<sup>2</sup> School officials also reported a dispute about a Confederate flag at Cordington a few years prior to our study. Similar to the incident in Jena, Louisiana, in 2007, in which a vicious fight broke out between black and white students after nooses were found hanging from a tree in the schoolyard,<sup>3</sup> these incidents highlight the endurance of racist symbols and racial hostility between blacks and whites in the South. Yet unlike the Jena case, most racial incidents receive little attention outside of the communities in which they take place, leaving few opportunities for systematic analysis of the underlying factors and meaning making surrounding these conflicts.

Furthermore, most recent studies documenting racial tensions and fights among students were conducted in ethnically and racially diverse schools in the West and Northeast (e.g., Bettie 2003; Lee 1996; Morrill and Musheno 2009; Perry 2002; Staiger 2006). In those accounts, the group conflicts were usually between two or more nonwhite groups, reflecting the changing demographics of those regions. The South presents a different landscape. Despite large-scale demographic shifts introducing Hispanic migrants (Lippard and Gallagher 2011; Wahl and Gunkel 2007), blacks and whites still make up the vast majority of the population in North Carolina, at 22 and 65 percent, respectively (U.S. Census 2011).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, cultural symbols and images (e.g., nooses, lynching, Confederate flags) of the old slave-holding and segregated South dot the landscape of North Carolina. Schools are no exception. Indeed, some of these symbols, particularly the Confederate flag, were ever present at Cordington and the cause of much tension. This context is important because it presents a unique opportunity to examine racial dynamics in an environment of blatant, overt racism, which is less common today than in the past. Few contemporary studies have assessed how these dynamics play out in schools in the South. Thus, we heed Morris and Monroe’s (2009) call for more attention to place in social science research, particularly as it relates to the educational experience.

In this article, we examine the social and institutional factors that make race meaningful for youth in schools and how they contribute to racial hostility and conflict. We are particularly interested in how school actors construct and respond to racism. At Cordington, issues of race and racism were apparent throughout the school in observations and formal and informal interviews before and after the riot; thus, the incident is just a touchstone for examining these issues. We find that as in other parts of the country, institutional practices

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<sup>2</sup>We did not conduct observations or interviews at this school. It was during our time administering surveys to the students that we learned from them that a race riot had erupted there earlier in the year. Conversations with school officials confirmed the students’ reports.

<sup>3</sup>The case drew national attention after the first of the six black teenagers charged with attempted murder for the beating of a white student was found guilty of conspiracy and aggravated battery by an all-white jury. The teen faced up to 22 years in prison.

<sup>4</sup><http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37000.html>. Retrieved November 1, 2011.

(e.g., tracking) and the social organization of students (i.e., cliques) strengthen racial and class identities within schools. However, the presence of southern rednecks, a group historically defined as synonymous with racism, serves an important ideological function. While redneck students clearly contributed to racial hostilities at Cordington, this population of students was frequently cast as the only culprit of racism at the school. This communicated a shared understanding of racism as an individual trait and overt action. However, as conceptualized by Bonilla-Silva (1997; 2003) and others (Chesler, Lewis, and Crowfoot 2005; Wellman 1994), racism is an ideology that supports a racialized social system that rewards racial groups unequally across a number of domains. Such a system was evident at Cordington in tracking and, according to students of color, disciplinary practices, yet school actors ignored the symptoms of racism and the racialized social structure in favor of placing the blame for racism on the rednecks. Thus, not only could others point to rednecks to deny any racism on their own part (e.g., “I’m not like that”), but the group’s behavior also drew attention away from and helped mask racist structures within the school. In total, both the blatant aggression of the rednecks and the more passive, but powerful, institutionalized racial structure contributed to racial inequality at Cordington.

We argue that similar to test scores and other evaluative criteria to which Americans often point to deny structural components of racial inequality, Cordington’s rednecks were a means to “plausibly deny” racism (Liu and Mills 2006; van Dijk 1992). Our findings show that “plausible deniability of racism” is achieved not only through discourse, as in “the rhetorical moves” speakers use to defend their words as not racist, as European and Oceanic scholars have found (Liu and Mills 2006:83; Simmons and Lecouter 2008), but through objects as well, things or people to which one can point to provide a plausible alternative explanation to institutional racism or to deflect charges of individual racism.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Racism and Rednecks

Popular conceptions of racism define it as an individual-level attribute (Chesler et al. 2005): Racists are people who both see race and discriminate on the basis of race in an intentional manner. As scholars have documented, it has become common for whites to defend their status as nonracists by claiming that they are color-blind (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004). Whites use this definition of racism and “race-talk” to mask and justify prejudiced thoughts and behaviors (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004; Eliasoph 1999; Jackman 1996; Lewis 2001). This includes two seemingly opposite behaviors: First, whites assert color-blindness and stigmatize the discussion of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Crenshaw 1997; Lewis 2004), and second, they use “factual” stories to defend and perpetuate stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004). Both practices ignore structural and institutional systems that maintain racial inequality. These systems, and the ideology that supports them, comprise racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997), of which the more transparent forms of racial prejudice are only one piece.

Building on theories of modern or symbolic racism, several British and Australian researchers have studied how dominant group members use language to deny that their words have any racist intent (Liu and Mills 2006; Simmons and Lecouteur 2008). These “discourses of plausible deniability” implicitly defend racist structures and blame minorities for social problems in a way that allows the speaker to claim no racist intent. One study, for example, examined how media accounts of two riots in Australia, both in response to police chases that resulted in the deaths of local youth, portrayed the unrest that followed in the two low-income communities (Simmons and Lecouteur 2008). Media stories depicted a non-Indigenous community’s problems as an isolated incident and the fault of a small number of youth while a very similar incident in an Indigenous community was framed as the natural

and immutable outgrowth of immoral behavior characteristic of the community. In neither case did reports use explicitly racist language, yet depicting the Indigenous community's problems as intractable conveyed the futility of addressing structural problems such as poverty and implicitly characterized its members as permanently flawed.

Color-blind discourse and blaming minorities for their problems can both be characterized as means of achieving plausible deniability. Furthermore, to make the claim that they are not racist believable, whites need to define what racism is, in addition to what it is not. As we show in this study and other scholars have posited, groups such as "hicks" (Bettie 2003) or rednecks serve as a readily available target for blame for racism (Essed 1996). Charles Payne (1984:13), in his work describing the possibilities for urban education, uses the concept of "Redneck-as-Patsy" to describe theories of inequality that focus exclusively on "lower status Haves," and "encourage a Good Person-Bad Person conception" of inequality. Yet while previous work has suggested that this may be a means for some whites to avoid the label of racist, no work has explicitly examined how individuals frame racism in this manner. In part, this may be because these studies have focused on northern urban areas, making rednecks a less salient symbol of racism. Within the southern context, however, this tool for defining and denying racism is potentially more accessible.

The term *redneck* is typically applied to a particular stylized white person, usually poor and southern, and often male (Morris 2008), who may also be called "white trash," "hick," or "country." In addition to being derogatory, some of these epithets make both whiteness and class explicit, possibly because of the presence of an identifiable culture that goes against popular notions of what it means to be white (Bettie 2003; Hughey 2009; Morris 2008; Perry 2002; Wray 2006). Stereotypical rednecks are depicted as speaking in "hick" or "country" accents, fighting with little provocation, and wearing clothing associated with manual labor (Roebuck 1982). While redneck whites share the "symbolic capital of whiteness" (Lewis 2004:628), they are often stigmatized in American society and occupy a low status (Jarosz and Lawson 2002). They frequently are found in lower academic tracks at school, particularly vocational classes (Morris 2008), and blue-collar and low-wage jobs in the labor force (Olzak 1992). Consequently, they are often in direct competition with nonwhites, particularly blacks (Weis 1990). The resulting stigma, combined with preexisting racism toward blacks, creates a situation in which poor whites may attempt to exert power and superiority by reemphasizing their cultural identities as rural, white, and male (McDermott and Samson 2005). As a result, they are often more aware of race and racial identity than are middle-class whites (Hartigan 1999). This may be especially so in the South, and black-white racial conflict in southern schools may be more likely as a result.

### Racial Conflict among American Students

American public schools have a long history of race-related conflict, dating from the early days of desegregation (Metcalf 1983; Stock 1979; Wieder 1988) to the present (Carter 2005; Deyhle 1995; Staiger 2006). Many of today's conflicts can be described as microaggressions (e.g., minor disputes, ridiculing, racial slurs, and other insults), yet some are more serious, involving many students and threats and/or acts of violence (Kiang and Kaplan 1994; Morrill and Musheno 2009; Staiger 2006). As schools have become more diverse, the conflicts have moved beyond the black-white binary, and scholarly interest has followed. Previous studies and media reports have documented racial tension and incidents of violence among students from various nonwhite racial and ethnic groups, depending on the demographics of the region and school (Kiang and Kaplan 1994; Staiger 2006). Clashes between Latinos and blacks are not unusual in California high schools, for example. In the past 10 years there have been newspaper reports of racial unrest between these two groups at more than 10 California high schools.<sup>5</sup>

In almost all of these cases, witnesses (e.g., students, parents, police officers) describe the incidents as race riots. Yet this description is sometimes contested, most often by school and district administrators who deny that a riot occurred or that the incident was racially charged, engaging in a deracialization of the incident (Lewis 2003). Similar patterns are seen within higher education, wherein racial incidents are routinely dismissed or explained away by university administrators (Chesler et al. 2005). The institutional framing of a racial incident has implications for the manner in which it is handled. When school officials define the event as an isolated incident, caused by a few troublemakers, they often do nothing more than mete out suspensions and other punishments to the students thought to be involved. Subsequently, students and parents complain that long-standing racial problems go unaddressed.

As other studies have shown (Fine and Weis 2003; Schofield 1989), community voices are routinely silenced, and issues of race ignored, because teachers and school administrators see their roles as primarily academic. They prefer not to address issues of race, which they view as “political.” It is understandable that schools want to maintain calm and avoid controversial topics. As Wells et al. (2009:132) explain, “By not talking about race and being color-blind, the rationale went, educators could prevent [racial conflict] from happening.” Yet the manner in which voices are silenced—and structures of inequality masked—may differ depending on the geographic locations of schools and composition of their student populations. While previous studies have focused largely on disputes between different minority populations in the northern and western United States, we examine racial tensions arising from historically sensitive divisions between white and black students in a southern high school.

### Institutional Boundary Making

What tools of plausible deniability mask from view are the forces of institutional boundary making. In high schools across the United States, high-track classes are overwhelmingly populated by white and middle-class students, while lower-track classes largely serve minorities and lower-income students (Bettie 2003; Conchas 2010; Gamoran and Mare 1989; Lucas 1999; Morris 2005; Oakes 2005; Staiger 2006; Wells et al. 2009; Welner 2001). Tracking, the practice of separating students for instruction based on perceived ability, achievement, and/or projected future occupation, has the effect of separating students from one another by race and class. Numerous studies show that it contributes to racial and class divisiveness and animosity among students as it creates, magnifies, and reinforces group differences (Bettie 2003; Carter 2005; Lee 1996; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Staiger 2006; Tyson 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005).

These studies highlight the ways tracking facilitates youth’s construction of raced and classed identities by creating and reinforcing a hierarchy of groups. Previous studies have generally focused only on tensions between groups across academic tracks, however. Few studies highlight the tensions that exist between groups within tracks, particularly in the lower tracks, where the students least likely to gain status, respect, or dignity from the schools’ placement and reward structure are found (Bettie 2003; Lopez 2003; MacLeod 1995; for an exception, see Staiger 2006). In this study, we examine how school actors’ construction of race and racism serves to mask the institutional structures that create and reinforce racial hierarchies. We aim to show how enacting tools of plausible deniability shapes young people’s shared understanding of racism while concealing the structural aspects of racial inequality. What we find, as we demonstrate below, is that the hidden

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<sup>5</sup>The *Los Angeles Times* featured a number of stories about the melees. See <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/may/10/local/me-locke10> and <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-jefferson6jul06,0,6512314.story>. Retrieved May 14, 2009.

structural aspects of racism along with the public definition of racism as an individual trait and overt action both augment racial tensions that, when sparked, further confirm the definition of racism as individualistic and blatant.

## DATA AND METHODS

This research was conducted at Cordington High School,<sup>6</sup> a medium-sized school in North Carolina. Located in a middle-class community with a population of slightly more than 10,000 people, Cordington is situated between a rapidly industrializing urban area and more rural farmland. The school is composed of a series of one-story brick buildings connected by walkways. It is located along a one-lane, sidewalkless roadway. Houses along the road sit at a distance from the street and one another, and many display American flags. Not far from the school sits a house that flies a Confederate flag from one of the trees on its property. The flag extends out from the top of the tree, hanging slightly over the road itself, and is difficult to miss.

Cordington enrolls more than 1,000 students, of whom more than 80 percent are white and more than 10 percent are black. Hispanic students make up a small (approximately 1 percent) but growing minority within the school. About 15 percent of the students in the school are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The median family income in the town is slightly greater than \$41,000 per year, somewhat less than the national average (DeNavas-Wait, Proctor, and Smith 2009). More than 40 percent of adults in the town hold bachelor's degrees, compared to slightly more than one quarter of adults nationwide (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2004). Cordington High School is considered one of the better schools in the district based on the demographics of the student population (among the highest proportions of white, middle-class students) and the overall achievement of the students.

In September 2006, we began an ethnographic case study of Cordington High School as part of a larger multimethod study of the ways in which law and other authority affect everyday school life at 24 high schools in New York, California, and North Carolina. In addition to surveys of teachers, administrators, and students about their attitudes toward the law, sense of rights, and mobilization of law in particular situations, we conducted ethnographic case studies at 5 of the schools. We conducted observations and in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and administrators and collected documentary evidence (e.g., student handbooks).

For nine months, one member of the research team (white female) conducted biweekly observations at the school. Most observations occurred in classrooms, but other areas, including the student cafeteria, main lobby, and Commons area, were also observed. In some classrooms, the researcher assisted the teachers as needed. The researcher observed 14 classrooms within the school, most on multiple occasions: 3 honors/advanced placement, 3 college-prep, 2 general education, and 2 elective classes; 2 specialty classrooms for academically struggling students; and 2 special education classrooms.<sup>7</sup>

A team of three interviewers interviewed students, teachers, and administrators at the school during their free or elective periods. A black woman interviewed the teachers and administrators ( $n = 6$ ), and male and female white interviewers interviewed the students ( $n = 15$ ). We selected students in two ways: through classroom announcements in which we

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<sup>6</sup>We use pseudonyms to protect the identities and confidentiality of the schools and informants.

<sup>7</sup>Honors and advanced placement classes were the highest level of courses offered at Cordington, followed by college prep classes. The college-prep track was intended for students who planned to attend college, and they appeared to be the most common course of study at Cordington. General courses were usually taken by students in the career or vocational college tracks. Classes for academically struggling students were designed for students who had failed a course or needed extra help in a subject area.

asked for volunteers and through individual requests. In most cases, we received voluntary interest from female students but had to seek out male participants. As in most qualitative research, we selected our cases strategically to obtain theoretically useful comparisons (Ragin, Nagel, and White 2004). Cases are not meant to be strictly representative of the population but rather illuminating for identifying social processes. In our study, we selected student interview participants with an eye toward diversity of experience, academic track, and social status within the school and interviewed only those students who returned signed parental consent forms. We interviewed one Hispanic female, four white female, five black female, three white male, and two black male students. Table 1 displays each student informant's race, grade, academic track, and timing of interview.

All of the administrators and teachers interviewed were white; four were female, and two male.<sup>8</sup> This was largely representative of the race and gender of the school's staff; we observed only two black female teachers working at the school and one black female substitute teacher during nine months at the school. All other teachers and administrators appeared to be white, and most were female. With the exception of two student interviews (a white male and a Latina), all interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. We took extensive notes during and after the interviews that were not taped to capture as much of the conversation as possible. In addition to these formal interviews, students and teachers were informally interviewed throughout the year during the course of ethnographic observations.

All interviews were conducted on school grounds—in the library, an empty classroom, an administrative office, or the teachers' lounge. Student interviews ranged in length from approximately 30 to 60 minutes; teacher and administrator interviews generally lasted longer, between 30 minutes and nearly two hours. Teacher and administrator questions centered on experiences at the school, the interviewee's approach to student discipline, disputes or conflicts experienced at school, how conflicts are resolved, feelings about the dispute resolution process, ideas about law and rights for all actors at school, and general background questions (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, employment history). We asked students about their academic (e.g., grade, years at the school, courses, grades) and personal (race/ethnicity, age) backgrounds, their school (e.g., how they like it, whether there are cliques, how students get along, what students, teachers, and administrators are like), school rules (e.g., whether they are clear, how students learn them), and problems (e.g., what kinds occur, how they are resolved). We did not set out to study race relations, racism, or race making, nor did we ask about race or racism unless the issue was raised by an informant. Yet we could not ignore the specter of race at Cordington.

## Data Analysis

Our coding of the qualitative data from Cordington High School revealed a recurrent theme of racial divide and conflict within the school community. About five months into our observations, a racial incident sparked unrest and rumors of weapons and fights that brought this into stark relief. Although the research was not designed to study racial conflicts, we utilize the field notes and interview transcripts from students, teachers, and administrators to explore the intricacies of race, racial conflict, and racism in a southern high school. We focus on one racially charged incident in particular because it represents an expression of the culmination of issues surrounding race and racism reported by students in the first half of the

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<sup>8</sup>The mismatch in interviewer and interviewee race may have affected the interview process, but evidence of that was not apparent in any of the interviews. We are most confident about the student interviews because those informants were in classrooms in which the researcher who would later interview them had observed. Thus, students were aware of the interviewer's race when they volunteered for the interview. The only interview in which an informant seemed reluctant to open up involved a male, self-described redneck and a white male interviewer. The interviewer thought that the informant did not fully trust him or the confidentiality of the interview because he whispered during parts of the interview when he discussed whites and fighting and often had to be prodded to expound on his responses.

year. It also emerged as the most frequently mentioned and salient event in the students' narratives (in both formal interviews and classroom discussions) regarding their perceptions of school climate in the latter part of the academic year. Our approach to the analysis, then, was very much inductive.

We used a computer-based approach (Atlas.ti) to organize and code all interview transcripts and field notes. Both authors and an undergraduate student read the field notes and transcripts and coded separately before comparing and discussing interpretations. We were highly consistent in our coding and interpretation of the data. After initial coding of student perceptions of race and racism; descriptions of physical and social barriers in the school; treatment of students by teachers, administrators, and staff; descriptions of social groups within the school; and descriptions of racial and other incidents that occurred at the school, we engaged in more focused coding to identify the major patterns and themes across the interview transcripts and observations. A third round of coding involved creating a table to display and more closely examine key information for each informant.

## RESULTS

We begin by describing the social and institutional organization of students at Cordington and school actors' perceptions of group relations and school climate.

### Race and Class Divisions in Peer Groups

Cliques at Cordington were visibly segregated along race and, to a lesser extent, class lines. Similar to the findings of other studies (Bettie 2003; Tatum 1997), racial divisions were particularly clear during lunch, when students had the opportunity to sit with friends and eat in the cafeteria or hang out outside the school. We often observed groups of same-race peers congregated around the school, although some peer groups included one or two students of a different race than the rest.

When asked in interviews whether there were cliques at the school, students identified groups differentiated by race and class, which is not uncommon. What may be unique to Cordington and other schools in the South, however, is the salience of a group identified as rednecks. Students described peer groups primarily within the context of the interviews (although students and teachers at the school occasionally referred to the rednecks in casual conversation). John, a black male student, explained, "There's the preppy white people, the regular white people, then there's the rednecks." Steven, a white male student who admitted he hung out with the redneck students, offered, "Like, you have a bunch of rednecks over here. And you got all the, I guess the Gothic people over here. And then, like, the black guys hang out over here." A black female student, Patricia, explained,

*Patricia:* There's your—I'm trying to think—there's basically, like, your redneck crew, which is down here. On the other side, there's ROTC kids, and there's, when you come up here, there's, like, your Gothic kids and stuff like that, semi-Gothic. Then you come in the Commons, there's your black, your whites—they're, like, your preps and stuff.

*Interviewer:* Blacks and white, both preps?

*Patricia:* Um-hm. It's just, like, people who hang out, mostly, your loud ghetto that hang on this side and eat their breakfast. I mingle with everybody. And then, like, your band geeks are down here.

According to Corey, a white male student, "There are the preppies, the rednecks, the blacks, the Mexicans, and the Goths."



In general, the cliques that informants identified fell into four primary social groups at the school (although there were other, smaller cliques and sub-cliques): rednecks, whites or preps, Goths, and blacks.<sup>9</sup> Thus, with the exception of the Goths, race was the distinguishing feature of the major clique at Cordington. As several students acknowledged, some black students were also preps, and some of these larger groups had subcategories (“regular whites,” “preppy whites”). Despite the overlaps, however, these groups appeared distinctive in students’ categorization of social cliques. What stands out in the students’ identification of peer groups is the salience of the redneck group. This appears to be a uniquely southern phenomenon. In the larger study, we find no mention of rednecks in any of the New York or California field notes or interviews. All of the references to rednecks made by informants appear in the North Carolina documents.

Black and white informants at Cordington were nearly uniform in their description of rednecks. Descriptions of this group were based on style of dress and behaviors. According to our informants, rednecks were “country” or “hicks,”<sup>10</sup> chewed tobacco, and wore Carhartt clothing, camouflage (related to an interest in hunting), and “redneck gear” (including t-shirts, belts, hats, and other items that display the Confederate flag and other symbols of the South). The marking of redneck in this way is consistent with prior research on schools and race that finds that students perform race and class identities partially through stylistic choices (Bettie 2003; Carter 2005; Perry 2002; Staiger 2006). Rednecks performed their southern, rural identities by wearing clothing associated with manual labor and hunting as well as t-shirts emblazoned with symbols of the Confederacy. Yet as described by Sarah below, these articles of clothing were more than an articulation of southern identity; they were also a way to antagonize black students, contributing to a hostile environment. The following outfit worn by Joel, a white male student, is representative of redneck wear: brown work boots caked in mud, loose-fitting jeans that were dirty near the bottom, and a t-shirt with “Redneck Outfitters” written on the front and a picture of a fire truck on the back. Two Confederate flags were pictured on the truck, one of which bore a label that read “Original rebel flag used at the Battle of Shiloh.”

Signaling a departure from the invisibility of poor whites that researchers have found at schools outside the South (Bettie 2003), rednecks were both marked and conspicuous at Cordington. Teachers and students noted that redneck students occupied distinct physical spaces in the school. The most prominent among these was called “the tunnel.” The tunnel was a long concrete hallway connecting two school buildings. Covered, but not closed in from the outside, the tunnel was dark and austere. During the day, redneck students typically hung out by one end of this hallway in a large group. Most of these students were male, although girls congregated on the periphery of this group. Steven estimated that about 40 students “stand out in the tunnel in the morning.” Although rednecks may have comprised a small segment of the school’s population, they were an imposing presence, particularly when they congregated within the enclosed space of the tunnel.

According to Alicia, a white student, the tunnel “is usually where a lot of fights happen.” Patricia reported that this area was a meeting place for redneck students during the days of the race riot: “The tunnel, it all started [there] where the rednecks go to. So nobody could go through the tunnel without them, like, cursing and do—people cursing them back and forth.

<sup>9</sup>Latino students constituted about 1 percent of the school population, and informants rarely mentioned them when they identified the various cliques at Cordington.

<sup>10</sup>Informants varied in the terms they used. Field-workers heard the terms *rednecks* and *hicks* used derisively, whereas *country* appeared to be either a more polite euphemism (e.g., used by the principal to refer to students who wore clothing with representations of the Confederacy) or a preferred term used to describe oneself (Steven and Sarah, who both said they associated with rednecks, self-identified as country). Students appeared to use *country* to distance themselves from the redneck label, despite membership in the larger social group.

I would just personally avoid it.” Another informant, Jonathan (working-class white male), came into the classroom one morning in October and told his teacher he had heard racial slurs in the tunnel during the transition from one class to the next. When the field-worker asked him about the incident, he said that it was where the “hicks” hung out. These were the “redneck” students, he said, and to indicate his disgust for the group, he added that he almost said “effing” (he mouthed this) “rednecks.”

During the nine months of ethnography, this group of students was often observed in the tunnel during an extended 15-minute break between two class periods. Some of the same students appeared to gather there during lunch, but they also often hung out in an outside courtyard nearby when the weather was temperate. These students appeared to match the redneck stereotype. Most of the boys who congregated in this area wore Carhartt pants and work boots and often sported t-shirts, belts, or hats with symbols of the Confederate South. As far as we know, there was no attempt to prohibit this group of students from congregating in the tunnel either before or after the conflict.

Cliques and other social groupings are commonplace among high school students (Coleman 1961; Eckert 1989; Wells et al. 2009), but they are not always so clearly distinguished by race (e.g., Perry 2002), nor do they include the redneck category. We suspect that the combination of location of the school in the rural South, racialized tracking, and the absence of significant numbers of other students of color contributed to the stark white–black social divisions at Cordington. As we show in the next section, these divisions were frequently replicated across classrooms through tracking as well as within classrooms by teachers.

### Divisions within and across Classrooms

Segregation across tracks was quite visible at Cordington. Academically advanced classes appeared to comprise primarily middle-class white students, while minorities and perceived rednecks composed a large proportion of lower-track classrooms. Students who wore traditionally redneck clothing or who were identified by teachers as members of this group were observed only in vocational programs, general education classes, and classes for academically struggling students. Of the students we interviewed, the only two white males who acknowledged an association with rednecks and dressed according to redneck fashion—Corey and Steven—were enrolled in vocational classes and classes for academically struggling students. One white female student, Sarah, associated with rednecks as well but was enrolled in some college-prep courses.

Table 2 shows the racial composition of the school compared to that of the classes observed. Whereas the school was 84 percent white, the honors and advanced placement classes we observed were 98 percent white, and African Americans, who constituted 13 percent of the student population, accounted for 1 percent of the students observed in these classes. Black and Hispanic students were slightly overrepresented in college-prep and general education classes. The special education classes were roughly on par with the school averages (although not for Hispanics). Nearly 22 percent of students in the courses for academically struggling students were black, and 13 percent were Hispanic. Both figures are about double what one would expect to see based on the percentage of black and Hispanic students within the school.<sup>11</sup> While our observations covered only a portion of Cordington’s classrooms, we have no reason to believe the racial pattern we observed was atypical. In fact, early in the year, a white teacher suggested to the researcher that she sit in on regular classes, which he said would be where most of the “problem students,” described as primarily “rednecks” and “empowered minorities,” would be.<sup>12</sup> The same teacher described “white honors” and

<sup>11</sup>Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the exact number of redneck students in each class.

“ethnically mixed [low] performing” classes when describing typical distributions of classes. The teacher’s comments suggest that our observations were representative of a larger pattern of racialized tracking, of which others were well aware. This type of tracking is a part of the structural aspect of racial inequality, which, while visible, is largely ignored. Yet numerous studies show how it contributes to racial and class boundaries and divisiveness among students (Bettie 2003; Carter 2005; Conchas 2010; Lee 1996; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Staiger 2006; Tyson 2011; Tyson et al. 2005).

Racial segregation also existed within classrooms. For example, the teacher of a general-track government class explained that she separated her students with a seating plan that, in her words, placed rednecks on one side of the room and blacks on the other. She frequently stationed herself in the middle of the classroom to quell tensions. In one of the most racially mixed (nearly half of the students in the class were black and the other half were white) classrooms—an elective theater course—observed at Cordington, where students were able to choose their own seats, black students sat on one side of the room, and white students sat on the other. At one point in the year, when the teacher divided the class into two teams, placing a white student, Bethany, in a group with most of the black students in the class, several of her white friends objected. They argued that Bethany was seated just on the other side of the divide and they wanted her to be in their group. Despite this, neither the students nor the teacher (who was black) ever commented on the racial division. In fact, most students described the class as one of their favorites and a place where everyone got along. Indeed, during our time at the school, we observed that everyone in the classroom seemed friendly with one another. Compared to most other classrooms we observed, there was more interaction between black and white students in that classroom. We also noted that on one occasion when the class moved temporarily to another room, black and white students from this class sat together. Thus, there were times when the group seemed more integrated.

These examples of racial segregation across classrooms are consistent with previous research on American secondary schools. We emphasize them here to highlight how tracking students in this way sustains racial hierarchies and reinforces group boundaries. Yet we also found that teachers in lower-track and mixed classrooms were cognizant of racial tensions and allowed or even enforced these divisions within their classrooms. These educators, like those described in other studies (Fine and Weis 2003), were largely silent on the topic of race, although the specter of race was ever present. In this context, race becomes all the more meaningful for adolescents. It is not surprising, then, that peer groups were organized primarily by race and that the divisions ultimately gave way to tension. Yet even as race and class marked the boundaries of the major cliques as well as in-class seating arrangements, students maintained a narrative of tolerance and friendliness. As we show in the next section, this narrative was central to how school actors defined what racism is and is not.

### Perceptions of Racial Harmony at Cordington

Just as Wells and her colleagues (2009) found in a study of adults who graduated from high school in 1980, we found that while students readily identified cliques at the school, they played down barriers between peer groups, arguing that divisions were minimal compared to how well students “got along.” Students and faculty alike described the school as integrated and cohesive and better than others in the district, where fighting was more common. For example, Lefty, a black male student who was interviewed in early December, responded to a question about how well students got along at Cordington by saying, “We don’t have too

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<sup>12</sup>We do not know what the teacher meant by “empowered” minorities, but he may have been implying that the black students do not know their place. We were unable to ask for clarification at the time because he immediately resumed interaction with his class.

many fights. . . This school is probably the best school around.” In interviews, many students remarked on the friendliness they felt from other students and staff—even after the race riot. For example, Alicia, a white ninth-grade honors student interviewed after the incident, explained, “I like how there is a good diversity of people and not just like all one race and stuff like that. And like . . . overall, the kids are pretty good. And you hear about schools that have a lot of fights and stuff and we don’t.” Patricia (a black female student), interviewed after the incident as well, also compared Cordington to other schools in the area:

Students—out of all the other high schools I talk to other people about, students here are very friendly. They don’t have—like, when I came here, we didn’t have the separation between popular people and all that stuff. We had more—everybody mingles with everybody, so it’s not really, you have bullying. You don’t really see bullying here.

Although Patricia insists that “everybody mingles with everybody,” the ease with which she only a few minutes later called off the cliques occupying different spaces at school and her claim that she (as opposed to everyone else) mingles with everyone, suggests that the unity she describes here may not be all she makes it out to be.

Patricia was not the only informant to describe the school as unified. Most students indicated that they had never, or very rarely, seen a fight on school grounds. These assertions, made before and after the racial conflict, were often used to minimize the specter of racial divisions. Students asserted that black and white students were friendly with one another in the school. In particular, many students made the point that they themselves did not judge others by race and that their friendships transgressed racial boundaries. As Zakeshia, a black female student interviewed in March, explained, “The students, it’s like, it’s friendly. It is, it’s a friendly atmosphere. Like I have a lot of Caucasian friends, like you know, it’s cool because I get down with them.” Yet Zakeshia, like Patricia, also made comments that call into question her claims of racial harmony. Just before she discussed the friendly atmosphere at the school, she remarked that she sometimes wished she “went to a different school,” because of “the racism that’s here.” Zakeshia went on to explain that the school’s rural location and the history tied to the area made her doubtful that anything would change: “Because it’s like a lot of, like country farm men out here, you know. The old kind of thing. It’s never going to change really.”

Lefty, Zakeshia, Patricia, and other students we spoke to seem to hold contradictory views of the school, depicting it as both friendly and occupied by at least one racist group. Many of these students settled this contradiction by characterizing the rednecks as others, outside of the primary population of the school. For example, Zakeshia finished describing the students at her school by saying, “You know, like, so like, everybody’s cool but it’s just like, it’s a group of people who don’t like, you know, don’t like you.” It is particularly interesting that these statements were made by black, as well as white, students. Prior work has criticized whites for separating whites into regular and white trash categories, arguing that doing so silences racial privilege among the poor (Holyfield, Moltz, and Bradley 2009). Black students also appear to dismiss rednecks as ancillary to the primary culture of the school, although they draw attention to racial inequality meted out by school administrators.

Teachers and administrators disavowed internal divisions within the school as well. In casual conversations, teachers noted that conflicts were due to individual differences and that students got along with one another on the whole. Administrators, in particular, emphasized that Cordington was a “family.” Mr. Gardner, an administrator, commented, “But we really do try to visualize and operate the school on the basis of we’re part of the community, interrelated, and that the school is a family, that even though these students come from a variety of backgrounds, they’re still part of the family.”

Ms. Lucas, the principal (a white woman), echoed this sentiment in response to a question about the strengths of the school: “I think it’s very family oriented, very friendly. When I am hiring, I’m looking for people that will be a part of the family.” Students’, teachers’, and administrators’ descriptions of Cordington emphasized its solidarity. Conflict, when acknowledged, was blamed on individual disputes between students, or on a single group: the rednecks.

In this context with “a good diversity of people” (i.e., less than 20 percent students of color) and general amicable interracial relations, institutional racism is concealed. In the absence of outward displays of hostility and intolerance by the majority, school actors appear blind to other manifestations of racial inequality and tension at the school. Racism, as an individual trait, does not exist among friends, and certainly not among family. Thus, when an event such as the race riot occurs and disrupts the family environment, as we discuss below, most observers can dismiss it as an anomaly introduced by a marginalized group (the rednecks) and continue to ignore the underlying racial tension and institutional structures that fan the fires. At Cordington, then, the behavior of the rednecks helps to obscure those structures by providing a plausible explanation for the school’s racial problems.

### Redneck Identity and Racial Conflict at Cordington

Rednecks were at the center of many complaints heard throughout our time at the school and faced overt disapproval and mocking by other students, the school’s teachers, and its administrators. Many white students appeared to feel comfortable deriding redneck students, thus marginalizing them within the school. In an honors class during the first half of the year, a white student giving a presentation on her family background made demeaning references to her “redneck relatives” and triggered laughter from her classmates.<sup>13</sup> In an interview, Ms. Lucas explained, “Our school’s, you know, real big, was real big into wearing the Confederate flag and they didn’t—I think it was lack of education or really understanding. I think we got a bunch of country bumpkins that just wore it because that’s what always—you know.”<sup>14</sup> And recall Mr. Belk’s reference to the “rednecks” (and “empowered minorities”) as “problem” students.

Grouped with empowered minorities in the lower-level classes, redneck students found ample opportunities to make racially charged remarks and antagonize black students. In one incident in September, the researcher was sitting in a class for academically struggling students talking to Corey, a self-identified former redneck whose clique affiliation, behavior, and dress still matched the group’s description. Corey told the researcher that he wanted to fight. Asked why, Corey explained that he was in the mood to fight, feeling unhappy and anxious. His thoughts quickly turned to the only black male in the room, and he told the researcher about previous fights with this student and how much he hated the student. This incident is striking because it demonstrates how a redneck student, without provocation, gravitates toward picking a fight with a black student. Fortunately, Corey did not act on his feelings.

Sarah, a white female student who identified herself as “country,” attempted to explain the redneck students’ behavior for us:

Like the rebel flag usually wouldn’t stand for something like that, you know. It doesn’t. And people have made it that way, and it just, and they wear it to represent, “Hey, look at me, I hate you.” You know, you can tell that they’re doing

<sup>13</sup>The teacher did not reprimand the student.

<sup>14</sup>Although here Ms. Lucas seemed to imply that students no longer wore Confederate clothing, we observed this clothing quite often at the school.

that, 'cause they—you know, a black person will walk by and put their nose up to 'em. . . But a lot of the times, I think that's a way for a redneck to represent how redneck he is, or, you know what I mean? When you don't like black people, callin' 'em the "n word" or—or when he goes up talking about somebody trying to make 'em laugh, and he uses the "n word" to try to get attention, and make everybody think he's cool.

Sarah's remarks are illuminating. Although she identifies herself as country, she sets herself apart from rednecks in describing them. Sarah also identifies possible motivations for the rednecks' behavior. She explains that these young people use clothing and language to taunt blacks and that such behavior becomes a marker of "coolness" among these youth. In doing so, Sarah articulates some of the motivations behind wearing these symbols quite differently than documented in prior work, which has shown that whites frequently describe the Confederate flag as a representation of heritage, denying its racial implications (Holyfield et al. 2009). However, when challenged to explain why rednecks display the Confederate flag, at least one white student at Cordington, as we learned from a teacher we interviewed, drew on the heritage argument. According to the teacher, in an "intense discussion" she arranged between the "little rednecks" who "had a Confederate flag" and a black student who had earlier worn a Malcolm X shirt, "it had come out that" the white student did not do it because he was "trying to offend somebody." "It's just that's part of my heritage," she recalled him explaining. In the end, the teacher said, the students "all agreed that it was inappropriate to do something if they thought it would openly offend somebody."

While the student handbook does not explicitly ban clothing with the Confederate flag, it specifies that "clothing that is distracting, offensive to others, or that causes any disruption or disruptive behavior to the school day should not be worn," and students understood that this included clothing depicting the Confederate flag. Included in the handbook's "listing of inappropriate attire and accessories" is "shirts that advertise or portray racism, blatant disrespect of others' beliefs, or have any slogans that are deemed offensive or not in good taste." It is well known, especially in the South, that blacks view the Confederate flag as a threat, a symbol of racism and antiblack sentiment (Cooper and Knotts 2006). Yet school officials did not appear to restrict this type of clothing; some students regularly wore Confederate flag-adorned clothing without repercussions. This point was not lost on the students. For example, in her discussion of the rednecks, honors student Kate mentioned that "you're not supposed to wear a Confederate flag here because, you know, what it symbolizes. But some of them still do." Thus, Sarah may be correct in arguing that the act of wearing clothing depicting the Confederate flag is meant to antagonize black students.

The school's principal seemed to share Sarah's perception. Yet she felt her hands were tied. When asked about instances in which the law influenced her handling of a situation, Ms. Lucas mentioned the Confederate flag, explaining that "technically, by law," she could not "ban it unless it causes a disruption on my campus." While she acknowledged that "a fight broke out between the black and white kids on campus" a few years earlier, thus allowing her to ban the flag the following year, she insisted she could not "ban it for eternity."

Considering the simmering racial hostility on campus, the visibility of the rednecks, and the general silence of the adults, it is not surprising that violence, or the threat of violence, erupted during our year at the school. What is perhaps surprising is that there were not more incidents of explosive racial conflict.

### **Accounts of and Explanations for the Racial Conflict**

According to Mr. Belk's recollection of the race riot, there had been a fight because a black student walking through the tunnel heard a white student say, "Let's go lynch some

n\*\*\*\*\*s.” Most accounts of the incident by students and teachers suggested that this comment was made deliberately to antagonize the student. Students and teachers used narratives to portray the incident in different ways. Several students referred to the conflict as a “race riot” or “redneck riot,” although few reported any specific fights or physical altercations. Only one student, Alicia (a white honors student), when queried about whether there were any “physical fights” related to the conflict, claimed that there were “a couple of fights, but nobody really got hurt.” Many parts of the incident were contested, including the identities and number of people involved, progression of events, and consequences. Although all acknowledged that race was at the core of the incident, few connected it to a broader problem at the school. In a casual conversation, one preppy white male student told the fieldworker that the incident had been about “gangs and race stuff.” In his interview, Corey reported that the incident involved a large number of black students and only three rednecks. John, a black male, characterized the initial incident as one in which a larger redneck student was picking on a smaller black student, Joseph: “There was no need for them to say he was going to hang somebody. And as small as [Joseph]—[Joseph’s], like, small, so that doesn’t make sense to me. You know, if you going to talk trash, talk trash to, you know, older kids.” Thus, students told stories about the incident that reinforced their own point of view: Black students and rednecks placed blame on one another, while other white students portrayed the incident as far removed from themselves. Others added that in response to the initial incident, a rumor started that a black male student planned to bring a gun to school to fight the rednecks. The object of these rumors was John, although he denied planning to bring a weapon to school.

The school’s response to these perceived threats of racial violence consisted primarily of punishments of the students involved and reassurances to parents. John and the redneck student who initially made a derogatory comment received in-school suspension (ISS) in the days that followed.<sup>15</sup>

Although this incident offered the school the opportunity to address racism and racial conflict, students reported that there was no formal response from the administration. Only one student reported hearing a teacher talk about the issue to her class. Zakeshia reported that her African American teacher spoke to her class about the incident and about hearing one of the redneck students make a racially charged remark:

She told us it’s life, you know. From back when like slavery and all that we just have to deal with stuff like that sometimes. Because she heard him say it. When she was in the tunnel she was walking by and he was like, “Where’s the sun at because it’s getting mighty dark in here?”

Thus, the only time a student recalled hearing a teacher talk about the incident in the classroom, it was both dismissed as ordinary (“it’s life”) and compared to another racist remark, this one minus the threat of violence, made by the rednecks.

Although previous studies have found a general silence in schools around issues of race (Fine and Weis 2003; Schofield 1989; see Lewis 2003 for an exception), we were surprised to find this at Cordington because the school appeared to have a space for just such discussion. The school had a program in which academic classes were shortened for one day every other week so that students could meet in small groups with one teacher for the first hour of the day. This program was characterized by teachers and administrators as an opportunity for students to talk about sensitive issues. Yet when asked, students reported these sessions were not used to discuss race, either before or after the conflict. Indeed,

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<sup>15</sup>Accounts varied, but John (the most central eyewitness to these events) reported that he and the other student received in-school suspensions.

teachers appeared reluctant to discuss the incident in front of students. The fieldworker first heard about the conflict from Mr. Belk, a history teacher at the school, who took her out into the hallway and described the incident in hushed tones. This occurred several days after the initial conflict, while police officers were still stationed at the school. In another encounter, when the researcher asked a white female teacher, Ms. Bell, about the race riot, she minimized the conflict by characterizing it as “stupidity,” adding that the students involved “were friends, and still are.”

Despite teacher and administrator characterizations of the incident as an anomaly, black students spoke openly about racism and prior incidents of racial conflict. Charlene, a senior, said she had heard “that the same exact thing happened like a year before I came,” echoing Ms. Lucas’s report of the earlier fight. When asked what he thought of teachers at Cordington, John said some of them are “kind of racist.” And after stating that she sometimes wished she “went to a different school,” Zakeshia explained, “As in, like, the school really can’t help it, but like the racism that’s here kind of. I’d like to change that.” As explained previously, the school’s location in the rural South made Zakeshia doubtful that this would change. Finally, Patricia described the general complacency toward racism at Cordington: “[Cordington] does have a racist problem. But it’s been covered up for so long that it’s hurting—nothing’s done about it. And that’s going to hurt them in the long run if nothing’s done about it, ’cause it’s just cooled down for now.”

For minority students, the racial conflict highlighted a broader problem, harkening back to the days of slavery and de jure segregation. As we describe in greater detail below, while the seriousness of the incident may have been unusual, many of our black informants made charges of racism and racial bias, particularly regarding disciplinary matters, including the handling of the race riot. Yet white faculty and students viewed the riot as an isolated incident of racial conflict.

### Defining Racism

Administrators’ and teachers’ silence regarding issues of race, and their implicit framing of the race riot as an isolated incident, coincided with the prevailing stereotype of rednecks as racist and marginalized within the school. In their description of the riot, students defined racism as prejudice and racial intolerance. By implication, individuals could make the claim that they were not racist by portraying themselves as tolerant or friendly. For example, a white female student, Kate, who was interviewed several months before the race riot, described the rednecks as racist and then was eager to say that she was not one of them: “And sometimes it’s like I can feel it, see the tension between [rednecks and blacks]. And I can tell that like—I’ll just say rednecks—don’t really like the black people as much. But I mean, I’m not like that. A lot of people aren’t like that.” Other white students also distanced themselves from the rednecks. Several explained that while some students belonged to cliques, they themselves did not discriminate.

The explicit racism of redneck students provides an easy target for blame. It allowed other whites to draw further distinctions between themselves and rednecks and, in doing so, portray themselves as not racist. The widely held perception of rednecks as racist is central to how students whose style and behavior match the description of redneck become a readily available scapegoat for and explanation of everyday racism at the school. The act of defining racism as a characteristic of a particular individual or group of individuals who display overt racial prejudice and antagonism sets boundaries on the meaning of racism, which conceals institutional racism and provides an outlet through which whites can claim to be not racist.

It was particularly telling that although rednecks were identifiable by their clothing and other preferences and behavior, few students we spoke to actually claimed the identity. This



finding is consistent with Payne's (1984) characterization of the use of the "Redneck-as-Patsy" explanations as a distancing mechanism. Even Corey, who by his own description of rednecks as wearing "a lot of Carhartt clothes" would be considered part of the group, distanced himself by claiming that he had only been a redneck "for, like, a week" in ninth grade. Nonetheless, when we met him as a senior he still wore Carhartt clothing as well as hunting-related apparel, often caked with mud; spoke of his hatred of blacks; and used racial epithets. He was also friendly with other perceived rednecks. Yet Corey identified himself as a "prep" (although he was enrolled in at least one course for academically struggling students and vocational courses). Thus, students were able to make the claim of not being racist by pointing out that they were not rednecks and/or that they were friendly with everyone. In fact, at one point early in the year Corey claimed that he was not a racist because he was a "nice person." In comparison, rednecks were considered racist because their open hostility and unfriendliness toward blacks meant that they were not nice people.

White students' remarks and the school's response to the racial conflict seem to deny that racism was a problem at Cordington, but black students' accounts of disparate treatment suggest otherwise. While sitting in a lower-level science class one day in December, a student asked the field-worker what she was doing. After telling the student that we were interested in learning more about the school, the student (who appeared to be a Latina but may also have been black) spontaneously remarked that she thought the school was racist. It was not only students, she said, but teachers also. She explained that she had six tardies from her homeroom teacher but that when she was there on time she would see white students come in late and not get tardies. She insisted that black students received tardies even if they walked in the room as the bell was sounding. Charlene made a similar point during her interview. When asked about her likes and dislikes of the school, she responded, "What I don't like? Sometimes it seems like they have, like, certain favorites. . . As in, white, black favorite stuff. . . They'll go about things with the black child, or minority child, differently than they would a Caucasian child." When probed for more information, she explained,

Like, if we, one of us say anything, it don't even have to be a cussword, anything like that, it's automatically you're suspended or something like that. But I know one of my friends took somebody to the office because they were cussing and acting a fool to her, who was—he was a white student, my friend was black. And he didn't get in trouble. It was like [the administrator thought], "I know he wouldn't do that," and because he's on the football team too.

Another black student, Lefty, believed that he was punished for behaviors ("talking in class, interrupting class") that other people got away with. He reported that "some principals let some other people get away [with infractions]. They're like basically the redneck people. They'll let them get away, I don't know why, but they just do." John (a black male student) believed that the school reserved the harshest punishments for students with "bad reputation[s]" and that at Cordington those students were presumed to be black: "I think they just don't like people who have a bad reputation. Like, supposedly, we all have bad reputations. Most of, the majority of the, I want to say the black group, we have a, like, bad reputation."

While white students also described teachers' and administrators' treatment of students as based on the students' reputations, they did so in color-blind terms. For example, Kate explained, "Sometimes, like, as I said, like, the students that continuously do wrong things, like, they're going to be more strict on them." Stephanie (a white female student) complained that the "popular" girls "don't get in trouble" for violating the school dress code. "Just because you're popular or you're on the dance team or the cheerleading squad," she argued, "doesn't mean that you shouldn't follow the school rules like everybody else." Steven also noted the difference as he described how administrators responded to students

skipping school: “It’s all about who you know. [Really? What do you mean by that?] Like, if you’re like a good student, I guess, then, it doesn’t matter as much. . Unless you’re somebody that’s like, habitual and does it all the time.” These accounts appeared to be supported by Mr. Gardner, an administrator, who noted that he used reputation as a guide when making disciplinary decisions.

Black informants also perceived that the white students involved in the racial conflict received less severe punishments than the blacks involved. Whether accurate or not, it is significant that race shapes how the events of the incident and its aftermath were viewed. The racialized institutional environment at Cordington no doubt contributes to this reality. According to Zakeshia, “So, like the black people got suspended but not many of the white people got suspended. They got like ISS (in-school suspension). A lot of black people got, like I know one got, that got suspended for ten days.” Charlene had a similar perception of the disparity in punishment meted out:

Some of them [who] were suspected of it, got sent home. But more, they, the administrators didn’t do what they were supposed to do with that, because the way I saw it, they was doing more with the black people than with the white ones. They were sending most of them home, and you didn’t ever hear about them disciplining the white neck—white rednecks, whatever you want to say.

John believed that not only were the white students involved treated more leniently, but also they were protected.

They had police here for a while, but, you know, I thought—I almost—I looked at it like they were protecting [Harold], you know? They had him in an ISS room. Nobody could come in. He was, you know, surrounded by police. You know, if I would have said I was going to do some stuff like that (lynch someone), I would have been suspended for 10 days, and he got suspended for 3.

Thus, disciplinary practices are another way in which a racial hierarchy is established and race is made real and consequential for black students, even as they too attempt to minimize the specter of race in their peer relationships.

Black and white students agreed on the general friendliness of the environment at Cordington and that students with reputations were punished more harshly, but their views of the school’s treatment of blacks differed. Institutional structures and behaviors that perpetuated racial inequality within the school were masked by whites’ color-blindness and fear of being labeled racist. White students and teachers acknowledged that discipline was unequally enforced but suggested this was understandable because students’ prior behavior demanded consideration. As several black students pointed out, however, reputation appeared to map onto skin color, and black students routinely faced harsher punishments. Thus, skin color itself—partially augmented by one’s peer group—became a marker of a bad reputation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Another Way?

Given the significance of racial conflict within schools, it is important to ask whether efforts to address the riot could have ameliorated some of the tensions and could prevent future problems because as one student warned, “it’s just cooled down for now.” Previous research suggests that direct interventions and discussions about race can help (Staiger 2006). While it is not practical to speculate as to the effectiveness of something that did not occur at Cordington, one incident does suggest that mediation could play a role in diminishing conflict. As described above, when racial tensions flared in a lower-track classroom over a

redneck student's wearing clothing adorned with Confederate flags and a black student's wearing a Malcolm X-adorned shirt, a teacher brought the students and their classmates together for a discussion. "But see, they resolved that," she said of the students' agreement that it was "inappropriate" to do things that would offend others.

While this kind of approach may not solve every problem of racial conflict within the school, it accomplishes three important goals: quelling immediate tension, facilitating positive communication, and teaching students that race is a topic appropriate to open discussion and inquiry. School officials must also be willing to take a hard look at their policies and practices to assess whether any contribute to or even give the appearance of racial inequality and how they might be fanning the fires of racial tension. Whether or not one views tracking, for example, as racist, it is hard to miss the uneven racial distribution of students across track levels. Schools must pay closer attention to how unequal structures affect group relations. Too often, however, such structures are simply ignored, and racism and racial conflict are attributed to other plausible explanations.

This study is an important reminder of the continuing salience of race in everyday life, especially in schools. First, we showed that the explicit racism of rednecks provided an easy scapegoat for Cordington's race problem, both before and after the riot. By making claims that they were "friends with everyone," other white students drew distinctions between themselves and rednecks, and in doing so portrayed themselves as not racist. Yet many of these students were tracked into classrooms in which almost all students were white, thereby avoiding contact and competition with both rednecks and nonwhites for most of the day (see also Staiger 2006). These privileged white students were sheltered from the conflicts at school yet benefitted from them. They juxtaposed redneck behavior with their own friendliness, implicitly suggesting that politeness and friendship with black students signifies a lack of racism (similar to the often-used line, "Some of my best friends are black").

Second, by blaming rednecks, school actors implicitly set boundaries on the meaning of racism, defining it in terms of individual and overt motivations of racial hatred. This does not mean that the redneck students are blameless. They regularly used racial epithets and acted threateningly toward their black peers. Yet racism is not only a symptom of prejudice or a psychological trait but also an ideology that supports a racialized social system that rewards and punishes racial groups unequally across a number of domains (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2003; Chesler et al. 2005; Wellman 1994). As Bonilla-Silva et al. argue, "Racial outcomes . . . are not the product of individual 'racists' but of the crystallization of racial domination into a *racial structure*" (2004:558). Tracking and disciplinary practices in schools are undeniably part of that racial structure. In contemporary America, the consequences of racism are more severe at this systemic, less easily recognizable level (Feagin 2000). The presence and behavior of rednecks at Cordington help to reinforce the more common understanding of racism as blatant prejudice displayed in the words and deeds of bigots and to render the school's institutional racial structure even more invisible. This study demonstrates how defining racism narrowly as an individual disposition of intolerance masks deeper structures of inequality within schools. In some ways, it is not surprising that school administrators did not formally address the conflict, because this may have forced them to address structural race and class inequality.

While students of color also described friendly relations between racial groups at the school, save for the rednecks, they also identified racism at Cordington as more than a redneck problem. They reported that students of color were not treated the same as whites by school staff. For these youth, disciplinary practices are another means through which race is consequential. Unlike the authors of previous studies of racial conflict in schools (e.g., Kiang and Kaplan 1994; Staiger 2006), we found that minority students were less concerned

with the immediate disputes among students than with unequal treatment by administrators and teachers. Yet these students expressed a sense of resignation about the culture of racism in the rural South, that “old kind of thing,” as Zakeshia put it. These young people seemed to view individual racism as embedded in the culture of life in the South and not likely to change.

In deconstructing the underpinnings of and responses to Cordington’s race riot, we identify ways one’s own and institutional racism can be plausibly denied. The southern context provides a confluence of factors that provoke and map onto black–white conflict. The availability of rednecks as a scapegoat for racism is uniquely southern, but as a means to deny other, less overt, forms of racism, it is not particularly unique. Thus, in this article, we have tried to show that strategies of plausible deniability are not limited to media portrayals that subtly perpetuate racist stereotypes (Liu and Mills 2006:84). Instead, they can include a number of strategies or means whites can use to deflect charges of racism against oneself or deny institutional racism. In neither case does racism have to be recognized as such or be intentional because, as we found with the use of rednecks at Cordington, the tool or strategy can obscure or mask other forms of racism. The end result, however, is the same: By pointing to rednecks, plausible deniability of racism is achieved, and everyone else can claim to have no responsibility for or knowledge of the hostile racial climate at Cordington. This is significant because the institutional framing of a racial incident has implications for the manner in which it is handled.

It is perhaps no surprise that the administration did nothing more than mete out suspensions and other punishments to the students thought to be involved. By defining the race riot at Cordington as an isolated incident, caused by a few troublemakers, school officials were able to minimize the problem. Thus, the race riot was handled quietly. After several days of tension, order returned to the school. But the sources of racial conflict remained unaddressed.

Subsequently, students of color complained that long-standing racial problems go unaddressed. Given the history of black–white relations in the South and the likelihood that rednecks may be a visible and imposing presence on campus, officials there should be all the more vigilant about these matters and open to talking about race and race relations. By turning a blind eye to race and racial conflict, students learn that it is a taboo subject and that color-blindness is the appropriate strategy (Schofield 1989). This approach guarantees that the structures from which racial tensions arose will remain in place and that the wounds inflicted from such practices will continue to fester. As Howard Winant (1997:45) argues, “a refusal to engage in ‘race-thinking’ amounts to a defence of the racial status quo, in which systematic racial inequality and discrimination are omnipresent.” Schools must make an effort, guided by policy research and recommendations, to address issues of race and racial inequality. Doing so can contribute to student learning and growth in regard to these issues and facilitate all students’ comfort and safety in schools. Moreover, addressing racial inequality in schools may go a long way toward building minority students’ “confidence in the fairness and integrity of public institutions.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>*Grutter v. Bollinger et al.*, No. 02-241, 02-516, p. 9 (2003). Retrieved July 19, 2011, from <http://www.law.duke.edu/publiclaw/supremecourtonline/additional/gruvbol.html>.

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## Biographies

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**Table 1**Informant Information ( $N = 15$ )

<b>Name</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Academic Track</b>	<b>Month Interviewed</b>
Alicia	White	9	Honors	February
Corey	White	12	General	December
Charlene	Black	12	College prep and honors	February
Joan	Hispanic	10	General	May
Jonathan	White	12	General	November
John	Black	9	College prep	April
Kate	White	9	Honors	December
Keenya	Black	10	General	April
Lefty	Black	12	Special education	December
Patricia	Black	12	College prep and honors	April
Sarah	White	10	College prep	May
Stephanie	White	9	Honors	November
Steven	White	12	General	November
Tamika	Black	10	College prep and honors	May
Zakeshia	Black	10	College prep	March

**Table 2**  
 Percentage of Students of Each Racial/Ethnic Group in Classrooms Observed, Compared to Schoolwide Total (N = 14 Classrooms)

	Honors/Advanced Placement	College Prep	General Education	Elective Courses	Academically Struggling	Special Education	School Total
White	97.8	79.8	82.1	68.9	56.5	81.3	84
Black	1.1	14.3	14.3	31.1	21.7	12.5	13
Hispanic	1.1	4.8	3.6	0.0	13.0	6.3	2
Other	0.0	1.2	0.0	0.0	8.7	0.0	1
<i>n</i>	90	84	56	61	23	16	330