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A social network analysis of acting white

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Abstract

Using social network and interview data, this case study illuminates why *acting White* did not apply to students at a predominantly Somali African American school in the U.S. Specifically, this case study shows that high-achieving Somali working-class students were not isolated from their peer networks in their school. Furthermore, this study suggests that Acting White may be not applicable to schools where schools are structurally small-sized, culturally college-bound, and ethnically-homogenous.
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1. Introduction

Willis (1977) identifies certain cultural mechanisms whereby working-class students consciously or unconsciously reject schoolwork by forming a counterculture of predominant ideology that eventually leads them to be locked into lower socio-economic status. Following Willis's perspective, researchers equipped with an anthropologic lens transfer this cultural mechanism to Black students in the U.S. For example, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) view that peer pressure often negatively functions as accelerating anti-school culture in the U.S. public schooling context because being labeled as Black in American society often means being placed in a racial power-relation mechanism that regards Blacks as "second class citizens" (Torres, 2007). This climate ripe for "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1995) has existed persistently in American society and devalues Blacks by describing them as lazy and unintelligent (cited in Torress, 2007). What is worse is that this potential for activating stereotype threat thrusts and justifies a perverse and collective unconsciousness. That is, for some African American students predisposed to stereotype threat, "doing poorly in school becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy" (Torres, 2007, p. 41). [2] Researchers have explained this insidious phenomenon among some African American youths with the oppositional culture framework (e.g. Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) by coining terms such as *acting White* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), *self-defeating culture*, or *therapeutic alienation* (McWhorter, 2005). The purpose of this study is to investigate whether

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the insidious phenomenon, particularly *acting White*, exists among newly-immigrated African American adolescents.

2. Theoretical Framework

In general, *acting White* refers to ethnic minority students who are academically inclined, and shunned by their ethnically-identical peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). One critical issue regarding acting White is whether it is a phenomenon identified outside of the U.S.-born African American community. Specifically, it is particularly important to investigate whether acting White exists among newly-immigrated African American students, given that they are often labeled as Blacks by main stream society regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. It should be noted that racialization, "a socially constructed process where race becomes the predominant way of defining oneself or being defined by others" (Bigelow, 2008, p. 28), is a specific social mechanism re-shaping newly-immigrated African American students' racial identity. Exploring this social mechanism for newly immigrated African American students is important because they are confronted with racialization based on skin color rather than cultural, ideological indicators.

Reflecting this racialization issue in this study, we focus on Somali immigrant students as our primary interest because Somali adolescents are stigmatized with racialization experiences in general and the activation of stereotype threat in particular in their everyday lives (Bigelow, 2008). Combining the acting White thesis and the racialization issue, we hypothesize that high-achieving Somali immigrant students may be isolated by their ethnically identical peers because of certain oppositional cultures in school.

3. Research Design: A Case Study Equipped with A Mixed-Methods Approach

We planned a case study equipped with a mixed-methods approach to investigate the research hypothesis noted above. Specifically, the case study is based on a qualitative follow-up design in data collection for elaborating quantitative results (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003; Creswell, 2002). That is, students' social network data gathered from a network survey served as the critical foundation in exploring the phenomenon of interest: "are high-achieving Somali students isolated from their peers? If so, why? If not, why?" After our analysis of the network data, we found several noticeable common patterns of network characteristics among Somali immigrant students. In explaining some of the patterns, reflecting our research hypothesis, however, the question "why" still remained unanswered with the network data analysis. To this end, we conducted a series of individual interviews and performed qualitative data analysis.

3.1. Site selection

Consistent with the primary purpose of this study, in order to obtain substantial target populations, we chose a public school located in a large urban/inner-city area where comparably large immigrant populations reside in contrast to other suburban or rural areas in the upper Midwest where such populations do not exist. The public school is located in a typical, large urban/inner-city was chosen; hereafter let us refer to the school as "Baro Prep." The major characteristic of Baro Prep is that it is a predominantly Somali African K-12 school (71.5% as of 2006). The rest of students enrolled in the school are U.S.-born African Americans: in total 438 students, including both Somali and U.S.-born African American students, were enrolled in the school.

Notably, Baro Prep has shown relatively high school performance in statewide assessments, which is quite impressive for a school that has a large concentration of limited English proficient (37.4%) and Title 1 (90.2%) students.

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[2] The terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably in this study. The reason of this interchangeable use of the terms is because of variations in the use of the terms in previous research and literature as well as data used in this study. However, we used the term "U.S.-born African American students" in order to distinguish the non-immigrant group from recent African American immigrant students.

3.2. Social network data collection

We utilized three sub-datasets, which chart different social boundaries of peer inter-relationships. The first dataset included the complete social network of the 47 sample students from Baro Prep.[3] Because of there being no missing actors, this type of complete network data has particular strengths in revealing complete social dynamics of actors within a group in terms of network structure and position. Notably, of the 47 students, six were non-immigrant African American students because they originally belonged to the 47 sample students. In order not to distort the complete network, we included the six Blacks in our network analysis. However, they were later excluded in grouping two Somali groups for comparing group network sizes because they were not a target student group of this study.

The second dataset was an ego-centric network dataset, which captures close peers "outside" the complete network group. That is, this dataset was designed to provide supplementary information about the 47 students' friendship, which exists outside the complete network. Given that the 47 students were one particular group in the school, the second dataset charted additional peer networks with other student groups both within and outside the school.

Finally, the third dataset was constructed by combining the two aforementioned datasets for investigating more comprehensive peer networks, which we call the "combined" network. That is, by combining the ego-centric networks of the 47 students with the complete network, this combined network captures peer groups formed within the sub-group and other peer groups generated not only within but outside the school.

3.3. Qualitative data collection

For the qualitative data collection in this study, we used a purposive sampling procedure for elaborating and expanding findings from network analysis. In other words, gathering qualitative data was designed for elaborating students' social relations based on network data (i.e. for providing elaborated answers to the research hypothesis). Specifically, after analyzing the network data, follow-up qualitative data were garnered from semi-structured interviews of a subsample of the 47 students. To this end, we purposively selected 8 out of the 47 students for follow-up data collection and analysis.

4. Results

We utilized the two achievement groups to examine the pattern of network size by achievement level. That is, the 39 Somali students were divided into three groups by achievement-levels: high-achieving group (G.P.A. is higher than 3.2), mid-achieving group (G.P.A. is between 3.2 and 2.3), and low-achieving group (G.P.A. is lower than 2.3). Because standardized test data was not used, grouping students by G.P.A. required contextualizing. Therefore, constructing the achievement groups was based on information provided by the school principal. According to his data and experience in the school over the years, students with a G.P.A. higher than 3.2 had a higher chance of going to four-year universities, including major state universities. Conversely, students with a G.P.A. lower than 2.3 had a relatively low chance of college attendance.

Table 1 presents the numbers of both in- and out-degree ties from the combined networks. In the table, "degree" refers to the number of social ties incident to an actor (or node). Because the network is a directional network, we needed to specify the direction of each degree. In-degree ties refer to "chosen" ties (i.e. in-coming ties) and out-degree ties means "choosing" ties (i.e. out-going ties).

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[3] There were 130 students enrolled from 9th grade to 12th grade in the school. For reasons of cost, we selected one sub-group, sharing one extra-curricular activity.

Table 1. Comparison of the number of ties from three peer networks

Network Properties	Mean	S.D.	df	t	Sig.
In-degree Ties from Combined Network					
Mid/Low-Achieving Working Class	2.96	2.41	37	-.725	.473
High-Achieving Working Class	3.64	3.07			
Out-degree Ties from Combined Network					
Mid/Low-Achieving Working Class	4.54	2.21	37	-2.62	.013
High-Achieving Working Class	6.55	1.96			
Total Ties from Combined Network					
Mid/Low-Achieving Working Class	7.50	4.24	37	-1.74	.089
High-Achieving Working Class	10.18	4.49			

Note: n = 39 (28 low- and mid-achieving vs. 11 high-achieving students).This means that while there were 120 actors in the combined network, the analytical focus was on the 39 students consistent with the research questions.

Findings indicate that there were significant group differences especially in terms of "out-degree" ties in the combined network (p = .013). The high achievers had more out-going ties than their counterparts. Additionally, there was a noticeable group difference in terms of total ties in the combined network at the level of p <.10. These findings imply that the high-achieving Somali working-class students may not be isolated from their peer groups, considering their larger average network sizes compared to their counterparts in their peer networks.

In particular, our interview data reaffirm that the high-achieving Somali working-class students may not be isolated from their peer groups. When we asked for criteria which students consider important when choosing their friends, most of the interview participants indicated personality (e.g. nice character) as the most important criterion. At the same time, some of the low-achieving students indicated school performance as a key aspect they consider in choosing their friends.

Interviewer: Do you think high achieving students are popular?
S21 (low achiever): You could say that.
Interviewer: How so?
S21 (low achiever): Everybody knows they're smart…I think people want to be like [them].
Interviewer: Why do people [students] want to be like them?
S21 (low achiever): They know the results that [a] person who is educated [knows] and has a successful future.

Interviewer: When you choose your friends do you want to be friends with some students showing a very high GPA?
S27 (low achiever): Yeah, I want to have someone who studies very well, writes the best, and is a good student, I want to work with someone who knows good things, can help me when I need something.
Interviewer: Are high achieving students popular?
S41 (high achiever): Yeah, they are. You get to know them and you hear their names, this person did that and this….

We identified three key school contextual characteristics for the popularity of high-achieving students in Baro Prep (i.e. no existence of acting White). First, the popularity of high-achieving students in the school stems from a positive school climate that values earning good grades and attending colleges. Interviews revealed that earning good grades and attending college were the most important values shared throughout all interview participants regardless of their achievement level.

Interviewer: What is valued in your school?
S21 (low achiever): Good grades, good behavior.
S27 (low achiever): It is important for students here to go to college, because if you don't have education, you don't get money and you don't have a good life.
S20 (high achiever): Going to college, making sure you graduate…getting good grades.
S41 (high achiever): SAT and high grades…They [S41's friends] all think it is important to get grades and go to college.

As the interviews above show, the academic-oriented and college-bound school climate shared by Baro Prep students seemed to contribute to the school atmosphere of the popularity of high-achieving students.

Another distinctive reason was found in their small school size. Coupled with the college bound school culture, structurally, the school size of Baro Prep was quite small (438 total students). This structural feature seems to contribute to scaffolding a positive peer context—i.e. promoting students to know almost all students in the school. Indeed, the positive perception of the small school size of Baro Prep was commonly identified from all the interviews.

Finally, it should be noted that Baro Prep is a predominantly Somali school. Because no White students were enrolled in the school, it seemed almost impossible for Somali students to ostracize high-achieving peers by analogizing them with academically-oriented White students. This resonates with Fryer's (2006) Add Health data study which found that acting White is a disturbing phenomenon in more "racially-diverse" public high schools rather than racially homogenous schools.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study shows that the social networks of high-achieving Somali working-class students are primarily based on their relatively larger outgoing social ties. This suggests that acting White is not likely to be found among African immigrant adolescents, especially when school organizational characteristics are based on a small-size, predominantly ethnic minority school setting, and an academic-valuing school culture. This also reminds us of another simple fact, often ignored by mainstream society. Despite sharing the mechanism of racialization, Somali African Americans have a different experience from non-immigrant Blacks which can be reflected not only in culture but maybe also in their opportunities to express a healthy achievement-ideology.

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