

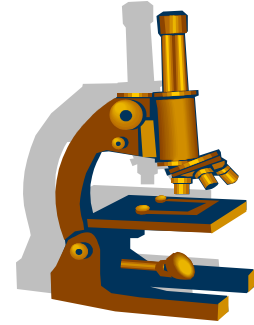
# The Multiple Dimensions of Boundaries in U.S. Schools: Observations from the Northeast & South

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# THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

- Schools comprise “dual structures”—material and cultural/symbolic—that impact groups of students’ incorporation into the school (Sewell 1992)
- Schools comprise boundaries of different attributes (e.g., Zerubavel 1991; Lamont and Molnar 2002; Alba 2005)

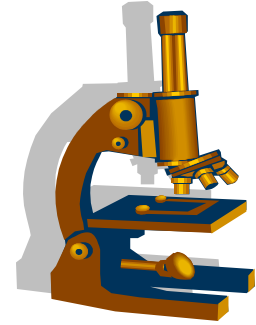
# RESEARCH AIM #1



- To identify how different school contexts either diminish or reproduce social and symbolic boundaries
  - \**Social boundaries* are objectified forms of social differences among social actors manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources.
  - \**Symbolic boundaries* are cultural tools that groups of individuals can use to acquire status, monopolize resources, and/or separate and distinguish themselves from others.

\*Michèle Lamont and Virag Molnar. 2002. "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 167-195

## RESEARCH AIM #2



- How do school practices either facilitate or inhibit the propensity and ability of students to participate in multiple cultural environments?

# THREE PROPERTIES OF BOUNDARIES

- **Permeability**—propensity for the cross-penetration of boundaries (cf. Lamont 1992; Wright & Western 1994)
- **Diffusiveness**— propensity of in-group cultural resources to disperse and influence out-group members who then begin to identify with a new social classification
- **Flexibility**— propensity of the receiving group or context to extend its cultural repertoire so that it incorporates and represents its new members or boundary crossers (cf. Zerubavel 1991)

# METHODS &



- Case Study of 4 Schools in the Northeast & South
  - 2 Multiracial, predominantly of Color (MA-”DuBois;” MS- “Walker”)
  - 2 Multiracial, predominantly White (MA-”Jetson;” MS- “Southern”)
  - All in Compliance with NCLB (ranked either Level 4 or 5 schools)
- Ethnography: School and Classroom Observations
- Informal Interviews and Observations of Teachers
- Formal Interviews with Principals
- Surveys of Random Sample of Student Populations (N ≈ 750)
- 64 Student Group Interviews (from 3-5 students)

# FINDINGS

- Social organization of school differs when students of color are in the minority, compared to when Whites are in the minority
  - Permeable spatial boundaries into quality schools though rigid social boundaries maintain
  - Rigid social boundaries correlate with student participation in academic course and extracurricular activities
  - Concerted effort to keep Whites in the higher echelon classes at both of the minority dominant schools; not the same for students of color at white schools
- “School is boring!”
  - Explicit talk about disengagement due to content and presentation of information; students do not like what they are taught in many instances!
  - Social boundaries are reinforced by shared cultural practices that are dispersed but unidirectional → asymmetric dispersion of cultural practices (e.g. English, History, celebrations, etc.)
  - Models of creativity, intelligence and competence among teachers vary in minority schools, not in predominantly White ones (“And she’s our color...”)

# FINDINGS cont.

- GENDER
  - Black & Latino boys appear less flexible in their academic, social and cultural identities than female ethnic peers
    - More variation among females in terms of performance compared to males
  - Creation of “male” domains within school
    - Refuge in Special Ed./tutorial classroom (MS “Northern High”) & ISS (MA “Jetson High”)
    - Run by two female teachers who in both instances regarded as their “friend”--respectful, caring and willing to listen
- Student response to relatively low returns on extra effort
  - Lack of positive reinforcement make kids feel less
  - Self-described “Leftovers”