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.

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…”)

• 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”