

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: SHADOW POLITICS IN THE RICH LIGHT OF DAY:
BLACK YOUTH, POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION, AND
ONE WASHINGTON, D.C. METROPOLITAN AREA
HIGH SCHOOL

Darwin Ben Fishman, Doctor of Philosophy, 2006

Dissertation directed by: Professor Ron Walters
Department of Government and Politics

There is still a lot that is not known about how we develop our political identity and why we retain certain parts of our political identity and shed other parts. Most of the research done in the last forty years was based on the assumption that political socialization occurred during youth and that youth learned some of their most important political lessons while in school. The current field of political socialization has expanded and changed greatly, but still retains youth identity formation as the foundation of most scholarly work. The racial and quantitative bias of this past research on political socialization has been neglected. These theoretical and methodological concerns have provided the basis for my research. To be able to address these issues and to delve more deeply into these issues, I have focused my work on the political socialization of Black youth.

I decided to conduct an ethnographic research project to be able examine the political socialization process for Black youth and to be able address some of the larger

questions about the field of political socialization and identity politics. This project was based on observations and interviews in one African American History elective class for Juniors and Seniors in a public high school. This high school was located in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area, and it was nestled in a poor working class suburban area.

The research gave me insight into the lives of Black youth's political socialization from a unique perspective. Unlike past race neutral work and quantitative research, this ethnographic research illustrated how complicated and contradictory Black youth political socialization can be. I found the students' lack of knowledge about local, state, and national political affairs was not matched by an equally apparent lack of interest or enthusiasm for political issues or participation. Instead I found that the students were most passionate and well versed in a few, very specific political areas. This ethnographic approach did not produce a way to avoid these awkward points, but it instead created the space in which many of these contradictory trends could be re-stitched together in a more meaningful fashion.

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AND ONE WASHINGTON, D.C. METROPOLITAN AREA HIGH SCHOOL

by

Darwin Ben Fishman

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Ron Walters, Chair
Professor John Caughey
Professor Sheri Parks
Professor Sangeeta Ray
Professor Clyde Woods

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my Uncle Fred Perry who passed away on December 4th, 2004. I have no doubt that he would have disagreed with almost every argument I made in here, but he would have been the first person to ask me to sign his copy of my Dissertation.

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As much as I would like to believe that this work is a product of my own dogged determinism, I know this does not present a complete picture of what has transpired in the last six years. There has been a huge community that has contributed to this final product. The good, the bad and the ugly that have come from this community has all been integral to my experience at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP). I truly believe that I would not have pushed as hard as I have if I had not met so much resistance and encountered so many obstacles. Since I have been at UMCP I have found God, a wife, and a new sense of purpose out of my own blood! Given this dynamic, I am especially thankful for those that reached out to assist me in this journey.

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our success continues to translate into a deeper commitment to and service for our community.

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INTRODUCTION

UNRAVELING THE POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION KNOT FOR BLACK YOUTH

The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon... or too late.
Frantz Fanon *Black Skin White Masks* 7.

The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on what the world around me says I am.
Beverly Daniel Tatum *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* 18.

It used to be common knowledge that political socialization occurred during youth and that youth learned some of their most important political lessons while in school. As this transpired, youth were also adapting to an adult world, and this political socialization process was just one part of this growing up process. Most of the research done in the last forty years has turned these assumptions on their respective heads and the current field of political socialization has expanded and changed greatly. There is still a lot that is not known about how we develop our political identity and why we retain certain parts of our political identity and shed other parts. Youth identity formation continues to be the focal point of political socialization research and the way that this emphasis continues to be predicated on a notion of a solidified and static adult political existence remains a contentious issue.¹ The conundrum that the field of political socialization has found itself in has been due in part to the way that identity politics has entangled and confounded the field in a general fashion and the specific way that race and racism have challenged the field. There is also a struggle over the depth and breath of definitions utilized for political socialization, and an examination of Richard Niemi's and Barbara Sobieszek's work provides a way to examine this struggle. In particular, I develop a definition that is based on Niemi and Sobieszek notion of a broad understanding of political socialization: All political learning is included; and all age ranges are considered.² To be able to address these issues and to delve more deeply into

¹ A lot of theoretical work done on the issues that youth confront has an inherent age bias built in. Whether it is from the standpoint of theories about our identification process or political behavior, there always appears to be a fully functional adult in the background or foreground for this research. (This adult is usually presumed to be white, wealthy and a male too.) This is also implicit in youth and children based theories that are based on a development model that invariably leads to this fully functional adult. I am aware of this bias and set aside direct consideration of this bias until my theory section and my conclusion.

² I discuss the definition of political socialization in greater detail in Chapter II. I use the following work as the basis for this definition. Richard G. Niemi and Barbara I. Sobieszek, "Political Socialization" *Annual Review of Sociology* 3(1977):225.

the implications of these issues, I have focused my work on the political socialization of Black youth.

I decided to conduct an ethnographic research project to be able examine the political socialization process for Black youth and to be able address some of the larger questions about the field of political socialization and identity politics. This project was based on observations and interviews in one African American History elective class for Juniors and Seniors in a public high school. This high school was located in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area and it was nestled in a poor and working class suburban area.³ Most of the students I interviewed were associated directly or indirectly with one Social Studies class, and their participation in the interviews were voluntary.⁴ For the purposes of my work, I chose to focus on the predominately Black community that surrounds the school and the majority of Black students that attend this school. I wanted to examine whether these students were politically active and what this activism might mean to them. I attempted to learn how much of their political activity might be considered traditional political activity (i.e., voting, political party affiliation) or non-traditional political activity (i.e., public protest, boycotts), or even if what they had described to me could be considered political in content, design, and/or execution. The way in which youth in D.C. learn to identify themselves and their community and how this identification process connects to the way in which the youth develop their political

³ I decided to refer to the location of my study as Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area. Even though my research is based in one Maryland county that borders Washington, D.C., I did not think this county was a sufficient way to identify this area. There are many valuable and significant connections that could be made between this county and Washington, D.C. and I decided that attaching Metropolitan area to Washington, D.C. provided a better way to convey the way in which these areas are interconnected. Many of the students' life stories in Chapter 4 substantiate this point too.

⁴ Not all of the students that I interviewed were officially registered in the class. At least one of the students enjoyed stopping by the classroom and sitting in on some class sessions. Two students were referred to me by a teacher and were not in the African American Studies class.

views and behavior was one of the focal points of my research. How this process reverberates within the larger frame of political socialization provided the theoretical and conceptual background for my work.⁵

Much of what has been written about political behavior in the United States is based on the form of representative democracy that we live under and the type of engagement individuals and groups have available to them and what decisions they make about these potential points of engagement⁶. Our electoral process is considered to be an essential part of what distinguishes our form of government from other forms, and the voting habits of individual citizens can provide a window into the views citizens might have of their government. Equally important is the knowledge and understanding of which elected officials one is voting for and the decision making process one engages in to be able to make his/her political selection. I decided to focus most of my attention on the knowledge of local, state and national level political issues and leaders, as well as general interest in traditional and non-traditional outlets for political involvement. I wanted to learn more about the beliefs that Washington, D.C. Metropolitan youth hold regarding these aspects of our political life and what led to these beliefs being incorporated into their lives. In particular, I wanted to assess not just the statistical representation of Black youth's political beliefs and activity in the Washington, D.C.

⁶ I decided to use an introductory textbook for a Political Science course to establish what aspects of our government are presented to students as what is most valued and what is most significant and in particular, what form of government we have and what makes this form of government distinct. In this attempt to draw out the dominant narrative, I did not want to also close the door on other potential narratives or even establish the existence of one right answer for the form of government we currently have and how this form of government compares with other countries' forms of governments. This is merely an attempt to provide a starting place and to begin to develop a way to understand and evaluate the political behavior of youth in DC. Morris P. Fiorina, Paul E. Peterson, Bertram Johnson, and D. Stephen Voss *The New American Democracy* Fourth Edition (New York: Pearson Longman) 2005.

Metropolitan area but what might contribute to the growth and the development of these beliefs.

One way to understand our own form of government is from the standpoint of what is expected of the citizenry. One political science text describes this goal in the following manner: “Popular democracy is expected to produce both better citizens and better policies.”⁷ I wanted to start with the premise that if this is the expected outcome of the adult political maturation process, then the validity of this understanding of popular democracy should be seen in all youth: Do they believe in our form of government, and, if they do, then in what ways do they express these beliefs? If they don’t believe in our form of government, then how can this be measured and assessed? Do they participate now, or envision participating at some point, in the political channels that are available to them or are they oblivious or ambivalent towards political involvement and activities? Can an examination of their participation in our electoral process and their views and attitudes towards voting help clarify and illuminate their understanding and interest in our form of representative democracy? What can an analysis of the youth political socialization process tell us about the reliability and validity of theories that are developed with fully functional adults as its basis of understanding? These are some of the questions that I explored in my research, and I discovered some of the limitations of these questions too.

This conceptual understanding of what is expected of the citizenry and the questions that are generated from this standpoint were not adequate for Black youth’s political socialization. It was apparent that the application of a dominant paradigm for

⁷ Morris P. Fiorina, Paul E. Person, Bertram Johnson, and Stephen D. Voss, *The New American Democracy* (Fourth Edition), 9.

political socialization created as many problems as it resolved. In attempting to explain the Black youth political socialization process, an emphasis needed be placed on the social conditions that they live in and the theoretical and methodological issues that these conditions raise also needed to be addressed.

In the area of the socio-economic conditions of the neighborhoods that the students live in, it was apparent that most of them were poor and working class. Many of the students that I interviewed lived in the small town where the high school was located or they lived in a town near where the high school was located.⁸ A cursory examination of the neighborhoods that many of these students lived in suggested that there were a lot of social and political conundrums they have to wrestle with and many of these problems were tied to deeply entrenched institutional barriers. The median household income for the town that this high school was located in was \$34,966; one nearby town was \$44,041; and for the county that these towns were located in, it was \$55,256.⁹ The poverty rates for these two towns (high school town 11.8% and nearby town 12.0%) was also higher than the poverty rate for the county (7.7%).¹⁰ The percentage of people 25 years old or older with no high school diploma or GED was also substantially higher in these two towns (high school town 31.8% and nearby town 30.2%) than it was for the county (15.1%). These statistics, coupled with the fact that these two towns and the county have an overwhelming majority of minority population, suggest that this urban neighborhood could not just be characterized as a predominately poor and working class Black (and

⁸ Population of the town where the high school is located is 7,557; population of the nearby town 6,563, and the population of the county 801,515. Data Place by Knowledgeplex [dataplace.org](http://www.dataplace.org) (based on 2000 Census figures)

⁹ Data Place by Knowledgeplex (based on 2000 Census figures) <http://www.dataplace.org/>

¹⁰ Data Place by Knowledgeplex (based on 2000 Census figures) <http://www.dataplace.org/>

Brown) neighborhood but one that also faces similar challenges as other large urban areas.¹¹

These local statistics can also be understood in a larger national context for Black children where each day brings these statistics: “3 children or teens are killed by firearms, 22 babies die before their first birthdays, 293 babies are born to teen mothers, 659 babies are born into poverty, 5,888 public school students are suspended.”¹² Or one could turn to the alarming national statistics on childhood poverty and see a similar picture of race and poverty being presented:

In 2001, 16.3% of the children in the United States lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty line of \$18,104 for a family of four. In 2001, African American and Hispanic children (about 30.2%) were more than twice as likely to be poor as white children (13.4%).¹³

These statistics highlight the way that racial disparities for the socio-economic standing of people in our society continue to exist on a local and a national level, and they also illustrate the way in which our society is highly stratified and divided along racial lines. They also provided a significant point of departure for my research, and this racial stratification can also be understood on a theoretical and a methodological level.

A theoretical frame can be utilized that places these socio-economic conditions in the context of oppressive conditions for a minority populations and a methodological

¹¹ (Town with the high school: 12.1% Non-Hispanic White; 68.3% Non-Hispanic Black/African American; Non-Hispanic Asian Hawaiian and Pacific Islander 2.8%; Hispanic Latino population 14.1%). (Town next to the town with the high school: 28.8% Non-Hispanic White; 35.4% Non-Hispanic Black/African American; Non-Hispanic Asian, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander 5.3%; Hispanic Latino population 28.0%). (County: 24.4% Non-Hispanic White; 62.1% Non-Hispanic Black/African American, Non-Hispanic Asian, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander 3.8%; Hispanic Latino population 7.1%). Data Place by Knowledgeplex (based on 2000 Census figures)

<http://www.dataplace.org/>

¹² Children’s Defense Fund “Each Day in America”

<http://www.childrendefense.org/data/eachday.aspx>

¹³ “Children Living in Poverty” The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

<http://www.jointcenter.org/DB/factsheet/chilpovt.htm>

approach can be developed that is sensitive to the socio-economic dynamics that these minority populations live with. Paulo Friere provides a brilliant argument for how these oppressive conditions can be tied to certain types of political behaviors and beliefs. In particular, what this marginal social status means for the radical political socialization of minority populations. Paulo Friere rhetorically asks, “Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffers the effects of the oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?”¹⁴ The youth in this predominately Black and poor and working class neighborhood fit the description of the oppressed that Freire presents, and they could also be considered the most significant part of any racial minority movement for social change. One can then ask: Does this oppressive social location and political reality attract or repel the youth in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area when it comes to the level of political engagement that scholars, like Freire, have theorized about? If the youth were, or were not politically active, then what was the role, if any, that their social identification played in determining their level and form of engagement and what are some of the social and political ramifications of the path that these students choose to follow?

To be able to assess the way in which the development of social identity interconnects with the political socialization process and how this process influences Black youth, I have divided my work into the following sections: 1) one’s own personal grounding presents an acknowledged (or denied) social location, as well as an inherent bias for any research, and this phenomenon will be examined from the standpoint of a

¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 1970.

racial discourse and from the standpoint of what implications this racial identity might have for research; 2) an examination of the brief history of the field of political socialization illustrates the need not just for a change in the theoretical landscape it occupies but also a shift in the methodological orientation; within the specific realm of methodological considerations, the bias towards quantitative approaches will be critically examined, and a case will be made for the utilization of qualitative methods for the political socialization for Black youth; 3) the application of an ethnographic research project based on high school students in the Washington, DC metropolitan area will be presented and the way in which these young Black men and women describe their engagement with the political socialization process will also be presented; 4) the implications of this research for the larger field of political socialization and for the more narrow area of research being done on Black youth's political socialization will be reviewed, but also a case will be made for a broader interpretation of the impact and consequences that this research might have on identity politics debates in academia and for future research projects.

The identification process that continues to plague my life provides a way to understand some of the broader questions about the field of political socialization and identity politics. In particular, one's social location not only connects directly with the discourse on race and racism, as well with some of the large debates about identity politics, but it also provides arguably the bedrock for identity politics. To be able to evaluate these areas, I begin with a discussion of the significance of race and racism in my own life, how these experiences fit into the larger racial matrix that dominates our

society, and, finally, what this might mean for the existence and significance of identity politics.¹⁵

I have always been curious about the social construction of our identities and the way in which our identification process has been and continues to be politicized. Even though this curiosity provides the backdrop for my academic interest, there is also a deeply personal element attached to this curiosity too. It is this personal element that can serve as a window into my current research project. This personal element begins with my own biracial background. My mother, Sylvia Fishman, came from an African American working class background in West Oakland, CA and my father, Jerry Fishman, was raised in a middle class Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx, NY. This biracial background has made me keenly aware of how amorphous anyone's identity can appear to be while retaining rigid and distinct boundaries. As an African-Polish American who has 'passed' as Hawaiian, Brazilian, Moroccan, and Puerto Rican (to name only a few 'mistaken identities'), I have always been sensitive to how significant these sincere and intense efforts to 'label' and 'know' my identity have been and can be for many people that I have come into contact with.

I would like to highlight the way in which my identity has been constructed along racial lines and what this has meant for my own development and knowledge of identity politics. The formation of my own racial identity can easily be linked to the racism I have experienced, and that my family has struggled with, and to the formation of my own social and political views. The racial experiences I have struggled with have seemed to

¹⁵ I define identity politics at a later point. I use identity politics, social location, and identity formation interchangeably, and I make a more substantial case for this being an acceptable practice in Chapter 1: Personal Grounding. The point at which these terms overlap and illuminate some aspect of our identification process is what I am attempting to draw attention to at this point.

lead in only one political direction. Even though I can identify a clear link between my identity and political development, I am mindful of the fact that there are many incongruent and contradictory aspects to this link. I was raised in a middle and upper class, predominantly White suburb in Northern California and there were very few overt racial incidents I encountered growing up. Unlike my grandfather on my mother's side, who had witnessed a lynching in Texas, or even my mother, who had experienced racism in her work place and subsequently filed a lawsuit in response to discriminatory treatment, my experiences have been ones that have tended to not put my life in immediate danger or even present the potential of great physical or psychological harm I have, nevertheless, developed a political outlook that incorporates a very strong sense of racial identity and one that places the existence of racial oppression as the basis of my world outlook.

This apparent crystallization of one's personal life and political identity is not a given, and it is a process that arguably could never be substantiated. Some of the current debates about identity politics can shed light on this process, and they also provide a way to examine some of the debates that have transpired and continue to take place in the field of political socialization. One of the battles waged over identity politics is around the existence of this phenomenon: Did identity politics ever exist and does it exist now? If it does exist, then what would be considered acceptable proof of its existence? How can scholars evaluate identity claims and the significance that this identity might or might not have for an individual's political socialization process? To be able to properly address these questions, I would like to review the historical origins of the term and how the term is being currently used. This discussion will be guided by the overarching question of in

what ways, if any, does the process of identity formation interconnect with political identity formation and is identity politics the most useful term to apply to this process.

For the purposes of my work, I am focusing on the Black community, and I am analyzing the way in which our identity and our politics appear to merge and diverge simultaneously. On the one hand, our racial identity is constructed in a clear fashion, yet, on the other hand, the way in which this racial construction is worn, displayed, and processed can appear to be schizophrenic and nonsensical when examined from a political standpoint.¹⁶ This can be understood by the use of terms of “racial unity,” “responsibility” or “allegiance” and the belief that racial divisions that one perceives as natural will always provide clear, predictable demarcations of political views or actions. This expectation can lead to the apparent befuddlement and amazement some people might have in reaction to the slightest deviation from the perceived racial script other people are supposed to adhere to. In particular, for Black youth, the way in which they struggled with notions of being ‘White’ and being ‘Black’ and how these views coincided with their views about traditional politics and acceptable forms of political engagement was part of what I was interested in studying. The tension then between how one learns to identify himself or herself racially and the apparent disconnect or connection this might make to a certain set of political beliefs and behaviors is part of what I am interested in exploring. I believe that this process is most noticeable with Black youth’s

¹⁶ I develop a more complete definition for schizophrenia in the last chapter. It is important to note at this point that my use of schizophrenia is an attempt to capture a phenomenon that is very popular in and outside of academia. One of the more prominent examples of a scholar wrestling with this ‘split personality’ phenomenon can be seen in W.E.B. Du Bois’ discussion of a “double consciousness”: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Penguin Books), 1903, 5.

political socialization, and this is why I chose to study a senior level class at Trenton High School as the basis for my ethnographic project.

This personal backdrop provides the internal compass that also guides my academic and, in particular, my research on Black youth's political socialization. In my review of the field of political socialization, I will demonstrate the way in which the weaknesses in the field do not just hurt the potential for worthy scholarly results. These results and the academic process tied to them are also connected to actual community struggles and success. To be able to highlight this point, I will examine some of the past research done on political socialization, youth attitudes towards politics, racial divides in political behavior and attitudes, and system maintenance theories. As part of this examination, the way in which Richard Niemi and Barbara Sobieszek construct the field of political socialization will be presented. This will be supplemented by the work of Richard Merelman, and a great deal of attention will be given to his sharp and insightful critiques of the field of political socialization. The way in which they orientate their discussion around youth's political socialization will be examined, as well the role that parents, peer groups, and educational institutions have played in the political socialization process. I will also examine the way these scholars approach theories about youth political socialization and system maintenance.

Their work will provide the context in which Black's youth political socialization can be presented and critically examined. Much of the work done on Black youth's political socialization hinges upon the way a particular scholar understands the social conditions of the participants in the research and how this understanding influences the scholar's theoretical, as well as methodological, choices. Two examples of theories that

illustrate this point are as follows: Social deprivation theory of political alienation and the political-reality theory. The way scholars overtly align themselves with or distance themselves from these theories or seek to prove or disapprove their vitality and explanatory power still provides the solar system that most work on Black youth's political beliefs and behavior orbits in. Articulation of these theories and the response to their use can be seen in the work of Paul Abramson, Samuel Long, and Schley Lyons. These theories, and the variations of them that have been produced, will be examined as well as the connection that these theoretical debates have with ones occurring in social sciences and in the humanities. These gaps and inconsistencies in the field of Black youth's political socialization also appear to be linked to some of the theoretical struggles that plague discussions about identity politics.

Qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches are common in academia, and both of these methodological approaches have a significant bearing on the field of political socialization. These methodological approaches provide two distinct points of departure for access into human lives and what they are able to reveal about human behavior and ideas. I would like to expand on these approaches and assess their worth and value before I attempt to apply them to the field of political socialization. To do this, I will illustrate the way in which qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches not only seep into every aspect of our lives but the way in which these approaches present distinct ways for us to understand ourselves.

After this methodological review, I will provide an argument for qualitative methods and, in particular, ethnographic research, being a vital instrument for scientific research being done in the field of political socialization. A discussion of qualitative

methods and my own choice of an ethnographic approach will be included in this discussion. I will also explain my choice of ethnographic methods as being the most suitable for my subject matter and as a way to understand the current debate about political socialization, as well as a way to highlight the shortcomings of this debate. There is a way in which the voice of Washington D.C. Metropolitan youth can be recorded and portrayed that is not only beneficial from an academic standpoint but can arguably be presented as useful for these youth and their communities. Part of the process of moving in and out of the narrow public policy or good-of-the-community debates is being able to illustrate the potency of these voices and the way in which a sound methodological approach can assist in highlighting the significance of these voices.

I presented these students with specific questions about their political beliefs and actions as well as open ended questions about what political options are available to them. I also asked these students how they feel about current political issues, our political structure, and their feelings about key political leaders at the local, state, and national level. Questions about contemporary and local political issues, as well as personal questions about political beliefs and actions were part of what I explored. I also asked questions about their experience in school, future plans, and the way in which they identify themselves. The way in which these high school seniors process our political culture and structure was the basis of my research design, and the questions I posed to them presented a variety of different attempts to access and evaluate this knowledge. This knowledge and understanding of our political system and of specific political leaders and historical events was analyzed in the context of what influence their identification process might have on their political growth and development. I was interested in giving

these students the opportunity to speak beyond the boundaries that a traditional survey or questionnaire research format utilized to study their political beliefs and behaviors might have allowed for while at the same time I was interested in presenting a contemporary portrait of youth political beliefs and behaviors from a qualitative standpoint. This type of interdisciplinary approach is needed for a more nuanced and complicated analysis of Black's youth political socialization. The utilization of this analysis can also be quite convincing in public policy debates as well quite insightful in the creation and analysis of theoretical and conceptual frameworks used for the field of political socialization.

This discussion of quantitative and qualitative methods will illustrate the way in which these scientific methods are not only used in our daily lives but also the way that these methodological approaches provide different insights, different ways to understand and explain our world. Part of the confusion and differences of opinion that appear within the debate about political socialization and the role of identity politics stem from the various methodological approaches utilized by scholars. I will review some of the more common arguments used to support a quantitative research approaches, as well as the basic arguments utilized for qualitative research. To be able to more thoroughly assess this aspect of the debate I would like to supplement this methodological analysis with my own ethnographic work.

What I learned from these students was remarkable, and their stories usually provided me with fascinating and concise narratives. What these students contributed to the debates that continue to plague the field of political socialization was more difficult to assess. When placed in just the narrow filter that traditional political socialization research allows for, the way in which these students described their own lives and their

impressions of our political life and systems of government became confusing, humorous, and even contradictory at times. These dynamics prompted me to divide my research results into two sections: Character and setting sketches; and a review and analysis of the most significant findings.

In the area of character sketches, I present the school, the teachers and the students I interacted with as the basis of this section. I start by describing my first visit to the school and my first impressions of this massive new school. From there I discuss my first interactions with the first adults I came into contact with and what these contacts led to. Eventually I discovered an African American studies class that met my methodological requirements, and I was able to settle into this classroom. What I was able to observe in this class provides a vital component of this section. When I move on to the face-to-face interviews, it is the classroom setting and environment that became incorporated into the prism that I viewed these outside-the-classroom experiences through. Their African American Studies class serves a reference point and as a way to shed more light on the interviews. I attempt to show how students operated in their respective 'element' and what meaning they give to their own beliefs and actions in and outside of the school. This is done by dividing each of the fifteen student interviews into three sections: Personal grounding; Understanding of racial identity; and Political beliefs and behaviors.

In the next chapter I review three of the most striking results, and I analyze them in terms of how these results might fit into the larger field of political socialization and the smaller subfield of political socialization for minority races. I begin by describing the monumental lack of local, state, and national political knowledge all of the students had.

I use the specific inability to name local, state and national political leaders and describe and identify mechanisms of operations as the basis of this insight. The second result I review is the amount of contemporary political knowledge and interest the respondents had about some issues. The five most frequently mentioned areas of interest were same sex marriages, abortions, the current war in Iraq, education and community concerns. The third result was the widespread interest in voting. No other traditional political activity garnered as much support from the students.

There was an apparent gap between the general enthusiasm for certain political issues and an appreciation for the way in which these political issues connected with traditional forms of politics. Since very few of the respondents could name political leaders, let alone present their positions on political issues, the more elementary question one could pose is, “Why wouldn’t the respondents have more knowledge about those political leaders that had the most direct impact on the issues that the students were most concerned with and why would the students not be familiar with those public policy debates about these same issues”? Put another way: Why did the particular strengths (interest in some contemporary political issues and in voting in elections when they turn eighteen years old) of the respondents fail to mesh with the more noticeable weaknesses (lack of basic political knowledge of leaders and institutional processes)?

These questions serve as the basis for the analysis that I begin to develop in my conclusion. Instead of narrowing the contours of the debate, I attempt to breathe life into new and old theoretical and methodological approaches that have been utilized for the field of political socialization. The stories the youth at Trenton High shared with me at times were confusing, passionate, and very succinct. They did not always lend

themselves to simple theoretical categories, and it was often difficult to group their beliefs and actions into the established framework that the field of political socialization offered. The character sketches and the more formal analysis of results suggest that Black youth's political socialization is a rich field in and of itself and that there is a lot of room for more research.

Trenton High School is clearly located in a suburban community where the social and political wounds remain hidden and completely exposed. Even though the absence of power in this suburban community can be difficult to detect, all of the signs of the typical problems that plague many urban schools are apparent. The way in which these students engage the concept of politics everyday provides they type of layered and nuanced political setting that I was interested in studying and how these students did this in a classroom setting, and in the larger school setting, was the prism that I viewed this social and political development through. This could also be understood in a series of questions: What do the students learn about the United State's government? Do the students accept traditional notions about American politics? What do they openly question/contest? How do they show their comfort or dislike of politics? How do they understand their own power and status in society? Do they believe they can change their social conditions? Do they look to what would be considered mainstream political options or would their political views and actions be considered radical, non-traditional or insignificant? How can someone begin to measure and evaluate their political beliefs?

The lives of Black youth can begin to shed light on some of the limitations and weaknesses inherent in this typical definition of a representative democracy and the role of good citizenry. From the standpoint of our political process being one in which

resources are allocated to those that are most deeply involved, then it would make sense that those communities that appear to have the least would have the greatest vested interest in our political process. The voting patterns of Black youth in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area would not suggest that this group of eligible voters could be classified as “better citizens,” nor have they received “better policies.” Why then does this dominant political narrative not apply to Black youth’s political ideas and behavior? Is it an inherent deficiency in Black youth’s ability to play the political role of ‘good citizens’ in our society or is there a way in which the political behavior of Black youth is fundamentally misunderstood?

All of these questions illuminate some very different openings for ethnographic research on Black youth. Instead of just demarcating the nature and the extent of disparate treatment that Black youth face in academic settings or even showing how this treatment in academic settings connects to larger social phenomenon, I have attempted to develop an analysis that provides a way to examine the way in which the discourse for identity politics and race and racism is inextricably linked to the field of political socialization. Even though my research does highlight this connection between the political socialization process and identity politics, it is also equally true that this connection is not always apparent and it can be found to exist in antagonistic or contradictory relationship with each other. Specifically examining what Black high schools students learn about themselves and what they have learned about their political and social surroundings helps to incorporate the previously mentioned areas and illuminate the potential political and social understanding of their world that might be ascertained. Put another way, the very place in which our society has sanctioned as the

space for political and social education (the U.S. Government class), should illuminate the most about what young Black students are learning about themselves and their world (identity politics based on race, gender, and sexuality.) Unlike areas, such as English or biology, American Government is devoted to the study of our past political history, as well as the study of our current political system. The way in which this political process coincides or contradicts the way in which Black youth develop their (racial) identity is part of what I examined. Broader insights that might be drawn from this work can be applied to theories about social change and identity politics as well as to our understanding of youth, race and our educational institutions.

In the final review of my research results I present some alternative explanations and I discuss some potential openings for future research. I do this by first reanalyzing the discussion of political socialization of youth, system stabilization theories, and the significance of social and political conditions. I include in this discussion the role of peer groups, parents, and educational institutions. It is from this vantage point that I make a case for the central place that racial, theoretical and methodological issues have in discussions about political socialization. In defense of this point I offer the ‘Vote or Die’ campaign from the last presidential election and the knowledge and familiarity with Councilmember Marion Berry. These two examples suggest that there are areas of political engagement that Black youth are attracted to and that even in the area of traditional politics there are noticeable openings available for them. There are three areas I point to that are ripe for future research. These areas are not based on specific political leaders or campaigns, but, instead, are based on more nebulous areas of institutional support, cultural consumption, and gender and sexuality identity issues. In the first area,

it was apparent that the school I observed did not have strong institutional ties with any local, state, or national political entities and the absence of these relationships contributed to the lack of knowledge of political leaders and issues on all levels. The second area was based on the intersection of three areas: cultural consumption, youth development, and the political socialization process. The third area consists of an examination of the impact that gender and sexuality might have for the political socialization process of Black youth. These potential points for future research do mean that ambivalence, ignorance, and cynicism are not the only characteristics of youth's political socialization that are worthy of study by scholars. There is a lot more research that can be done on youth's political socialization process and the theoretical and methodological choices scholars make are vital in determining whether or not the growth of the field of political socialization will occur. In fact, in the area of Black youth's political socialization it is clear that a much more nuanced and complicated research projects need to be developed and that this political socialization process deserves a lot more attention in and outside of academia. Narrow race based research or broad multiple identity strand research designs should be developed and implemented. New research projects can help address many of the lingering questions that my research helped to highlight about the Black political socialization process and assist in the advancement of academic knowledge about the field of political socialization processes.

CHAPTER 1

PERSONAL GROUNDING, RACIAL DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Race will always be at the center of the American experience.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* 6.

Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories, but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans.

George Lipsitz *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* 2.

We are sitting in a parked car at the University of Maryland, College Park and we notice another car quickly drive right up next to us. Both of us are graduate students that have night classes and it is not unusual for us to be in this lot at night. Only now we can see UMCP Police Officers get out of the car next to us, and they begin to ask us sharp questions about what we are doing in this parking lot. As they continue to shine flashlights in our faces, I begin to think about why we are receiving this treatment. We are not the only people in this huge parking lot, and clearly we must look like graduate students sitting in a car talking. The suspicious tone continues, and I think about the possibility of these young men being auxiliary police officers or just being deeply confused or bored. Why wouldn't the answer "We-are-just-two-graduate-students-sitting-in-car-after-class" be sufficient for them? We are eventually allowed to go about our business, and the incident seems to be over just as quickly as it started. We could forget this incident, and we could chalk it up as another unfortunate mishap. I can not stop thinking about this incident though, and I keep thinking about why I was involved with another search and questioning by security officials. The fact that the two officers were White and that my friend and I are Black has made me unsettled and unclear about what transpired and what the implications of this incident might be: Are these racist police officers that like to harass Black people? Were they truly looking for someone or something? How can be sure that race was, or was not, a factor in the way we were treated? How am I supposed to understand government sanctioned authority figures when so many of interactions with them are negative? And what impact does this and other experiences I believe to be racist or race based have on my political outlook and behavior?

These are some of the questions I would like to begin to address in this chapter; I would like to start by defining my own racial position in society, as well as my own views about race and racism. Many of the incidents I have encountered appear to be only linked by the racial and gender reality of the people that continue to stop me and feel a need to question me. There is a certain level of suspicion that has been permanently implanted in my mind and this is part of a very common race consciousness that I have developed as a Black man. It is not only a survival strategy, but it is literally part of an overall worldview that I have developed, and it is one that is shared by many other minorities. I have developed a racial identity that is inextricably linked to the political and social views I continue to hold. The way in which this identification process continues to plague my life provides not just a way to understand my own personal struggle, but it also provides the backdrop for the way in which I pursue answers to some of the broader academic questions, such as the relationship between identity politics and political socialization.¹⁷ I have always been curious about the social construction of our identities and the way in which this identification process continues to influence our social and political maturation process too. Even though this curiosity provides the backdrop for my academic interest, there is also a deeply personal element attached to this curiosity too. It is this personal element that can serve as one window into the specific research I have done on Black youth's political socialization.

The way in which the field of political socialization connects to the discourse on race and racism and then also interfaces with the debates about identity politics can be

¹⁷ I use the terms “identity politics,” “identity formation,” and “identity development” interchangeably at this point to convey the way in which we construct our social identities (*identities* in a broad sense.) I present a specific definition and way to understand identity politics as a concept at the end of this chapter and continue to develop this definition throughout my work.

seen through a personal filter. This personal filter is as ‘true’ for me as it is for the Black youth that I studied; there are many parallels and similarities in this identification process that I have gone through and that Black youth are also struggling with. A personal filter provides a way to loosen the theoretical and conceptual knot that political socialization, race and racism, and identity politics have become so tightly twisted into. In particular, I will show that the negative racial experiences I have lived through have always been connected to a sense of recovery and resistance. As part of the feelings of anguish and humiliation that a racial attack or slight inevitably brings with it, there is also always a need to find the right response and this search for a response has had a dramatic impact on my (ongoing) political development. It is in this realm of searching and in acting out a response to race and racism (identity formation wounds) that I believe political behavior and beliefs are developed. Ultimately these racialized experiences become critical ingredients for the personal (and racial group’s) construction of one’s political identity and orientation (from mainstream traditional political outlets to radical, anti-establishment beliefs.) For me, this has meant that to the extent that I was going to be aware of my own socially and historically constructed Black racial identity, there was going to have to be political outlets- ways to respond to, to challenge, and to heal these racial wounds.¹⁸

This approach is at loggerheads with much of the historical work done on political socialization and many of the issues that an identity based and influenced approach towards political socialization raises have not been resolved. Not only has there been a

¹⁸ Even though “African Americans” and “Blacks” are valuable terms that can be used to refer to those people of African descent that reside in the United States, for the purposes of my work I decided to use “Black.” Since both of these terms can also be understood to represent a group of people that are racially classified as Black, then it makes a lot of sense to focus on the term that conveys this racial designation in the most potent and succinct fashion.

lack of attention paid to race and racism in political socialization research, but there has been a distinct absence of research done on identity formation and the development of political ideas and beliefs. I will investigate these points in greater detail in the next chapter, but it is important to understand at this point some of the general contours of the field of political socialization. What is important to understand about the field of political socialization is that a lot of the research done in this field relies heavily upon on the existence of a uniform theory that connects the psychological and political development of youth into a meaningful and reliable narrative. The ability to locate and decipher this psychological and political development through quantitative research is accepted as a given and this approach has left much of the theoretical and methodological components of this field in place.¹⁹

To be able to examine and critique this position, it is vital to first present the significance of personal and family racial grounding, then show how this racial grounding fits into a larger racial discourse, and finally show how this larger racial discourse is one aspect of our identity development that can be placed in the theoretical context that one type of understanding of identity politics might allow for. It is from this vantage point that the questions about political socialization and identity politics can be addressed and analyzed in a constructive fashion.

MY RACIAL IDENTITY

This personal element begins with my family. As previously mentioned, my mother, Sylvia Fishman, came from an African American working class background in

¹⁹ In the next chapter of my work, I discuss the history of political socialization through the work of these scholars: Richard, M Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," *Sociology of Education* 45(1972) and Richard G. Niemi and Barbara I. Sobieszek, "Political Socialization" *Annual Review of Sociology* 3(1977). Both of these works make this same point about the history of the field, and they provide a similar critical lens for the field of political socialization.

West Oakland, CA and my father, Jerry Fishman, was raised in a middle class Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx, NY. The personal element extends beyond my immediate family and encapsulates the lives of my grandparents, uncle, aunt and cousins too. My grandparents on my father's side were immigrant Jews from Poland who moved to New York City at the turn of the twentieth century and my grandparents on my mother's side were literally forced to move from Texas and Louisiana to California at around the same time. Some of their stories and their children's stories have also played a significant role in my own racial consciousness and activism.

I would like to highlight the way in which my identity has been constructed along racial lines and what this has meant for my own political identity. The formation of my own racial identity can easily be linked to the racism I have experienced, along with the racism my family members have experienced. The racial experiences I have struggled with have seemed to lead in only one political direction. Even though I can identify a clear link between my identity and political development, I am mindful of the fact that there are many incongruent and contradictory aspects to this link. I was raised in a middle and upper class, predominately White suburb in Northern California and there were very few overt racial incidents I encountered growing up. Unlike my grandfather on my mother's side, who had witnessed a lynching in Texas, or even my mother, who had experienced racism in her work place and subsequently filed a lawsuit in response to discriminatory treatment, my experiences have been ones that have tended to not put my life in immediate danger or even present the potential of great physical or psychological harm. I have developed a political outlook that incorporates a very strong

sense of racial identity and one that places racial oppression as a significant component of my world outlook.

The one notable exception to this benign type of racism I experienced was when my family and I stopped at a small roadside diner in Southern California during the day. My family traveled a lot and this was not an extraordinary road trip for us. All four of us went into this diner and we proceeded to find seats at the counter. Not long after we had been seated a White woman came up to us and tossed the water in her glass at my father and he decided to pursue this woman. She had already moved out of the restaurant and my father quickly went through the emergency exit in the back of the diner. This set off the alarm and focused the entire diner's attention on us. One of the waitresses in this diner told us that she had overheard this very same woman muttering comments about interracial couples and how disgusting she thought these couples were. Even though my father tried to confront this woman outside and she did not offer him any verbal response, this approach was not capable of producing a meaningful resolution for us. This woman did not want to discuss this incident and she did not want to discuss any racist feelings or thoughts she might have. I felt like as if there was very little we could have done to response to the attack on our identities we had just suffered through and that our individual options were limited and at best based on short term satisfaction. Regardless of the embarrassment and humiliation we might have felt there seemed to be no way to effectively counteract what had been done to us. This then became more than an incident in which my family witnessed water being thrown at my father; it become an incident in which our racial identities were made “not right,” and we were considered “not normal.”

Years later, I began to process this experience and others not just as a part of a personal or family quandary, but as part of collective (racial group's) struggle. I began to understand that the issue was not why this woman decided to single my family out for abuse or whether or not my father should have attacked her, but that this was truly more than a personal experience and it was also more than a personal solution that I craved. I was also developing a way to not only comprehend and analyze what had happened to my relatives, and me but to learn ways to confront and combat the racial world I was placed in and to see that it was a part of a much larger racial struggle.

I was apolitical until my senior year in high school, and I felt that I was dragged into a political realm in which there was no escape from race, and racism was an integral factor in this political shift. The dominative narrative for this politicization process presented itself in terms of how I learned (and was forced) to identify myself in racial terms. As I began to experience race and racism as a living breathing, phenomenon, I was also learning about the way in which our society was constructed in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class. This transformation was most noticeable in my last year of high school. I remember joining organizations such as the Peace Club and the Black Student Union. I had moved from an intensely private life, to one in which I grudgingly acknowledged the significance of battling the racial demons that plagued me and forming alliances with those that traveled the same path.

My first few years of college became my most formative years in my own identification and politicization process. I became more aware of the racial dynamics of my social relations and as I gained greater exposure to people of different races in college these experiences intensified. Whether it was changing my major from History to

Sociology after I experienced my first Black male teacher in an introductory Sociology course, or forming social relations with Black women that were the same age as me for the first time, race began to be the dominant trope in my life. Much of this racial growth was on the murky subconscious level of what “felt right” and just made the “most sense” at that time. Most of these experiences did not manifest themselves in an overtly negative fashion, and it was not until I had graduated from college that many of my racial experiences began to become more hurtful and irritating.

My identity became more than an unsettling or an amusing mystery; but it became a very real racial wound that could be picked at and torn open easily. About four years ago, I went to a restaurant with a friend in Delaware. It was late at night, and we had just come into town. We noticed a sign stating its hours of operation and we knew that they were not scheduled to close until later that night. Once inside we noticed a fair amount of people still seated and we asked the waitress if we could be seated too. We were told the restaurant was closed. Why we were told that the restaurant was closed when the hours posted on their sign stated that they should still be open was a question that I can not fully answer to this day. This question can be seen as more rhetorical in nature. Because of my own background and life experiences, I had already leaped to a conclusion: Racism. I did not need to know anything more than the fact my own (and my friend’s) Black identity stood out in what appeared to be a White-family-type-of-restaurant. Our ‘unique’ racial identity provided a ready made answer to this to this perplexing situation, and I have not budged from my initial conclusion. I had experienced racism on enough occasions to understand how I am perceived, and I have learned what the real repercussions of this racial perception can be and continue to be for me. This experience

was actually topped off by my friend and I also seeing two Black youth pulled over by two older White male police officers. We witnessed the police searching these two young men's car and then we saw them go through their trunk and look into the backseat of their car. The police eventually left, and there appeared to be no citations issued and no arrest made. Did these two police officers need to treat these Black youths in this way? Was this also another racist incident? As these questions suggest there was more to these stories than simply two people being turned away from a restaurant or two people being stopped by the police for a routine check. The fact that we could not ascertain an exact answer did not stop us from processing these incidents and reaching the same obvious conclusion.

While moving out of my apartment in Hyattsville, Maryland two years ago, I was asked if I worked there. It was late at night and as part of my final push to get out I was cleaning. I had some supplies in my hands when I was asked by a White, male, off-duty police officer that lived in one of the adjacent apartment buildings if I worked there. Even though I quickly said "No," it dawned on me that our brief exchange was based on the racial premise that I was a Latino worker for this apartment complex: All of the 'cleaning staff' I had encountered were Latino (with only one exception), and even though I did not think I looked like one of the staff members, and I did not think it made any sense for one of the workers to be out this late at night, it was clear that this was how this off-duty police officer perceived me. I had initially thought that he was talking with another tenant about a parking problem and that he had decided include me in this conversation to find out if I knew about this car. Especially since I had parked a mini van illegally near where they had been talking in the parking lot. If this was the case, then my

status as staff or as a member of the Latino community would not be useful information for a discussion of whose car was parked illegally and who can move it. His questioning of me seemed to fit the need for a racial placement in this discussion, and I also worried that it was based more on the need to establish clear lines of authority. The overriding logic seemed to be that we could not just have a discussion about a parking problem, or any other matter, until we had determined the racial standing of everyone involved with this discussion. I had a similar experience in New Mexico when my car tire blew out, and I was stranded in the median of the Interstate. When the White male police officer arrived the first question out of his mouth were about my racial status, and it went something like “Are you Mexican?” Considering the damage done to one part of my car and the dangerous position it still resided in, there seemed to be some more appropriate or at least more useful questions that could have been asked. Race once again though seemed to represent the most salient issue for the authority figure, and my placement on a racial hierarchy appeared to be the most critical part of our exchange.

My wife, Gretta Goodwin Fishman, and I had dinner at a popular restaurant in Washington, D.C. two years ago. When I came back from the bathroom, I passed two very long tables full of White people. I had already taken note of this group because Gretta and I had been engaged in an ongoing discussion about the national police week, that Washington, D.C. hosts annually and why this restaurant looked to be even more full than usual. I was the first to mention that I thought this group of folks might be a part of these festivities and this made me more prepared for the comments I received. Just as I passed these tables an older White man asked me something about his table in the back. I did not understand what he had asked me and I asked him to repeat his question. I still

could not fully understand what he said, but the part about needing staff help and cleaning was clear enough. I told him quite politely that I did not work for this restaurant, and I moved on. As I discussed this incident with Gretta I became aware of the fact that I was still wearing part of my Sunday Church Clothes and that maybe the white dress shirt and black slacks did make me look like a waiter. I also began to look at all of the staff in this establishment and their very noticeable color coordinated blue (dark) top and black bottoms solidified this as a racial moment for me again. Once again I clearly did not look like the people that this comment was supposedly direct at and beyond some loose racial affiliation I might have (in terms of appearance) with Latina/os, these comments made no sense. It's frustrating to think that whether I am wearing shabby clothes and cleaning an apartment, or modest travel clothes, or even my best outfit on at a restaurant, I still received comments about my racial location and comments that reflect this perceived knowledge of my racial affiliation.

MY BROTHER'S RACIAL IDENTITY

My brother, Wendell Fishman, also encountered racism while we were growing up in Davis. Wendell's experiences were similar to mine with respect to the lack of harshness and brutality of the racial incidents, but they still left an indelible mark on our lives.

One example of this was when Wendell was playing soccer, and one of the players on the opposite team referred to him as a 'nigger.' Wendell and I both played in youth soccer leagues when we were growing up, and Wendell stood out as a star forward who was a potent goal scorer. This automatically made him a magnet for attention, and this was particularly true for close games. It was not surprising then that players would

become angry or frustrated by my brother's talented soccer performance, but it was shocking that one White player included racial slurs as his response to competing with my brother on the soccer field. Wendell did not seem fazed by these comments and I don't remember learning about this incident until much later. There was no physical fight or penalty that resulted from this racial verbal assault, and everyone seemed to move on without further incident.

It was not just with playing soccer that my brother stood out as a talented athlete; his gift for playing music on piano and keyboard also made him a noticeable phenomenon. Wendell decided to attend the University of California, at Davis and stay in the community in which he was born and raised in. His particular interest in music and his interest in performing on a regular basis in the Davis area meant that he had a very visible Black male presence in a predominantly White music scene and town. This was very evident after he came back from Jamaica and started not just playing reggae and world beat music but also let his hair style turn to dreadlocks. I remember Wendell and his other fellow musicians joking about whether or not Wendell was the first musician to have dreadlocks in Davis. It was not long after this that some of the other Black members in his band started fashioning a dreadlock look too. Not too surprisingly this presence received quite a response from the public and from some public officials. It seemed that Wendell was stopped more often in his Toyota van by police officers and was asked more questions during these 'routine checks.' People also now approached him in the street and asked him if he could give them some ganja, or at least direct them to where they might be able to find some. Attention by White female women was also more noticeable, and it was clear that Wendell appeared to represent some type of exotic

superstar to many fans of his band. Part of this treatment was part and parcel of everyday experience we had both encountered growing up in Davis, and Wendell's dreadlock look seemed to intensify and magnify this racialized perception and treatment.

Another example of how this dreadlock appearance seemed to raise the stakes of his racial identification was what happened in airports. If this perception in Davis, was not enough, then Wendell's international trips certainly took the cake. One of my most memorable experiences of Wendell's airport woes was what occurred during the trip we took together, with one other friend, to Jamaica. Our return trip from Jamaica to Florida turned out to be quite an adventure. When we went through customs in Miami, we were most definitely 'flagged' by security and pulled to the side to be searched. We had to pull out every packed item from our luggage, and we had it searched thoroughly by security. One White security officer even used a metal prod to open a can of tuna we had brought back and this prodding was part of scrutinizing every single item we had. Nothing illegal was discovered, and we never discovered why we were singled out for this search. Even before 9/11, my brother and I were evidently easy airport targets. To see so many people sail through and to be singled out for no apparent reason was quite difficult to understand and accept at that time. Wendell's dreadlocks seemed to solidify an already strongly felt racialized view that many people had of him, and it included experiences with not just the occasional person that passed him in the street but clearly figures in authority took notice of his 'dreaded' racial presence.

MY PARENT'S RACIAL IDENTITY

My parents have also experienced racism together, and they have also experienced the peculiarities of our racial discourse on an individual basis too. As a

couple they had to confront distinct racial stereotypes and these stereotypes shifted once they had children. The fact that my father is a Jew and the fact that this background includes a last name that is easily discernible as being Jewish (Fishman) has meant the racial discrimination my parents have encountered was enmeshed in this reality too. This coupled with the fact that my mother has a common Jewish first name, Sylvia, also contributed to how peculiar this racial discrimination has appeared to be at times. Even with my mother's obvious Black identity and my father's White identity, their experiences with racism have included these cultural and religious dynamics.

My parents had a racist experience with a White man that worked at a motel many years ago. The story started with my father and mother attempting to reserve a motel room late at night. They were accompanied by a White friend of my father, who was not looking for a room but was somehow dragged into the narrative. The hotel representative decided to make comments about how they do not charge by the hour. These comments seemed to be prompted by the fact there were two White men and a Black woman standing in front of him. Somehow a White and Black couple checking into a hotel changed the dynamics and it was not a matter of two people attempting to get a room anymore. The racial dynamics somehow made questions insinuating that it was some 'pimps/johns' and 'prostitute' fair game. My parents were understandably upset by these comments, and they decided not to leave and find another motel.

Even the fact that my parents were able to have children had racial overtones. In the summer of 1966, my parents went to New York to see a fertility doctor, due to the fact that they could not have children. My paternal grandmother had recommended this doctor because two of my father's cousins had gone to this doctor and had had children.

At the time, this doctor was considered to be one of the best fertility doctors in the country. Besides taking different tests, my mother was given a pap smear which came back positive. After talking with both of my parents and going over the different tests, the doctor said that he had discussed mom's case with his wife and that they both thought since mom's pap smear was positive that she should have a hysterectomy because she had some type of carcinoma. This information frightened my mother very much, and she wanted this doctor to perform the operation as soon as possible, but after talking with a friend of hers in New York who said that she should get another medical opinion, my mother decided to wait until she got back to California. My mother explained to her doctor in California what the doctor in New York had said (also, the doctor in New York had sent the mom's medical report). My mother just knew that the doctor was going to tell her to have a hysterectomy, but the doctor said that we should not go so fast. The doctor said, on the east coast, it's one thing; on the west coast, it's different. He gave my mom a second pap smear, and the second pap smear came back negative. My mother was told that she had a harmless fibroid growth, and that she did not need a hysterectomy. Eventually my mom became pregnant and had two children. Given the dramatic differences in diagnosis, my parents still wonder if it was a West Coast/East Coast difference in medical practice as the doctors suggested, or if it was more about some insidious racial view that influenced these medical opinions. Both doctors were White Jews, but the suspicion that the doctor in New York might have had strong feelings about interracial couples and their offspring is still a widely debated topic in my family.

My mother also experienced racial discrimination when she tried to get a job at Joseph Magnin during the Christmas season of 1962. Joseph Magnin had advertised for

Christmas help. When she went to apply for a job in person, she was suddenly told that they were no longer accepting job applications; they had already hired enough people. My mother went home and called Joseph Magnin's personnel office. My mother said her name was Sylvia Fishman and that she was calling to see if they had job positions open for the holidays. The woman said "Yes we do. Can you come in and fill out an application?" My mother confronted the woman by asking her if they hired Black people. The woman quickly said, "Oh yes we do." My mother then said that she had come to the store in person about two hours ago and was told that they did not have any positions open. At this point, the woman said, "Oh let me let you speak with a supervisor," and she put my mother on hold. My mother hung up and did not pursue the matter. This is not an unusual story, and it is a quite typical job experience for minorities. Magically the sight of minorities makes job openings disappear, and, then, suddenly, they reappear during phone inquiries.

My mother also had a peculiar experience, in the early 1960s, when she arrived at Sak's Fifth Avenue to pick up shoes that had needed to be adjusted. She said to one of the sales clerks that she was Sylvia Fishman and would like to pick up her shoes that were being adjusted. When she asked for the shoes, the sales clerk did not believe that these shoes were actually for my mother. She assumed that my mother must have been some type of hired help and must be picking them up for a Jewish woman named Sylvia Fishman because she said to my mother, "Are you here to pick up shoes for Sylvia Fishman?" My mother said, "No, I am Sylvia Fishman." She was given the shoes in a box and not the typical store bag that other customers were given. (She was told that they were sale shoes, and sale shoes are not put in Saks' bags.) When a friend of my mother, a

White social worker, purchased sale shoes on another day, she was given a bag for her purchase. Once again, the fact that my mother was Black, and a “Sylvia Fishman,” appeared to be beyond belief and comprehension. My mother decided to pursue this matter and filed a claim in court based on this incident. As it turned out, the presiding judge for her case was related to someone at Sack’s Fifth Avenue, and her case was subsequently dismissed. The issue of conflict of interest was never raised, and the impact it had on my mother’s claim was never ascertained.

More recently my mother pursued a lawsuit against the University of California, at Davis, and this was based on gender and race discrimination she had been exposed to while she was working there. My mother also had to deal with the director of the department who had asked her during her interview if she would serve him coffee. As a temporary Administrative Assistant, she had refused at one point to make coffee for him, and he decided to bring this issue up again at that time they were considering hiring my mother as a full time employee. My mother was fortunately very ready for this stunt, and she quickly shot back at him, “Did you ask any of the other women (who were all white) that were interviewed this same question?” This ended his line of questioning and my mother was eventually offered the job as a full time employee.

The incidents that were most distasteful for my mother revolved around the director of the department, an office manager and a co-worker. My mother had been subjugated to different forms of subtle and not so subtle verbal abuse from a co-worker and this abuse took a dramatic turn for the worst during the time in which my family suffered through a house fire. It turned out that the co-worker and my mother were not on friendly terms. She had a problem with this co-worker who was the wife of one of the

firefighters who came to our house. This gave the co-worker personal and inside information about our fire, and this co-worker decided to use this information against mother. The most shocking statement this co-worker shared with other employees was about a sleeping bag that firefighters found that had fallen from our attic. This co-worker somehow twisted this information into a joke about how the firefighters were not sure if there were dead bodies in our attic or what we had been keeping up there. When my mother complained about the co-worker spreading these rumors the office manager commented that the co-worker was a good worker and would not be fired. She suggested mediation. My mother did not ask the office manager to fire the co-worker. She only wanted the office manager to stop her from spreading these rumors.

The office manager, my mother's supervisor had not give my mother her yearly evaluations for 5 and ½ years and this denied her the possibility of promotion or of receiving a raise. All of the other employees, whom were all White had received their yearly evaluations. My mother complained about this verbal assault from the co-worker, coupled with the abuse my mother received from her supervisor, and this created a poisonous work environment. The fact that my mother was the only Black woman in this department meant that this abuse had a pointed racial and gendered edge to it. Right after complaining about this co-worker my mother received an evaluation but it was very negative. My mother's lawsuit became a class action lawsuit for a brief period (Judged severed it) with other women that worked at UC Davis, and then it became a single action lawsuit again. My mother eventually settled out of court, and she received a monetary reward. She was embroiled with in this messy lawsuit for years and she was forced into retirement during this legal episode.

As a child, I also noticed the confusion that having interracial parents presented for other people. In hindsight, one of the more amusing examples of this confusion was our experience at the Canadian border. My father was trying to take my brother and me into Canada and we were not only stopped, but my father was asked if he was related to us. I did not fully appreciate at that time that having a White father could be perceived as “abnormal” or even “sinister.” It was clear for me and my brother that if we were with one parent we might receive different treatment than if we were with the other one. In terms of my father, I began to understand that people might not see us immediately as father and son and that this racial distinction was especially critical for authority figures. From the standpoint of Canadian border security, my White father might have been someone that kidnapped Black children. I do not know how many parents and children that can be easily identified as having the same racial background were stopped and asked the type of personal and intrusive questions my father was, but I think it is safe to say that this would be highly unusual. Fortunately my father was able to persuade the border guards that we were a family . My father’s White racial identity and my mother’s Black racial identities were seared into my own identity in ways that I could not begin to control, nor could I easily understand.

RACE AS A DISCOURSE

I have been using the term “race” in a variety of ways and I have attempted to draw attention to the personal nature of race. This aspect of race is the most significant point of departure and this is especially true for those that are most marginalized by this discourse. I would like to now link this understanding of race to the way in which race is

used within academia, how race has been historically constructed, and what some of the implications of this understanding and use of race continue to have for our society.

Within academic circles, there are two different strands of emphasis for the origins of race and racism. One school of thought places the greatest emphasis on Western expansion in the 15th and 16 centuries and the colonial relations this contact created. Robert Miles describes this in his work as: “When colonisation became an objective, a class of Europeans began a new era of contact and interrelationship with indigenous populations, a contact that was increasingly structured by competition for land, the introduction of private property rights, the demand for a labour force, and the perceived obligation of conversion to Christianity.”²⁰ The emphasis of this school of thought is placed on the relations that began to be built during the colonial period and the inherent power differential in the relations that were created during that time period. The actual language of race and racism had not been developed yet, but Europeans had already begun to dominate and control large portions of the world. The second school places its emphasis on the development of a language of race and racism and how this development came through a scientific filter:

These developments interacted with the emergence of the idea of ‘race’ in European thought, an idea that was taken up by scientific inquiry and increasingly attributed with a narrow and precise meaning. As a result, the sense of difference embodied in European representations of the Other became interpreted as a difference of ‘race’, that is, as a primarily *biological* and *natural* difference which was inherent and unalterable. Moreover, the supposed difference was presented as scientific (that is, objective) fact.²¹

From the vantage point of our contemporary society it is easy to identify elements of both of these schools of thought in our current discourse on race. Race and racism in the

²⁰ Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge), 1989, 20.

²¹ Robert Miles, *Racism*, 1989, 31.

United States are still based on inherently unequal relations between the European American population and People of Color population (Africans American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American), and it is based on a racial discourse that places Whites (people of European descent) at the top of the social, political and economic hierarchy and People of Color at the bottom this scale. Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe this aspect of race and racism in following way:

The continuing persistence of racial ideology suggests that these racial myths and stereotypes cannot be exposed as such in the popular imagination. They are, we think, too essential, too integral, to the maintenance of the US social order. Of course, particular meanings, stereotypes and myths can change, but the presence of a system of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be a permanent feature of US culture.²²

The combination of these two aspects in our current society means that we continue to live in a highly racialized society and that this race based discourse continues to serve as a hierarchal division for social, political and economic resources, as well as an often vicious, unfair, and lethal dividing line between Whites and People of Color.

Even though this presentation of race and racism is very clear cut there are still many contradictory and confusing aspects of our racial discourse that I would like to explore. One way to understand this aspect of our racial discourse can be seen in Miles' assessment of this conundrum

The fact that only certain physical characteristics are signified to define 'races' in specific circumstances indicates that we are investigating not a given, natural division of the world's population, but the application of historically and culturally specific meaning to the totality of human physiological variation. This made equally evident when we consider the historical record which demonstrates that populations now defined as 'white' have in the past been defined as distinct 'races'. Thus, the use of the word 'race' to label the groups so distinguished by

²² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (London: UK:Routledge) 1986, 63.

such features is an aspect of the social construction of reality: 'races' are socially imagined rather than biological realities.²³

Miles description of race points out the fundamental tension within the discourse of race: On the one hand, scientists (and academia as an institution) have not been able to establish the existence of any natural or identifiable racial categories that can be applied to human beings, while on the other hand, race continues to provide for one of the most powerful social, economic, and political demarcations we use in our everyday lives. Omi and Winant describe this phenomenon in the following way:

Clearly the attempt to establish a biological basis of race has not been swept into the dustbin of history, but is being resurrected in various scientific arenas. All such attempts seek to remove the concept of race from fundamental social, political, or economic determination. They suggest instead that the truth of race lies in the terrain of innate characteristics, of which skin color and other physical attributes provide only the most obvious, and in some respects most superficial, indicators.²⁴

The justification for using race in scientific research then is that it is an intrinsic social phenomenon and that it ultimately does not matter if the origins reside in the faulty categorization of humans or even if it was an integral component of our past (and current) colonial rule of 'third world' countries. There does need to be a biological or even a historical component for race to exist today, and the fact that race still operates in our society in such a potent fashion does mean that any scholar can attempt to study this phenomenon. Even this rationale is inadequate and does not ultimately bridge the gap between the historical (political) and biological (scientific) origins of race and how race is currently being used and how it is understood.

²³ Robert Miles, *Racism*, 1989, 71.

²⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 1986, 59.

One way to understand this gap between how race was historically constructed and utilized versus how it exist in today's society can be seen in the previous personal stories I began this chapter with. In particular I would like to examine the incident my friend and I encountered in a restaurant in Delaware and focus on the way in which race manifests itself as a negative phenomenon. If one is to accept that racism flows between the dominant groups (Whites or Europeans) and the oppressed groups (Non-White or Non-European), then this exchange must be based on an understanding of the oppressed group's race, and it must include how this understanding influences the dominant group's beliefs and actions. To address the these points, I would like to pose a series of questions that could be directed at the specific incident in Delaware: Since the White waiter did not allow two young Black people to be seated in the restaurant, then what could be offered as sufficient proof of it being a racist incident? Would the mere fact of my friend and me having a darker skin color be considered sufficient proof or would one have to substantiate that this darker skin color was noticed and understood as a negative phenomenon before this incident could be labeled as racist? And if it could be concluded that we were treated in a racist manner, then it would it be more meaningful to highlight this treatment by saying it is based on a scientific premise that was never established or would drawing attention to the discomfort and anger that this treatment gives rise to be more important? Given the nature of these dynamics, what does it mean for those of us that believe we are on the brunt end of racist experiences? How do we learn to identify ourselves and do we learn to develop our own political outlook and behaviors?

IDENTITY POLITICS

Race presents just one entry point into our identity formation process: other points of entry could include gender, sexuality, class, religion, age, and even physical and mental abilities. All of these other aspects of our identity could also be included as factors in our political socialization process. Even though I am specifically focusing on my own racial identity and race as a discourse, it is extremely important to consider this larger identity matrix. One way to explore this larger identity formation process is to specifically examine the concept of identity politics and to look at the relationship between identity politics and political socialization. To begin this process I will first present a definition of the term identity politics and review some of the implications of the way this term is used. Throughout my work I will highlight the significance of this concept by analyzing how one part of this concept, race, plays such a vital role in the field of political socialization, and I will reevaluate this concept at the end of my work from the vantage point of what ethnographic research on Black youth's political socialization might mean for how it is used and how it is understood.

Quite often identity politics is referred to as the “politics of group-based movements claiming to represent the interests and identity of a particular group, rather than policy issues relating to all members of the community.”²⁵ This type of definitions can lead to the popular misconception of identity politics being about some warped form of ‘political correctness’ or a product of some ‘crazed academic intellectuals.’²⁶ Instead of accepting or contesting one of these more commonly accepted definitions of identity

²⁵ This definition is from the on line version *From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, and it represents a common academic and popular assessment of identity politics.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_politics

²⁶ McElroy, Wendy “Individual Rights vs. Identity Politics” FOXNews.com October 5, 2004.

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,134562,00.html>

politics, I would like to reconstruct the concept from the space that gender, race, and sexuality can provide for a definition of identity politics.²⁷ One way to understand and examine identity politics is from the standpoint of our identification process and, in particular, the way in which race, gender and sexuality influence and form our identity.²⁸ The demarcations of these areas of identity and the lumping of them together under the umbrella of identity politics can be understood as a suspect, even a radical move for a variety of reasons. The exclusion of class from this definition can be considered one of the more troubling aspects of this definition of identity politics. One way to illustrate the potency of identity politics is to show how it might exist in its most ‘pure,’ ‘undiluted’ form, before disentangling some of the more thorny theoretical knots it encompasses.²⁹ Unlike the more amorphous definition previously mentioned, I believe that the emphasis should be placed on those aspects of identity that appear least under one’s control. This only runs contrary to the other key ingredient of the *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* definition of identity politics: “Group identity may be based on ethnicity, class, religion, sex, sexuality or other criteria.”³⁰ This more expansive and open ended approach towards

²⁷ The basis of my analysis relies on the work of Black feminists’ scholarship. The work of Audre Lorde, Angela Davis and Patricia Collins provide examples of the way in which race, gender and sexuality are interlinked and how these three areas can stand alone in terms of scholarly work. Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Davis, Angela Y. *Woman, Race, Class*. New York: Random House, 1981. Lorde, Audre *Sister Outsider*. Trumansberg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984.

²⁸ There are innumerable texts that could be used here to substantiate the existence of race, gender, and sexuality as factors in our identification process and in our politics. I have chosen the work of Weber to cite here to give credence to some of the basic sociological principles about identity that many scholars that are concerned with marginalized communities accept. Weber, Lynn *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework* Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001.

²⁹ I will provide more detailed coverage of the debates between class and non-class based approaches to identity politics at a later point. For now, it is sufficient to assume that identity politics can stand on these strands of our identity: Race; Gender; and Sexuality, and not only work as a viable academic and intellectual concept, but that it can also work as an effective and useful political concept too.

³⁰ This is also from *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, and it serves as the other side of two perfectly placed bookends around the concept of identity politics.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_politics

identity politics is one which I will critically examine too. The inclusion of race, gender and sexuality is critical for any formulation of identity politics not only because of the way in which these areas have historically been linked to notions of biology, but also because of the way in which social movements and resistance have been constituted along racial, gender, and sexuality lines. The construction of identity politics in this way does not have to come at the cost of neglecting or avoiding class and it can even provide a more pronounced way to evaluate some of the various of camps that have been formed around identity politics.³¹

Part of the confusion about identity politics stems from the fact an overly broad understanding of the concept is accepted and used inside and outside of academia. This confusion leads to the type of schizophrenic definition previously presented that suggest identity politics can be, “Politics of group-based movements claiming to represent the interests and identity of a particular group,” but it can not be a ‘normal’ or ‘traditional’ political engagement that addresses “Policy issues relating to all members of the community.”³² The typical link drawn between an individual and his/her choice of political engagement is severed and challenged by a definition of identity politics that is implicitly built on a politics of ‘nature’ or ‘biological’ dimensions. In other words, the fact someone is defined as a woman, Black or gay and the conditions they live under and struggle with are shaped by this identification process does provide for a substantial

³¹ In particular I am thinking about the simple dichotomy between an allegiance to a materialist or a culture camp. Many of the class based critiques leveled at identity politics are based on a definition that does not and can not include class as an analytical category. Instead of accepting the easy (and very common) solution of inclusion, I would like to continue to make the more complicated and nuanced argument about an identity politics in the form of race, gender and sexuality and show how this more ‘pure’ form of identity politics can still answer and address those critiques leveled from the materialist camps.

³² *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_politics

departure from the identification process a smoker, a gun owner, or a vegetarian might encounter and wish to address as a public policy matter³³. Whereas the significance and stature that race, gender, and sexuality might hold for a definition of identity politics might not appear to be controversial in this respect, the implications of this choice, and the implications of having any choice at all, are quite often not addressed. I would argue then that identity politics should be applied to those groups that have been forced to hold a subordinate identity position in our society which has been historically contested

Identity formation and maintenance still appears as much as a riddle with all of the answers laced with internal contradictions and flaws. On one hand, the way we learn to identify ourselves in the United States seems quite simple, and there appears to be very little disagreement about who might be identified as heterosexual, a woman, or as Black, while, on the other hand, our identification process continues to be detrimental, confusing, and even nonexistent for just as many people.³⁴ If asked, most adults would have ready made answers for what their social location is, and they would be able to locate these same identity signifiers in other people. This level of clarity can appear quite murky when someone does not fit neatly into a racial or sexual category and one is left to guess at what a brown hue or long hair might mean or signify. Even within the realm of contested or unclear identities, there is always an assumed backdrop that provides the fountain from which various forms of neurosis and anxiety for the unsettled identities can flow. The most vexing problem for identity formation is not just within the realm of the

³³ There has been a substantial discussion of voluntary or involuntary identity groups developed already. Identity politics should not be thought of as any group based identification that an individual's life can choose to hold or disregard at any point in time. Instead of reengaging these discussions, I have chosen to focus on the way in which race, gender, and sexuality have become an integral part of identity politics.

³⁴ Terkel, Studs, *Race. How Blacks and whites think and feel about the American obsession*, London: Minerva, 1993.

rigidity or malleability of the categories, but it is also in murky realm of the unrelenting force that always appears to be just under the surface of any designation of a particular identity for an individual and for a group. This identification process not only provides a way to understand other humans but locks everyone into dominant and subordinate (identity) positions. Even though the fact that this identity formation usually reflects the social inequality within the United States which is not disputed by many scholars, the implications of this reality and the potential for changing this identification process are still highly contested inside and outside of academia.

These debates might remain an academic enterprise or appear irrelevant to most people if it were not for the invisible engine that drives these debates. What tends to be lost in these debates are the power dynamics behind the various positions and what is ultimately at stake in these arguments. Even if one academic standpoint can be found to offer a more persuasive position about the way in which identity functions and operates in this country, this does not necessarily translate into an approach that can change the way in which identity is lived by millions of people here. In other words, what makes our identification process distinct is not in the clarity of the categories, but in the inherent power dynamics linked to the process in which everyone is inscribed with an identity. Whether one wants to argue that our identification process is flawed, perfect, or unnecessary one would inevitably have to reckon with how our apparently elastic identification process remains static for so many people. By more closely linking the various arguments with the power dynamics embedded in these scholarly and theoretical positions, it can be more clearly understood what is being contested and why something is being contested. This can not only provide the space in which more relevant and

meaningful political positions can be developed, but it can also produce the space needed to address the way in which some of the larger metatheoretical debates have been inadvertently or mistakenly tied to everyday struggles of individuals and organized movements.

This personal referential point not only guides my life, but it guides my academic work. The link between these two realms is not just an antidote, or one of life's peculiarities, but the central thrust of the confusion that not only muddles views about identity formation and political development for individuals, but also plagues academic work too. I have provided examples of experiences my family and I have had that we believed were influenced and infected with race and racism. These experiences included being stopped by police officers while driving, playing soccer, leaving an airport, trying to be served in a restaurant, department store and a hotel, attempting to find work, trying to cross a border check points, and even sitting in a parking lot where I have been confronted by auxiliary student police officers. All of these experiences involved a certain amount of discomfort and displacement and they all included the use of a racial discourse. These experiences have had a substantial, ongoing, impact my own, as well as family's, political and social development. Race has just been one part of this process; there have been many other factors that have played a critical role in my and my family's political and social development. My interest is in the way in which these factors come together and form not just a social identity, but contribute to our political socialization influenced my decision to study this phenomenon in young Black youth. This then became not just an academic pursuit to test the strength and vitality of this relationship, but also part of an ongoing life struggle that continues to have an impact on my life and

my family's life. The way in which race is experienced on a personal level and can be linked up to a racial discourse and also be placed in a larger identity politics matrix can provide many openings for positive change. Even though the construction and implementation of my research design is aimed at the specific relationship between identity politics and political socialization for Black youth, there are many personal, as well as academic openings that this research can illuminate. More attention will be paid to these openings in the last chapter of my work as I return to many of the rudimentary lessons about the personal nature of race and race as discourse that could be gleaned from this first chapter and apply them to some of the public and political policy debates that the field of political socialization encounters.

CHAPTER 2

THE BATTLE OVER MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION WAR

Our view of the literature on political socialization reveals a remarkably uneven development with a lack of clear directives.

Richard G. Niemi and Barbara I. Sobieszek “*Political Socialization*” 228.

The point, of course, is that we do not know what to conclude from the literature.

Richard M. Merelman “*The Adolescence of Political Socialization*” 142.

The personal grounding I have offered could provide a reasonable place for a scholar to begin to grapple with his/her subject matter. This personal space does not magically translate into a set of answers that could be applied to the previous questions about personal grounding and research projects. Nor does it provide the most significant tools to be able to decipher a particular scholar's work, but it is still an invaluable asset for being able to comprehend a scholar's work. When placed in a larger context of what theoretical and methodological choices a particular scholar makes and how these choices influence the way in which s/he studies his/her subject matter this personal grounding can help shed light on a particular scholar's research process and results. This is apparent in my own work on the political socialization of Black youth. Even though the personal identification I presented in the previous section can be understood as a distinct area, it is also clear that traces of my personal grounding can be found in the theoretical and methodological choices I made. Within the specific theoretical terrain of how Black youth learn to identify themselves and what the implications of this process are for their political orientation and development, there continue to be number of questions about how to evaluate measure and substantiate the existence of these areas. Black youth's political socialization inhabits a similar academic terrain as many other fields and sub-fields and since Black youth's political behavior and beliefs remain unearthed and unprocessed, personal narratives continue to provide a potent analytical tool to access and review the methodological and theoretical decisions scholars make in their attempts to delve into this world.

There appears to be an impenetrable morass that bedevils scholarly attempts to research Black youth's political socialization. To be able to wade through this morass, I

will examine some of the past research done on political socialization, youth attitudes towards politics, racial divides in political behavior and attitudes, and system maintenance theories. In particular, I will examine the way in which Richard Niemi and Barbara Sobieszek construct the field of political socialization in their work and the way in which Richard Merelman provides a sharp and insightful critique of this field in his work. The way in which they orientate their discussion around youth's political socialization will be examined, as well the role that parents, peer groups, and educational institutions have played in the political socialization process. I will also examine the way these scholars approach theories about youth political socialization and system maintenance. Their work will provide the context in which Black's youth political socialization can be presented and critically examined.

Much of the work done on Black youth's political socialization hinges upon the way a particular scholar understands the social conditions of the participants in the research and how this understanding influences the scholar's theoretical, as well as methodological, choices. Two examples of theories that illustrate this point are social deprivation theory of political alienation and the political-reality theory. The way scholars overtly align or distance themselves from these theories or seek to prove or disprove their vitality and explanatory power still provides the solar system that most work on Black youth's political beliefs and behavior exist within. Articulation of these theories and the response to their use can be seen in the work of Paul Abramson, Samuel Long, and Schley Lyons. These theories, and the variations of them that have been produced, will be examined as well as the connection that these theoretical debates have with ones occurring in social sciences and in the humanities. These gaps and

inconsistencies in the field of Black youth's political socialization also appear to be linked to some of the theoretical struggles that plague discussions about identity politics and the relationship between the field of political socialization and identity politics.

What is Political Socialization?

There has been quite a lot of work done on political socialization, and there has been a sharp divergence in opinions about the nature, scope and significance of what this term might entail. Richard Niemi and Barbara Sobieszek provide an excellent entry point for a discussion of political socialization in their article, "Political Socialization," by stating:

What constitutes a political socialization study? Greenstein has pointed out that political socialization can be thought of either very narrowly- meaning civics classes in high school- or broadly-meaning all political learning. To us, a striking feature of political socialization studies is that they often involve learning at the preadult age. Indeed, one contribution of the field of socialization is a convincing demonstration that political ideas begin to form in childhood. However, we do not confine our attention here solely to preadults. As we indicate below, recent literature emphasizes an approach to socialization that covers the entire life span.³⁵

This definition immediately sheds light on some of the key points and debates that swirl around the term "political socialization," and it also provides the basis of the definition of political socialization that I utilized in my own research. First, there is a great deal of disagreement about what counts as political socialization. The narrow and the broad interpretation of what political socialization can mean will be reviewed. The second point is the actual age at which this political socialization process begins is highly contested. The implications of this choice will also be analyzed in greater detail. Even though I develop a case for a broad definition of political socialization, it is important to

³⁵ Richard G. Niemi and Barbara I. Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," *Annual Review of Sociology* 3(1977):225.

note that all of the points that Niemi and Sobieszek raised should be incorporated into any definition of political socialization.

Richard Merelman's work, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," offers not only a thoughtful analysis of the field of political socialization, but also his own sharp critique of the field. Merelman begins by tracing the origins of the field of political socialization to a specific scholar and text:

The appearance of political socialization as a distinct field of inquiry usually is dated from the publication, in 1959, of Herbert Hyman's *Political Socialization*.³⁶

By using this text, Merelman is able to present the following information about the field of political socialization:

This approach provided the foundation for two vital assumptions about socialization: 1) socialization should be conceived mainly as a process by which social institutions inculcated political values, rather than as a learning process by which innately different individuals develop their own brand of political orientations; 2) because social institutions and agencies change more slowly than the individual, political socialization inevitably acts as a brake upon political change. In short, the vulnerability of the child and the relative stability of social institutions destined political socialization to be an important conservation force in the polity.³⁷

It is from this vantage point that Merelman launches a devastating critique of this historical construction of the field of political socialization and raises many questions about the current state of health for the field of political socialization. To be able to review some of these critiques it will be necessary to first examine the debate about youth's political socialization.

³⁶ Richard, M Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," *Sociology of Education* 45(1972): 135.

³⁷ Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," 135-136.

Emphasis on Youth

In the work of Niemi, Sobieszek and Merelman, political socialization is characterized as being historically rooted in a focus on youth and all of these scholars challenge this emphasis in a variety of manners. Merelman provides the most succinct presentation of the weaknesses and strengths of this approach:

Hyman's sociological perspective had the unfortunate side effect of encouraging later investigators to think of socialization research mainly as the measurement of youthful political preferences, rather than as the illumination of psychological processes by which socialization agencies operated. Soon political socialization research became the study of political preferences at particular points in childhood and adolescence, rather than the longitudinal study of political maturation.³⁸

Niemi and Sobieszek's historical review of political socialization research echo these sentiments:

In the mid-1960s, the suggestion was made that political socialization was virtually complete as early as the end of elementary school. This viewpoint was predicated on the lack of change between 9th- and 12th-grade students in response to a number of questions about political behavior.³⁹

The logic of this research path became embedded in a vision of childhood in which children learned about politics at an early age, and the beliefs they formed lasted throughout their lives. The way in which this understanding of political socialization developed and became the basis of the field will be explored next.

Niemi and Sobieszek cite the work of Easton and Dennis as being integral to the development of political socialization being seen through the lens of youth's political development. In particular, Niemi and Sobieszek state that:

³⁸ Ibid., 136.

³⁹ Richard G. Niemi and Barbara I. Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 225

Easton & Dennis (1969:391-93) provide four terms that conveniently summarize the most prominent results of early findings about children's views of political authority: politicization, personalization, idealization, and institutionalization.⁴⁰

Niemi and Sobieszek provide the following definitions for these terms, starting with politicization:

Politicization means that young children learn early that there is an authority above and beyond family and school figures. This politicization might come about in rather simplistic ways, for instance, when a father obeys a traffic law so as not to run afoul of the police, but it is effective nonetheless.⁴¹

Niemi and Sobieszek then define personalization:

Personalization means that children become aware of political authorities first and most easily through individuals-most commonly, the president and the policeman.⁴²

The following term is one that Niemi and Sobieszek describe in the following way:

The most striking finding in this area was that idealization also characterized children's views. That is, to most children political authority seemed trustworthy, benevolent, and helpful. To a surprising degree children responded that the policeman and especially the president "would *always* want to help me if I needed it," that "they almost *never* make mistakes," that "they know *more* than anyone" (Hess and Torney 1967:41,45,49).⁴³

The last term Niemi and Sobieszek define as:

Finally, the development of children's viewpoints was characterized by institutionalization. Young children gradually learned to associate with depersonalized objects such as the government and Congress.⁴⁴

Each of these terms offers a building block and together these terms construct the foundation of the field of political socialization. All of the current debates about political

⁴⁰ Ibid., 211.

⁴¹ Ibid., 212.

⁴² Ibid., 212.

⁴³ Ibid., 212.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 212.

socialization either have direct referential points or indirect connections to this early research and to the theories and concepts that they inspired.

The construction of the field of political socialization in this manner also carried a great deal of unseemly baggage and this baggage has never been properly incorporated into the field, nor has it been completely discarded. An example of this baggage can be found in the way that Merelman explains the connection made between childhood development as understood by a psychologist and the political learning process as understood by a political scientist:

Fred Greenstein did most to adapt the Freudian framework to the study of political socialization. Greenstein (1965b) not only built heavily upon Lasswell's analysis of authoritarian and democratic personality structures, but also followed Freudian assumptions by choosing to focus upon attitudes towards political authorities (Greenstein, 1965a:ch.3). The Freudian framework also had the virtue of complementing the structural approach followed by Hyman, because psychoanalytic theory assumes that environmental pressures usually win out over instinctual energies, albeit at considerable psychic cost.⁴⁵

Merelman quickly ties these insights back into the previously mentioned insights that had been gleaned from work done on political socialization. Merelman does this by suggesting that:

For our purpose, however, the important thing was that the choice of a Freudian framework for political socialization temporarily decided two important research questions. First, political orientations would be conceived mainly as diffuse, deep-set responses to environmental stimuli; this implication followed from the Freudian emphasis upon unconscious motivation. Second, political socialization research would focus primarily on childhood, the major formative period according to psychoanalytic theory.⁴⁶

Merelman presents a convincing case for the way in which theories from psychology and political science were integrated for the purposes of developing the field of political

⁴⁵ Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," 136.

⁴⁶ Ibid.,136-137.

socialization. Before assessing the faults and limitations of this merger, the political theory side of this equation will be reviewed.

System Stabilization or Not?

A great deal of the early work done in the field of political socialization was based on a notion of system stabilization. The research seemed to rest on the assumption that the end results of the political socialization process were adults that lived and operated within a fully functional democratic political system. Niemi and Sobieszek describe this approach in the following manner:

Drawing primarily on Easton's systems theory, Easton and Dennis and others, such as Greenstein, argued that childhood views of political authority were an important source of stability in the American political system.⁴⁷

Early scholars used the perceived political stability of the United States as the implicit or explicit backdrop for their research. This assumption worked well as the rationale for why youth developed political attitudes at an early age and were able to maintain these healthy political views from childhood. This understanding of political socialization began to unravel, along with the psychological components.

Before illustrating the way in which this theoretical work has collapsed and turned on itself, it is worth first turning to the way in which system stabilization was presented and supported. The internal logic of these arguments will be reviewed first; then a more extensive examination of the racial implications of these theories will be examined. Finally, in the next chapter attention will be devoted to the methodological limitations of Freudian approaches (Psychology), as well as approaches based on system maintenance theories (Political Science.) One of the most noticeable kinks in the armor of system maintenance theories is the lack of substantive research support that it has been able to

⁴⁷ Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 216.

garner. Even Merelman's presentation of research that could offer the most potent support of this theory is unsatisfactory:

By the fourth grade, most American children have developed two important political orientations, one towards the President (Greenstein, 1965a:ch.3; Hess and Torney, 1967, ch. 3; Easton and Dennis, 1969: ch. 8) and the other towards political parties (Greenstein, 1965a:ch.4).⁴⁸

Whereas these research results would seem to lend credence to a system maintenance theory being accurate, and the way in which youth develop their political orientations could also be understood as being part of this process, there still have been research findings that challenge these insights. In particular one can also find in Merelman's work less clarity about what is understood by the political socialization of adolescents. Here Merelman cites the work of Jennings and Niemi on adolescence as the basis of this insight, and this insight appears to contradict his previously mentioned insight:

Adolescence emerges as a period of political uncertainty during which strong developmental patterns usually are absent. Jennings and Niemi argue that the instability and malformation of adolescent political attitudes signifies a need for more study of adolescents.⁴⁹

This "instability" and "malformation" would seem to fly in the face of the previous certainty ascribed to fourth graders' political orientations. Instead of attempting to probe into this apparent discrepancy in the political development of youth, Merelman instead attempts to brush over this point by stating that, "It could be argued as well, however, that the ambiguity of adolescent political orientations should serve as a warning to investigators that most of the important political orientations are formed in childhood, and that little of consequence is to be learned from further attention to adolescence."⁵⁰

The opposite point could be argued, and a more obvious conclusion could be drawn:

⁴⁸ Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," 140.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 142.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 142-143.

Political socialization is not as clear-cut as previously thought and there is a great probability that it is a lifelong process. This insight is borne out by a lot of the past and current research being done on political socialization, and it is even a point Merelman eventually concedes.⁵¹ An example of this point can be seen in Merelman's discussion of his own work:

Merelman found relatively little pro-democratic movement during adolescence along such attitude dimensions as freedom of speech, civic obligation, majority rule, and minority rights. Indeed, many adolescents simply refuse to endorse democratic norms, a surprising finding in view of the widespread reference to such values by radical student spokesmen.⁵²

Merelman also suggest that:

Finally, over half of Merelman's 12th grade Los Angeles sample called themselves either Independents or "don't know," a figure exactly equal to the 9th grade percentage. Adolescence apparently produces anything but commitment to parties.⁵³

The juxtaposition of these results with the research done on fourth graders suggests that the theoretical work done on system maintenance is far from complete. The contradictory research results call into question not just the final result of political socialization (system maintenance) but ultimately raise questions about the entirety of the process (age producing coherent and observable political development). Since the clarity of the research done on preadolescents could not be matched by the research done on adolescents, it is necessary to broaden the scope of political socialization at this point and consider other key

⁵¹ This point can be seen in the work of Niemi and Sobieszek: "Now it seems undeniable that adult attitudes do change substantially, though what constitutes "normal" rates and directions of change is still hotly debated." Niemi, Richard G. and Sobieszek, Barbara I. "Political Socialization," *Annual Review Sociology* 1977 3:216. Merelman's work also confirms this point: "It is now clear that we should view youthful political attitudes merely as way stations on the road to adult political identity, not as the identity terminal itself." Merelman, Richard M. "The Adolescence of Political Socialization" *Sociology of Education* 1972, Vol. 45 (Spring): 144.

⁵² Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," 144.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 144.

variables in this research. The theoretical dilemma that system maintenance provided political socialization scholars might be properly answered by a more careful examination of what other factors contribute to a political socialization process, before the thorny issue of the final result might (or could) be looked at.

Role of Parents

The role of parents is one of the key factors considered in political socialization research that Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman all cover. Niemi and Sobieszek declare that: “It should perhaps be emphasized that virtually all studies have found positive correlations between parents’ and children’s attitudes⁵⁴.” This insight is quickly followed with this caveat: “Young people are indeed reflections on their parents; however, they are pale reflections, especially beyond the realm of partisanship and voting.”⁵⁵ The contradictory nature of Niemi and Sobieszek’s comments seems to be substantiated by the way they report on previous research results:

Reporting on a national sample of high school seniors and their parents, they found that correlations between the attitudes expressed by seniors and those expressed independently by their parents were below 0.40 for a variety of political issues, groups and values-with the sole expectations of partisanship and candidate preferences.⁵⁶

Merelman weighs into this confusing area by also suggesting that:

It generally is agreed that family influence dominates early political development. There is pervasive parental impact both on the child’s partisan identification and on his image of political authority, the two major components of early diffuse support.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Niemi and Sobieszek, “Political Socialization,” 218.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁶ Ibid.,:217.

⁵⁷ Merelman, “The Adolescence of Political Socialization,” 149.

To answer questions about the nature and impact of the role of parents in the political socialization process for youth though, Merelman returns to the same contradictory points

Niemi and Sobieszek previously offered:

However, the influence of the family normally recedes as the child becomes an adolescent. More important, there may be a secular trend over time toward a weaker family role, as Jennings and Niemi's data suggest (1968b). Particularly striking in their work is the generally modest correspondence between student and parent views on issues. Parental control over political socialization, as over much else, may have been damaged in the past decade.⁵⁸

By offering these additional comments, Merelman undercuts the significance of his earlier argument about the degree of influence family has over early political development. The more intriguing question that can be posed from the vantage point of the confusion that Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman's comments appear to present is why this specific area loses its influence, and what the implications of this loss might mean. Even within the specific areas Merelman identifies as being most salient for parents' influence on children's political socialization ("the child's partisan identification and on his image of political authority"), there is no attempt to explain why these two areas gain significance, and not other aspects of political socialization, and then why these areas lose significance. These points seem to suggest that parental role is not as pervasive as has been thought and even in those areas where it can be documented as being influential, there is little that can be offered that can explain why it is dominant in these areas (and not others) and why this dominance dissipates in these areas.

The specific role that mothers and fathers might play in the political socialization process of youth also lacks clarity. Niemi and Sobieszek trace this confusion to the fact that initial research done on political socialization, "Assumed (with little evidence) that

⁵⁸ Ibid., 149.

fathers were more instrumental in transmitting political views than were mothers.⁵⁹

Merelman cites research that presents a different conclusion: “Langston presents evidence that mothers have become increasingly central to the (political socialization) process, a trend seemingly consistent with the secular liberation of women.⁶⁰ These results also beg the question of why it was assumed that the father was central for the political socialization process “with little evidence” and then why this leading parental role has now shifted to mothers. Part of the confusion is methodological in nature, and Merelman describes it in the following fashion:

Equally absent from the literature is any special concern about the mechanisms and techniques by which political orientations are learned. Still, some investigators have drawn inferences about these micro-processes. For example, Langston (1969:ch. 2) concludes from studies of parental treatment of the child that inducement and explanation generally are superior to direct coercion as methods for inculcating specific political attitudes. However, because they do not observe these techniques directly, Jennings and Langston must rely on respondent reports of emotional climate and discipline practices in the home. Consequentially, their findings undoubtedly are subject to error.⁶¹

Being able to establish a methodological approach that can accurately detect these “micro-processes” is an ongoing source of tension in the political socialization literature, and it is what I will cover in the next chapter. It is worth noting that at this level of analysis, the role that a mother or father provides is quite a conundrum, and it is one that could not be easily resolved by the quantitative methods Merelman alludes to as being inadequate. Even though it is well established by the work of Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman that parents have an influential role in the early development of the political socialization of their offspring, it is unclear what exactly this role is and how a scholar might be able to measure or identify this role.

⁵⁹ Niemi and Sobieszek, “Political Socialization,” 217.

⁶⁰ Merelman, “The Adolescence of Political Socialization,” 149.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

Role of Peer Groups

Research on the role of peer groups in the political socialization process for youth has been fruitful. Niemi and Sobieszek cite the work Jennings and Niemi as evidence of a positive relationship between students and their peer group when it comes to forming political beliefs:

Also, in a study in which direct assessments of attitudes was actually obtained from those named as friends, attitudes between seniors and their friends were sometimes higher than those between seniors and parents (Jennings & Niemi 1974:243). Still more generally, if researchers were to consider thoroughly the implications of the development of national and even international youth cultures, as suggested in some sociological writings (see below), more extensive influence of peers on political attitudes would probably be found.⁶²

This finding provides an excellent link back to the previously mentioned research on parents. It supports the questions that had been raised about the exact nature of the parents' role in the political socialization process. If it is possible to discover that peer groups have a greater role than parents in one or more areas that are tested for the political socialization process, then doesn't this help to further the proposition that there has been an inadequate amount of information gathered about the political socialization process? There is also the distinct possibility that the difficulties that have been highlighted so far go beyond the realm of specific theoretical or methodological concerns. As these results on peer groups suggest, it might very well be the case that there are multiple factors that contribute to the political socialization process and that these factors vary for each individual. This would also mean that dominant tropes might not be possible to detect and that a shift in the methodological or theoretical tools would not shed much more light on the subject matter.

⁶² Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 222.

Role of Education

By far education and youth development have been the two greatest factors cited in research done on political socialization. Whether based on psychological models (e.g., Freud) or political realities (e.g., voting age), it is clear that the development youth undergo provides for a critical period for political socialization. It is also true that this time period is greatly influenced by school from the standpoint of institutional learning, as well as by personal and social development that also typically takes place during this time period. Given this background, it is surprising that Niemi and Sobieszek begin their discussion on the role of education by stating that:

Research on the role of the school in political socialization is surprisingly sparse, and has been piecemeal rather than directed by clear theoretical perspectives. Consequently there is a welter of specific ideas, but little can be confidently stated and backed by adequate research.⁶³

To be able to examine why this might be the case some of the scholarly literature in the area of youth development and education will be reviewed.

It is worth also noting that dividing the literature on education into two sections (youth development and education as an institution) has been a contested point too. The necessity of this split is predicated on the acceptance of a distinction many scholars made between youth development and school education as separate factors to study in the process of political socialization. Niemi and Sobieszek describe this distinction in the following way:

Even by the time children arrive in school, the family has exerted its influence both in early value formation of the children and in their attitudes on authority. The school reinforces some of these views, but does little to alter them. In the absence of schools, families might play a larger role in reinforcing views established earlier, along with a more important role for other agencies such as religious organizations. Moreover, regardless of school lessons about social

⁶³ Ibid., 220.

studies, children do not develop the ability to think abstractly about politics or anything else until roughly ages 11-13.⁶⁴

These insights seem to rest upon two unstable assumptions: 1) What schools “reinforce” can be accurately traced back to families (or not!) and 2) That political thought is contingent upon the ability to think abstractly. Instead of countering these assumptions right now, I would like to only suggest that they are emblematic of deeper problems within the field of the study of youth development and education that appear throughout the scholarly literature, and that these problems manifest themselves in all of the research that has been done on the role of youth development and education in the political socialization process. While accepting the description of youth development and education that Niemi and Sobieszek have offered, I would like to turn to the research that has been done within these two areas.

The role of educational institutions in the political socialization of youth appears to be insignificant and inconclusive. Merelman sets the tone for these research findings by declaring that:

A wealth of recent research has modified earlier optimistic pronouncements about the school’s place in political socialization. For years educators and laymen alike proclaimed the school’s power to convey democratic values, but such trust now appears misplaced. Civics courses apparently have little positive effect on most students; and Merelman and Ziblatt both find no relationship between participation in extra-curricular activities and student political orientations. In fact, Merelman concludes that the high school experience apparently increases neither adolescent support for nor understanding of democratic values.⁶⁵

Even if these research findings were correct, and they pointed to the failure of specific efforts to aid students in their political socialization, this would not be the end of the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 220.

⁶⁵ Merelman, “The Adolescence of Political Socialization,” 150.

discussion. According to Niemi and Sobieszek's presentation of youth cognitive patterns, school must be one of the times and places that political socialization occurs:

High school, according to our schema, should be a crucial time for the development of political attitudes, since young people by this time have the cognitive capacity to deal with political ideas. Yet studies have not been uniform in finding positive effects of the schoolroom.⁶⁶

The logic of these assumptions continues to vex Niemi and Sobieszek's attempt to portray the research results from educational institutions through this youth cognitive development filter:

Yet a major study by Langston and Jennings found virtually no impact of civics courses in a national cross-sectional sample of high school seniors, although these courses did have a meaningful impact on black students in the sample. Similarly, Merelman comes to basically negative conclusions about the role of the school in a study of sixth, ninth, and twelfth graders. If adolescence is a crucial time for learning about politics, one wonders why this mixture of positive and negative results has occurred.⁶⁷

This is a legitimate question, and it is one that appears to be a byproduct of the research done in the area of education. The way in which Niemi and Sobieszek have constructed a model for youth development, and the space that this development should share with research done on the impact of education for youth political socialization, does not allow for this question to be fully answered.

This research did not produce the concise and insightful results that were expected and these failures seemed to be always reflected back to a scholar's particular understanding of youth development. If youth developed their views on politics during this pre-adolescent or adolescent period, then educational institutions should have had a more dramatic and pronounced impact on this political development. These areas of study for political socialization invariably run into the previously discussed problems that

⁶⁶ Niemi. and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 221.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 221.

such divergent areas as peer and parental relations and life cycle and generational periods all share. This can be seen in yet another attempt by Niemi and Sobieszek to explain why the educational research results did not produce the expected outcomes:

Another factor that may dampen the influence of schools during the adolescent years is the fact that young people are still at home. And, until virtually the end of high school, even with the 18-year-old vote, junior high and high school students are not yet regarded as adults and are not given an active role in the political process. One would expect that not many political lessons do take hold until actual participation is possible and expected.⁶⁸

Instead of pondering on the cognitive model they have constructed for youth or questioning their conception of the way that youth learn about and understand politics, Niemi and Sobieszek instead decide to shift their focus. By introducing a new concept (political learning dependent accessibility and responsibility), Niemi and Sobieszek weaken the potency of their previous analysis. Does this new concept mean that childhood is not a critical time for political socialization and do youth not learn about our political process until they are legally required to? The way this new concept is presented, it also suggested that parents play a dominant role in the political socialization of youth right up to the age of 18 years old. It is unclear if Niemi and Sobieszek intended to muddle these points or even if they intended to undermine their previous arguments, but their conclusions do raise serious doubt about how useful and meaningful the distinctions they (and other scholars) have made between youth development and educational institutions.

Another way this dilemma can be understood is from the standpoint of research done on other age ranges and the attempt by scholars to tie these various age ranges together into one meaningful chronological explanation. It is worth noting again how

⁶⁸ Ibid., 221.

commonplace it has become for scholars to weave together cognitive models for youth and the process of political socialization and assume that the research results could only verify the strength of their particular conception. This can also be seen in Merelman's work:

Additional significant evidence in support of the differentiation assertion is the fact that most 8th grade students have completed the institutionalization of politics, that is, the transfer of perceptual focus from key political personages and symbols to political institutions and roles.⁶⁹

This example actually harkens back to Easton and Dennis' work that was previously cited and Merelman's understanding of institutionalization is based on their definition⁷⁰. By locking his insights into this model, Merelman is not able to explain variations in this pattern or even how this model might interface with other factors. Is it possible that some eighth graders might have had more contact with elected officials, and this contact might have a greater influence on whether or not they have developed an institutional attitude? Or even within the sphere of cognitive development, is it possible that those eighth graders that have developed a greater aptitude for math are more inclined to develop an institutional understanding of politics than a student that might have developed a greater appreciation for the arts or humanities? It is not shocking then that Niemi and Sobieszek finally report that:

Thus our conclusion is that colleges have more of an influence on young people's political attitudes than high schools, despite the fact that cognitive development theories might be interpreted as suggesting the early adolescent years as the time when students are most susceptible to influence.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," 150.

⁷⁰ "Finally, the development of children's viewpoints was characterized by institutionalization. Young children gradually learned to associate with depersonalized objects such as the government and Congress." Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 212.

⁷¹ Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 222-223.

The way in which this cognitive model of youth development has merged with an understanding of an appropriate political socialization process is left largely in place and scholars are advised to turn their attention to college students. The tendency to believe that other studies will produce more sympathetic results and that a complete rethinking of the models is not necessary has become characteristic of the scholarly outlook towards the field of political socialization.

Where Does This Leave the Field of Political Socialization?

The field of political socialization covers a vast theoretical landscape, and even this small sample of the literature from the 1960s and 1970s only provides a brief glimpse into this field. The two articles that were written by Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman do provide an invaluable foundation to begin a discussion about political socialization.

Political socialization is a vibrant field, and it has also undergone significant transformations. I would like to discuss some of these shifts and changes in the field of political socialization that Niemi, Sobieszek and Merelman have highlighted in their respective work. Niemi and Sobieszek discuss the decline and disavowal of one of the four key components in Easton and Dennis' work: Idealization. They suggest that "idealization" used to be a "key component" but that it "built a shaky theoretical foundation" and has to be considered "now disproved."⁷² Since idealization was built upon youthful identification and admiration of political figures and since this process of identification supposedly followed a similar pattern that youth and parental development follows, it is not surprising this conception of idealization would be successfully challenged. Besides the methodological problems that testing the existence of this phenomenon might hold for scholars, there is also the theoretical question about the

⁷²Ibid., :223.

significance of this concept. As the previously mentioned research about police officers and the President suggests, there are not a lot of conclusions that can be safely drawn from a respondent's attachment to these authority figures. One fascinating aspect of the decline of idealization as a component of political socialization research is that it was tied to social and political events of the time:

But it also seems clear that events of the 1960s played a role in declining idealization. For one thing, there is the simple matter of the timing of the decline. For blacks, we noted Abramson's conclusion that a shift in political trust probably occurred in 1967, with the summer of that year witnessing riots in major American cities.⁷³

Niemi and Sobieszek's comments do not just point to the demise of idealization; they introduce some of the most potent critiques that can be leveled at a great deal of the work done on political socialization. By introducing the role that social conditions can have on theoretical and conceptual landscapes in the field of political socialization, they open the floodgates to a myriad of potential interpretations and critiques. One of the most salient critiques that I will address in the next section is one based on race, and I will examine the work of Abramson that has been cited by Niemi and Sobieszek. On a practical level, this revelation can be thought of as another layer of analysis that is needed for research on political socialization. In other words, it is not just the veracity of the results and the significance that can be drawn from particular variables that must be scrutinized. One example of this can be seen in research results that show a strong positive relationship children have for police officers but not the President. Part of the reason for these split results might not be a flaw or an inconsistency in the idealization component of the Easton and Dennis model; it might be a more accurate reading of post 9-11 youth's views of political officers (and firemen!) and of a current President with low approval ratings.

⁷³ Ibid., 215.

Niemi and Sobieszek also add to this insight about idealization a different vision of cognitive behavior and development:

In any event, all of this new work suggests that children do not uniformly idealize political authority as was initially thought. Like adults, preadults react to ongoing political events.⁷⁴

This is a critical point when placed in the context of so much of the early work done on political socialization being obsessed with child cognitive patterns. Current scholarship on political socialization has been less focused on youth development and has greatly broadened its scope. This has allowed scholars to examine the impact that peer groups, life cycle, media/modern technology or any other factors, might have on youth, as well as on adults, in terms of political socialization.

This leads to the last trend in political socialization scholarship that I would like to draw attention to now. One of the weakest points in political socialization research that has been covered is the single dimension nature of the work. Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman all discuss this weakness in their extensive review of the literature and they all point to changes in this approach. Merelman suggests "...these forms of learning may have much to do with the impact of such socialization agencies on the school, the peer group and the mass media, whose representatives rarely establish enduring relationships with the child⁷⁵. The most hopeful sign for what direction or directions political socialization research can take can be seen in Niemi and Sobieszek's proclamation:

Overall, what has happened in recent years is a general expansion of the number of important agents from the family or the family and school to a broader array of individuals and other factors. Clearly, the family does not by itself dictate how young people will emerge as political actors. Nor does the school seem to have an overwhelming effect. Rather, it is more

⁷⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁷⁵ Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," 148.

amorphous factors, such as peers, the media, and events that have gained prominence.⁷⁶

Whereas this conclusion might not be considered to be profound in and of itself, the type and form of research it might lead to has left an enduring legacy. The weaknesses in the field of political socialization have not only changed and been transformed, but they still appear periodically and occasionally plague current research. Henceforth, even though it might be abundantly clear that a single frame or variable might not present a complete picture for political socialization, it is also apparent that it is even more complicated and confounding to try to put together multiple variables and forms of analysis in a cohesive and meaningful fashion. This is still just one part of a larger jigsaw puzzle that political socialization research represents, and I would like to analyze arguably the most insidious and treacherous piece of the puzzle.

Race and Political Socialization

In the last section, I suggested that there had been some significant shifts in the nature, scope and form of research that occurred in the field of political socialization. One of the more intriguing and daunting shifts in this research was the inclusion of race as explanatory factor and as a meaningful variable.

Work in the early 1970s moved in several directions to fill in obvious gaps in earlier work and to expand its scope. First, investigators examined subgroups of the American population, especially groups likely to hold attitudes different from those of middle-class whites. Abramson cites 34 separate studies reporting on black-white differences in feelings of political efficacy or trust.⁷⁷

As noted by Niemi and Sobieszek, the work devoted to race, and the work that included race was primarily limited to work on “black-white differences” and this work was shoved into the filter of “feelings of political efficacy or trust.” It is clear that Abramson

⁷⁶ Niemi, and Sobieszek, “Political Socialization,” 215.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

is quite often credited with this broadening of the scope of research done on political socialization, but it is also true that his research choice limited the way in which race was covered and utilized:

Abramson's comprehensive review of several dozen studies comparing racial groups shows that black youths have unquestionably felt less able to influence political authority figures than have whites. Blacks are also less trusting of authority than whites, at least since 1967.⁷⁸

In the following review of Abramson, Long, and Schely's work, I will illustrate the weakness in this form of analysis and also the many other potential and realized paths that political socialization research has traveled.

Paul Abramson

Abramson's work provided a theoretical way to understand Black youth's political socialization process and a way to distinguish this socialization pattern from the other patterns that had been documented.⁷⁹ Unlike past scholarly work done on youth, Abramson's work acknowledged and identified Black youth as a group that has a distinct political socialization process.⁸⁰ The distinction Abramson made between the political socialization of Black and White youth became not just a discussion about a deviant and a normal group. It grew more into a well rounded and sensitive discussion about the nature of the differences in the political socialization for Black and White youth and what these differences might mean for the overall field of political socialization.⁸¹ Abramson

⁷⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁷⁹ Paul R. Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations" *Journal of Politics*, *The Journal of Politics* 34(1972), 1259-1262.

⁸⁰ Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," 1259-1262.

⁸¹ "Previous studies of political sophistication and civic competence found gender but not race a significant variable." Carol A. Cassel and Celia C. Lo, "Theories of Political Literacy," *Political Behavior* 19(1997):324.

begins his article, “Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations” with the insight:

The six million black schoolchildren in the United States, like their white counterparts, have virtually no political power. Yet, socialization research suggests that black children feel less politically powerful than white children do.⁸²

Abramson’s immediately establishes the premise that Black school children not only have a marginal status in our society, but that social scientists have also documented that Black school children “Feel less politically powerful than white children do.”⁸³ These insights provide the twin pillars on which the theoretical structure of his work is built upon: “If we wish to begin to build theories about the differential political socialization of subcultural groups, we need to go beyond mere findings and progress toward the development of explanations.”⁸⁴ Henceforth, Abramson’s research provides a marked departure from the absence or the questioning of the validity of racial differences in a political socialization process, and he boldly suggests that these racial differences not only exist, but that the oppressive social condition of Blacks in our society is critical in developing explanations for these political differences. This is a marked departure from the previous factors that had been considered, and it suggests a distinct new course for political socialization research.

It is in this arena of explanatory pursuits that Abramson’s work provides the greatest legacy for those scholars that are most interested in understanding the political socialization process of Black youth: “My goal in this article will be to evaluate two basic explanations to account for lower feelings of political effectiveness and political

⁸² Abramson, “Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations,” 1243.

⁸³ Ibid., 1244.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1244.

trust among black schoolchildren.”⁸⁵ Accepting then that there is a difference in the political socialization of Black youth and that this difference has been documented and established by social scientists, Abramson then goes on to suggest that the focus of scholarly work should turn its attention to why these differences exist and what could be done about this uneven pattern of development.⁸⁶ Abramson offers the following explanations:

- A. Racial differences result from social structural conditions that contribute to low feelings for self-competence among blacks. I will call this the *social-deprivation* explanation.⁸⁷
- B. Racial differences result from the differences in the political environment in which blacks and whites live. I will call this the *political-reality* explanation.⁸⁸

In most all of the theoretical work done on Black youth’s political beliefs and behavior, Abramson’s explanations are either directly or indirectly referenced and/or reviewed. These definitions provide another example of the shift in emphasis that has occurred within the field of political socialization, and they provide for some very different angles for understanding the political socialization process.

Both of Abramson’s explanations present a way to construct theoretical models that could be used to understand the political socialization process for Black youth in particular, but, arguably, for all people with a marginal status in society. The first explanation, “social-deprivation,” was based on five assumptions:

⁸⁵ Ibid., 1244.

⁸⁶ “Socialization researchers, having studied a wide range of political attitudes among American schoolchildren, agree upon the following two findings:
Finding 1: Black schoolchildren tend to have lower feelings of political effectiveness than white children do; and
Finding 2: Black schoolchildren tend to have lower feelings of trust toward political leaders than white children do.” Paul R. Abramson, “Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations,” *Journal of Politics*, 34(1972), 1244.

⁸⁷ Abramson, “Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations,” 1249.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1249.

Assumption A.1. Persons deprived of opportunity and denied respect tend to have low levels of self-competence.

Assumption A.2. Persons who have low levels of self-competence tend to have low levels of political effectiveness.

Assumption A.3. Persons who have low levels of self-competence tend to have low feelings of political trust.

Assumption A.4. Black children are deprived of opportunity and denied respect.

Assumption A.5. Black children have lower feelings of self-competence than white children do.⁸⁹

Abramson follows these assumptions with the statement that “[t]here is both theoretical justification and empirical support for each of these assumptions.”⁹⁰ The second model, “political-reality,” was based on three assumptions:

- 1) Blacks have less ability to influence political leaders than whites do.
- 2) Black have less reason to trust political leaders than whites do
- 3) Black children know these facts, or they are indirectly influenced by adults who know these facts, or both.⁹¹

To be able to substantiate this theoretical work and the assumptions that they were built upon was beyond the scope of Abramson’s work. His analysis of past social science work did not clearly establish or disapprove the usefulness or the validity of his theoretical work. A more intriguing test of Abramson’s work can be found in the social science research that attempted to use his theoretical models. It is one of these scholar’s work that I would like to examine now, and it is within his work that the strengths and weaknesses of Abramson’s theoretical models can be most readily identified.

Samuel Long

Far from resolving the larger debate about political socialization for White and Black youth or even settling the more specific debate about Black youth’s political socialization, Abramson’s work appeared to be another Pandora’s Box in the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1250.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1250.

⁹¹ Ibid., 1259.

development of political theory for Black youth. An example of the confusion and uncertainty that Abramson's work contributed to and that continues to spring up in current scholarship in the field of Black youth politics, can be seen in Samuel Long's work.⁹² Six years after Abramson's article, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Back Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," was published, Long offered his own response in his article entitled: "Personality and Political Alienation among White and Black Youth: A Test of the Social Deprivation Model." Long begins his work by stating that: "The most current research on political alienation the United States clearly indicates that attitudes concerning political efficacy and political trust not only differ when black and white adult populations are compared, but also that these differences in levels of political alienation are on the increase."⁹³ Now it is not just a difference in the political socialization process that can be identified along racial lines, but it is a problem that is becoming worse.

To test this premise, Long borrowed and pieced together an elaborate schematic that was based primarily on Abramson's work. Long suggests that: "Since the social deprivation theory of political alienation will provide the conceptual scheme by which data will be analyzed and evaluated in this paper, it would seem appropriate to consider the evidence which might be brought to bear to support or refute these previously mentioned assumptions."⁹⁴ In support of these assumptions, Long suggests that

⁹² Samuel Long, "Personality and Political Alienation among White and Black Youth: A test of the Social Deprivation Model," *The Journal of Politics*, 40(1978):433.

⁹³ Long, "Personality and Political Alienation among White and Black Youth: A Test of the Social Deprivation Model," 433-434.

⁹⁴ "Persons deprived of opportunity and denied respect tend to have low levels of self-competence.

- (1) Persons who have low levels of self-competence tend to have low levels of political effectiveness.
- (2) Persons who have low levels of self-competence tend to have low feelings of political trust.

Abramson offers the following defense: “Most social indicators, for example, clearly show that blacks in the United States today are, relative to whites, socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged, as well as being victims of racial discrimination.”⁹⁵

It is at this point that Long’s work takes a bizarre twist as he asserts that what is “[m]ore difficult to establish, however, is the effect of the position of blacks in the social structure on their personalities.”⁹⁶ Leaving aside the intellectual question of Long’s choice of making personalities one of the centerpieces for his research, there is the more mundane question of the link that Long has attempted to establish between the oppressive conditions that Black people experience, discrepancies in political beliefs between Black and White youth, and what might be the causal link between these discrepancies. It could be argued that the previous case Long made for the existence of oppressive conditions for Blacks would detract from any attempt to establish personality types as the source of the link that connects oppressive Black experiences with the discrepancy in political beliefs and behaviors between Whites and Blacks. An apparent defense of Long’s focus on personality differences can be found in his discussion of two theories that relate to self-competence. Long declares that: “One theory holds that white pre-adults manifest higher feelings of self-esteem than black pre-adults, primarily because of the disadvantage status of blacks.”⁹⁷ Long then states that “A second theory asserts that personality factors, such as self-esteem, do not typically differentiate the two racial groups because the

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- (3) Black children are deprived of opportunity and denied respect.
 - (4) Black children have lower feelings of self-competence than white children do.”
Long, “Personality and Political Alienation among White and Black Youth: A Test of the Social Deprivation Model,” 435.

⁹⁵ Long, “Personality and Political Alienation among White and Black Youth: A Test of the Social Deprivation Model,” 435-436.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 433-434.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 436.

developmental assumptions intrinsic to the first theory are incorrect.”⁹⁸ The discussion of these theories does little to alleviate the tension Long has created by the inclusion of personality traits as an analytical category on par with race and racism. This tension appears more potent as Long develops his schematic and then present his results.

After Long presents these theories, he then proceeds to offer the following hypotheses:

As a means of investigating the social deprivation model of political alienation (Abramson) among black and white adolescents the following hypotheses will be tested:

H1 Black adolescents, relative to white adolescents, will examine higher levels of perceived social deprivation.

H2 Black adolescents, relative to white adolescents, will exhibit lower levels of perceived social competence.

H3 Black adolescents, relative to white adolescents, will exhibit higher levels of felt political alienation

H4 Perceived social deprivation will correlate negatively with perceived social competence.

H5 Perceived social deprivation will correlate positively with felt political alienation.

H6 Perceived social competence will correlate negatively with felt political alienation.

H7 The correlation between social deprivation and perceived social competence will be higher for black adolescents than for white adolescents.

H8 The correlation between perceived social deprivation and felt political alienation will be higher for black adolescents than for white adolescents.

H9 The correlation between perceived social competence and felt political alienation will be higher for black adolescents than for white adolescents.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ibid., 437.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 443-444.

It is at this point that Long offers an equally problematic methodological approach to test each of these nine hypothetical points. A more substantive discussion of some of the weaknesses in Long's methodological approach will be reviewed in the next section. What was most revealing was the lack of noteworthy results that Long's work produced. Even with the apparent self-evident nature of his hypothetical points and his basic methodological process, Long is still not able to produce any noteworthy or new knowledge. Long boldly claims in his conclusion that: "[t]he social-deprivation model of political alienation among white and black adolescents has not received strong support here."¹⁰⁰ Long even asks: "Why have the expected differences between white and black adolescents not occurred?"¹⁰¹ It seems clear that far from substantiating the significance or vitality of Abramson's theoretical work, Long's work provides a more critical exposure of its unreliability. The underlying tension in Abramson's and Long's work remains intact, and the way in which this tension is linked to the difficulty of studying the political socialization of Black youth is what I would like to now address.

Schley Lyons

Schley Lyons' work, "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," provides a brilliant antidote for Abramson and Long's work, and it is also provides another way to engage the dominant literature within the field of political socialization. Lyon also identifies race and the study of Black youth as being of critical importance for the study of political socialization:

Explanatory factors investigated in other socialization studies include the family unit, social class, sex, intelligence, school curriculum, peer groups, and the mass media. However, a potentially significant explanatory factor that has received relatively little attention is race. Does the fact that one's skin is black aid in

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 453.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 450.

predicting how a child will score on indices measuring a sense of efficacy and feelings of cynicism? After controls were introduced for race, it became evident that the association between milieu, the environment in which the children lived, and the dependent variables was primarily a result of attitude differences between white and black children.¹⁰²

Lyons also finds it necessary to reach out beyond the previous political socialization literature and to delve into social conditions of the participants in the research. Lyon's work is also emblematic of some of the new trends in political socialization research. The point then is not to simply study parents, peer groups, life cycles, generations or other factors, or even to study multiple factors in a simultaneous fashion. Lyon advances the premise identified by Abramson and Long, and she states the obvious:

It is obvious, however, that the slum child, particularly the Negro slum child, acquires his political values and beliefs within a milieu of poverty and racial discrimination that differs significantly from that of white, middle-class children. What is the effect of such early life experiences on the slum child's sense of efficacy? Do children who grow up in the deprived milieu of the inner city develop more cynical feelings about government than children who grow up elsewhere?¹⁰³

To address these questions, Lyon concludes that based on this backdrop that it is best to precede with her own research project:

The above observations have been synthesized from data gathered primarily from white, middle-class children living in urban, industrial communities. In this study a distinctive sub-population of children- those who grow up in a slum- are singled out for attention. In previous socialization studies one seeks with little reward clues about the political socialization of the slum child, particularly the Negro slum child. Greenstein's New Haven sample of 659 children included 20 Negroes.¹⁰⁴

Given this backdrop, Lyon also decides to devise her own research project in a way that will highlight the impact of race and racism in the political socialization process. Lyon's

¹⁰² Lyons, Schley R. "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," *The Journal of Politics*, 32(1970): 290.

¹⁰³ Lyons, "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," 290.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

research project also utilizes the same filter that Long borrowed from Abramson and this filter is based on testing the level of cynicism and efficacy in Black youth. Lyon defines efficacy as: “The expectation that in democracies citizens will feel able to act affectively in politics.”¹⁰⁵ Lyon tested for efficacy in the following fashion:

The efficacy index employed in this study was based upon agree-disagree responses to the following: (1) What happens in the government will happen no matter what people do. It is like the weather, there is nothing people can do about it. (2) There are some big, powerful men in the government who are running the whole thing and they do not care about us ordinary people. (3) My family doesn't have any say about what the government does (4) I don't think people in the government care much what people like my family think. (5) Citizens don't have a chance to say what they think about running the government.¹⁰⁶

Lyon also describes cynicism and the way to test for it in the following way:

Cynicism appears to be a manifestation of a deep-seated suspicion of others' motives and actions. Among adults it has been found to be positively correlated with contempt for others, feelings of impotency, and low educational attainment. It is negatively correlated with political participation. The political cynicism index was based upon responses to the following: (1) Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are? (2) Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it? (3) How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right-just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time? (4) Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing, or do you think that quite a few of them don't seem to know what they are doing? (5) Would you say the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?¹⁰⁷

Following a similar path as Long, Lyon also attempts to test the strength and applicability of efficacy and cynicism for the political development of youth. The last component of Lyon's quantitative research design that is worth noting is the rationale behind her selection of a research site:

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 290.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 291.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 289.

This area was Toledo's hard core slum, exhibiting the worst example of physical, social, and economic decay in the city. Population density was more than twice as high as the city average, substandard dwellings made up 30 percent of all units, almost a third of the area's 10,334 families lived on less than \$3,000 per year, the unemployment rate was twice as high as that for the city as a whole, a third of all adults had less than eight years of formal education, and rates of juvenile and adult delinquency were almost three times as high as that in the city as a whole.¹⁰⁸

This selection would also seem to also lend credence to Abramson's notion of "political-reality" and "social-deprivation." Part of what Lyon's research detected was the political and social reality of the students that lived in various parts of Toledo, and she provides a convincing argument for some of the ways that these social conditions influenced the political socialization of youth. Besides simply testing for efficacy and cynicism, Lyon has also established a way to test the assumptions and the form of analysis that Abramson brought attention to and Long utilized.

Unlike Long's results though, Lyon's research appeared to produce clear and significant results. Lyon begins by stating her greatest finding:

The major point to be established in this study is that children who live in the deprived environment of the inner-city slum had by the fifth grade (roughly 10 to 11 years of age) already become more cynical about politics and lagged behind children who live elsewhere in developing a sense of political efficacy.¹⁰⁹

Lyon also describes these findings in terms of the quantitative research outlook:

Theta correlations between efficacy and race and cynicism and race were higher than between milieu and the dependent variables at every grade level with the exception of the fifth and sixth graders on the efficacy index. Negro children regardless of where they live had a lower sense of efficacy and higher feelings of cynicism than white students.¹¹⁰

At first blush Lyon's research would seem successful, and it would seem to answer the questions she posed at that outset of her work. The premise that Black children would be

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 292.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 294.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 296-297.

less efficacious than their White peers and more cynical is accurate according to Lyon's results. It also appears to be the case that her work has resolved the dilemmas implicit in Long's work and that Lyon has found a way to substantiate and advance Abramson's work. What I would like to examine in the last part of this chapter is what conclusions might be drawn about the field of political socialization and in particular, what the new work on race and racism might mean for the field.

Where Does This Leave Us Now?

Part of the brilliance of Lyon's work can be found in her conclusions, and I think it is worth thinking about the implications of Lyon's conclusions as ways to measure and evaluate future work. First, Lyon simply connects her research results to real world socio-political problems:

Aside from adding to our knowledge of childhood political socialization, a second implication of these findings is that the prospects for the Negro fulfilling this aspiration through widespread use of the ballot are not encouraging. For adults a sense of political efficacy and low feelings of cynicism are positively related to political involvement. The weaker the sense of efficacy and the stronger the feelings of cynicism the less likely one is to participate in the political process.¹¹¹

Second, Lyon's not only enmeshes her research results in real life socio-political problems, but she also offers a very insightful prediction of how and why this problem might persist:

In recent years legal barriers hindering the full participation of the Negro in the political process have been largely stripped away. The federal government is attempting to stimulate a kind of "grass roots" democracy among Negroes and the urban poor through the poverty and model cities programs. Various black spokesmen striving to arouse the Negro poor out of their apathy and self-hate have captured the headlines and news bulletins. Nevertheless, black youth continue to develop early in life fundamental political orientations that suggest that 'nothing very basic is happening.' When one projects into the future the kind of political behavior correlated with the low-efficacy and high-cynicism

¹¹¹ Ibid., 303.

orientations of Negro youth, one is led to speculate that the next generation of Negro adults will still be operating far below its potential in the political arena.¹¹²

From the vantage point of a historical perspective, most of Lyon's comments can be borne out. It could be submitted that Lyon's work also provides for some vital openings for future research on political socialization. In the next chapter, I will describe the methodological apparatus I developed to test some of the theories and concepts that I have reviewed here. There are some ways in which this theoretical work is inextricably linked to the methodological choices made, and it is within this nebulous arena that I will conclude my comments on the theoretical terrain of the political socialization literature.

The approach I have developed for my research on the political socialization of Black youth is based on four key points: 1) Weaknesses of past scholarly work; 2) Significance of Socio-Political Conditions; 3) Identity Formation; and 4) The necessity of new and different types of methods. In my examination of Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman's work, I presented an overview of some of the key components of the way that the field of political socialization was initially constructed in the 1950s and then modified and challenged in the 1960s and 1970s. I reviewed the impact such factors as parents, peer groups, school, generational periods, life cycles, and media/modern technology have had in political socialization process. In particular, I delved into the emphasis of the scholarship on youth political socialization and this focal point being built around multiple disciplines, including psychology and political science. The backdrop for this work was an understanding of a system maintenance theory or some type of equivalent. Through the discussion of all of these areas, the recurring themes of

¹¹² Ibid., 303-304.

inadequacy of results, lack of (quantitative) significance, and methodological limitations were pointed out and scrutinized.

When the limitations and fault lines of the field of political socialization were revealed, it also became apparent that there were new and different paths available for scholars to embark upon. An example of this could be seen in Niemi and Sobieszek's discussion of idealization and Abramson's work.¹¹³ One of the key insights of Niemi and Sobieszek was that idealization did not just decline and fail within the parameters of typical social science work. What they cite as placing the nail in the coffin for this concept was its inability to provide explanations of minority racial group's behavior and beliefs and the inadequacy of this concept in the face of socio-political realities of that time. The fact that socio-political realities could be brought to bear in this academic analysis suggested that some of the previously mentioned weaknesses in the field had to be examined in a new light. Instead of trying to rearrange some of the more familiar puzzle pieces, such as peer groups, parents, and education, or simply including more puzzle pieces, such as life cycles and generation periods, the recognition of racial minorities and socio-political realities meant that these scholars left open the possibility for a much more fruitful and arduous research task for other scholars in the field of political socialization.

What this new research might entail could be viewed in the presentation of Abramson's work and the way that Long and Lyon incorporated his work, as well as the way they distanced their work from his. Abramson is often credited with substantiating

¹¹³ This point is based on a quote that was highlighted in the earlier portion of this chapter: "But it also seems clear that events of the 1960s played a role in declining idealization. For one thing, there is the simple matter of the timing of the declines. For blacks, we noted Abramson's conclusion that a shift in political trust probably occurred in 1967, with the summer of that year witnessing riots in major American cities." Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 215.

the importance and the need to include race and racism in the study of political socialization. The analytical frame Abramson developed was based on his understanding of the oppressive social conditions Blacks struggled with and the particular influence these life conditions had on the political efficacy and cynicism Blacks exhibited. With recognition that much of the previous research was clouded by predominantly white middle class youth samples, Abramson, Long, and Lyon all developed their work in and around this insight. What their work began to lay the foundation for is an exploration of what the political socialization process might be like for other races and what might be a useful and effective way to learn about this process. Instead of relying on this past cookie cutter approach of forcing all youth into one cognitive pattern or one way of relating to parents, Long and Lyon's research begin to highlight how necessary and difficult this process might be for scholars.

This leads to an inevitable discussion of what methods should be developed in the changing theoretical terrain for the field of political socialization. If the past research did not provide insights into the rich racial diversity in our society and the variations in the political socialization process that can be witnessed for these different racial communities, then the theoretical and conceptual tools should be built upon these principles. Abramson, Long, and Lyon's work all advance this premise, and Lyon's work could be considered the most bold and provocative in this respect. Lyon not only incorporates the significance of socio-political realities into her work, but she interweaves the way in which these socio-political conditions continue to influence and even hamper the political socialization process of Black people. Lyon literally shifts the discourse of political socialization from being a matter of discovery of youthful cognitive patterns and

development, to one in which the relevant social and political conditions of minority racial groups are given equal standing as all other factors. In doing this, Lyon's work ultimately suggests that a much more layered and nuanced approach towards political socialization must be utilized. In terms of a racial minority community, these insights mean that there must be attempts made to observe and understand what the political socialization process looks like and feels like for them. To this end I would like to present a methodological approach that might allow for greater access into this previously ignored and misunderstood realm. As I develop this methodological approach the theoretical terrain will shift slightly, and I will also cover this shift and what some of the consequences of this shift might entail. Moving from a quantitative to a qualitative approach does mean that different questions can be asked and answered, as well as even producing different answers for some of the same questions. In particular, the introduction of race and racism, as well as socio-political conditions, invariably changes the moral and ethical nature of the theory that can be utilized, and this suggests that many of the previous problems that Abramson, Long, and Lyon encountered, along with other scholars of political socialization, such as Merelman, Niemi, and Sobieszek, will need to be wrestled with more.

CHAPTER 3

FINDING A WAY TO SHED MORE LIGHT

In summary, many studies of political socialization have generalized unwarrantedly from limited populations, cross-sectional surveys, poorly measured and theoretically ambiguous variables, and unreliable data. Not until investigators utilize a variety of techniques to observe socialization directly over a considerable time period in representative populations will many useful conclusions about political socialization be forthcoming.

Richard Merelman "*The Adolescence of Political Socialization*" 154.

Children, unlike adults have little or no opportunity to engage in reality testing with their political environment. Moreover, compared with adults young children have little political knowledge. Thus, even if we accept as factual that blacks are deprived of political power and have reason to distrust political leaders, we cannot assume that black children know these facts.

Paul R. Abramson "*Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations*" 1260.

The field of political socialization has made great strides from its initial humble beginnings in the 1950s. The theoretical morass that was covered in the previous section has been largely addressed but not resolved in a satisfactory fashion. This is particularly true for political socialization research that has been done on race and racism. There are still very few responses that have been offered within the field of political socialization that adequately answer the myriad of intriguing questions that race and racism pose for the field. A shift towards qualitative based research could provide a more in-depth and a more layered understanding of the field of political socialization and could provide a different set of answers for questions about race and racism. I finished the previous section by offering a qualitative approach as one alternative to the traditional quantitative research that had been utilized, and I offered this approach as a way to address some of the theoretical and methodological conundrums that have plagued the field of political socialization. In particular, I highlighted the significance of research that was done on racial minorities by Abramson, Long, and Schely in the field of political socialization, and I suggested that a methodological approach based on qualitative methods could enhance and supplement their research findings. In this chapter I would like to build upon these critiques by illustrating the way in which the specific application of qualitative methods can be utilized to address these critiques. I will incorporate a discussion of some basic qualitative methodological principals before moving on to a more detailed analysis of how an ethnographic approach could be applied specifically to research on Black youth's political socialization process. To be able to apply a qualitative approach to the study of Black youth's political socialization there are two crucial areas that I have woven into my own research: The first area is an examination of

Abramson's work and Long and Schley's response to the inadequate and non-existent work that was done on race and racism in the field of political socialization. The second area is the specific ethnographic approach I applied to the study of Black youth's political socialization and what some of the possible implications of this approach were

QUALITATIVE METHODS FOR THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

To be able to properly assess the critiques of quantitative methods, I will review some of the theoretical knots that have materialized in research done on the political socialization of youth, and I will highlight the way in which these critiques present openings for other methodological approaches. It is worth first noting that qualitative methods are not governed by the same scientific rules that apply to quantitative research, and they do not claim to access or illuminate their respective subject matter in the same fashion. Unlike the standards set in quantitative methodological approaches for verifiability, significance, or representative samples, qualitative methods do not rely on these standards as the basis or the barometer of their success. Qualitative methods are designed for and orientated towards the gathering of more intimate and difficult to access knowledge about human behavior.¹¹⁴ Le Compte and Schensul describe the necessity of qualitative methods in the following way: "Many kinds of evaluative or investigative questions that arise in the course of program planning and implementation cannot really be answered very well with standard research methods, such as experiment or collection

¹¹⁴ For more information about qualitative research and specifically ethnographic methods, the following texts can be reviewed: Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn H. Lofland, Editors, *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: Sage Publications, 2001 and H. Russell Bernard, Editor, *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1988.

of quantifiable data alone.”¹¹⁵ As this insight of Le Comte and Schensul suggest there is a great deal of information that is not detected and processed in traditional quantitative research projects. The use of ethnographic methods is one way to address what the quantitative methodological approach missed, neglected or was not able to incorporate into its findings.

This is the point at which the limitations of quantitative research can provide a potent argument for the use of a qualitative approach and a convincing argument for how much is still not known about the political socialization process of Black youth. It is important to review some of the weaknesses of the survey and questionnaire research that have been utilized by scholars in the field of political socialization and to identify exactly how qualitative research could supplement and enhance this research. An example of this point can be found in the way I described the decline of Easton and Dennis’ conceptual category of idealization. In particular, the way that Niemi and Sobieszek argue that the collapse of this category was due in part to multiple theoretical weaknesses also provides an opening for other methodological orientations to be considered.¹¹⁶ It was not just the external awareness of diversity (Black political socialization) or socio-political conditions (change in political views represented by the turbulent 1960s), but the fact that it was simply not that valuable as a theoretical or conceptual tool anymore and that it could not be substantiated by the methodological tools that were being utilized. Put another way, the theoretical and methodological orientations that Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman relied upon to initially portray the significance of Easton and Dennis’ work could not

¹¹⁵ Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research* (Ethnographer's Toolkit, Vol. 1) (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1999) xiii.

¹¹⁶ This point is based on quote from Niemi and Sobieszek that has been previously cited: and discussed in Footnote 113.

ultimately support these findings and this left many unresolved questions about political socialization in place.

It could even be argued that Easton and Dennis' conception of idealization was built upon shaky psychological principles and applied to even more unstable political theories. This was predicated on the utilization of a narrow quantitative methodological approach that could not account for or detect more subtle and complicated forms of human behavior in the participants of this research project. In particular the psychological component of idealization was based on survey research done on youth, and this research also relied upon models of authority that incorporated parental relations as the primary source of control and discipline. This model was not based on qualitative methods that could have incorporated participant observation or in-depth interviews. From this backdrop, scholars used the answers students offered through surveys and questionnaires about trust, knowledge and power of the President and policeman to extrapolate on how political socialization developed for youth.¹¹⁷ This literally meant that authority was transferred from parents to such public figures as policemen and Presidents, and this process of transference occurred for youth at the exact same point in their development. There was no way to witness or analyze this transference of power in a direct manner and there was no attempt to follow up with any of the participants in the process to pinpoint how and why this process unfolds in the way scholarly research suggests it has.

¹¹⁷ "The most striking finding in this area was idealization also characterized children's views. That is, to most children, political authority seemed trustworthy, benevolent, and helpful. To a surprising degree children responded that the policeman and especially the president "Would *always* want to help me if I needed it," that "they almost *never* make mistakes," that "they know *more* than anyone." (Hess and Torney 1967:41,45,49) Richard G. Niemi and Barbara I. Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," *Annual Review of Sociology* 3(1977): 212.

The fundamental point that should be established by this line of analysis was never substantiated though and this project has remained a highly contested enterprise.¹¹⁸ Since these views of youth never established a clear, concise understanding of youth political development and since these findings did not add to our understanding of political development for any period, this left open the possibility that either youth never developed their political views with any understanding or appreciation of idealization or that idealization was never relevant for the development of their political views in the first place. The point being that if research that was conducted on adults never substantiated the role of idealization in the political development of youth, then the question of how various childhood periods of political development might connect to the adult life (stage) or with a person that has fully formed political his/her views and behaviors would still not be answered. It was also equally clear that quantitative methodological approaches would never allow for these questions to be fully answered and that other methodological approaches needed to be utilized.

It is also important to point out the impact that race and racism and the socio-political conditions had on the field of political socialization and how qualitative methodological approaches can support research in these areas too. I would like to return to the way that Niemi and Sobieszek presented Easton and Dennis' notion of idealization and suggest that the racial and socio-political fault lines that were uncovered in this

¹¹⁸ Merelman undermines the logic of idealization at one point in his work when he suggest that the marriage between the psychological and political theory used for the field of political socialization had not even been successful substantiated: "How can we predict whether political orientations will stabilize until we identify the psychological mechanisms by which such orientations are learned? It becomes important to know whether a particular orientation rests upon modeling, reinforcement, imitation, traumatic childhood event, or cognitive-ego development, for each of these mechanisms may have different capacities to crystallize the attitude in question." Richard M. Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," *Sociology of Education* 45(1972): 157.

conceptual framework were emblematic of the problems within the field of political socialization.¹¹⁹ Niemi and Sobieszek draw attention to the fact that socio-political time periods can represent a significant shift in political orientations and socialization, but that this process is also inextricably tied to the way in which identity formation proceeds. To be able to examine this point it is important to examine the attention that Niemi and Sobieszek give to Abramson's selection of 1967. The fact that they mentioned the specific year 1967 and the riots that occurred in the summer of that year highlights the way in which these points converge.

It is true that 1967 provided a critical point in the Civil Rights Movement, and it was not just the riots in Newark and Detroit that made it such a momentous time. A year before, the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California was founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, and, in 1967, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) was given credit for coining the phrase "Black Power." It was also less than one year later that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. These historical events had a profound impact on race relations in the United States, and this impact was acutely felt by racial minority communities. It could even be argued that for many Black people it meant that those attempts to change the social conditions through non-violent, direct action was becoming less effective and more violent, and militant tactics were becoming more appealing. The riots represented a certain level of overt frustration but also arguably represented a shift in a world view and mindset that many Black youth had embraced. This is especially true for the level of respect for, and trust in traditional political methods and institutions. It is not surprising then that Niemi

¹¹⁹ Support for this argument can be found in Footnote 113.

and Sobieszek's review of Abramson's work would specifically draw attention to this date as an integral factor in the declining significance of idealization.

What is less clear is how this year or any historical period can be presented as support or a weakness in the particular framework a scholar is attempting to develop and what potential dilemmas might arise from the reliance on this or any other conceptual tool. It was not just represented by the riots that Niemi and Sobieszek mentioned but by a myriad of cataclysmic events that represented a literal test of faith for Black people in this American society: Would we continue to believe that America could be changed by a Civil Rights movement or was it going to be a time of violent and repressive social and political force exerted upon us? From this vantage point it is easy to see how there might have been a more dramatic shift in the measurements used for idealization in Black children's political socialization, but what methodological approach could be utilized to prove this point? Would a series of written questions from that period of time or from our contemporary period provide the best evidence? Would ethnographic research that incorporated the insights and the impressions of that period or our current period provide better evidence? These questions can be seen as not just carrying a heavy or almost impossible burden for scholars that have to make these methodological choices. In other words, being able to do research on youth who were in the process of forming their social and political views is a tremendous task, but that added dilemma that minority youth place on the scholar further complicates this scholarly endeavor. In particular, trying to determine what impact 1967 had on Black youth's political socialization in the context of a time when so many fundamental aspects of our social and political fabric were being dramatically altered is a very treacherous exercise. How to properly account for the

relevancy and the necessity of dominant conceptional tools, such as idealization, has to be incorporated into an understanding of the potential limitations of any conceptional tools used to study minority communities. This is particularly true on the level of methodological choices that can always alter, disrupt, or confound research results for minority or dominant communities.

Based on the critique Niemi and Sobieszek offered of idealization, the question of whether this concept was ever relevant or significant is not only one that can be raised; one could also ask if idealization was ever a relevant concept for Black children's political socialization. This critique could allow for a more detailed analysis of Black children's interaction with authority figures within their communities (e.g., police officers) and external authority figures (e.g., the President). Schley describes the different outlook towards government that Black children develop in the following manner: "Unlike white, middle-class children, Negroes developed negative attitudes toward government long before adolescence."¹²⁰ Schley also concludes from her research that:

Although limited to one city, the data suggest that being Negro is a much stronger predictor of a low sense of efficacy and feelings of cynicism than milieu. Negro youth were more cynical and felt less efficacious than their white counterparts regardless of where they lived.¹²¹

Even though Schley's research helps to substantiate the significance of socio-political factors and race in the field of political socialization, it is still within the realm of quantitative research and it leaves fundamental questions neglected. The point then is not simply to include more detailed or a greater variety of questions in a survey or

¹²⁰ Schley R Lyons, "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," *The Journal of Politics* 32(1970): 302.

¹²¹ Schley R Lyons, "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," 301.

questionnaire, but to literally develop a different approach towards gathering information. Ethnographic approaches that incorporate participant observation and in-depth interviews are vital components in being able to properly address complex and confusing research questions. A change in methodological approaches provides a way to shore up and build upon the theoretical bedrock that is often neglected or is mistakenly assumed to be sacrosanct. I would like to build upon Schely's insights and connect her work to an argument for specifically, the utilization of qualitative methods for the study of Black youth's political socialization.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS AS THE QUALITATIVE WEAPON OF CHOICE

To begin this discussion of qualitative methods, I would like to examine the work of Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul. I would like to make a case for why a qualitative methodological approach should be used for research within the field of political socialization. This case can be built not just upon the limitations of quantitative research, but also on an understanding of what contributions qualitative methods can offer the field of political socialization.

Two of the more common components of a qualitative approach are participant observation and face-to-face interviews.¹²² Each of these entails a direct form of communication in the ways that allow for and provide the space for the subject of a study to interact with the pursuer of the study. Unlike the one way street of quantitative-based research methods, qualitative approaches leave room for the information gathered and

¹²² There are a variety of techniques that can be used for ethnographer research. I focus on only two approaches, but LeCompte and Schensul provide a more detailed list: "The ethnographer's principal database is amassed in the course of human interaction: direct observation; face-to-face interviewing and elicitation; audiovisual recording; and mapping the networks, times, and places in which human interactions occur." Margaret D LeCompte and Jean J Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, 1999, xiv.

offered not just a process to flow in the direction of the researcher and researched, but to be more of a back and forth process that is more respectful and mutual in nature.

LeCompte and Schensul suggest that, “Unlike other approaches to research, the (ethnographic) *researcher* is the primary tool for collecting data.”¹²³ This emphasis on the researcher’s role helps to highlight the significance of his/her personal background and social location as integral factors in the research process.

The way in which this personal grounding meshes with the respondents plays a vital part in the research results, and this is part of the critical background information that I began my work with. Instead of a survey being distributed to respondents to fill out in a solitary fashion or a set questionnaire being administered orally, qualitative methods provide for a setting in which there is a (direct or indirect) interaction between the researcher and the respondent, and there is always an element of unpredictability and surprise built into the research. This aspect of the research will continue to be included in the research design, implementation, and conclusions that Compte and Schensul cover, as well as within my own work. It is important to note that part of what distinguishes qualitative and quantitative research is the role of the researcher. Some of these differences will be explored in the next section when research on Black youth is covered in general, and, as my own research design is presented, more specific differences will become apparent too.

These two key components of qualitative research, participant observation and face-to-face interviews, can also be understood by examining their unique contribution to the research process. LeCompte and Schensul describe participant observation in the following way: “It entails spending a considerable amount of time with research subjects

¹²³ Ibid., xiv.

in their natural settings as they perform day-to-day activities, observing these behaviors and listening to the comments and conversations of subjects, and recording this information as field notes for later analysis.”¹²⁴ This technique, coupled with the use of face-to-face interviews, would open up the possibility of moving beyond what a survey or a limited questionnaire might be able to provide. Face-to-face to interviews provide a way to follow up on what is observed during the participant observation component of the research, and this allow for the researcher to probe more deeply into those points that s/he finds most striking or relevant. Le Compte and Schensul describe the way that techniques can come together and form an ethnographic method in the following way:

Ethnographies and other forms of case studies always involve a consideration of people and events in their natural settings. They are, therefore, ideal for answering a question such as, “What’s really happening in this program or with this individual?” The focus of such research, then, is on what makes the people in the study tick- how they behave, how they define their world, what is important to them, why they say and do what they do, and what structural or contextual features influence their thoughts, behaviors, and relationships.¹²⁵

When these insights are applied to the previous chapters, one can see how these two techniques could be effectively utilized for research in the field of political socialization. The exact way this research approach could interface with research being done on the political socialization process of Black youth will be covered in greater detail now.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS APPLIED TO BLACK YOUTH’S POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

When the previously discussed methodological approach is applied to the political socialization process of Black youth in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, then the potential value this approach might have becomes easier to appreciate but more

¹²⁴ Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul,, *Mapping Social Networks, Spatial Data, and Hidden Populations* (Ethnographer's Toolkit, Vol. 4) (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1999) 152.

¹²⁵ Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul,, *Designing and Conducing Ethnographic Research* (Ethnographer's Toolkit, Vol. 1) (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1999) 84.

complicated and difficult to defend (within a traditional social science framework.) My decision to utilize an ethnographic approach can be shown to be the logical extension of what the previous critical review of the methodological (and theoretical) approaches highlighted. Whereas a specific review of qualitative and quantitative approaches, as well as non -academic approaches, will illustrate the need for a methodological orientation that includes qualitative tools, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, this does not diminish the significance of other factors that need to be considered and addressed.

As Schley and Long's work in the previous section suggested, this is especially true when the methodological debates are not just applied to more abstract concepts, such as identity politics and formation, but are placed in the specific context of a study of the political socialization for Black youth. It becomes not just a simple methodological decision about the appropriate tool used to measure the phenomena being studied; it becomes a decision about the impact that the measuring device might have and a decision about what the implications of attempting to measure people within a marginalized community might mean. In other words, when it moves from an abstract discussion about the utility of a qualitative or a quantitative methodological approach into a discussion about what approach might provide the most insight into the political socialization process for Black youth and what might generate the potential for social change for Black youth, then the lines between the various approaches become more murky and confusing.

The way in which LeCompte and Schensul describe ethnography provides an excellent example of how this approach could be applied to the field of political

socialization and specifically to Black youth's political socialization.¹²⁶ Granted the previously described dilemmas and weaknesses that survey research has represented for the field of political socialization, an ethnographic approach that incorporates participant observation and face-to-face interviews would appear to be a well-deserved antidote for this quantitative research. There are a variety of ways that ethnographic research techniques could be utilized in conducting research on Black youth's political socialization, and I would like to review my specific selection of participant observation and face-to-face interview techniques in this section of my work. Participant observation was one of the key techniques that had been previously discussed by LeCompte and Schensul, and they identified this technique as being applicable for any group setting in which there were regular, noticeable patterns of social interactions.

I chose a high school for my research location because of not only the institutional setting it provided for youth (required school attendance by law), but because of the potential for being able to observe the political socialization process directly (African American Studies class.) and indirectly (social relations and identity formation.) Being in this setting allowed me to freely interact with students and to witness the way in which they created their worlds inside and outside of the classroom. This technique, participant observation, was supplemented with the type of face-to-face interviews that LeCompte and Schensul also describe as being a critical component of ethnographic research. Face-to-face interviews provided me with the opportunity to talk with students on a voluntary basis about specific issues, as well as other areas of interest that the students might have

¹²⁶ Ethnographic work done on Black youth in educational settings can be found in the following texts: Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001. and L Janelle Dance, *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling*. New York: Routledge Falmer, 2002.

had. These interviews were primarily conducted in the Media Center or in one of the teachers' cubicles. These informal settings offered us a relaxed environment in which we could discuss their political and social beliefs and behaviors.

The classroom setting provided me with an invaluable basis for my research, and the interviews solidified a comprehensive and intriguing ethnographic approach.

Through the establishment of this location for my research, I was not only introduced to the teachers and administrators that were critical for my work, but I also gained access to an elective social studies course for Juniors and Seniors. This African American Studies class offered me a setting in which I could observe how students learned about political and social issues, and this classroom setting connected extremely well to the research topics I was interested in pursuing.

The interviews helped to reveal points of connection in subtle ways, as well as in an overt fashion. I divided the interviews into four different sessions, and each session was devoted to a different aspect of the political socialization process. The first interview provided the students with an opportunity to talk about their personal lives with special attention paid to their family, friends, and community and their educational life. The second interview primarily focused on their political beliefs and behavior. The third interview was designed to gauge the depth of each student's knowledge of Black political historical leaders and events, as well as knowledge of significant contemporary Black political figures, events, and concepts. The final interview was devoted to reviewing the previous material and probing in greater detail into their political philosophy. This included questions that might elucidate the role that some specific factors might play in the development of their political views. The combination of participant observation in

the classroom and interviews in informal settings provided me with a unique vantage point to be able to observe the political socialization process for Black youth.

To further elaborate on the way that the interview process enhanced my research and also distinguished my work from previous quantitative research, I would like to present the rationale for my choice of questions and my choice of the interview format. There were three specific areas that my questions were organized around, and this included the following: Inspiration and direction provided by the work of specific scholars; interest in finding out more about Black youth's knowledge of Black politics and history; and learning more about the relationship between the field of political socialization and identity politics. In terms of what questions I developed in conversation with and in response to other scholars' work, the following questions, from the first and second interviews could be viewed as representative of this area.¹²⁷

The questions I based on Jones' work were from survey research that was administered to high school students in 1971 and 1972. Even though the students I selected were not part of a "social studies program which actively encouraged student participation in the local community,"¹²⁸ it did seem appropriate to test whether any student's involvement in community work, political activity, or volunteer activities might have influenced his/her political beliefs and behaviors. The questions that followed Greenstein's lines of inquiry were more rudimentary in nature. Greenstein's questions were used for elementary and junior high school students, and the simplicity of these questions was very apparent. These questions provided me an opportunity to establish a foundation on which I could build a more complex and detailed platform from which I

¹²⁷ Appendix I.

¹²⁸ Ruth S. Jones, "Community Participation as Pedagogy: Its Effects on Political Attitudes of Black Students," 400.

could launch more provocative and insightful questions. The inclusion of questions that were similar to the survey research material Greenstein's questions covered was not meant to challenge the strength or validity of these more narrowly framed points, but to push and prod the boundaries of the broader questions that could be raised about how and why Black youth develop their politics in the way that they do.

Unlike the survey research format that Jones and Greenstein utilized, I allowed for my respondents to move well beyond the scope and the depth of the intended questions. Even though I incorporated similar questions into my interview sessions, I believe that the respondents presented answers that went well beyond what could have been incorporated in a survey or a questionnaire. The question format I utilized allowed for the students to verbally respond, and their answers also provided openings for follow up questions and other avenues of investigation. Facial inflections, body movements, and unintelligible syllables could become part of the response and were open to further scrutiny. Even though I chose to work with the same material as previous scholars in the field of political socialization, I also decided to move beyond the usual survey research format and this process was most apparent in some of the questions I used in my first two interviews.

The third set of interviews dealt with some contemporary and past noteworthy Black political leaders, local, state, and federal level elected officials for Prince George's County, historical and contemporary political phrases and terms that specifically resonate within the Black community, general politically relevant events and terms. The sixty plus names, phrases, and events in this section were designed to explore the depth of the

student's knowledge in a wide variety of areas.¹²⁹ This was not intended to be an exclusive or an exhaustive list for Black history or contemporary knowledge of Black political or social events and figures. Nor was this list intended to create a hierarchy for general political or historical knowledge of local, state or national events or political leaders. The way in which students could respond to these questions allowed them to contribute to the debates about the use and vitality of establishing canons of political knowledge for youth and whether or not these canons would be appropriate for the larger field of political socialization. Canons have been built around the level of political knowledge youth are expected to have gained at this point in their development. I was not interested in trying to re-establish or contest the utility of a baseline of acceptable political knowledge for youth at certain ages; I was interested in highlighting what specific political knowledge students might have acquired already. Whereas the debate about specific knowledge is extremely important, it is also equally important to try to discover why some areas appear so boring and other areas tend to elicit such animated responses from the students.

The first interview and part of the fourth interview were primarily built around the premise that there were subtle and overt ways in which youth develop their own identity that intersects with the way in which they also develop their political identity. This is why most of the first interview is focused upon personal and family life and why the fourth interview is split between questions about identity formation, political socialization, and entertainment/modern technology.¹³⁰ These questions begin to unearth the way that Black youth learn to identify themselves and what some of their political

¹²⁹ Appendix I.

¹³⁰ Appendix I.

beliefs and behaviors are. This line of questioning begins to open windows into the complexity of youth development and how difficult it is to tease out specific points of political development without the inclusion of a vast array of potentially contradictory and trivial points. Whereas quantitative research might be able to illustrate certain political tendencies or beliefs, these questions provided a way to account for and review the way in which youth might develop these views and behaviors. This line of questioning also allows for the impact of the socio-political environment to be considered. The inclusion of these identity formation and socio-political factors produced more layers to the research and can potentially produce a much more rich and nuanced vision of Black youth's political socialization. I have presented some of the reasons why I utilized an ethnographic method that incorporated participant observation and face-to-face interviews.

It is at this point that a qualitative methodological approach could be proposed as a solution for some of the dilemmas that quantitative approaches present and as a way to advance the research that has been done in the field of political socialization. In particular, an ethnographic approach that incorporates face-to-face interviews and participant observation could provide greater insight into the political socialization process for Black youth. By starting with participant observation in a classroom setting, I was able to watch the students interact with each other and the teacher, and I was able to observe what transpired during these interactions. I set up follow up interviews with some of the students, and I was able to probe more deeply into how some of the students construct their social and political worlds. This type of investigation had the express goal of being more revealing and informative than a quantitative approach would be.

Especially in terms of such potentially delicate areas as an upsetting home life, overtly racist experiences, lack of interest in school, or personal feuds with other students, teachers, or staff. All of these areas would have a greater likelihood of being detected and documented by an ethnographic approach. These qualitative techniques opened doors that quantitative research might not have been able to budge. Quantitative research has been able to substantiate and document the existence of a particular attitude or behavior, but the use of a qualitative approach can shed more light on ways in which attitudes or behaviors manifest themselves and what might be some of the factors that contribute to this process. The potential for producing results that could move beyond the established literature was the basis of my selection of an ethnographic approach and it was the guiding principle for the way I constructed my research design.

THE RACIAL GRIND AS FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND

For my ethnographic project, I chose to study a senior level high school African American History class, and I conducted interviews with fifteen students in this class (and in the school.) The school I worked in was Trenton Senior High School, and it was located in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The two key components of this ethnographic approach were participant observation and face-to-face interviews. I utilized a participant observation technique in one African American History classroom, and I also taped a series of four interviews with each of the fifteen students that volunteered to participate in this research project. Trenton Senior High School is clearly located in a suburban community where the social and political wounds remain hidden but manifest themselves in obvious and insidious ways within and right outside the school walls. Many of the signs of the typical problems that plague urban schools are

apparent, and reports of violence, failing grades, multi-day suspensions, dropout rates, police activity and teen pregnancy are all part of some of the daily problems that plague Trenton High School.¹³¹ This contradiction between what one might expect from a middle and working class suburban high school and what actually takes place at this school on a daily basis is part of a larger conundrum that the political socialization process for Black youth has become trapped in, and it is also one of the areas I address in my research.

The way in which these students engaged the conceptual nature and the reality-based nature of politics on an everyday basis provided me with the type of layered and nuanced setting that I was interested in studying. It was this setting that allowed me to gain access to some of the ways in which a Black political socialization process developed alongside the process of individual identity formation. How these students navigated through the field of real and perceived political issues, in and outside of a classroom setting, was the prism that I wanted to shine a light through. This prism and light could be understood in terms of asking the following questions: What do these students learn about the United State's history and government? Do the students accept traditional notions about American politics? What is the depth and the substance of their political knowledge? How do they show their comfort with or their alienation from politics? How do they understand their own power and status in society? Do they believe they can change their social conditions? Do they look to what would be considered traditional political options or would their political views and actions be considered non-traditional?

¹³¹ The same problems that I witnessed at Trenton High School I also witnessed at a high school in Washington, D.C. This first school I observed was part of a pilot program for my current research project.

Previous quantitative research done in the field of political socialization tended to neglect or ignore race and racism as viable factors, and Abramson, Long and Schley's work represented very distinct departures from this past race neutral or absent work. I believe that the quote from Abramson that I began this chapter with is emblematic of the confusion that used to reign supreme in this field, and I believe it still represents one of the most difficult areas that scholars have to grapple with now.¹³² It's worth restating the fact that Abramson was considered a pioneer in the field of political socialization with regards to bringing race and racism into the conversation, and I have highlighted the way in which so many other scholars have cited (Merelman, Niemi, and Sobieszek) and used his work (Long and Schley). It is not an exceptional quotation I used from his work for the epigraph, but it is part and parcel of an overall view Abramson had of race and racism and its place in the field of political socialization:

Like white children, black children have little or no experience with which to evaluate the trustworthiness of political leaders, but research suggests that black children are also less likely to trust political leaders than white children are. Feelings of political powerlessness and political distrust appear to develop among blacks even before they become adults. Why do such feelings develop?¹³³

This quotation, like the epigraph, suggests that all children have no experience with a "political environment" or "political leaders" and that because of this given reality, there should be no racial differences in the political outlook that any children have. Of course, Abramson recognized and documented the racial differences in political attitudes and behaviors that existed between White and Black children, and this led to his hypothesis

¹³² "Children, unlike adults have little or no opportunity to engage in reality testing with their political environment. Moreover, compared with adults young children have little political knowledge. Thus, even if we accept as factual that black youth are deprived of political power and have reason to distrust political leaders, we cannot assume that black children know these facts." Paul R. Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," *The Journal of Politics* 34(1972): 1260.

¹³³ Paul R. Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," 1243-1244.

being based on the lingering, troublesome question: Why do these differences in racial feelings develop?

It is critical to review Schley's findings again and present her work as one logical extension of the work that Abramson started on race and racism for the field of political socialization. Schley also discovered racial differences in the political socialization process of youth, but she appeared to be stuck in the same analytical framework that limited Abramson's work:

What are the implications of these findings? First, the widely accepted model of political socialization among children assumes rapid socialization during the elementary school years with relatively little change thereafter. The samples that provided data for the above hypothesized pattern contained an urban, white bias and as a result may be descriptive of only the white child from a working- or middle-class home. Such a model was not descriptive of the Negro child's political socialization in the dimensions explored here- efficacy and cynicism; nor was it descriptive of the white slum child's acquisition of a sense of efficacy.¹³⁴

I would like to draw attention to Schley's use of cynicism and efficacy as her theoretical filter. It is not just that her work falls into the category of quantitative research, but it is also her specific use of the previously noted narrow categories of cynicism and efficacy that stifled her work's potential. These categories do record a racial difference (between Blacks and Whites) and they do highlight a negative phenomenon (higher rate of political alienation and a lower level of trust among Black children), but these insights do not shed light on some of the more basic aspects of the political socialization process for Black youth. This limitation in Schley's work can be understood in terms of a series of questions that could be posed for her work: How do Black children develop such negative attitude towards politics? What could change their outlook? Is it possible to change this phenomenon?

¹³⁴ Lyons, Schley R. "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," *The Journal of Politics*, 32(1970): 303.

These are exactly the type of questions Schley attempts to grapple with in the last part of her work and that she ultimately fails to adequately address. I previously cited a portion of this conclusion in a more extensive fashion, and I reviewed the significance of this conclusion in the context of Abramson and Long's work.¹³⁵ What is most intriguing about her conclusion is that she believes that the racial differences she detected within the categories of cynicism and efficacy will become more pronounced as political blemishes for Blacks and that she believes the effort at that time geared towards erasing these blemishes would fail. In hindsight, it would be easy to suggest that these predications were way off base and not even supported by her research. Clearly the voting rates nationally have improved for the Black voting age population, and the last national election suggests that voter participation dramatically increased for everyone.¹³⁶ I would submit that this is not the end of the story and that there are even more questions that could be raised though: Are local, state or national voting patterns the best indicator of cynicism or efficacy? Do testing personal attitudes and beliefs about political figures and institutions provide a better indicator for cynicism or efficacy? Is the problem with the development and utilization of the analytical categories or are there inherent weaknesses in any analytical categories? If these analytical categories are not used, are there better terms that could be utilized?

As these questions suggest, it is not just a matter of offering a critique of Abramson, Long, and Schley's work that is important; it is a whole re-evaluating and re-

¹³⁵ "Various black spokesmen striving to arouse the Negro poor out of their apathy and self-hate have captured the headlines and news bulletins. Nevertheless, black youth continue to develop early in life fundamental political orientations that suggest that, 'nothing very basic is happening.' When one projects into the future the kind of political behavior correlated with the low-efficacy and high-cynicism orientations of Negro youth, one is led to speculate that the next generation of Negro adults will still be operating far below its potential in the political arena." Schley R Lyons, "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," 301.

¹³⁶ David A Bositis, "The Black Vote in 2004," *The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies*, 1.

conceptualizing of the field of political socialization that needs to be pursued. I would like to probe more deeply into other possible ways to answer the previously asked questions through the use of an ethnographic method. Even though I have reviewed Schley's and other scholars' answers to some of these questions in terms of theoretical considerations, I believe it is equally important to address some of the methodological issues that arise from these questions too. It is from this vantage point that I envision my work as a way to assess and evaluate these questions.

In particular, the question that Abramson posed is central to my work: "Why do such feelings [of political powerlessness] develop [for Black youth]?" To be able to address these questions, I set up an ethnographic research project at a high school in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan area. I not only utilized participant observation methods in one classroom, but I also complemented this method with one-on-one interviews with fifteen Junior and Senior high school students. This selection of students was not based on any quantitative logic of a random or representative sample but primarily based on class size, student availability, and school and classroom access considerations. Even though ethnographic research would not allow for me to safely extrapolate from my research any results that could be use for establishing general principals or creating new theories, it did provide me with a potent vehicle to review previous work, assess strengths and weaknesses, and highlight fruitful new paths of inquiry. Most importantly I developed and utilized a methodological approach that provided me with an opportunity to access areas of political socialization that had been rarely witnessed in terms of the application of methodological tools and inadequately addressed in the construction of theoretical frameworks.

I attempted to engage the question of, “Why do such feelings [of political powerlessness] develop?” by trying to discover how these Black young adults created and maintained their political world. I devised questions that would allow me to touch on the wide swath of variables and factors that had appeared in the field of political socialization at one point or another. These areas include the role of parents, peer groups, educational institutions, and the status of youth. System maintenance theories and the socio-political environment of the respondents are also included and are key areas of examination. I also allowed for the respondents to carve out their own space and to move beyond even this list of factors and variables. The richness and complexity of their answers went well beyond what the literature had suggested and certainly did not fit into the narrow theoretical confines that scholars like Abramson had established. Applying an ethnographic approach to the study of Black youth’s political beliefs and behaviors is critical from the standpoint of this specific methodological debate (quantitative or qualitative), but it is also important from the standpoint of the lack of basic knowledge we have about the political socialization process for youth in general, and Black youth specifically.

CHAPTER 4

SOUNDING OFF POLITICALLY AND NOT SO POLITICALLY

There is evidence that the schools make a substantial contribution to the political socialization of both minority group and duller students through a process Langston has called “compensatory political socialization.” Because few of these students bring parental support for democratic values or political participation with them to school, they find social studies offerings stimulating, not redundant. By contrast, their more fortunate peers apparently are bored by the social studies courses that recapitulate ideas already mastered elsewhere. Indeed, there is even some evidence that the school alienates bright twelfth graders from democratic values. Thus, the effects of the school appear to be both variable and selective. Richard M. Merelman, “*The Adolescence of Political Socialization*” 150.

Those students who drew on life experience in seminars quickly learned that scholarly discussion moved on over this offering as if it never occurred. I learned that experience was a shameful burden of knowledge acquired “practically,” every day, rather than “theoretically” from a distance. This erasure of a particular form of knowing the world by the academy was one aspect of my present life that helped me to listen more respectfully to the children’s talk than I might have otherwise.

Ann Arnett Ferguson *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* 14.

THE SCHOOL AND THE CLASSROOM

When I arrived at this suburban Maryland high school, I immediately noticed it was a new facility. This observation was later confirmed by students, teachers, and staff that told me this building had not only just opened in 2005, but that it also cost fifty eight million dollars. Only about a block from a major thoroughfare, and not far from a freeway exit, it was apparent that this high school was conveniently located. As I pulled into the parking lot, and I began to stare at the five story structure, I was also struck by how compact it appeared. Even for a school population with a total enrollment of 2,046 students, the visible space seemed tight.¹³⁷ It's difficult to imagine how the two connected buildings can serve as the entire space for the school. Once inside the largest building, a different sense of space could be seen. Instead of appearing cramped and tight, the long, and wide halls gave a sense of a very spacious facility, and during those times when students were in class an almost eerie empty silence lingered over the school. This feeling shifted again when I went into one of the classrooms. I started with an observation of a ninth grade class that was packed tight. There was not an empty seat and the teacher told me that thirty plus students per class was the average for all of her ninth grade classes. In fact, this teacher, Ms. Sweet, even stated that there had been a "population explosion," and that this was due in part to the new facility.¹³⁸ This new facility could hold more students than the temporary school it had replaced, and the increase in ninth grade students was testament to this fact.

¹³⁷ High School Enrollment Distribution official records as of Monday, November 21, 2005. (Provided by Trenton High School Administrative Staff.)

¹³⁸ To protect the anonymity of the participants in this research, their names have been changed. All of the quotations in this section are based on my field research at a high school in Maryland.

As I started with Ms. Sweet's Freshman level World History class, and moved on to Mr. Fieldmore's Junior level AP American History class and Mr. Tackle's Senior level Psychology class, and then finally to Mr. Tefton's Senior level African American History class, I began to notice a lot of other special traits of this school. Ms. Sweet gave me permission to observe her class on that one occasion, and, as chair of the Social Studies Department she was able to provide me with assistance in my search for a class that was more appropriate for my research to study. I was looking for a Social Studies class with primarily Seniors in attendance. Based on the previously reviewed literature I had already decided that a Senior level class would provide me with an appropriate population to observe. Students at this age are beginning to grapple with impending adult responsibilities and this includes being able to vote at age eighteen. Being able to study how youth learn about politics within a classroom setting would be the primary focus of this ethnographic research, and this classroom setting would also allow me to set up interviews with some students to learn more about other aspects of their overall political socialization process. This would include, but not be limited to how they process this academic material on a personal basis. Before I found a class that met these criteria, I observed three other classroom settings.

I began to notice some prominent trends within the student body as I attended these various classes within the Social Studies Department. The vast majority of the students in attendance at the school that I noticed were Black, and there was also a substantial Latino population. I also noticed one or two White students in the school, and I did not see any Asian or Native American students. The four classrooms I observed had a majority of female students. These observations matched the statistical breakdown of

the student body produced by the school in the area of race but not the statistical breakdown of the student body by gender.¹³⁹ I also noticed that three of the four teachers that I worked with were White and three of them were men. I was not completely sure what relevancy this apparent discrepancy between the student body's racial and gender makeup and the teachers' racial and gender makeup might mean yet. I decided to focus my research on Mr. Tefton's Senior level African American History class.

Mr. Tefton's class immediately stood out, and it became apparent that this was a very unusual class. In particular, Mr. Tefton's teaching methodology, the course curriculum, and the classroom dynamics all seemed to be built around establishing and maintaining informal discussions as the norm for each class session. Mr. Tefton taught this African American History elective class for Seniors during seventh period, and this young Black teacher seemed quite comfortable and confident in playing the role of leader and facilitator during the class sessions. The students clearly identified with him, and I was not surprised to hear that he had been the Varsity Basketball coach the year before. Nor was I surprised to learn that he had been a fellow graduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park and that he had been in the School of Education¹⁴⁰. His tall, slender, athletic build was as noticeable as his very charismatic and engaging classroom approach. Unlike the other classrooms I had observed, Mr. Tefton's class used only one text book - African American History: A Journey of Liberation - and this text was only sparingly used.¹⁴¹ He also rarely gave in class assignments and he assigned very little homework. The classroom dynamics seemed to revolve around discussions of current

¹³⁹ High School Enrollment Distribution (Provided by Trenton High School Administrative Staff): 67% Black, 27% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 1% White and 51% Women, 49% Men

¹⁴⁰ University of Maryland, College Park produces the largest number of teachers for the state of Maryland.

¹⁴¹ None of the students actually mentioned using this text or being assigned something to do in this text. It was unclear how this text was utilized, if at all.

political and social hot button issues, and these discussions usually dominated the entire eighty-one minute period. Mr. Tefton shared with me his frustration in being given this class at such a late date and not being able to properly prepare for it, as he had done for his other classes.¹⁴² He explained to me that the text was outdated and needed to be replaced and that it had been difficult to find suitable supplemental material for this class. In terms of the quality and the depth of the conversations though, it appeared that many students enjoyed these exchanges, but that also many of them struggled with the ideas and concepts that were introduced to them during these classroom discussions.

The first time I walked into the classroom, Mr. Tefton was reading Courtland Milloy's column in the Washington Post. This particular column was the second in a two part series, and it offered a biting critique of the lack of political activism and awareness of the student body at Howard University.¹⁴³ As the twenty students looked at their own copies of this article and listened to Mr. Tefton read this column, they began to formulate their responses. I noticed that eighteen of the students were Black and two of the students were Latino. I also noticed that only seven of the students were women, and thirteen were men. The men sat in the middle of the room and they were clumped together while most of the women sat on the outside of this group. This alignment also tended to reflect the group dynamics in which quite often the men spoke first and most

¹⁴² This class was assigned to Mr. Tefton right before the Semester started, and it was not like all of the other classes he had time to prepare for. This elective class did not appear to be given as high a priority as the other core and required classes.

¹⁴³ In the first column, Milloy questions why Howard University students did not have a stronger reaction to President Bush's visit to the campus. Milloy pokes fun at those events that Howard students embrace and support, and Milloy suggest, that Howard students have become apolitical and apathetic. Courtland Milloy, "How Bush Visit Became the Siege of Howard U.," [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/29/AR2005102901574.html), Sunday, October 30, 2005 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/29/AR2005102901574.html> In the second column, Milloy responded some of the Howard University students' criticisms of his work. Courtland Milloy, "Time for Some Soul-Searching At Howard U.," [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com), Wednesday, November 2, 2005 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/01/AR2005110102060.html>

often. Mr. Tefton encouraged the students to write out their responses and wait to speak after this had been done. There did not appear to be a clear agreement with the Howard students, nor was there an outpouring of sympathy for Courtland Milloy's position. A lot of students wanted to know why the incident at Howard was such a "big deal," or why political activities (or an absence of them) were being scrutinized in the way Milloy had written about them in his column. Mr. Tefton suggested to his class that, "A lot of what he [Milloy] is saying is true," and he also suggested to his class that, "As much as you [they] might hate what he has to say," they needed to think about Milloy's column very carefully. Mr. Tefton asked his students to think about whether or not students should be involved in politics and what type of politics they should or not be engaged in. Mr. Tefton allowed this conversation to develop, and he continued to nourish it as it spilled into other areas.

It became clear that the students were most interested in talking about the recent violence in the community and at the school. There had been a huge melee at the school, and some of the students claimed that three hundred students were involved. Mr. Tefton asked them directly about this incident and asked for the students' versions of the events. He told the students that it was being presented to staff and teachers as part of an ongoing feud between the Wicker and Tidal Basin neighborhoods. The students did not dispute this official version, but they did offer a lot more details. Some of the students knew the student that was initially "jumped" that started the free-for-all, and some of the other students knew the "jumpers." Other students commented on how ridiculous they thought the various neighborhood disputes were, and others shared their fears about traveling to and from school. Still other students talked about the community network that was

established and maintained in the neighborhoods and how this was needed for survival. There were also comments made about illicit drug use and the crimes that come with this drug activity. One student suggested that, “Drugs were brought here by the White man” and another student mentioned Rayful Edmond’s video. The comments about Rayful Edmond seemed to reinforce his legendary and notorious status in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan area.¹⁴⁴ Mr. Tefton asked the students if they thought that illegal drug activity and use was good for their communities and if they chose to be a part of this activity, if this was the best that they could do with their lives.

The teacher reminded the students about his West Indian heritage and how he was “Born and raised in the Bronx.” I believe that Mr. Tefton’s divulging of personal information was instrumental in creating a space in which the students felt comfortable reciprocating and sharing their own stories. An example of this was what happened during this same conversation when one of the male students appeared to be fighting back tears and went so far as to say that he was, “Still in pain.” This student was describing the passing of his grandmother and how much this event still had a hold on his life. After this testimony, Mr. Tefton attempted to return to the previous discussion, and he asked about why violence as a real, or perceived threat, was so salient for their lives. He also wanted to know why some of the students appeared immune or uninterested in the implications of violence for their world. I would later recognize the significance of violence as an overarching theme for many of the discussions in class. These discussions were often guided and informed by the teacher’s own experiences growing up in the Bronx and then moving to Connecticut as a teenager. The teacher also attempted to

¹⁴⁴ “Rayful Edmond III, (born 1965), was a notorious drug dealer who is largely credited with introducing crack cocaine into the Washington, D.C. area.” *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rayful_Edmond

connect his personal experiences with their own, and he would say on more than one occasion that he used be, “In that chair.” This was a reference to his literally being in the same type of school environment that his students are in now. This comment reinforced a sense of their all being in the same boat and that they shared a similar struggle. Mr. Tefton also told his class that, “We are all minorities in here.”

Mr. Tefton attempted to steer the conversation into other topics with sometimes more success than others. The first foray into traditional politics I noticed was uneventful. Mr. Tefton set the table by suggesting to the class that, “Politics is one thing that you all have definitive opinions on.” He then went on to ask if the students if they knew the name of, “The mayor of Slopton.” After receiving an insufficient response, he then went on to ask, “If I say Democrats, what do you think?” “What does the Democratic Party stand for?” One student responded by stating, “Social Programs,” and another student later responded to a questions about the Republican party by declaring that they, “Are advancing the country.” This same student also shared with us that, “My [his] dad voted for Bush.” There appeared to be a variety of political persuasions percolating in the room, and more of the male students appeared most comfortable offering their positions.

The next time I came to this class, Mr. Tefton told me that, “Today is [was] terrible.” Even though it appeared that violence was foremost on the mind of everyone, Mr. Tefton still asked for the students to write out their own list of five discussion topics, “That interest you.” Mr. Tefton announced that a, “Student was maced,” and this began another long discussion about violence and disputes within the school. Some of the students disagreed on whether it was mace or pepper spray that was used or if there was a

spray or gas that was used at all. There was agreement that police had a very visible and strong presence at the school that day and that things appeared to be getting out of control. Mr. Tefton continued to push his students about this apparent escalation in police tactics, and he stated that, "I [he] want[ed] to know about the response." One male student responded by stating, "I'm not really concerned about the fight- that happens everyday." Mr. Tefton proceeded to discuss how the second floor was cleared by police officers using some type of spray, and he continued to prod his students into thinking about whether or not this was an acceptable police tactic to use in a school. Would this shift in tactics lead to a "police state" where police are just "grabbing" unruly students in the halls and, "Throwing" them into classrooms on a daily basis? This particular incident did not seem to elicit a great deal of concern from most of the students.

This new venture into the topic of violence did not produce any more noticeable results, and Mr. Tefton allowed the students to move on to other topics. This included a discussion of stereotypes and their relationship to race and racism. At this point one student offered her insights into why she believed, "My [her] mother is [was] really racist," and this was based on her mother's views of White people. Another small class came in, and the classroom mushroomed to twenty-seven students; there were now nine women and eighteen men. The teacher in the adjoining room apparently let her class come into Mr. Tefton's and literally gobble up the remaining chairs. The passion and the intensity of the discussions did not dissipate. Mr. Tefton asked the class about what they believed was the, "Single most troubling thing," that was "Holding the Black community back." Students quickly chimed in with "competition" and then, "Competition is deadly" as well as "greed." One student talked about a "weak person" and another student

suggested it was, “Survival of the fittest.” Mr. Tefton made the conversation very personal, and he attempted to connect the students’ lives to a greater Black community. The discussion for this day wrapped up with a few comments made about language and the use of the word “Nigger.” Mr. Tefton suggested that, “I [he] hear[s] it 60 or 70 times a day.” One student suggested that it was a “regular word” and that even her sister’s “Spanish boyfriend” used this word. Instead of challenging this assertion or many of the other students’ comments, Mr. Tefton encouraged his students to respond and dialogue with each other.

The second classroom discussion that delved into political issues I witnessed was more revealing. Mr. Tefton presented his class with the open-ended question: “What do you think about politics?” The quick answers that students shot back to the teacher were, “I hate politics” and “Everybody is a crooked, conniving bastard.” This last comment came from the self-appointed class comedian, but the general cynicism and distaste for politics was palpable in the classroom. Their comments about how, “Republicans and Democrats” are, “Always trying to outdo themselves” and about how they, “Don’t need us” seem to represent a lot of the students’ feelings about politics. Mr. Tefton pressed on; he asked them about what political party they think of when they hear the word “Welfare.” One of the students replied with “Democrats,” and Mr. Tefton went on to describe his own political affiliation. After reminding his students that he identified himself as a “Republican” because of the “moral issues,” Mr. Tefton said the two key moral issues for him were “abortion” and “gay marriage.” He went to say that, “My [his] Dad always gets on me for being a Republican.”

Mr. Tefton then went on to explain abortion and same sex unions as two of the most important moral issues for him, and he said that he agreed with the conservative position on these issues. He suggested that abortion “is murder.” Some of the students challenged and questioned Mr. Tefton’s position on abortion and one student asked him how he would advise a pregnant student. Mr. Tefton acknowledged how difficult a decision might be for someone and that he could not speak directly to every particular situation someone might find him/herself in. The discussion about same sex marriage seemed to become mired in a thicker mud of ignorance and humor than the previous discussion. The students’ use of profanity became more pronounced as more and more homophobic slurs were utilized. Comments about how a student, “Can not work with them faggots” and other derogatory terms were bantered about. Mr. Tefton did little to discourage this use of language, and he allowed the conversation to proceed. Some students expressed support for same sex unions using the neutral language of why does it matter what some people do and why can’t two people that love each other get married. Mr. Tefton did provide cover for some of his students’ harsh criticisms of homosexuality and homosexuals in general. He did this by suggesting that there was an, “Increase in the homosexual population” and that this was “especially” true in the “girl” population. There was no attempt to explain this insight or place it in any meaningful context. Mr. Tefton even went on to suggest that “I [he] don’t [does not] blame the girls” and that this homosexuality might actually be the fault of the boys. He suggested that boys were, “Becoming increasingly violent” and that this has contributed to a rise in homosexuality in the girl population.

I had become increasingly concerned about the direction of this particular conversation, and I attempted to offer some of my own thoughts.¹⁴⁵ I interjected at one point and discussed my own views about same sex unions and homosexuality. I used my experience at Church as the springboard into these issues, and I described how my own Church had just voted to not recognize or allow for same sex unions to take place in the Church. I discussed one of the Church members who had ‘come out’ to me in a private conversation this past summer. He was the same person who received a great deal of support in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, this person was from the New Orleans area, and all of his relatives were forced to evacuate. My church adopted his family, and we provided them with a lot of financial and emotional support. I suggested to this class that if it were known that he was gay, many of the people who had been so supportive of him and his family would not have responded to this call for help. In fact, he might not have received any support, and this was exactly why he continued to ‘hide’ his identity.

I wrapped up my comments by suggesting to the students that homosexuals are everywhere and that we interact with them on a regular basis. From this standpoint, I asked the class if it made sense to specifically target this community and discriminate against them when it came to one specific right (i.e., marriage.) If some of the students wanted to use Biblical justifications for this discrimination, then I asked if this same standard should be applied to all of the marriages that take place in their Churches. I offered this argument in the context of a rhetorical question: When someone is about to get married, is s/he asked if s/he is a child molester, if they have engaged in premarital

¹⁴⁵ I offered my opinions on a few occasions, and I attempted to give the students some sense of who I was. I wanted students to feel comfortable with my presence in the classroom and I wanted them to also feel comfortable with participating in the interview portion of my research too.

sex, if they have murdered someone, etc. This was not the only time I offered comments, but it was certainly one of the only times I presented an extensive argument on one side and included my own experiences within this argument. The comments did not appear to have an impact on the teacher and students' conversation, and the flow of the conversation proceeded in the same fashion and direction. What had started out as a discussion about politics quickly moved into a highly charged debate about two "moral issues." Even though Mr. Tefton attempted to prepare his class for this discussion by asking them to make a distinction between their own set of beliefs and what might be best for society or for a government to choose as its policy, it was self evident that much of what the students decided to contribute was based on personal feelings and emotions.

The topic returned to violence at school during another class visit, and the response to these violent incidents preoccupied most of the students' attention. One of the more intriguing aspects of this discussion was the gender and sexuality of the participants. A few students described it is not just as a fight between women but between "lesbians" and "gay gangs." At one point Mr. Tefton asked his class why it appeared that "60% to 70%" of the fights at the school were between women. Mr. Tefton suggested that in his day it was primarily men fighting, and it was quite often organized and announced. The fights usually took place outside school grounds and after school had ended. The class provided many different answers, and the answers came from women and men. A lot of the comments seemed to be directed at how women have changed and have more of an "attitude" now. In particular, many students pointed out how women resolve their personal problems with each other in a different fashion than men and that women were not able to let little things go as easily as men do. This led to

more women resolving their personal “beefs” with a physical fight. There was not a further exploration into the use of “lesbians” and “gay gangs” though. No one attempted to explain why these terms were used or what the criteria of these designations entailed.

It was also noted that pepper spray was used again and that the police had their night sticks out. Some of the students claimed they were pushed around by the police even though they were not even directly involved with the fight that started in the cafeteria. One of the students offered graphic details about how one woman was put into some type of headlock by a school security guard and how she was able to head butt this security guard. Once she broke free, she was restrained by yet another school security guard, and this student noticed that the first security guard was “leaking” from his mouth. Once again Mr. Tefton asked his class about these police tactics and whether or not they were needed. Another discussion developed around Peer Counseling, and Mr. Tefton asked his students about this resource. Many of the students were critical of and skeptical about the utility of Peer Counseling. The biggest concern seemed to be with how serious the participants would be in the program and if they would continue to have “beefs” with each other after they had a mediation session with their peer counselors. When Mr. Tefton probed into what solutions might be available for youth and community violence, there were not that many hopeful comments offered. Most students expressed a view of violence being entrenched in their community. Even when students offered comments about how parents raise children or how the police handle gang activity, other students were quick to challenge insights on the grounds of potential or long term success.

THE STUDENT INTERVIEWS

1) Bonilla Starr

A

The most exciting and informative interviews I had were with Bonilla. She not only shared some of the most intimate and fascinating stories with me, but we continued to talk about a variety of topics when we meet in the school halls. Bonilla is a seventeen year old Senior, and she appeared as comfortable talking about her gay identity as she was about her academic aspirations and her brother's problems.

Bonilla would visit Mr. Tefton's class even though she was not officially enrolled in it. I officially met her during my first day of interviews at the school, and we quickly built a wonderful rapport. She was with another student that I was interviewing, and I gave her permission to quietly observe this interview. I subsequently learned that this was her girlfriend, and I proceeded to include both of these students in my research. By the time I reached the point of actually interviewing Bonilla, it became clear that she was a bundle of information, and she placed a great deal of trust in me with handling a lot of sensitive information. I not only learned in our first interview about her gay identity, but I also learned that her "girlfriend" was another student in my sample (that never disclosed her own lesbian or bisexual identity).¹⁴⁶ I eventually even learned about a Black lesbian (and bisexual?) party and how one of the participants in this gathering became so out of control that the police had to be called. Bonilla became an ethnographer's dream informant, but she also became an ethical nightmare as our interviews proceeded.

It was also very clear from the beginning that Bonilla was an excellent student and that she was motivated to succeed academically. I was not surprised to learn that she

¹⁴⁶ It was unclear from the way Bonilla described some of the other students' sexuality whether or not they were gay, bisexual, or in an 'experiment' phase. Even Bonilla talked about how she had only come out during her time in high school.

was a “4.0 student” and that she always, “Made honor role.” I was surprised to hear that she was enrolled in Spanish 4; she seemed to also have a gift for foreign languages. I also learned that her girlfriend was in this class and coordinating their schedules appeared to be a habit they had developed. Bonilla’s favorite subject is English, and she also described her interest in writing. She not only enjoyed writing poetry but was also, “Putting together a book.” Bonilla was also an avid reader, and her greatest source of enjoyment was urban romance novels. Given this backdrop, it was also shocking to learn that she only talked about a local community college as her next academic step.

Part of the answer to this apparent contradiction between her academic talents and in her academic goals could be found in Bonilla’s family life. Bonilla talked about her four brothers, and this included a twin brother. Her family has always lived in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, and her father moves furniture for a rental company, and her mother works as a manager at another company. She talked a lot about her twin brother and the problems he has had. This included being caught drinking alcohol at a school and being expelled. Bonilla never conveyed a sense she had family support for her moving on to a college or for utilizing her academic talents and skills in any other fashion.

B

When I spoke with Bonilla about race there appeared to be a process of embracing and actively disconnecting to this concept. Bonilla seemed to hesitate when I asked her about her racial identity, and then she said that she was African American. She also made a bizarre reference to the fact that she, “Could have been born white.” This response indicated that Bonilla, like a number of her classmates, is not comfortable with

her racial identity. They also tended to view their own racial identity as something that others expect from them or force them into. When asked about any racist experiences Bonilla told me the story about the Black lesbian (and bisexual) party she attended the previous weekend. What seemed to disturb her most was not that one person had become so out of control and that the police had to be contacted, but that this person was spewing out so much racial hatred (at fellow Black lesbians.) She said this Black gay woman had become possessed by the most wretched evil White racist imaginable. Bonilla wanted to put this incident into a psychological frame; she wondered about the implications of this coming out of a Black gay woman: Does this represent her greatest suppressed fears? Or does it represent some type of secret and suppressed identification? It was easy to notice that Bonilla had developed a different identification process since she started dating women and that she was capable of articulating the way in which her racial identity was tied to her gender and sexuality identity. The fact that she was willing to share this with me and that she was willing to openly ponder and approach these points of confusion and clarity separated her from the other students I interviewed.

C

When asked directly about her political views, Bonilla offered a much more modest appraisal of her own political views than I had anticipated. She started by suggesting she was not sure about how she would describe her own politics. Bonilla went on to offer some of the typical cynical comments that other students had shared with me about politics. She described politics as being about “selling yourself,” and she also suggested that, “They don’t even have to do half of what they promised.” Bonilla said, “There is nothing you can do” about it, and Bonilla apparently believed politics was

rotten to the core. Even though Bonilla said that she did not know a lot about politics, she expressed a belief in the importance of politics and political knowledge. Bonilla stated that “You have to know what’s going on in your country.” This comment supported her response to questions about voting from a previous interview. In that response, Bonilla not only claimed that she would vote when she turned eighteen years old, but that her parents voted too. In fact, Bonilla told me that her parents told her that, “If Bush gets in we will be picking cotton.” Unlike many of the other students that I spoke with, Bonilla’s parents seemed to play an influential role in her political beliefs and behaviors. They even seemed to provide some type of counterbalance to some of Bonilla’s more cynical sentiments.

2) Celia Mc Neil

A

Celia is a seventeen year old Senior who has also spent four years at the new and old high school facility. She described herself as “loud,” “smart,” and “nice.” This seemed to fit her behavior inside and outside the classroom. Quite often her playful demeanor and light-hearted answers made it difficult to assess how sincere or serious her responses to my questions might be.

When Celia described her life though there were some parts of it that were presented in a very earnest fashion. She described living with her grandmother near the school, and she also talked about her younger brothers and sisters living with her mother. Celia had moved around a lot, and, after six years of living at her current location, this had become the longest period of time in one place. She had lived in many different places in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan area, including Washington D.C. Celia also mentioned that she was not working right now and that her support came from her

grandmother who worked for the federal government. It was also very clear that Celia was interested in going to a small local university to obtain a “degree in accounting.” She considered math to be “fun,” and she described herself as a “B student.” Celia was interested in going on to college after she completed her senior year of high school to build a career around a degree in accounting.

B

What was more difficult to ascertain is how she identified herself and what her understanding of race was. Celia’s reluctance to identify her race as Black could be seen in her comment that, “I [she] have some white in me” and that it might be more appropriate for her to check the “other” category. This was a very common pattern for many of the students; it presented noticeable tension throughout the entire interview series. On the one hand, many of the students would attempt to deflect and then gingerly answer direct questions about their own race while, on the other hand, they would manifest overt racial interest or taste when it came to more mundane and simple areas. An example of this could be seen in two of her favorite actors, Halle Berry and Denzel Washington, her favorite radio stations, WKYS 93.9 and WPGC 95.5, her favorite musical artist, Mariah Carey, Toni Braxton, Mary J Blige, or even in her favorite authors, Roy G. Glen and Zane. For Celia, this was also noticeable in the way she seemed to play down the obvious nature of her race, but she found ways to articulate opinions, preferences, and knowledge that were greatly influenced by a certain racial discourse. For example, when I asked her about her preference for a political candidate, she asked me first if I was talking about a Black or White candidate. This was fascinating because I had purposely not included any racialized language in my question about a generic

political candidate that would be worthy of support. Celia first read race into the question and needed this point resolved before she could answer the question. Only from the vantage point of some racial position would this interpretation of my previous question about a political candidate make sense. Even though she was the only student to raise race as an issue for this question, her response helped to illuminate the racial tension that was endemic throughout all of the interviews. Although she made some comments about the racial identification of some of the names of leaders and historical figures I inquired about, there was nothing overtly communicated to me about her own sense of racial identification or her sense of race as a social or a political phenomenon.

C

Celia was not comfortable talking about her political views and activities, and when I persevered with my questions, she did begin to unveil a variety of political thoughts and feelings. When I asked her about her political philosophy, she jokingly sighed and said, “Oh Lord” and “Skip.” Celia went on to say that she would, “Vote for the good guy.” Celia did not move beyond a very superficial understanding of politics, and she continued to give me very simplistic answers. I asked her about what she felt was important to know about politics; she replied by saying, “I don’t know,” and then, “That’s a good question.” This matched her response to other political question. Celia had also told me that she was not sure about voting and that she wanted to be sure that her vote would, “Count for something” before she would actually go through with it. She then told me that she would, “Do it once” and then assess whether or not it would be worth voting again. Celia also told me that she did not know a lot about the political parties and that she would look for a political candidate that would, “Put me on their

side.” This discussion included comments about whether the candidate was “Black” or “White.” When I asked Celia about what political issues she was concerned with, she first told me that, “She didn’t know” and that she did not, “Watch the news.” She did go on to talk about the, “Whole Katrina thing” and, “Why it took him [President Bush] so long” to respond to this crisis. Celia did not share with me how she pieced together these various stands and thus constructed her own political identity. This was not unusual, and it was fascinating to see how she left these various strands standing apart.

3) Ron Blood

A

When I started this interview, it did not take long before I began to wander into some treacherous terrain and to quickly shed light on some aspects of Black male identity. When I asked Ron about his academic status, he tried to explain to me that this was his second year as a Senior, and he was eighteen years old. He went on to tell me that he had been removed from school because he did not live within the official boundaries for the school. Ron described the way he transferred from another school and said that this was just his third year at Trenton High School. It was also made clear to me that Ron had moved a lot and that he had been “up and down the Trenton line” his entire life. It was also striking to learn that Ron was born in Washington, D.C. and that he had lived in South East DC. This area is portrayed in the media as a notorious crime spot; many sensational youth crimes have been associated with this area.¹⁴⁷ This background

¹⁴⁷ Del Quentin Wilber, “Police Union Disputes D.C. Crime Statistics: About 200 Cases Allegedly Set Aside” washingtonpost.com, Monday, October 4, 2004

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A4481-2004Oct3.html>

Theola S. Labbe, “Juveniles' Deaths Breeding Rituals Of Grief for Peers: Silence by Some a Worry,” Sunday, October 3, 2004

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A2908-2004Oct2.html>

began to lend itself to a portrait of an all too common young Black male in trouble or making trouble.

This observation was reinforced by Ron's comments when we talked about school. Ron shared with me how much school continued to be a struggle for him, but also how far he had come. What he didn't share with me was the fact that he had been suspended and that he continued to be plagued by disciplinary actions for unacceptable behavior.¹⁴⁸ Ron told me that his "African American Studies" class was his favorite. He added that, "It is so open" and, "We discuss real world problems," and these points distinguished it from his other classes. Ron also expressed a dislike for math. When I asked about his academic aspirations, Ron talked about his interest in attending a, "Trade school" and learning a specific blue collar trade. I asked him more about this specific interest, and Ron described his father's work in the "Steam fitting" trade and how this was a very good union job for his father. Ron did not express an interest in attending college, and he also talked about the fact that his grade point average had never gone above 2.13. When I asked Ron about his homework, he gave me the impression that, "It's getting pretty easy" and that he has, "Free time." Ron even went on to describe his English class as another one of his favorite classes; he described the, "Poetry they have in the books" as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the class. He also linked the topics that are covered in this class with his African American identity. Ron emphatically included the autobiographies of Malcolm X and Fredrick Douglass as two of his favorite texts.

¹⁴⁸ I only learned about two of these suspensions from Mr. Tefton. When I could not find Ron in one of his classes or when he did not show up for an interview, I would ask Mr. Tefton for help and it was on two of these occasions that Mr. Tefton had informed me that Ron had been suspended. One of the suspensions was for smoking on school grounds and another suspension was based on comments Ron made to an administrator.

B

As I began to ask more questions, Ron continued to play with his one Black glove and his answers continued to be very short, but he also continued to offer very sincere and heartfelt responses. I asked how Ron would identify himself, and he told me with a big smile that, “I’m a pretty noble guy” and, “I’m pretty well liked”. I probed into the area of race, and he told me that he considered himself to be African American. When I asked him about what this racial identification meant to him, Ron told me that it was, “Something to be proud of,” and, in the same breath, he talked about our experience with, “Slavery.” Within this terrain, Ron opened up a great deal, and he shared with me how important it is to show people that we are not just into, “Rap music” and, “Sports,” but that we can have, “Self respect,” and we have a “thinking ability” that needs to be recognized. Ron was equally open about how he lived in a tough neighborhood, and he mentioned the “thugs” and “drug dealers” he encounters on a regular basis. Later on he went on to describe how these people would end up in, “Jail or a box” and he described how this was a common dilemma in his neighborhood. Ron talked about how he had experienced, “A lot of death” in his life. I asked him if he thought that staying in SE Washington, D.C. would have provided him a safer community. Ron suggested that his current home in Maryland could be considered more dangerous and that the communities in Maryland were not as tightly knit. I was not sure if crime rate statistics would support this point, but it was fascinating to witness how Ron explained his sense of security in these two locations.

It was not until the end of the first interview when Ron made reference to missing school again that I asked him about what led to this lost school time. Ron answered quite

frankly that he had been arrested for, “Armed robbery and grand theft auto.” He went on to tell me that this happened when he was fourteen years old and that he had spent eighteen months in a juvenile hall in Maryland. These insights placed not just the previous discussion about living in Washington, D.C. or Maryland in a very different context, but it also placed our entire interview in a different context. The crime Ron committed was unusual for a middle class youth. Whereas auto theft continues to be a popular crime for youth of all classes in the Washington, D.C. area, the use of a weapon is more uncommon and isolated to a certain segment of society.

C

Based on the length of our interviews, it could be argued that Ron had the most substantial knowledge of our political leaders, history, and current issues. It is also true that Ron loved to talk and he had strong opinions on almost every issue that was raised. He also exemplified a certain level of comfort and confidence in his racial and political identity that would be more typically associated with older adults. Ron gave me the most thoughtful and extensive answers to questions about political leaders, events and history. There was only one other student who came close to providing as many accurate and lengthy answers to these question. Ron almost always identified and understood the Black political leaders as a part of a community he inhabited. Whether it was Rosa Parks (“That’s my girl”), Rev. Al Sharpton (“Good ole Al”), or Rev. Jesse Jackson (“I like Jesse”), he used colloquial description and language used to convey a connection with these Black leaders. This was not a typical technique employed by his peers; it was amazing to see Ron consistently to do this. In this respect, Ron appeared to have the most mature appreciation and understanding of specifically Black political leaders, terms

and historical events. It was also clear that a great deal of this knowledge did not come from academia and was not presented in a typical academic fashion or language. An example of this could be seen in the way that he described Malcolm X as “a G (gangster)” and said that he, “Didn’t care” and he, “Was raw.” But Ron supplemented these thoughts with the observation that he, “Had a loud mouth,” and “Who he was with” were two of the key factors in his assassination. Ron also consistently conveyed more than a rudimentary understanding of political issues and events, and he was quite comfortable sharing his depth of knowledge in a wide range of areas.

4) Jamila Net

A

It did not take long before Jamila was able to announce her first love: Basketball. I had already heard her discuss this in Mr. Tefton’s class; and it was not hard to imagine Jamila being a basketball superstar just based on her large physical presence. I was surprised to learn that she was only sixteen years old and just a junior. The answers Jamila provided me with about her identity also flowed from these insights. She suggested that her, “Distinct appearance” was a critical part of her identity, and she listed the following four areas as the basis of this judgment: “I look older”; “I’m tall”; “I’m athletic”; and “I wear (gray) contacts.” She initially started her answer about identity by claiming that she thought of herself “As someone that loves everybody,” unless you get on her, “Bad side.” When I asked her more specifically about her racial identity, she was much less comfortable answering these questions. Jamila stated that she was “Black in color,” but she also made a point of sharing with me that some of her relatives were, “From Ireland.” Even though Jamila said that, “You should be proud to be an

American,” she also accepted the fact that she would, “Only fit under the African American category.”

Jamila had clear academic aspirations, and these goals revolved around her love of basketball and of languages. Her favorite classes were Spanish and African American Studies. Jamila said that she had raised her grade point average to 3.0, and she stated that she would like to go to college. Jamila would like to play basketball in the Women’s National Basketball Association at some point, but she also wants to become a translator. She would like to study Spanish in college, and she loves the “Hispanic culture.” I did not appreciate how much of a basketball star Jamila was until she described not just her starting position on the Varsity women’s team but when she described her experiences traveling on a basketball team during the summer months. She began to rattle off the name of almost every southern state when I asked her about her travel experience. When I inquired about this extensive traveling, Jamila replied by telling me about a basketball league for women that allows them to, “Play all year around” and that she had been doing this for six years. It was also clear when she also talked about not just this traveling basketball league but how her father currently plays basketball. This was the source of her talent and her attitude towards the sports.

This discussion of her father was fascinating; it stood in stark contrast to the discussion of Jamila’s daily life. When I asked Jamila about her home life, she described how she lives with her mother and her younger sister. She also described being born in SE, Washington, D.C. and moving at an early age to Maryland (where she has lived for thirteen years now). Jamila also described spending some time as a child in Shreveport, Louisiana. Even though she described a great deal of, “Outside violence,” Jamila

suggested this violence, “Doesn’t faze her.” The “Cops and fire trucks” she claims to hear on a regular basis have become acceptable to her to the extent that she suggested she would not know what to do if she moved to a more peaceful neighborhood. Throughout this discussion of her family and her neighborhood, only her younger sister and her mother were mentioned. It was clear that Jamila’s level of maturity was conveyed through her references to her own responsibilities and her description of all that was on her plate.

Jamila described a, “summer job” she had as a “life guard”. She even described how she “had to save kids” on a few occasions, and she described this work in a nonchalant way. Even though she is not working now, Jamila seemed to be very clear about how her “main focus (was) to get my grades together.” Jamila suggested that her mother was conflicted about her working. Her mother preferred to support her financially and not have her working while she was in high school. With her successful academic work and her basketball team requirements, it appeared that she and her mother accepted the heavy demands that these dual dilemmas place on Jamila.

B

Jamila was uneasy while talking about her racial identity, and this seemed to contrast with her comfort in talking about race in general. Jamila first told me that she was not only American but that she was only, “Black in color.” She even went so far as to say that some of her relatives were, “From Ireland.” Since Jamila is a tall, athletic Black woman, I was puzzled by her racial ambivalence. Jamila went on to say that she understood she, “Only fit under the African American category.” This has to be seen in the context of someone who declared the Dave Chappelle show was her favorite

television show; and that Hallie Berry, Denzel Washington, and Jamie Foxx were her favorite actors; and that Magic 102.3 was her favorite radio show; and that Keith Sweat, R Kelley, Alicia Keys, Gladys Knight and Luther Vandross were some of her favorite music artists. This coupled with the fact that when Jamila speaks out in class, she often uses her racial identity as the basis of her point. Whether she is arguing against or for a particular point, she usually finds a way to couch her argument in allegiance to a Black racial community. This was not an unusual tactic and this was done by most students as a way to buttress their particular argument. This can be seen in language that associates them with the “hood,” “ghetto,” or “South East” (Washington, D.C.) or distances themselves from “Negroes” or “Niggahs.” The way in which Jamila did this was fascinating, and it made her understanding of race and racism appear to be schizophrenic.

C

Jamila talked about how important it was to become involved in politics. She couched this concern and involvement in terms of her, “Community ghetto” and what would be best for this community. Jamila supported this view by claiming, “People are more important than anything else” and that should be the focal point of all politics. She also acknowledged that she, “Could learn more.” This point was substantiated by her responses to questions about political leaders, history, and terms. Given that Jamila is only a sixteen year old Junior, it was not surprising that her answers were not on a par with those of her older peers. Jamila was quite comfortable in expressing her dislike of President Bush and the Iraq war, as well as her support of affirmative action and gay marriage. What was most striking was her understanding of what constitutes the ‘political’ realm. When I asked Jamila to name some political organizations, she did not

include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She had previously mentioned this organization in another context, and I asked her why she did not include them as a political organization. Jamila told me that she did not consider them to be “political” and that she considered them to be “social” and that they, “Deal with issues.” It was illuminating to see how Jamila made a distinction between what was “political” and what was “social.” Even though she was the only student that did this in an explicit fashion, it was a point of observation that I continue to be aware of. Part of what appeared to me as confusion and as contradictory answers in Jamila’s responses to questions about politics, as well as race was a part of this definitional and semantic gap that kept popping up. How the students understood political ideas and behavior did not always match up with what is often associated with traditional political ideas and behavior in the larger society.

5) Tim Fast

A

When I started this interview, I noticed Tim crumpling a piece of paper in one hand and then in two hands. Tim had been withdrawn and quiet in class, and I was not surprised at how nervous he first appeared. Tim is a seventeen year old Junior; he is a new student at Trenton High School. Tim told me about transferring from another high school this year and said that this was the third high school he had attended. Tim talked said he had been, “Moving around” a lot and that this was why he had attended different high schools.

Most of what Tim described as part of his home life and his personal interests did not appear to be that unusual for young Black men. He described being born and raised in different places in the county; he is currently living with his father. He also mentioned

that he has two older sisters and one older brother. Tim was also quite clear on the fact that “I don’t socialize with people in the neighborhood” and that his “Friends from the old neighborhood” were still the people he was closest to. Tim talked about his interest in basketball, and he said he was, “Learning soccer,” but that the, “Spanish kids laugh at me.” When it came to questions about work Tim described his part time, fifteen hour a week job as a cashier for a shoes store. He said his hours were usually scheduled for weekends. He also mentioned that his father was a, “Case manager” and that he was engaged in, “Social work.”

When Tim described his goals, part of the confusion in his narrative began to appear. He talked about his interest in attending a local vocational school and in becoming an auto mechanic, but he also described his grades as, “A’s and B’s.” I was surprised to learn that Tim did not have higher aspirations and that he had very modest goals for his life after high school graduation. This contradiction was most noticeable in the way that Tim discussed his experiences with traveling abroad and how he discussed his interest in world history and foreign languages. Tim talked about traveling to Nigeria and Liberia with his father on business trips. Tim connected these trips to his interest in learning about those countries that were involved with slavery. This included European countries, such as, “Great Britain, France and Germany,” as well as learning foreign languages, such as, “Spanish and French.” When Tim described his United States history class as his favorite, it became clear that not just “history” was his favorite topic but that his personal experience with “other countries’ culture” was an integral component of this interest. All of these experiences and knowledge of other countries would seem to

suggest that Tim would be an outstanding candidate for a history major at a college or university.

B

When I moved on to questions about his identity, his struggle with answering some of my questions became more pronounced. At first he identified himself as, “Caring,” but when I asked about racial identity, he talked about being, “The best I can,” and, “I want to get a 4.0.” I had thought he misunderstood my question about racial identity, but I continued to receive responses that were difficult to comprehend. After a few attempts of rephrasing my question Tim finally stated that, “I’m not really into racism,” but then again he offered that, “People define me as Black.” What I began to detect was not just a discomfort with race and racial identification or a just a pattern of contradictory answers. I was concerned that Tim might also be struggling with a learning disability and that this was contributing to the difficulty he had with answering some of my questions.¹⁴⁹

Even with this backdrop, many of Tim’s responses to questions about his identity did not deviate substantially from what other students had shared with me. One example of this could be seen in the way that Tim did build upon or make reference to these experiences when he described his own identity. Tim stated quite proudly that, “Liberia” was the, “First African country to gain its independence,” and he said he had previously explained to another class that Africa was not a country but a continent. Tim’s response to my question about racial identity was to ask another question: “What color am I?” and

¹⁴⁹ There was no way for me to substantiate whether or not Tim had a learning disability, but Tim did continue to struggle with understanding and responding to some of my questions in way that was different from all of the other students’ responses.

then an answer: “I’m Black.” It was almost as if Tim wanted to believe that his own racial identification was not as significant as it was to understand the larger racial contours and perplexities in the world. Tim was one of the only students who shared with me a racist experience he had witnessed while attending another high school. Tim had noticed that a White student was using racial slurs against a Black student that he was fighting with. This seemed to be indicative of how many students processed their own racial identity in a simple and more innocent fashion, than the more negative and intense racialized observations and feelings they collect about other people and the larger society.

C

When it was time to answer questions about personal political beliefs, Tim continued to respond in a contradictory fashion. On the one hand, Tim described his own politics as, “Weak,” and he suggested that he didn’t, “Know anything about politics,” while, on the other hand, Tim had acquired a treasure trove of experiences which he could have used to develop and articulate a political position. This contradiction was also manifested in the way Tim presented his political allegiance and ideology in terms of electoral politics. Tim suggested that he would, “Vote for the Republican Party,” and he believed, “They talk a lot about issues in the Black community.” There is the possibility that these comments reflect more the overt political bias of the teacher of the African American Studies class, Mr. Tefton, than they reflect a substantial knowledge of various political parties. Tim even stated that he did not trust President Bush and that this was primarily because of the, “Stuff that took place in New Orleans.” Regardless of whether or not Tim truly identified with the Republican Party, his comments do point to how elusive and transitory the political beliefs of many of the students appeared to be.

Whereas a survey or a simple questionnaire might record Tim as a Republican, clearly his deep interest in the history of countries connected to the Atlantic slave trade, his experience traveling in Africa, and his comments about the issues his, “Community” confronts, suggest that his political beliefs were more complicated and confusing than this political party designation might suggest.

6) Teresa Cole

A

Teresa was also easy to identify as being not just one of the star students in the class but also an overall top student. I was not surprised that she was one of the first students to sign up to be interviewed and that her interviews went quite smoothly. Teresa is a seventeen year old Senior, and she has also been at Trenton High School for four years.

Teresa had some very clear goals for her life after school and a variety of current and past projects that supplement this interest. She talked about becoming a Certified Public Accountant; she wants to attend a local college that has a major in Accounting. Teresa told me that a 3.33 grade point average was the lowest mark she ever had. Her academic interests include calculus, accounting and her food class. Teresa also described her interest in law enforcement. She had an “Internship with the police,” and she described her position as a “Secretary” who primarily did, “Office work.” Teresa also talked about working for Pay Less, but that she does not work there anymore. Teresa told me that her mother did not want her to work there anymore.

Teresa also talked about her family life. She talked about living with her mother, uncle, her brothers, and her sister. Teresa has lived in the same community near the school for ten years now.

B

When I asked Teresa about her racial identity, she at first gave me the typical response, and then later she presented the most unusual racial understanding I observed in my research. Teresa started by telling me that she was very comfortable with her racial identity being Black or African American. She also added that race was not important to her and that she was, “One eighth white.” This acknowledgment of racial location and the simultaneous downplaying of this racial location was a very common part of most of the students’ answers to my questions about race.

The most intriguing aspect of Teresa’s understanding of race emerged when she discussed a racist web site she liked. Since she had been talking about humor and what type of jokes she liked, Teresa eventually provided me with some examples of what she found to be funny. Teresa mentioned that a Neo-Nazi/White Power web page had a joke section she enjoyed, but she also acknowledged that these jokes were disturbing. I went into the web page, www.tightrope.com, and I found that the jokes were not just disturbing but suggest something insidious might be unfolding.¹⁵⁰ Even if Teresa is exceptional in her overt enjoyment of these jokes, the fact that any person from a marginal group can find humor in these jokes is quite amazing

C

¹⁵⁰ I believe that this issue raises immediate questions about the applicability to Frantz Fanon’s work for the current generation of Black youth: “Bit outside university circles there is an army of fools: What is important is not educate them, but to teach the Negro not to be the slave of their archetypes.” Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Mask*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld), 35, 1967. This line of analysis can be seen in the following questions: Is there an ongoing process of colonization that removes one so completely from his/her current conditions s/he they could accept being ridiculed as humor? Or is it a case that for some Black people that have reached some modicum of success that these forms of racial humor do not register as insult or hurt for them? Or the immediate question that could be applied to a future research project is: What does an interest in such degrading racial humor mean for the social and political development of Black youth?

Teresa expressed the same ambivalence and lack of interest in politics as she had in race and racism. These views were typified by Teresa's statement: "I don't even know the difference between Democrats and Republicans." Even though she had expressed interest in voting before, it did not seem to concern her that she was not aware of what the two major parties stood for. In fact, she openly talked about the fact that she did not, "Really care about them" or any other political issues. Teresa had talked about her mother's influence on her views on voting, and she described her mother's and her preference for the Democratic Party. What to make of these apparent contradictory feelings and understanding of politics was quite difficult to decipher in Teresa's case. This was especially true for Teresa because of the fact that she was such a bright student and she had had experience working for a government agency (police department.) All of this did not seem to distinguish her from her peers with regard to holding this cynical view of government and politics while still holding to this steadfast belief in the importance of participating in the political process.

7) Terrell Dakota

A

The one time I started an interview at the wrong point was with Terrell. I had confused him with the other student that frequently came to class in a Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC) uniform that was similar to Terrell's uniform. I did not realize my mistake until we had finished the first interview and then I realized I had given him the questions for the second interview. Terrell graciously let me begin the interview process over; the next week we successfully completed the questions for first interview, and then we moved on to the second interview. What was most striking was how Terrell was openly critical of the government and of our political leaders. This stood in stark

contrast to his desire to join the military and continue the mission he believed he had started already in the ROTC. It was also in stark contrast to what other students in the ROTC program had shared with me.

Terrell is a seventeen year old Senior who at first appeared to be withdrawn in the classroom, but, later on, I noticed a much more complicated personality. Terrell openly described his personality as one in which he flipped from being, “Outgoing” to being, “Introverted.” Part of this chameleon-like personality I attributed to his background and his interests. He expressed an interest in obtaining a degree in education and in becoming a drill Sergeant at Fort Benning. Terrell described himself as a, “High C” student, but this average did not seem to reflect his aspirations. Terrell also described where he lived as, “One of the better neighborhoods”; his family appeared to have settled down and had been living in the same community near the school for the last eleven years. Moving seemed to have been an integral part of Terrell’s early life, and this was apparent in the way he described many of the places his family had lived in in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, including Washington, D.C. Terrell’s father is a truck driver, and his mother is an ordained minister at an African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.); she works as an administrative assistant. This information seemed to reflect Terrell’s middle class upbringing and also his values. He made a point of talking about not being caught up in a gang or involved in any nefarious activity. This point also seemed to be reinforced by the way he sat in the classroom and the fact that he rarely associated with any of the more clearly identifiable groups in the class.

B

Terrell first suggested that his racial identity was something he understood in terms of what is expected of him by others. In another interview, he added to this notion of expectation by suggesting that his race was just a matter of fact. Terrell told me that “I’m Black” and, “That’s who I am.” There appeared to be no room for self-reflection or critical thought on this racial identity. For him it was simply a set of immutable facts for him. When I asked about any racist experiences, Terrell shared with me an incident he had had with, “White boys” who ambushed him and his friends with snowballs. When they tried to confront these kids, one of them blurted out a racial slur. Even though Terrell was only seven or eight years old at the time, he not only remembered the incident but also remembered how strong of a reaction his mother had when he went home and told her about what had happened. Besides this childhood story, there were no other overt or subtle references to race or racism. Only when I asked specific questions about his own racial identity and experiences did he offer any commentary. Terrell openly talked about Jamie Foxx and the Boondocks being his favorite television show; Halle Berry and Denzel Washington being his favorite actors; WKYS 93.9 and WPGC 95.5 being his favorite radio shows, and Alicia Keys, Usher, and Ludacris being his favorite musical artists, but he did not connect these views and feelings to any racial outlook. This was indicative of what many of the students shared with me. In fact, this lack of a general racial outlook was very in much tune with the views of Terrell’s peers and seemed to be part of the identity schizophrenia that many Black high school youth exhibit. On the one hand, racial identity and consciousness were not comfortable while, on the other hand, so much of their world was inextricably connected to overt and subtle notions of race and racism.

C

This schizophrenia seemed to carry over into the political world for Terrell too. When asked about his own political orientation, Terrell stated “It’s dirty, but it is necessary.”¹⁵¹ This seemed to be a brilliant summation of the tension between many of his overtly cynical views and his naïve curiosity in politics. Terrell shared with me his belief that he knew a lot for someone his age and that he could not talk about political issues with many of his friends. He also believes that it was most important to, “Know how it is run” and, “How it is set up.” Terrell then went on to warn against, “What people say to win” and what they do, “To grab attention.” From here, Terrell moved on to the significance of knowing who, “You are rooting for” and not being tied to either major party. Terrell described himself as an “Independent”; he described his displeasure with and distrust of the Republican and Democratic parties. The way he presented his case made the whole political process sound tainted and corrupt, but Terrell still believed in the process and one’s ability to find an independent position in this process. In the context of someone committed to joining the military at a time when our country is at war these political views were intriguing to hear. Terrell’s views were also buttressed by the substantial knowledge of political affairs and historical events that he shared with me.¹⁵² All of these factors illustrated how difficult it might be to classify or analyze Terrell’s political beliefs and actions. Many of his responses did represent some common trends

¹⁵¹ Many of the students I interviewed struggled with this same understanding of politics, and I think most of them did not feel as strongly about it being “necessary” as Terrell felt it was. I think most of the students embraced more of the, “It’s dirty” part. I will discuss the implications of this view of politics in Chapter 6.

¹⁵² Terrell was one of the students that answered almost all of the questions correctly for the Third Interview (Appendix I). This suggested to me that he not only had a substantial knowledge of Black political history, but that he also had extensive knowledge of American history and politics.

and the way in which his responses could be compared to his peers will be reviewed in the next chapter.

8) Aaron King

A

Aaron was a seventeen year old Senior who had been at Trenton High School for four years. He was wise, but he also had a playful streak. This playful streak not only made him the center of class attention quite often but also helped to mask how bright he was. His classroom persona was slightly different from his persona outside of class, and a more serious and grounded individual was revealed to me in our discussions.

Aaron described his plans for his life after high school graduation, and these plans were connected to his interest in “football” and “college.” His long term interests were based on becoming a physical trainer; his more immediate goals had to do with attending a local college and playing football at this school. Aaron played football for the Varsity team, and two of his positions were running back and wide receiver. At first appearance, he looked too scrawny and small to play football, but I could see him in a speed position such as wide receiver. Aaron told me about a shoulder injury he had and how his injuries had hampered his ability play football. His mustache and facial hair made him look older even though they were covering a very youthful face. When he described himself, he not only gave the perfunctory, “Bright, intelligent young man” comments but also described his gift as, “Calming people down,” and, he said he had the ability to, “Take their stress away.”

Part of the explanation of this apparent incongruity, between a tough football player and a bright, sensitive young man, could be seen in his family's upbringing. He talked about being raised by his mother and growing up with two sisters. There was even

a time when Aaron lived in Virginia with his grandmother because he, “Was getting into a little bit of trouble.” I was given the distinct impression that growing up in a female household with women having such a prominent position played a vital role in his life. This was also noticeable in the fact that he was the team manager for his high school’s girl’s basketball team, and the fact that he had had experience working at a children’s day care center. He also described, “Reading,” “Writing poetry,” and, “Playing video games,” especially “Madden Sports” as some of his favorite hobbies, and Aaron was one of the only males to present this much diversity in hobbies (that are typically associated with one gender or the other.) This background did not make him immune from the violence and crime that infected his community. Aaron described how he, “Got robbed”; he said, “There was three of them” with a “chain.” These apparent contradictory aspects of his life had been woven together and Aaron was comfortable sharing these parts of his life with me.

B

When it came to answering questions about his racial identification, Aaron was not as comfortable talking about this topic, and it was only later that he warmed up and started talking about race on a personal level. He first suggested that, “Honestly, I don’t know a lot about my background,” and he resisted any racial classification. During our last interview, I raised the question of his racial identity, and Aaron gave me a completely different response. Aaron told me that his racial identity was, “Very important”; he told me that he represents, “All the members of my family.” Aaron was one of the only students that incorporated this sense of group belonging into his understanding of his racial identity and his understanding of race as a social phenomenon. Aaron went on to

describe an incident with the police he had last October, and he suggested that this was a “borderline” racist incident. The police had stopped Aaron and his “Caucasian friend” and they asked them about a Latino man who had been injured. Aaron told the officers they did not know about this incident, and they were not involved. After Aaron and the police exchanged words, one of the police officers started, “cussing at me,” and Aaron screamed at him, “Are you going to hit me?” They handcuffed Aaron but did not arrest him. This was the first time Aaron was placed in handcuffs, and he felt lucky that they eventually, “Let me [him] go.” These comments by Aaron suggested that he had developed some very strong feelings about his racial identity and that he had some experiences to draw upon on to buttress his views.

C

Aaron provided the most perplexing responses to questions about his political beliefs and actions. In general, he seemed quite comfortable talking about violence in the community, his dislike of President Bush, and the political ramifications of the Katrina hurricane, but when he was asked about his own political beliefs, he became silent. When asked what political issues were most important to him, Aaron told me “none,” and when I asked Aaron about his own political philosophy, he said, “No comment.” I continued to ask Aaron questions about what he felt was important about politics, and he responded by saying, “What really needs to be known is the code” for “the game.” He went on to say, “That there is always someone you have to answer to”; these comments were similar to some of the other cynical sentiments that were expressed by other students. The cynicism did not dampen his enthusiasm for voting in the future or his belief in the significance of participating in our political process. Aaron seemed to share

this conflicted outlook and interest in traditional politics. This outlook leads him to believe that he should participate in a system he has little trust and faith in.

9) Simone Redgrave

A

Simone is also a seventeen year old Senior; she has also been at Trenton high school for four years. Simone appeared to be very comfortable talking with me. She gave me a fascinating portrait not only of her life but also of the school and the community. Simone clearly represented a higher socio-economic status than the other students, and she also came across as someone fully engaged and aware of the many social and political issues that plagued the communities that many of the students came from.

Simone describes her plans for life after high school in a variety of ways. She talked about her interest in Sports Entrainment Management which she said was, “Pretty lucrative,” and she also talked about her interest in a specific university in North Carolina and its Sports Management Program. Simone said that she was a “B student”; her favorite subject was “math.” There was a long list of classes and academic interests she rattled off too. This included pre-calculus, Yearbook, ROTC and Student Government Representative.

B

In terms of her racial identification, Simone found a variety of ways to answer this question; I noticed some of the most revealing aspects of her identity were apparent in areas that I did not directly address. An example of this was the way in which her class standing appeared to be higher than many of her peers. The upper middle class element of Simone’s life was quite noticeable in the way she described her family and her experience traveling abroad. Simone mentioned that both of her parents graduated from

the University of Maryland. She also said that she lived with her mother, and that their, “Neighborhood is [was] not that bad.” She described it as, “Predominately white” and, “Fifty-fifty Hispanic and Black.” She also said her grandparents still lived in the North East area of Washington, DC. Simone mentioned she only lived with her mother and her father had seven other children that lived in various other places. Even though she was a part of a large family, there was a solidly upper middle class aspect in her upbringing and current socio-economic status. Simone also described for me in a great detail her experiences traveling with her grandmother. Since her grandmother owned a time share in Florida, and my parents own time shares in California and Hawaii, I was very curious to learn about these trips. Mexico, Colorado, Hawaii, Florida, and the Bahamas were some of the places she mentioned to me, and this was the most travel for pleasure purposes any of the students had described to me. Simone stated that, “I would have to say that my favorite hobby is traveling.” Simone added at another point that she was, “Very privileged” and that her, “Family bought me [her] a car.” This could even be seen in the negative incidents that Simone described; one of the most striking incidents involved her family being stopped by a police officer. She mentioned that she felt her family had experienced a “Driving While Black” incident; she described how her family was, “Pulled over and harassed” by the police. This was supposedly done because the police thought the, “Car was stolen.” The car happened to be a “Mercedes” with “tinted windows” and the car was full with Simone and her relatives all dressed for Church. Simone also made a comment about how, “Pretty much everyone in my family has that car.” All of these stories convinced me of how integral her class stature was for her identification process.

Even though Simone openly struggled with her “African American” identity, she still articulated one of the clearest and most succinct explanations of race and politics. I imagine that part of this clarity and confusion came from her upper middle class stature that granted her so much exposure to different social and economic settings, as well as her own intellectual and academic grounding. Early on in our discussion, Simone mentioned that her last name was French and she was not sure about her background. By the time we reached the last interview, she openly declared that, “I don’t know what I am” and that, “I have Hispanic in me,” along with “American Indian” and “Spanish.” Simone also went on to reveal that she would, “Get teased because I am fair skinned,” and everyone thought that, “I was better than them because I was light.”

This apparent racial unease or discomfort was in stark contrast to her overt racial politics and beliefs. One example of this could be seen in her rhetorical question, “Why is it every few blocks there is a liquor store,” and, “Someone selling drugs?” Or her more overtly racial comments that cut across class lines: “A lot of African Americans deserve money for slavery.” Her comments about Reverend Jesse Jackson could also be seen in this light: “I wish he would have been our first Black President.” Simone has a higher class stature than many of her peers and she was the only student that articulated a struggle with being, “Light skinned.” These factors did not contribute to Simone having an understanding of her racial identity or a sense of her own politics that differed greatly from those of her peers.

C

This overtly racialized understanding of Simone’s identity shifted when Simone was asked to describe her politics. Instead of specifically drawing from these previously

mentioned race-based comments or even utilizing her family's experience with race and racism, Simone offered a more humble and oblique position. She started by stating, "I don't really know" when I asked her about how she would describe her own politics. Even though Simone did suggest that she knew, "More than other people here because they don't really care about what's going on outside for their little world," she did not offer any specific racial location for her comments. She did not articulate a position for a generic Black community or even a position from her mixed race community. Simone's feelings about politics were similar to those of the majority of students I interviewed, and they did not appear to be tied to any specific foundation or to any overall outlook.

10) April Nelson

A

April is not only an exceptional student; she is an immensely complicated person. She openly expressed a wide variety of interests, and her life provided a rich source of information. April seemed to have developed and proceeded down a life track that was quite distinct.

April is a sixteen year old Junior, and she is also a transfer student. She has moved a lot; April told me that three years is the longest she has lived in one place. April has lived in a variety of places in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area, including Washington, D.C., as well as in New Jersey and Georgia. April described herself as a student who averages grades "between A and B." April talked about her interest in history and specifically in African American history. She also talked about how much she liked physics. April shared her goal of attending a historically Black College or University (HBCU) in Atlanta; she has a specific interest in studying zoology. There was also a very strong love of reading, and she provided me with the most extensive list of

books (“I’m running out of space for books”) and the highest number of hours of daily reading (“eight to nine”); this was more reading than any of the other students I talked with did. April also mentioned her involvement in Peer Mediation and Mock Trial programs at the school.

It became clear that her mother provides her with a great deal of support. April said that her, “Mom pushes for A’s.” April lives with her mother, one brother and two of her three sisters. Her mother is a driver for Metro in Prince George’s County. April also described her community as “gated” and as “pretty nice.” April also described her experiences traveling to many states, such as Pennsylvania, New York, Main, Virginia, Florida, Mississippi, and Alabama. Most of this travel was based on visiting relatives, but she also talked about traveling with the “drill team” at school and how they, “Went to Florida” for a competition. This list of travel destinations did not include the places she had previously lived, and this overall list made quite an extensive travel log for a sixteen year old.

One of April’s biggest loves is for animals. April works as an unofficial veterinarian, and she warmly discussed how people would, “Bring animals for me.” She names “dogs,” “cats,” “guinea pigs” and “hamsters” as some of the animals she is currently taking care of. April also described her musical talents. This included the ability to play violin, drums, and the French Horn, as well as singing in her Church choir. This begins to paint the picture of the student that provided me with the richest life history.

B

April first described her racial identity as African American, then as Black. What became clear is how important this racial identification is for her. When I asked April more questions about her racial identity, she told me that she, “Was raised to believe it was important.” April even shared with me an experience she had at a college fair when she was in tenth grade. A recruiter from Florida said to April that she spoke, “Well for a Nigger.” April claimed that, “Nobody had ever said something like that before” to her. Based on this story and her other comments about her racial identity, it was possible to conclude that April had developed a racial identity and a racial consciousness at an early age.

C

April is the only other student besides Malcolm who appeared to develop a racial and political identity that was overtly interlocked, and they were only ones where this development was quite noticeable. An example of this could be seen in April’s confidence in her identity, her relationship with her mother, and her level of activism. She was the only student I interviewed who not only included her mother (a parent or guardian) as someone that she had political conversations with on a regular basis but also as someone she engaged in political activities with as well. April claimed her joining the Women’s Collective she had been active in for two years was prompted by her mother, but “ironically” now she is not a “member.” As part of her work with this organization and other organizations, she has had experience with writing letters to newspapers, attending political events, and holding political signs. All of these factors I believed contributed to how assured April was about her political views and activism. When I asked her directly about this area, she stated that she knew, “A lot about it [politics].”

The depth and range of her political knowledge did not appear to be that far removed from other students, but it was apparent that political involvement had helped to build up a reservoir of political knowledge to be drawn on. An example of this is what happened when I asked her about the NAACP. She did not at first remember this organization, but she did finally remember that this group had been brought up in the Women's Collective. From there she was able to piece together an understanding of this organization, and this was a common pattern I noticed in our discussions. April was very comfortable talking about current political issues and political leaders, and she was also very comfortable sharing her own beliefs. It was for these reasons I believe she had developed a more sophisticated and substantial knowledge and understanding of politics than that of many of her peers.

11) Cliff Hopson

A

Cliff was one of the international students I interviewed. Cliff is from Jamaica, and he has Permanent Resident Status now. He only came to the United States “two years and four months” ago. Cliff is a seventeen year old Senior. The fact that Cliff had moved to the Washington, D.C. area only a few years ago from Jamaica was not easy to detect in his response to most of my questions. Cliff appeared to have many of the same interests, beliefs, and hobbies as his peers. He talked about being a “B student” with a “3.5” grade point average. Cliff told me that English is his favorite class, but that his favorite subjects were math and geometry. Cliff was also interested in going on to a local college or university after he graduates, and he expressed an interest in “accounting” classes.

Cliff also talked about playing soccer for the Varsity High School team, and he was one of the starting midfielders for the team. Cliff said that the team reached the “State Semifinals” before they were eliminated. Since I also played soccer in high school, and I also played with a lot of pick-up games with international students from the nearby university, I had to ask Cliff about how soccer in Jamaica and the United States compared. Cliff told me that, “Jamaican soccer is very competitive,” and the players he encountered over there were “bigger” and more “physical.”

Cliff also talked about living with his parents and his four brothers and one sister. His family lives very close to the school, and his father is a janitor, and his mother is a Nurse’s Assistant. Part of his ongoing connection to Jamaica is through relatives they visit in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York and the relatives that come to visit them. Cliff talked about various cousins that he liked to hang out with, and he talked about the relatives on his father’s side of the family that he interacts with.

B

When questions came up about Cliff’s racial identity, he not only talked about “being Black” but also why this was, “Very important” for him. He was also very comfortable with connecting his racial identity to his life in Jamaica where, “Mostly Black people” lived. Cliff also made a point of stating that he had not experienced racism and that he also believed that his “African American” identity was a “good” thing. During another interview, Cliff downplayed the importance of his racial identification and the importance that race plays in our society. Even when he described an incident in which someone used a racial slur against him, he quickly added that he, “Didn’t take it seriously.” Cliff ended up providing me with a similar form of schizophrenia that I had

become quite accustomed to. His attempts to downplay the significance of race had to be seen in the light of someone who had already described BET music as one of his favorite television shows; Cool Run (the Jamaican bobsledding team movie) as one of his favorite films; WKYS 93.9 as his favorite radio station; Reggae, Rhythm and Blues, and Hip Hop as favorite styles of music; and Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, Hallie Berry, Denzel Washington, and Queen Latifah as some of his favorite actors.

C

Cliff suggested that he did not, “Really follow politics” and that he believed he did not know a lot about politics. Since Cliff is seventeen years old and not a citizen of the United States, this would not be a remarkable position. What was most fascinating about Cliff’s politics was the merger between his religious beliefs and his political beliefs and the articulation of beliefs that might be consider radical Black fringe that seemed dislodged from any traditional political foundation. Cliff was one of the students who had participated in the discussion about gay marriage, and he had placed it in a religious context. His opposition to same sex unions was based on his religious faith. Cliff had shared with me his involvement in Church organizations such as “O.C.S.” (Onward Christian Soldiers) that was based on, “Bible study.” I was not surprised that this Church involvement provided the backdrop for many of his political beliefs, especially since they tended to mirror the teacher’s views too. Cliff stated that he, “Would vote for Bush.” This position would seem to safely place Cliff in a Christian, politically conservative space, and, this, in and of itself, would not appear to be too unusual for Black youth today. There was already an established tendency of the male students to provide more

conservative positions on the moral issues that Mr. Tefton raised and that I examined at the beginning of this chapter.

There were a variety of other opinions that Cliff expressed that were less easy to explain based on this Christian, politically conservative space he seemed to occupy. Cliff said some police officers are “crooked” and that these same officers, “Give youngsters in the community drugs to sell.” He talked about a cure existing for AIDs and that the government was not allowing this cure to be distributed. Cliff also talked about the government having early knowledge of the 9/11 attacks. The fact that Cliff was the only student that offered so many views that would fit into a political conspiracy or fringe camp was fascinating. Some of these views are of course common within Black communities, and, in that sense, they are not that unusual. The fact that they were coming from someone that had formed such a solid connection between many of his religious views and his political views made these pronouncements difficult to understand. This coupled with fact that Cliff is still a relatively new immigrant makes it even more puzzling. How quickly he has picked up and incorporated these views into his own outlook. Regardless at what point Cliff developed these views (Jamaica or the U.S.), he has reached the point where he feels comfortable sharing these beliefs (even in classroom settings.)

12) Tania Powder

A

I met Tania by happenstance, and I decided to include her in my research even though she is not enrolled in Mr. Tefton’s class. Tania was standing next to Malcolm Little when I was scheduling him for an interview, and it became clear that she was eager to participate too. Tania is an eighteen year old Senior at Trenton High School, and she

had only been at this school for three months when I interviewed her. She presented me with one of the most remarkable and troubling life stories.

There were few aspects of Tania's identity that were more noticeable than the transitory nature of her life. Tania described herself as not just "African American," but also "Jamaican" and a "New Yorker." If this was not enough to complicate a simplistic understanding of her identity, Tania's discussion of the six different high schools she had attended, including ones in the states of Florida, New York, and Maryland, was more than enough to confound any quick and easy understanding of her identity. It was apparent that Tania's being uprooted and having to move so many times was not always voluntary, but that there were many traumatic moments in her life that prompted these moves.¹⁵³ I became aware of how significant this point was when she described living with someone that was not her legal guardian now and she said that was not a minor any more. The way in which she described where her mother, siblings, and other relatives lived in nearby communities in Maryland reinforced this point too. Tania also openly talked about how she, "Had a lot of goals," but that her, "Moving around messed me up." In many respects, this background was tucked away very neatly and was not noticeable.

Tania seemed to be a very focused and serious student. She said she loved "reading and writing," and she described her English and journalism classes as her favorites. In terms of grades, for classes Tania suggested she was "average" and that she received, "A's, B's, and C's." Tania was also very clear about her interest in going on to a local college and studying journalism. She even complained about how soft this current high school was academically and how many of the students she encountered, "Don't

¹⁵³ She also mentioned being abused by two of her relatives. I believe these incidents were integral component of her identity formation, and they played a prominent role in the decisions that were made to move her to different locations.

want to go to college.” This apparent very clear grounding was in stark contrast to the transitory nature of her life.

B

Tania first gave the impression that she understood her racial identification as being a part of her Jamaican heritage. This outlook seemed to be reinforced when I asked Tania about her understanding of race and her racial identification. Tania stated that, “It is obvious that I’m African American” and, “We’re going to be judged.” The confidence and comfort she displayed in her answers were a reflection in part of her age (eighteen years old) and her experience living in many different locations (four different states.) Tania did suggest that she had not experienced racism, but that she believed, “It is silent now.” She described a scenario in which she would go into a job interview, and the employer would, “Already look at you.” Tania went on to say that she would not, “Know this,” and this type of racism would be difficult for her to identify. Tania did not say anything that undermined or questioned the validity or the significance of her racial identity, and she seemed to accept it as a part of her life. Even with this being said, it was peculiar that Tania did not mention her difficulty in registering for Mr. Tefton’s class. She was advised by a counselor to not transfer into his class and that his African American studies class would not be looked favorably upon by colleges and universities. The message that was conveyed to her was that learning about her (racial) history was not valuable, and she would not be rewarded for this effort. Tania did not include this story with her discussion of race, and it is worth noting that she did not see racial ramifications in this incident that were worthy of being documented as such.

C

This same confidence and comfort with race was also evident in Tania's answers to questions about her politics. Tania had no problem stating that her, "Politics is about fighting for my rights." Even though she expressed confidence on this level, Tania was quick to point out that she did not know a lot about politics and that this was because she thought of herself as, "Young." This sense of being young was also how she rationalized not being more active in politics: "When I'm older I will get more involved." Tania also made it clear that she was ready to vote and that she favored the Democratic party. She was also comfortable talking about President Bush not being, "Good for Black people" and citing hurricane Katrina as an example of this point. Besides some of these current political issues, Tania did not seem to have a lot of knowledge about political leaders, events, and history. She had about the same level of knowledge as most of her peers. Tania's interest and commitment to political issues and involvement was not matched with a great deal of political knowledge. This was a very common trend, and it is a point I explore more in the next chapter.

13) Malcolm Brave

A

Malcolm provided the exception to many of the previously discussed rules of political socialization for Black youth, but he also reinforced some basic tenets of the field of political socialization. I was introduced to this seventeen year old Senior by Mr. Tefton, and I was told Malcolm was the most well-known school activist. In fact, Malcolm was in the midst of preparing flyers for posting around the school, and Mr. Tefton was encouraging him to receive permission for these flyers from the Principal when we first met. This was at the height of the violent and disruptive events that were occurring at the school, and Malcolm, and his organization, Students for Change, were in

the midst of this struggle. Even though Malcolm was not in Mr. Tefton's class, I decided to include him in my research.

Malcolm described himself as a "rapper," "activist" and as a "leader," and it became quite clear early on that he was exceptional in terms of his political beliefs and involvement. Behind this thick radical political veneer was still a teenage boy who enjoyed playing video games, downloading music on his computer, and talking about girls. Malcolm described living with his mother and father; he also described his two older brothers and two older sisters that do not live with the family anymore. Malcolm also lived in a community, near the school, and he described working for his father's business during the summer or at times when his father needed help. The way in which he described both of his parents' occupations and his family's lifestyle suggested that they were middle class. This included comments about traveling to the Bahamas for a vacation and Malcolm's extensive experience traveling all over the country.

B and C

The way in which Malcolm answered questions about his identity and politics suggested a clear merging of these two areas. Malcolm was very comfortable with referring to himself as "African," and he was the only Black [American] student that purposely identified himself in this way. This identification fit with much of the Black Nationalist rhetoric Malcolm utilized in our conversation, and it also connected with the Black Nationalist organization Malcolm was part of. Malcolm described this organization as an "Afrocentric group," and he said that they believe in "Freedom for all their world people." He also told me that "Black people (are) called African" in this group and that they trace their roots to Marcus Garvey and his Pan-African group. Many

of Malcolm's comments reflected this background. Malcolm would openly talk about the government, "Forces ... keeping the status quo" and the government is, "Working for the rich." These self-described radical political views were also matched by a variety of political activities. Malcolm was one of the few students who described public demonstrations that he participated in. This included the recent "Million More Movement" march and rally.¹⁵⁴ Malcolm also talked about the organization he formed at school, Students for Change, and he even invited me to attend the Student Government meeting that he was scheduled to present at. Malcolm appeared to be completely immersed in this political work, and it provided the most noticeable anchor in his life.

All of this political organizing and work seem to come out of Malcolm's sense of identity and what this identity compelled him to do. When Malcolm elaborated on this point, he first stated that he considers himself to be an "African" and that he does not consider himself tied to, "The culture of America." This meant that the American "Benefits got passed down," but they did not reach him. Malcolm suggested to me that if he saw "bleeding," then he was going to do all that he could to stop it and that this is what his community expected from him. His commitment and loyalty to his fellow Africans and "third world" people was easy to detect, and he continued to reinforce these feelings with comments about the, "People's viewpoint" and, "Interest." To support this point Malcolm even stated as a response to one question that he was, "Not going to put my [his] opinion in there" and that he believed it was it up to, "The people" to decide. In one way Malcolm had already learned the language of a sophisticated, adult Black

¹⁵⁴ This rally and march was held as the ten year anniversary event for the original Million Man March (MMM) in Washington, D.C. in October, 1995. The original MMM was called by Minister Louis Farrakhan, and the Nation of Islam was one of the key supporters of this historical event.

activist, but he also still had only the life experience of a seventeen year Black male to base these beliefs and behaviors on.

14) Tiwana Owuor

A

Tiwana was one of the last students I interviewed. I noticed that she always sat in the very back of the room, and she never spoke during class. When I began to talk with Tiwana, I learned why she appeared so shy and withdrawn. Tiwana started by telling me that she is a seventeen year old Junior, and she only moved from Togo, Africa about seven years ago.

Even though Tiwana rarely referred to her life in Africa, it was quite noticeable the way that her Togo life continues to have an impact on her life here. I immediately noticed the marks on her face, and, because they were even and neat, I assumed they were ritual markings. Tiwana told me that her father was a diplomat who worked at the Tongan Embassy in Washington, D.C. She also brought to my attention the fact that she was Muslim when I asked her about Church attendance. Tiwana was the only student who did not identify as being Christian.

Tiwana also shared many interests and habits with her peers. She described herself as an “A and B student,” and she has made the Honor Roll. Her favorite subjects were biology, chemistry, and algebra/trigonometry. Tiwana also expressed an interest in going into criminal justice. She has lived in a nearby community for three or four years, and she has also lived in Washington, D.C. before. She has one brother and two sisters.

B

Tiwana told me that she was African American when I asked her about her race. When I asked her more questions about her racial identity, she revealed an understanding of her race that none of the other students had shared with me. Tiwana stated quite clearly that, “Most people see Africans as poor and stupid,” but she also attributed these sentiments to the Black people she encountered. She even claimed that she, “Never experienced this from White people.” Her understanding of racism was based on the discrimination she had received from Black people in the United States. Since her exposure to race in this country has been primarily based on living in a predominantly Black community, then it is not too surprising that part of this exposure would be negative. Tiwana occupied that ambiguous space of being racially Black but still easily identified as ‘other,’ as foreigner and immigrant. Given this location it is not too surprising that she has been and continues to be subjected to ridicule and harsh treatment on occasion and that part of her response has been to separate herself from the dominant Black community she lives in. Tiwana even went on to say that she had not heard the racial slur “Nigger” until she came here. All of this did not seem to change Tiwana’s own racial identification as an African American or hurt her sense of connection with other African Americans.

C

Tiwana’s political beliefs were also colored by this bi-cultural and bi-ethnic outlook. When I asked Tiwana how she would describe her politics, she responded by asking me for clarification. She wanted to know if I was referring to the United States, and, once this was understood, she told me that it is most important to, “Speak up before they do something.” Tiwana described how critical political involvement is in the

following way: “If I want to be smart in this country, I need to know law about politics.” She added that one must be become acquainted with the laws, “So you never get cheated out of something.” Given that Tiwana is not eligible to vote because of her age and non-citizen status, it was fascinating to observe how in tune and concerned she is about the political system here and how it operates. Her knowledge and understanding of U.S. politics was noticeably stronger than that of most of the other students I interviewed. This included her knowledge of Black history and leaders, as well as her knowledge and understanding of national political leaders, historical events, and office holders. Tiwana was also quick to point out when I mentioned Malcolm X that he was Muslim, and she knew that Nelson Mandela was the first African President of South Africa. These were facts that were not mentioned by other students, and these insights seem to reflect her West African background.

15) Fred Ngoli

A

When Fred told me he was sixteen years old and a Senior, I was shocked. Fred went on to tell me he was from Nigeria and that he had been in the U.S. for, “6 or 7” years. Fred was another student from a foreign country and he was also another very bright student.

Fred told me that all of his grades are “As and Bs,” and he is on the “Academic Honor Roll.” He also expressed an interest in going to a, “Good college” in the surrounding area, and he would like to major in accounting. Besides playing sports, Fred also enjoyed playing piano. Fred talked a lot about his involvement in Church; he said he was a, “Sunday School teacher for little kids” and the, “Treasurer for the youth group.”

Fred lives with his mother, stepfather and older stepbrother. They live near the school and Fred has lived at this place since he moved to the U.S.

B

Fred first mentioned his Nigerian heritage when I asked him about his racial identity. Fred seemed to accept the fact that he was Black and that his West African background gave this question a preordained answer. When I asked him more questions about his racial identity, Fred told me that he, “Was proud who I am.” He also said, “Africans take care of me [him.]” It was difficult to ascertain how much of Fred’s views were built upon his family, relatives and other West Africans, or whether these views were built on his relationships and understanding of the larger heterogeneous Black community that he lived in. Fred had shared with me how he had been involved in a physical altercation. Someone walked by him at night and flicked a cigarette at him. Fred said something in response, and it escalated from that point into a fight. This person had some friends that intervened on his behalf, and Fred made it sound as if he got the worst of it. Even though Fred did not describe this fight in racial terms, this story gave me the impression of how difficult a transition it has been for him and how much of a struggle Fred has had with reading and identifying racial clues.

C

Fred expressed a great deal of interest in American politics and he also seemed to have about the same level of knowledge as his peers. Fred talked about becoming a citizen and being able to vote when he turned eighteen years old. He told me that he, “Would go for the Democratic party,” but that he did not know what, “Difference there is between them [political parties.]” When I asked him specifically about his political

beliefs, he provided me some profound, but also cynical, insights. Fred told me that the politicians here, “Try to get your heart but they don’t do anything.” Fred also shared with me how important he thought it was, “To know their [politicians] goals.” I asked about where he learned about politics and political issues. Fred told me that that his, “Father talks” about these areas. Fred was one of the few students who told me he had political conversations with one of his parents and that his parents were a source of his political development. Fred did not explicitly tie these areas to his Nigerian roots, but it was apparent that he was applying a different filter to American politics. It not only stood out in contrast to the other students’ responses, but it also seemed to match up more closely to other international students’ responses.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS ETHNOGRAPHIC VOICES STITCHED TOGETHER

Many of us who came of age during the 1960s thought that these most blatant forms of residential segregation, and the gross extremes of wealth and poverty, of cleanness and filth, of health and sickness in our nation, would be utterly transformed within another generation. It was a confident, naïve, and youthful expectation, characteristic of that era. Our confidence, we now know, was mistaken.

Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*, 189.

Two additional exogenous variables we did not think should be included are race and civics instruction. Previous studies of political sophistication and civic competence found gender but not race a significant variable (Neuman, 1986; Strate et al. 1989). U.S. studies, including those using the Jennings and Niemi data, consistently have reported that amount of civics instruction-the variable available in the data we use-does not affect political literacy variables. However, because race is a theoretically relevant structural role, and civics instruction a relevant socialization agent, we added race and civics instruction to the model (Figure 1) as exogenous variables in a separate test. Neither contributed to the explanation of political literacy.

Carol A. Cassel and Celia C. Lo, "Theories of Political Literacy,"324.

All of these voices seem to make for a loud, clunky, and disjointed band. Delving into each one of these student's lives and observing them inside and outside of the classroom setting did appear to illuminate much more than various personal stories. Once I began to examine their stories, I noticed a significant overlap and connecting points in all of the stories that they shared with me. I would like to examine how these stories can be understood in terms of political socialization and what, if any, relationship the political socialization process has to identity politics.

To be able to effectively address these points, I constructed a way to organize and interpret the information I collected. I decided to start with the students' understanding and knowledge of local, state, and national politics, and I analyzed the way in which this understanding and knowledge of politics might mirror their own self-described areas of political interest. The next step in my analysis was examining how this relationship between the knowledge and understanding of politics and their own areas of political interest could be translated into recognizable traditional (or non-traditional) political activities or beliefs. These two areas appear to move in divergent directions, and they create more tension than they resolve. In the last chapter, I will provide some potential explanations for these contradictory trends. I would like to now turn my attention to the most striking findings: The lack of local, state, and national political knowledge the respondents had; the fascination with particular political issues, leaders and events; and their peculiar, but overwhelming interest in participating in our political system.

RESULT 1
TRADITIONAL POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE
LOCAL POLITICS

I attempted to ascertain the students' knowledge of local politics in a variety of ways. In the second interview, I asked the following questions about local political leaders: Do you know who the Mayor of the city you live in is? Can you name any of the Council members in the city that you live in? Do you know any of the current issues that the City Council or the Mayor has addressed recently?¹⁵⁵ No one was able to answer these questions correctly. Only a few students tried to answer the question about what issues are being addressed. These students all admitted that they were guessing, and they were not aware of what issues the Mayor and City Council were addressing. In fact many of the students gave me responses that were similar to Ron's cynical sentiment: "All government is the same" and identical to Celia's in terms of lack of firsthand knowledge: "I don't really see them do anything." None of the students could name the Mayor or any City Council member from their hometown and none of them could provide an accurate answer for what issues these local officials were addressing.

I also gave the students two names of local government officials, the Mayor of Slopton and a City Council Member of Slopton, in the third interview and asked each of them if they know who these people were.¹⁵⁶ No one was able to name these public officials, and these responses reinforced what was gleaned from the previous interview.¹⁵⁷ Unlike the questions from the second interview, there was no open ended

¹⁵⁵ Appendix 1.

¹⁵⁶ Appendix 1.

¹⁵⁷ Simone mentioned a county level official by name and this was a significant oversight on my part. I did not include any specific questions about county level government and there is a well know County Executive that I should have included in the names of public officials I used for the third interview. I don't believe this official or County government questions would have changed the specific results about the lack

question about local government and there was only the opportunity to respond to specific names. I did not include their titles and this gave the respondents no obvious indicators. For each interview, I simply read them off, and I received no response indicating knowledge of these names. Whether asked from the specific standpoint of the political leaders who were in their town or from the less personal standpoint of the leaders of the city in which their school was located, the responses were the same. This eliminated the possibility that respondents might be more inclined to know who their local officials were and that their political knowledge might be built around the premise that those officials that have the most direct impact on your lives are the ones that you are most likely to learn about. This was an intriguing point because at the time I was conducting my research the school was intimately involved with local officials and local law enforcement. This was described in great detail in the last chapter and even the Washington Post and the Gazette had covered some of the incidents that were described by the teacher and the students.¹⁵⁸ All of this coverage and the buzz that these school

of political knowledge of local government or the overall results about the about the lack of political knowledge on the level of local, state, or national government.

¹⁵⁸ In the washingtonpost.com there are many articles like these:

Allison Klein and Nick Anderson, "School Bus Violence is Common, Drivers Say: Two Prince George's Teenagers Are Charged With Attempted Murder After Gun Was Fired at Vehicle," washingtonpost.com, February 4, 2006.

<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/981213151.html?dids=981213151:981213151&FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&fmac=&date=Feb+4%2C+2006&author=Allison+Klein+and+Nick+Anderson&desc=School+Bus+Violence+Is+Common%2C+Drivers+Say>

Allison Klein, "Fear Pervades Prince George's Forum: Residents Describe Growing Frustration With Crime on Streets, in Schools," washingtonpost.com, January 22, 2006.

<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/973380881.html?dids=973380881:973380881&FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&fmac=&date=Jan+22%2C+2006&author=Allison+Klein&desc=Fear+Pervades+Prince+George%27s+Forum>

In the Gazette.Net Maryland Community Newspaper Online there are also a lot of articles about violence at schools:

Jeffery K. Lyles, "Officials seek end to violence at Slopton High: Thirty-three fights recorded this school year" gazette.net, Wednesday, November 23, 2006.

http://www.gazette.net/stories/112305/newcnew175556_31916.shtml

Jeffrey K Lyles "School sends home more than 100 hundred struggling students," gazette.net, Thursday, January 26, 2006.

incidents had created did not translate into any more rudimentary knowledge of local political officials though.

STATE POLITICS

Questions about state politics produced similar results as the previous questions about local politics did. There was not only the question in the second interview about state politics, but there were also specific questions about two State House of Delegates Representatives, one State Senate Representative, the Lieutenant Governor and the Governor.¹⁵⁹ With regards to the view of state government the answers were similar to the previously mentioned ones for local government. In fact, the students' views of state government were more pronounced with regards to their absolute lack of knowledge of state government officials and the way that they linked state government to all other levels of government that they also did not know about. For example, when Malcolm stated that local government was not, "Improving anything" and then went on to say that this phenomenon was, "Even more true for state government." Even though Malcolm was exceptional in his depth and breadth of political knowledge, his responses were consistent with most of the other students. For those students that could not articulate what the local or state government responsibilities were or who the various office holders were, they could convey a belief in their government's neglect and incompetence. These responses typically could be seen in their attitudes towards government in general and how they applied this specific view to all levels of government.

The inability to name state level elected officials was evident in the students' responses and these responses seemed to also correspond with the level of knowledge the

http://www.gazette.net/stories/012606/portnew182029_31928.shtml

¹⁵⁹ Appendix I.

students had about state government. The state government in Maryland consists of the State House of Delegates and the Senate. I gave the students the names of two Houses of Delegates Representatives and one State Senate Representative. These Representatives were selected on the basis of what cities and towns they represented, and this included Slopton, as well as the adjoining towns and cities that are heavily populated by the student body of Trenton High School.¹⁶⁰ None of the students recognized the names of these officials, and I usually received blank stares, amusing comments, or some awkward guesses.

There was not much of a difference in these responses compared to the ones that I received when I asked about the Lieutenant Governor and Governor. In Maryland, the Governor selects the Lieutenant Governor as his running mate and they essentially run as a team. The last Gubernatorial election in Maryland not only produced a Republican Governor (first time in thirty-six years), but also the first Black Lieutenant Governor for the state.¹⁶¹ I had thought that these facts might have garnered enough intrigue and shock that some awareness would have trickled down to the respondents. This was not the case, and only a few students recognized the Governor's name when I asked them. No one recognized the Lieutenant Governor who had become the highest elected Black government official in the state of Maryland. Once again the generic questions about state government and the specific questions about state level Representatives reinforced the lack of knowledge and understanding of this level of government that all of the students shared.

¹⁶⁰ Appendix I.

¹⁶¹ These two facts can be found on the official Governor of Maryland's web cite:

<http://www.gov.state.md.us/bio.html> (Governor)

<http://www.mdarchives.state.umd.us/msa/mdannual/08conoff/htm/msa13921.html> (Lieutenant Governor)

NATIONAL POLITICS

The response to questions about national politics and leaders did produce slightly different results. I first asked them about their understanding of national government in the second interview, and then I gave them specific names of national political leaders in and out of office in the third interview.¹⁶² I asked the students if they knew who their Representative for Congress was and who their two Senators for Congress were. I also asked if they knew former Secretary of State Colin Powell, and the current Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, as well as the current Vice President Dick Cheney and President George W. Bush. Besides testing their knowledge of specific national government officials, I was also interested in learning if Black people that held prominent positions in government were more likely to be recognized in comparison to other public officials.

When I gave the students the name of their three federal representatives in Congress they were unable to identify any of these representatives. Their Representative for the House is a prominent Black politician, and he has been in office for years.¹⁶³ Some of the respondents thought that they recognized his name, and one student remembered his name from lawn signs. The same was true for the two Senators who have also served in office for quite a long time, and both of their names were not correctly identified either. The fact that they were both White did not appear to factor into whether or not they knew who these officials were. The racial identity of these specific political leaders did not play a significant role in whether or not the students were able to recognize them, and it appeared that a fundamental lack of political knowledge was the most the significant factor.

¹⁶² Appendix I.

¹⁶³ Official web site for Representative Albert Wynn, Maryland's Fourth Congressional District. <http://wynn.house.gov/display2.cfm?id=3020&type=Hot%20Topics>

I received a substantially different response when I asked the respondents about the current and former Secretary of State and the Vice President and President. A lot of the students did know who Colin Powell and Condoleeza Rice were, but they did not know a great deal about what position they hold (or held) in government, nor were they able to articulate any specific thoughts about any actions or positions these government officials had taken. For example, Teresa claimed that she knew about Secretary of State Rice because she was featured in a comedy sketch on “MAD TV.” This discovery of Secretary of State Rice through comedy sketches was not isolated to MAD TV; Bonila shared with me how Secretary of State Rice was presented on the Dave Chappelle show.¹⁶⁴ On this show, she was presented as, “The Black woman in the White House,” and she was shown to be “Buying shoes during Katrina.” This unflattering view of Secretary of State Rice was also apparent in the impressions the respondents had of the former Secretary of State Powell. Teresa also told me that when she thinks of Colin Powell she thinks of the, “Gap in his teeth.” She also told me that “He’s Black,” and this was an observation she had included with many of the other prominent Black leaders I asked her about. One of the most extensive responses I received was from Simone who told me that Secretary of State Rice was, “The first Black female Secretary of State.” When I asked another student about Secretary of State Rice, she told me that, “Many people don’t like her either.” One of the students that seemed to have the most knowledge about the former Secretary of State provided the most venomous answers. Malcolm not only referred to him as an “Uncle Tom,” but suggested that he was either,

¹⁶⁴ Comedian Dave Chappelle is the host of a comedy show on the cable network Comedy Central and it is described by the Internet Movie Data Base as a “show that parodies many of the nuances of race and culture.” IMDB Earth’s Biggest Movie Database, “Chappelle’s Show.” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0353049/>

“Vastly confused or an evil entity.” The same could not be said about the current Secretary of State, and this pattern of knowledge of politicians and disgust with them was very apparent. There were a few students that shared neutral or positive thoughts about Secretary of State Rice. April suggested that, “She stands up for Black rights.” With the exception of Malcolm’s comments, there was very little presented to substantiate any of the points the students raised, and this left me with an overall impression that the lack of knowledge of these officials was more profound than name recognition.¹⁶⁵

These comments were substantially different from the comments made about the Vice President and President. Everyone knew who the President was and almost everyone knew who the Vice President was too, but almost everyone also expressed dissatisfaction or an outright dislike of the two highest political office holders in our country. Unlike all of the other politicians I asked about, there was not only name recognition but also substantial feelings and thoughts about these two leaders. Vice President Cheney was rarely mentioned in terms of specific actions but was more usually lumped into the concerns and problems the students had with the President.

The most common criticism that was leveled at President Bush was based on the way his administration has handled the war in Iraq and the administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina. An example of this is the way that Tim declared that, “No, I don’t trust him,” and this was based on, “The stuff that took place in New Orleans.” Most of the comments the students offered were personal in nature. Bonila started with an extreme commentary about President Bush: “I think he is the antichrist,” but then she

¹⁶⁵ Malcolm’s comment could be seen in the context of long conversations we had about President Bush’s foreign policy and members of his cabinet that supported these policies. For example, Malcolm was the only student that talked specifically about the role that former Secretary of State Powell played in the lead up to the most recent war in Iraq.

sarcastically added that, “He hasn’t destroyed the world yet.” These comments were supported by her observation that, “A lot of people being killed for a war that is not even necessary.” Or this type of personal critique could be seen in the comments Teresa made: “Mr. Bush...he doesn’t even get President Bush” and that, “It’s not right to call him your President.” Simone expressed even greater vitriol in her comments: “Worse President we have ever had.” Fred was the only student that raised the specter of race in an overt fashion: “The President being racist is a big deal.” Most of the other criticisms were more mild, but still personal. This could be seen in the thoughts that Aaron expressed: “I don’t agree with all the moves he makes.” Tiwana suggested that, “He is not very bright.” Malcolm offered “Real shady” as his description of President Bush. Tania said that, “I know he is the President” but she still felt as if, “There is not too much good to say.” Terrell announced, “I don’t like him” and that he would not, “Trust that fool with anything.” Only one student offered positive comments and these were also personal in nature. Cliff suggested, that “Bush is wise” and that he would vote for him. Most of the comments followed this pattern of being personal in nature and were rarely attached to knowledge of political issues, policy debates, or differences in political parties. In general national politics stood out as the area the students felt most comfortable commenting on, and specifically sharing their opinions of the President and Vice President attracted the most interest and insight.

RESULT 2

ISSUES OF POLITICAL INTEREST

The political topics the respondents expressed the most interest in were same sex unions, abortion, the current war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, education, community and school violence. Unlike the previous commentary provided for the more formal structure

and actors in our political system, these areas of interest were self-generated and motivated. These areas of interest were selected on the basis of the feedback I received. In particular, when I asked the respondents in the second interview what political issues were important to them, these issues kept bubbling up.¹⁶⁶ It was also evident in their responses that national issues were the most prominent concern, but a distinct local angle was implicit in many of the responses I received. The issues that the students raised were more noticeably tied to a racial discourse, and, unlike their inability to recall the names of Black and White political officials, a stronger case could be made for the prominence of race and racism in this process.

Same Sex Unions

The one issue that attracted the most attention from the students was same sex unions. Not only was this issue raised to national prominence in the last Presidential election, but Mr. Tefton also singled this issue out for class attention. During one class session, Mr. Tefton announced that he was not only a Republican, but he stated that the two moral issues that provided the bedrock for his decision to join this party were same sex unions and abortions. It was not surprising to find a great deal of what the students were interested in was a reflection of what Mr. Tefton covered in class, and it was also a reflection of Mr. Tefton's personal feelings too. The students were also divided over these same political issues and were attracted to these issues for distinctly different reasons.

¹⁶⁶ Appendix I.

With regards to same sex unions some students expressed outrage and disgust, while others expressed tacit support or a more neutral sentiment.¹⁶⁷ One respondent told me that the, “Same sex marriage thing” was an important issue and that, “Everyone should have a chance to be happy.” Another student told me that too much, “Attention” had been spent on “gay marriage.” There were more responses that could be understood as opposing viewpoints on this issue. One student told me that same sex unions, “Were happening too much.” Another student stated that, “Gay marriage should not be legal,” and he said, “It is wrong” based on what is written in the “Bible.”

War in Iraqi

Following at a close second is the ongoing war in Iraq. Even though this is clearly a national issue, it was apparent that the students felt a special connection to this issue. All of the students were at an age in which military registration and a potential mandatory draft would most dramatically impact on them. This sentiment could be seen in Cliff’s explanation of why, “Sending troops to Iraq” was important to him, and why he disagreed with this policy. Cliff did not believe that the way in which a, “Draft (of) students out of school” was transpiring was beneficial. He even added that if people must be sent to Iraq, that, “You have people in prison,” and they could be utilized for this purpose.

All of the students that commented on the current war in Iraqi offered critical comments. Tiwana told me that, “People are being killed over nothing” in Iraq, and she expressed her dislike of this national policy.

¹⁶⁷ This response should be understood in the context in which one student self-identified herself as gay and also claimed that two of the other female students I interviewed were also gay. She also mentioned that one of these students was her current girlfriend and that the other student she identified as gay was someone she had dated before. This meant that there was the possibility of at least three gay students in Mr. Tefton’s class.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina almost received the identical amount of interest as the war in Iraq. I began the interviews after Hurricane Katrina had hit the Gulf Coast region, and it was already clear that two and three months after the storm, the recovery plan for the people from this region was not only a local, state, and national political hot potato, but that this was a political disgrace and failure on all levels. The respondents not only picked up on this phenomenon, but they were also adamant in placing the blame for this national debacle on President Bush.

One typical response singled President Bush out for criticism based on the slow and inadequate response from the federal government to Hurricane Katrina. Fred told me that, “They didn’t respond on time” when the hurricane struck. Tim added to this point when I asked him why he did not trust President Bush. Tim said that he did not trust President Bush because of, “The stuff that took place in New Orleans.” Celia made exactly this same point when she told me, “The whole Katrina thing” was her biggest political concern, and she supported this point by rhetorically asking, “Why it took him [President Bush] so long to respond.”

It also worth noting that even though Hurricane Katrina provided a single political event, many of other trends that were evident in the answers the respondents provided me with could be identified. In particular, none of the respondents simply commented on the tragic nature of Hurricane Katrina. Almost of the respondents included criticism of the President in their responses. This also created a web of dissatisfaction and dislike of the government that was also easy to notice. An example of this could be seen in the respondents’ fascination with Kayne West’s comment: “George Bush doesn’t care about

black people!”¹⁶⁸ These comments came from Kanye West during a live televised concert fundraiser for victims of Hurricane Katrina. This comment not only shed a negative spotlight on President Bush but also reinforced many of the feelings the students had already developed. For many of the students, the failure of the federal government to respond to Hurricane Katrina in an effective fashion was due in part because of President Bush’s (racial) dislike of Black people, and West’s comments were just an opportunity to give these feelings a national profile. The same student that expressed interest in Hurricane Katrina was also the one that told me that the most important issue for him was, “President Bush being racist,” and when I asked him why he felt this way, he first cited West’s comments. Clearly West’s comments laid the groundwork for the way in which many of the respondents tied these issues together and were able to articulate these points to me.

Abortions

Abortion was an issue that Mr. Tefton had raised in class at the same time as same sex unions. This issue did not register as much of a response as the previously mentioned political issues, but it did appear in quite a few students’ comments. Part of the reaction to his presentation was an alignment of students in support and against his position and part of this divide in feelings about abortion broke down along gender lines. This was noticeable in what the respondents had to say about abortion.

One of the male respondents that attempted to present an argument against abortions proceeded cautiously. He first suggested that abortion was a “tricky subject” and he went on to suggest that abortion should be limited to certain circumstances. An

¹⁶⁸ Lisa de Moraes, “Kanye West’s Torrent of Criticism, Live on NBC,” [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html), Saturday, September 3, 2005.

example of this was he told me, “If she was raped” should be the basis for deciding whether or not a woman could have an abortion. One of the more thoughtful and sensitive responses came from Ron who stated that he, “Would be for abortions.” He talked about how an unwanted pregnancy could “Ruin her for the rest of her life.”

Education and Community Concerns

A lot of the respondents talked about educational issues and community based issues. There was a noticeable overlap in the way the respondents talked about education and community issues. Most of the respondents did not mention their education concerns in a vacuum; they usually presented these issues that could be understood as community concerns too. This was most evident in their discussion of violence and illicit drugs that students did not limit to schools but included the larger community in their discussion of these concerns. One example could be seen in the way that Bonilla described, “Issues about” crime being important for her, and she wanted to politicians to, “Get the crime rate down.” This community concern was very personal for her, and Bonilla told me that she was, “Still scared for my life” and that she has even on one occasion, “Started running home.” Bonilla also participated in the Student Mediator program, and she has provided assistance to students that signed up for this service. This program was set up for students having a problem with another student, staff or teacher or for students that would like to receive support from another student when s/he is in a difficult spot. Given the frequency of disputes and physical altercations that occur at the school, it was unclear on how successful this program had been. Bonilla suggested that often, “What developed in the community” turns into a, “Beef [that is brought] into the school.” Her fear of violence transcended a particular school or community environment, and the way her

fears blurred the distinction between these two locales was quite common. Based on what Bonila shared with me, it was also made clear that some of the school programs that had been established to address these problems were inadequate and ineffective.

There were some students that talked about national education issues or education as a distinct entity. Teresa claimed that the, “No Child Left Behind” legislation was not “... Doing much,” and from her vantage point, she had not noticed any improvements. Tiwana suggested the schools in the U.S., are, “Not that great.” Ron said that there should be, “More funding for schools.” All of the comments made by the students about education in general or their school specifically were critical, and the views the respondents shared with me were consistent with respect to how inadequate and insufficient the educational system was.

RESULT 3 TRADITIONAL POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

The respondents conveyed an interest in our political system in a variety of ways. I focused on their attitude towards voting. I used their interest and the likelihood of their voting as a way to measure their interest in electoral politics. There were questions that I asked about political participation and identification, as well letters to the editor and to elected officials, and all of these questions could also be used to address interest and involvement in our political process. The emphasis on voting I believe is significant because it does represent on at least a small scale the level of ‘political buy in’ the respondents have. Given the lack of knowledge about local, state, and national political leaders and operations, and the high level of interest in specific national (and some local) issues, then the level of political engagement that is envisioned or that is actually taking place is critical.

When I asked the respondents if they were interested in voting most of them described some level of interest, but only a few of them were already of voting age. I asked Ron, who is eighteen years old, if he was going to vote, and he stated emphatically, "Yeah, of course." He even added, "Anything to get Bush out of office" and it is "The only way to make change." Most of the respondents offered similar comments. Tania simply stated that now that she is eighteen, she, "Will vote," and she believed that voting will make a, "Huge difference." Simone suggested that if you are going to, "Complain about who is in office," then you should vote. Terrell echoed these themes when he said that, "One vote can change everything." Even Fred, who is not eligible to vote, stated: "I think it [voting] is very important." Jamila put it in terms of, "Who can represent me" and that her duty in a "democratic society" included voting. Tim not only stated that he was interested in voting, but that he would, "Vote for the Republican Party." Even though Tim was exceptional in his support of the Republican Party, most of the students did present their interest in voting in terms of the last Presidential election. Bonilla said that she was interested in voting when she turned eighteen years old, and she told me that her, "Parents vote." In fact, she said that her parents told her that if, "Bush gets in we will be picking cotton." The way Bonilla discussed her parents' influence was unique, but her understanding of voting in terms of national politics and politicians was very common.

Only two respondents expressed doubts about voting. Celia appeared to lack assurance her vote would count. She suggested that, "If my vote counts for something," then she said she might try to, "Do it once." Malcolm suggested that he, "Will have to sit down and think about that [voting.]" He later told me that "I think it is important in

general for society,” but Malcolm made it clear that he is personally, “Going against this whole system of existence.” These responses represented the strongest reservations that were articulated about voting.

The students did not know much about local, state and national political issues and leaders. This lack of knowledge was not matched by a lack of interest in some current political issues and events as well as interest in national political leadership. This lack of knowledge did not dampen the enthusiasm in participating in our political system. This was most apparent in the respondents’ interest in voting. Whereas other forms of political activity, such as political party affiliation and work and letters to elected officials and to newspaper editors, received very little support, this did not seem to detract from a palpable interest in participating in our political system. The apparent incongruity between lack of political knowledge and political interest and participation could be addressed in a variety of fashions and it is these potential explanations that I would like to address in my last chapter.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION RE-PLOTTING OLD AND NEW CONUNDRUMS

Black people will become increasingly active as they notice that their retrogressive status exists in large measure because of values and institutions arraigned against them.

Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* 44.

And the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man. And to make men, we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living, -not sordid money-getting, not apples of gold.

W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk* 61.

In my attempt to learn more about political socialization, I chose to study Black youth at a high school in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan area. Applying an ethnographic approach to the study of Black youth's political socialization process provided me with insight into what often appeared to be a contradictory or an inconsistent process syndrome. This was apparent from the standpoint of the internal logic of what could be implied by the students' responses, and it was also apparent from the larger context that the field of political socialization has created and maintained for comprehending this process. In terms of following the implied logic of the students' responses, I will explore some possible reasons why their lack of knowledge did not have a stronger relationship to those areas of political intrigue and interest. Specific attention will be paid to the influence that parents, peer groups, system stabilization/social and political conditions, educational institutions, and their status as youth, might have had in this process; these factors will be incorporated into my analysis. All of these areas do not provide complete or satisfactory answers, and the enigma of Black political socialization remains intact. There are some alternative ways of addressing this enigma that I will explore at the end of this chapter; I will illustrate the way in which my students' responses provided ample support for some of these alternative explanations.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION OF YOUTH

The first factor to examine is the age of the respondents and the second factor that are worthy of examination is the significance of age. How much of what I observed was due to the maturity of the participants and what are the implications of this selection of participants in this age range and what this might mean needs to be explored. As presented in Chapter 2, there was a great deal of attention that early scholars in the field

of political socialization paid to youth. The work of Niemi, Sobieszek and Merelman also substantiated this point.¹⁶⁹ An even stronger variation of this argument can be found in Niemi and Sobieszek's work.¹⁷⁰ The most frequent critique of these positions is based on the unreliability of results they frequently produce. Even though the genesis of these points has been successfully challenged, the nature of youth's political socialization is still a highly contentious and popular topic.

My research results also suffered from not having a longitudinal vantage point to evaluate them and this meant that they were limited to brief snapshot of the lives of fifteen young students. This limitation precludes my research from being useful in the debate over the impact of the political socialization process on a specific age versus it being part of an ongoing, ever changing life process. Even though my research was confined to one period in each of respondents' life, there were certain points that could be gleaned from this period. As already suggested, the main findings stand on their own and do not necessarily need to be incorporated to this larger debate to gain meaning. Put another way, whether or not these students develop a political identity that includes extensive political knowledge in areas of local, state, national politics or whether or not they gain this knowledge at a later point in their lives or if they remain severely limited in these areas for the rest of their lives is not the only key consideration. A stronger case

¹⁶⁹ The way that Merelman described this point is worth revisiting: "Hyman's sociological perspective had the unfortunate side effect of encouraging later investigators to think of socialization research mainly as the measurement of youthful political preferences, rather than as the illumination of psychological processes by which socialization agencies operated. Soon political socialization research became the study of political preferences at particular points in childhood and adolescence, rather than the longitudinal study of political maturation." Richard, M Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," *Sociology of Education* 45(1972): 136.

¹⁷⁰ "In the mid-1960s, the suggestion was made that political socialization was virtually complete as early as the end of elementary school. This viewpoint was predicated on the lack of change between 9th- and 12th-grade students in response to a number of questions about political behavior." Richard G. Niemi and Barbara I. Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," *Annual Review of Sociology* 3(1977):225.

could be made that this lack of political knowledge combined with the areas of interest and involvement that the students shared with me was more alarming in and of itself, and these findings raised a whole host of other questions.

The most significant reoccurring theme was the way that race silently seeped into and provided the backdrop for all analytical forays into the field of political socialization. The evaluation of relevancy of the political socialization process for youth is not just useful in the way that Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman have framed it. It is true that whether or not the political socialization operated in the way that Hyman and other pioneers in the field said it did is a vital area of research and scholarly exchange. It is also true that if the pendulum continues to swing towards envisioning political socialization as a lifelong process that this will not necessarily provide greater insights into the fundamental problems that Black youth's political socialization process appears to be mired in. In introducing race as a factor, it provides the vehicle to ask questions such as: Why do Black youth lack such a great deal of political information that is considered normal and necessary? If a racial discourse is going to be used that doesn't assume the inferiority of minority races as the basis of an explanation for the lack of political knowledge, then the more hazardous questions about how much this lack of political knowledge is a reflection of the psyche of a subordinate racial group in our society becomes paramount.

In terms of the political socialization process for Black youth, it can therefore be argued that there are significant factors. Our factor would be the applicability of the theories and methods that have been developed in the fields of political socialization. My research results support the proposition that childhood is a critical period for political

socialization and this period extends through the teenage years. The second factor that must also be addressed has to do with implications of this finding for Black youth. Put simply, if the political socialization process develops in a similar fashion for all youth, then how does one evaluate the strength or weakness of this development? Are differences along racial line acceptable or meaningful?

SYSTEM STABILIZATION THEORIES/ SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS

A lot of the early work done on political socialization was based on an understanding of what it meant to be a fully functional adult in a democracy. This understanding of political socialization provided the foundation for system maintenance theories. This can be seen in the previously cited work of Niemi and Sobieszek.¹⁷¹ Even though this theory has been challenged and has diminished in significance, it continues to have tremendous bearing on any research that is done on Black youth's political socialization.

A case could even be made for asking the question of what type, if any, system maintenance process exists for Black youth and that this question would become the primary consideration. Abramson's work opened the door into this realm as previously mentioned.¹⁷² Schley's research moved this insight onto the level of what implications this apparent racial discrepancy might have in the context of the larger social and political

¹⁷¹ "Drawing primarily on Easton's systems theory, Easton and Dennis and others, such as Greenstein, argued that childhood views of political authority were an important source of stability in the American political system." Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 216.

¹⁷² "The six million black schoolchildren in the United States, like their white counterparts, have virtually no political power. Yet, socialization research suggests that black children feel less politically powerful than white children do." Paul R. Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," *Journal of Politics*, 34(1972), 1244.

world that is also deeply fractured by race.¹⁷³ These scholars successfully shift the debate from whether or not Black children are more or less politically engaged or cynical than their White counterparts. The more potent question that Schley's work highlights is how this political socialization process contributes to or alters the marginal position that Black people occupy in our society. In this regard, it could be asserted that if there was a system maintenance component to Black youth's political socialization that this would not be beneficial for Black youth.

Abramson posited two theories that counter the premise of system maintenance theories that and could be utilized as another way to understand Black youth's political socialization process. The first theory is a social deprivation theory based on political alienation and political reality theory. The social-deprivation theory of political alienation was previously described as being based on the following five assumptions:

Assumption A.1. Persons deprived of opportunity and denied respect tend to have low levels of self-competence.

Assumption A.2. Persons who have low levels of self-competence tend to have low levels of political effectiveness.

Assumption A.3. Persons who have low levels of self-competence tend to have low feelings of political trust.

Assumption A.4. Black children are deprived of opportunity and denied respect.

Assumption A.5. Black children have lower feelings of self-competence than white children do.¹⁷⁴

The second theory, political-reality, was based on three previously cited assumptions:

¹⁷³ "In recent years legal barriers hindering the full participation of the Negro in the political process have been largely stripped away. The federal government is attempting to stimulate a kind of "grass roots" democracy among Negroes and the urban poor through the poverty and model cities programs. Various black spokesmen striving to arouse the Negro poor out of their apathy and self-hate have captured the headlines and news bulletins. Nevertheless, black youth continue to develop early in life fundamental political orientations that suggest that 'nothing very basic is happening.' When one projects into the future the kind of political behavior correlated with the low-efficacy and high-cynicism orientations of Negro youth, one is led to speculate that the next generation of Negro adults will still be operating far below its potential in the political arena." Lyons, Schley R "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," *The Journal of Politics*, 32(1970): 290.

¹⁷⁴ Paul R. Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations" *Journal*. 1250.

- 1) Blacks have less ability to influence political leaders than whites do.
- 2) Blacks have less reason to trust political leaders than whites do
- 3) Black children know these facts, or they are indirectly influenced by adults who know these facts, or both.¹⁷⁵

Both of these theories are based on an understanding of a racialized and stratified society that places Black people at the bottom and that this construction of society in this fashion has a detrimental psychological impact on those that are deemed racially inferior and this is especially evident in the psychological development of youth.

Presented in this fashion, system maintenance can be seen as maintaining the status quo, and it would be a difficult concept for Black youth to embrace. My research findings supported this point, and Abramson, Long and Schely's research results could be seen in this light too. Part of what I labeled as schizophrenic in the students' responses to my questions was due in part to this dual identity development space they inhabited. On the one hand, the students were being exposed to a dominant narrative about politics and political participation (e.g., the responsibilities of local, state, and national government), while, on the other hand, they were leading lives that in many respects were in friction with this understanding of politics (e.g., violent crimes, hurricane Katrina and the war in Iraq). Placed in this context, it was not surprising that their responses would indicate a low level of rudimentary political knowledge about such areas as local, state, and national politics; their responses also illustrated how much interest they had in some political issues and how much interest they had in voting.

An example of how this process of schizophrenia manifests itself can be seen in a conversation I had with Teresa. Teresa made a fascinating connection between "Caucasians" and how, "They are government" when I asked her about government

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 1259.

operations and policies. She claimed that, “When you think about White men,” then, “You think of government.” Not only does this support the claim that Black children undergo a distinct process of political socialization, but it also offers compelling evidence for the influence marginality has in this political socialization process. Teresa was literally telling me that the source of power in society is not her and that she does not identify with this alien entity. Or put another way, why should Teresa learn about local, state, and national government if she does not believe they are connected to or relevant for her? Teresa also expressed an interest in some political issues and in voting. These conflicted and contradictory responses make a lot more sense when placed in this context. Teresa’s response was emblematic of many of the students’ responses to my questions about interest in and understanding of politics. This same tension between a dominant narrative and understanding of politics and an understanding of politics for a marginal person or group can be seen as the ever-present backdrop for all of the other factors that I cover.

ROLE OF PEER GROUPS

This same form of analysis could be applied to the research that has been done on the role of peer groups in the political socialization process of youth. As previously documented, Jennings and Niemi produced research results that established the significance of the relationship between students and their peer groups in the political socialization process.¹⁷⁶ The strength of this relationship could be understood as on par with parental relations and this suggests that peer groups need to be investigated more.

¹⁷⁶“Also, in a study in which direct assessments of attitudes was actually obtained from those named as friends, attitudes between seniors and their friends were sometimes higher than those between seniors and parents (Jennings & Niemi 1974:243). Still more generally, if researchers were to consider thoroughly the implications of the development of national and even international youth cultures, as suggested in some

My research results were inconclusive in this area. Although it was easy to observe the influence that social relationships had on students' lives, it was much more difficult to identify the influence these relationships had on their political socialization process. Almost all of the students did not mention friends as a source of political information or even as people that they discussed their political ideas and feelings with. There was no overt attempt to attach any political beliefs or actions to peer groups that I witnessed. Even given this backdrop, it was also noticeable that students often presented political views in terms of the classroom audience. These dynamics were most noticeable during contentious political discussion, in particular the debates about same sex unions and abortions. It was very clear that any student that might have defended same sex unions would risk being identified with a group that a good portion of the class ridiculed and even the students that expressed support of (or tolerance for) same sex unions did it in a very careful and discreet fashion.

There was also a certain amount of posturing that took place during the individual interviews. This was most noticeable when some students attempted to align themselves with particular 'radical' or 'conspiracy orientated' positions. The following beliefs could be considered to be classified in this group: There is a cure for AIDs and the government will not release it; the government continues to distribute illicit drugs in Black neighborhoods; and the feeling that the government knew about 9/11 beforehand. These were some of the more common political ideas that fell into this 'radical' and 'conspiracy' camp. None of the students that articulated these views could provide arguments that substantiated these points. How much these ideas represented access to

sociological writings (see below), more extensive influence of peers on political attitudes would probably be found." Niemi and Sobieszek., "Political Socialization," 222.

and connection with certain peer groups was more difficult to ascertain. These views could also be understood as connected to previously mentioned phenomena. In particular, the fact that these views were more prevalent than any knowledge of local, state, and national issues seemed to reinforce the role that peer groups play in this process. It is not just parents then that contribute to this phenomenon; the circulation of knowledge, including ‘radical’ or ‘conspiracy’ politics, also supports the view that there is a status quo that does not incorporate these other areas.

Even though it is quite difficult to assess the role that peer groups have in the political socialization process for Black youth, it is worth noting that there is a role and that there is more that can be learned about this area. Even though the students I interacted with did not directly attribute their political views or actions to friends or to friendships, it is clear that political ideas were being shared, interpreted and incorporated as a natural outgrowth of these beliefs. How students self-identified politically was part of the way that they understood themselves and understood each other. This phenomenon contributed to the environment in which so many students would know so little about local, state, and national politics, yet they expressed such a great deal of interest in certain political issues and in participating in our political system by voting. It is also possible that peer groups contribute to the political alienation many students described and the ‘radical’ and ‘conspiracy’ narratives that are shared by the students might contribute to this phenomenon.

ROLE OF PARENTS

To be able to explain the results from the previous chapter, the theoretical material that was presented in Chapter 2 could be utilized. The way in which Niemi and

Sobieszek understood the significance of parental influence on youth political socialization was described in the following manner: “It should perhaps be emphasized that virtually all studies have found positive correlations between parents’ and children’s attitudes.”¹⁷⁷ Even though there was a case made for a strong relationship, Niemi and Sobieszek also suggested that: “Young people are indeed reflections on their parents; however, they are pale reflections, especially beyond the realm of partisanship and voting.”¹⁷⁸ On one level, this point was borne out by my research, and the students’ response to questions about voting reflected this point. When Bonilla expressed an interest in voting, she also discussed the fact that her parents vote and that they vote for Democrats. It appeared clear that she was not just going to vote, but that she also considered herself as a Democrat. The way in which these points interlock could also be seen in Bonilla’s joke about if, “Bush wins, we will be picking cotton again.” This was emblematic of many of the students’ descriptions of their own political views and the way in which they incorporated their understanding of their parents’ political views and activities.

Even though this is not a settled point within the literature that has been produced on political socialization, it does provide for a significant entry point into these debates about the role that parents and race play in this political socialization process. This point can be seen in the ‘color blind’ plane that the debate about the role of parents has transpired on. I have portrayed this debate through the work of Niemi, Sobieszek and Merelman and I have illustrated the way in which race and racism had not been considered or incorporated into the research results produced for the role parents have in

¹⁷⁷ Niemi and Sobieszek, “Political Socialization,” 218.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

the political socialization process. As previously noted Niemi and Sobieszek presented research results that suggested there is a weak relationship between parental influence and youth political socialization.¹⁷⁹ Merelman's comments could be understood as a counterweight to what is implied by these research results.¹⁸⁰ All of these positions would appear applicable for the Black youth that were a part of my research, but these research results would also not present a complete picture.

Whereas it was true that many of the students communicated to me some type of connection between their own political habits and preferences and their parents', it was also true that on another level it could also be argued that students were not brought into the political realm by their parents in the way Niemi, Sobieszek, or Merelman suggested. On a rudimentary level race provided a dividing line between White parents that might be able to bequeath their world a political beliefs and actions that would serve them well in the dominant society and Black parents that would have to prepare their children for the 'schizophrenic' world that not only encompasses what is expected from the dominant society, but also the 'unofficial' survival political beliefs and actions that racial minorities have to learn. Even for the students that appeared to be brought into the political realm that Niemi, Sobieszek, or Merelman covered, it was unclear how much of a role race would have or how much other factors might need to be incorporated into this analysis. Put another way, many of the youth might learn from their parents might be abandoned once they gain more experiences with race and racism or the youth might never have

¹⁷⁹ "Reporting on a national sample of high school seniors and their parents, they found that correlations between the attitudes expressed by seniors and those expressed independently by their parents were below 0.40 for a variety of political issues, groups and values-with the sole exceptions of partisanship and candidate preferences." Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 217.

¹⁸⁰ "It generally is agreed that family influence dominates early political development. There is pervasive parental impact both on the child's partisan identification and on his image of political authority, the two major components of early diffuse support." Merelman, "The Adolescence of Political Socialization," 149.

these experiences and they might never develop a ‘schizophrenic’ political outlook. It was also clear that a great deal of disenchantment and cynicism was being expressed about our political system, and this was gleaned from family members. Even if on the level of party affiliation and voting habits, the students tended to demonstrate a similar process of political socialization as Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman suggest, there are many other factors that need to be incorporated into the analysis. I will review these points in more detail when I discuss system stabilization. For now it is important to draw a cautionary note about the way in which these students appear to reinforce or challenge what has already been established in the field of political socialization.

Following the logic of this point, it could be argued that there is a special obligation that the students’ parents should have in this political process. One way this obligation could be understood is by asking the question of whether or not parents of Black children have a higher burden to meet with regards to their children’s political socialization process in a world that is so hostile to minorities. As the results suggest, there is a significant gap between political knowledge and political interest and potential involvement. Granted that parents have played an instrumental role in the party affiliation and voting habits of their youth, then it would seem to follow that parents have also had an influential role in the lack of knowledge their children have. This point was substantiated by the many students who told me that they did not talk with their parents about political issues, events, or elected officials. Even the students that noted their parents’ political preferences and voting habits rarely discussed a parental role in their political development. In fact, much of the political knowledge that was shared with me came from mass media or friends. Part of the process of unraveling why there was such a

huge gap between political knowledge on one side and political interest and participation on the other side must include the role of parents.

ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

One critical component of research on youth political socialization is the role of educational institutions. The emphasis on youth is invariably linked to educational institutions because of the role it has in youths' lives. The students I interviewed started school at 9:30AM and the final school bell rang at 4:15PM; some of the students were involved with school sponsored activities before and after school. It was not only the time commitment that educational institutions demand but also what areas of study schools cover. For many students, they not only learn a great deal about American politics, but the school also becomes the only venue in which many of them are exposed to learning about American politics in a formal and structured setting. These aspects of educational institutions, coupled with the historical emphasis on youth, suggest that these two areas are interconnected and vital.

The field of political socialization has not produced a lot of tangible results for the role educational institutions play in the political socialization process. Niemi and Sobieszek describe this phenomenon in the following way.¹⁸¹ Part of the mystery of the role that educational institutions play in the political socialization process is due to the difficulty of being able to discover and understand what students are actually learning. The ethnographic methods I employed provided me with a great deal of insight into how this learning process unfolds and also how complicated this process can be. To be able to

¹⁸¹ "Research on the role of the school in political socialization is surprisingly sparse, and has been piecemeal rather than directed by clear theoretical perspectives. Consequently there is a welter of specific ideas, but little can be confidently stated and backed by adequate research." Niemi and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 220.

examine this process and to evaluate specific areas that students learned about, I will examine three critical spaces of the educational process: The teaching methodology, the curriculum, and the classroom dynamics.

The first area is teaching methodology, and this area is arguably the most significant. As previously noted in Chapter 4, Mr. Tefton spent an inordinate amount of time and energy establishing himself as a worthy and responsible teacher. This included not only opening up his own life to scrutiny and establishing his credentials as a young Black man who could relate to their experiences but also included the way he dressed, interacted with the students, and presented the lesson plans. Mr. Tefton had to battle for some semblance of control of the class each and every day that he taught, and he always had to find various techniques to utilize for this task. Sometimes it was simply standing in front of the class and raising his voice, and sometimes it was just a matter of sitting at his desk and giving the class time to settle down. What was critical though is being able to quiet down the class and to find a way to communicate with the students in way that they would understand and respect. Most of the students spoke highly of Mr. Tefton, and they also considered his class unique.

Their ability and comfort in being able to relay back to me what they learned in class was a testament to this fact. Most of the students mentioned the class discussion on abortion and same sex marriage as being their favorite, and many of the students also included one or both of these issues as their most significant political issues. As previously mentioned, Mr. Tefton introduced this discussion by saying that he was a Republican and that he had decided to join the Republican Party because of moral issues that he wanted the class to talk about: Abortion and same sex marriage. It is for these

reasons that I believe the students were able to learn a lot about some political issues, and Mr. Tefton's teaching methodology also contributed to some of the students' interest in participating in our political system.

The curriculum utilized in the classroom is also a critical component of overall learning experiences. This area presented the most noticeable shortfall in the learning experience for Mr. Tefton's African American studies class. As previously mentioned, the only official text for the class was rarely used, and Mr. Tefton gave very few assignments. Even when material was assigned, there was little long term follow-up or short term feedback given. Since the class lacked written material and assignments, there was even a greater premium placed upon oral presentations and exchanges. It was expected that students would engage in lively discussion on a wide variety of issues in each class, and quite often the male voices were most noticeable and passionate. These dynamics led to most of these students believing that this class was very easy and that it was also enjoyable. Based on what students shared with me, it was also clear that many of the students learned about current political issues and gained an interest in participating in our political system.

As these two previously cited areas suggest, a vibrant and exciting classroom dynamic existed. It was not only very clear that those students were highly motivated to come to class on a regular basis, but that many of the students enjoyed participating in the class. This coupled with the fact that Mr. Tefton had established himself as a teacher who is worthy of respect and a viable source of information and guidance meant that a successful learning environment was created and established. Many students talked about what they learned in this class, and they talked about how important this class was

for them. Other students mentioned the discussion aspect of the class as being the most distinct and favorable part of the class. More than one student suggested that this classroom environment had been allowed for a more open dialogue and that they felt as if in their other classes they could not share their feelings and thoughts. All of them thought that this class was a valuable experience, and they appreciated the opportunity Mr. Tefton gave them to participate in the class.

RACE, THEORY, AND METHODS MATTER

What I discovered in the area of teaching methodology, curriculum, and classroom dynamics provides another way to examine previous research done in the field of political socialization, and it highlights how important the selection of methods and theories can be too. Niemi and Sobieszek cast doubt on the role that schools can play in the political socialization process of youth.¹⁸² It was not just students in the age range of 11-13 that they cautioned scholars to pay attention to but also the potential benefits civics courses could have.¹⁸³ Instead of examining written answers to a survey or a questionnaire, I instead utilized ethnographic techniques to study the political socialization of Black youth. Unlike the results that Niemi, Sobieszek and Merelman reviewed and based their analysis on, I based my analysis on an observation of how this

¹⁸² “Even by the time children arrive in school, the family has exerted its influence both in early value formation of the children and in their attitudes on authority. The school reinforces some of these views, but does little to alter them. In the absence of schools, families might play a larger role in reinforcing views established earlier, along with a more important role for other agencies such as religious organizations. Moreover, regardless of school lessons about social studies, children do not develop the ability to think abstractly about politics or anything else until roughly ages 11-13.” Niemi and Sobieszek, “Political Socialization,” 220.

¹⁸³ . “A wealth of recent research has modified earlier optimistic pronouncements about the school’s place in political socialization. For years educators and laymen alike proclaimed the school’s power to convey democratic values, but such trust now appears misplaced. Civics courses apparently have little positive effect on most students; and Merelman both find no relationship between participation in extra-curricular activities and student political orientations. In fact, Merelman concludes that, the high school experience apparently increases neither adolescent support for nor understanding of democratic values.” Merelman, “The Adolescence of Political Socialization,” 150.

process unfolded on multiple occasions. This provided me with a substantially different angle to view and understand the political socialization process, and it opened up a different set of questions. An example of this can be seen in the weight I have attached to the teaching methodology. Whereas students might have or might not have produced a higher score on a political aptitude test, it was clear that the students I observed were learning about political ideas and behaviors, and that I could document this. Part of the students' learning process incorporated not just what could be regurgitated on a questionnaire or a survey but information that could also be witnessed in the beliefs that they expressed and the behavior they exhibited. The fact that I could observe what the teacher taught, what materials were utilized, and how the students responded to this teaching methodology provided me invaluable insights into a robust learning process.

These factors are critical to consider before a conclusion can be reached on the impact of educational institutions on the political socialization of Black youth. Niemi and Sobieszek's conclusion, based on Merelman's work, that, "High school experience apparently increases neither adolescent support for nor understanding of democratic values" was not substantiated by my work. My research supported Abramson, Long, Schley's understanding of Black youth political socialization being distinct from the racial majority experience and being connected to a socialization process that is deeply embedded in the political and social conditions that Black children live in. From this background it was easy to identify and witness the way in which political socialization process appeared as a form of schizophrenia. On the one hand, the educational institution provided the students with a way to understand the formal procedure and mechanics of our government; on the other hand, the students were sensitive to how these same

government structures quite often appeared to be irrelevant for their family and their own lives.

What my work has helped to illuminate is the dual gap in the field of political socialization for the study of Black youth. Not only is there a lack of research that has been devoted to Black youth political socialization, but there has not been enough methodological and theoretical attention paid to minority communities both inside and outside of educational institutions. The inconclusive results that Niemi and Sobieszek cite for youth political socialization research are emblematic of this problem.¹⁸⁴ Even in the specific realm of civic courses, the same problems appear.¹⁸⁵ All of the research that is mentioned by Niemi, Sobieszek, and Merelman is based on survey research, and none of these research projects were designed or implemented in a way that minority students' responses could be properly accounted for and analyzed. What would be more revealing is the application of the specific application to the theoretical models that Abramson introduced, coupled with the utilization of the type of ethnographic methods I have employed. This could provide greater insight into not just a certain set of feelings or ideas students have about specific or abstract political knowledge; it could also provide insights into how this information is being processed and incorporated into their everyday lives. This is a critical point for racial minorities that are not only forced into a marginal position in our society but clearly learn to adapt to those substandard conditions by not

¹⁸⁴ "High school, according to our schema, should be a crucial time for the development of political attitudes, since young people by this time have the cognitive capacity to deal with political ideas. Yet studies have not been uniform in finding positive effects of the schoolroom." Niemi. and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 221.

¹⁸⁵ "Yet a major study by Langston and Jennings found virtually no impact of civics courses in a national cross-sectional sample of high school seniors, although these courses did not have a meaningful impact on black students in the sample. Similarly, Merelman comes to basically negative conclusions about the role of the school in a study of sixth, ninth, and twelfth graders. If adolescence is a crucial time for learning about politics, one wonders why this mixture of positive and negative results has occurred." Niemi. and Sobieszek, "Political Socialization," 220.

following and learning about the dominant political narratives of society. Instead, they find their own way to forage through the contradictory and often nonsensical messages they are sent by the larger society.

**ALL IS NOT LOST?:
LIMITS OF AMBIVALENCE,
IGNORANCE, AND CYNICISM MODELS**

Abramson developed a theoretical model for minorities that was based on testing ambivalence, ignorance and cynicism. There are some areas that were not addressed in this model, and some of these areas need to be studied more. Although my research results supported Abramson's model with respect to the lack of local, state, and national political knowledge, the same could not be said about political interest and desire. I noted not just the skepticism and disgust with all levels of government; I also noticed the primary interest in voting that nearly all of the participants shared. In this respect, the students did not fit into the theoretical models that were first presented by Abramson and then developed by scholars such as Long and Schley. There were a few key neglected areas that suggested to me that a more appropriate theoretical model still needs to be developed, and a different methodological approach will be needed to assess the strength or weaknesses of this model.

1) "VOTE OR DIE"

The first area appeared in the third interview when I asked about the now infamous slogan for youth from the last Presidential election: "Vote or Die." Rap artist and moguls P. Diddy (Sean John Combs) and Russell Simmons were two of the high profile proponents of this campaign, and it was an extremely effective voter education

and get out the vote drive.¹⁸⁶ How much of the national increase in youth voter registration and voter turnout was due to this campaign is unclear and disputed. What I could ascertain from the students I interviewed was the familiarity with and the positive reception to this campaign. All of the students named P. Diddy (Sean John Combs) or Russell Simmons as one of the backers of this campaign, and this was just based on the mentioning of the phrase “vote or die.” Many of the students specifically mentioned BET (Black Entertainment Television) or MTV (Music Television) as one of the two television stations where they learned about this campaign, and they also mentioned the shirts and other merchandise that this slogan appeared on. Given this widespread awareness of this campaign, it does suggest that youth can be understood as a potential political market and that there are successful ways to tap into this market. This is particularly true for Black youth that are media savvy and that have particular media interests which can be identified and utilized as the basis of this political work. This would suggest that more research needs to be done on the recent political partisan and non-partisan campaign work that targeted youth in general and Black youth specifically. Part of what needs to be done is a great deal of scrutiny on the depth and impact of this work. Was this work successful on the level of generating interest in one important

¹⁸⁶ Information about Russell Simmons and P. Diddy can be found in the follow places:

http://en.wikipedia.org/Russell_Simmons

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P_diddy

For more information about the Vote or Die campaign these web locations can be utilized:

Jose Antonio Vargas, “Vote or Die? Well, They Did Vote: Youth Ballots Up 4.6 Million From 2000, in Kerry’s Favor,”

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A35290-2004Nov8?language=printer>

MTV.com “Hillary Clinton Tells P. Diddy ‘Vote or Die’ Slogan Hits Nail on the Head”

<http://www.mtv.com/chooseorlose/headlines/news.jhtml?id=1489969>

Jen Chung, “P. Diddy Gets The Vote Out”

http://www.gothamist.com/archives/2004/07/23/p_diddy_gets_the_vote_out.php

Presidential election or did this campaign have a lasting effect on the attitudes and behavior of youth beyond this election?

2) THE MARION BARRY FACTOR

Besides the President of the United States, the politician that seemed to elicit the greatest response was the former Mayor of Washington, D.C., Marion Barry. Barry was recently reelected as the Ward 8 Council member, and he continues to have many loyal supporters all over the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The fact that Barry was elected as Mayor in Washington, D.C. in the 1980s and 1990s and has had so much local and national coverage of his rocky personal and political career have been integral parts of his folk hero status in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan area.¹⁸⁷

This was apparent in the students' response to his name being mentioned, and it was clear that there were very strong feelings that had been formulated about him. When I asked Bonilla if she knew who the Mayor was or who any of the city council members were in her city, she told me that, "All I know is Marion Barry" Celia referred to Marion Barry as the, "Coke man" and she asked if, "He was the Mayor" (of Washington, D.C. now). Ron told me that, "He should have run for President" and that, "He's the only one that made sense of the whole thing." The students' responses ranged from hostility, to laughter, to admiration, and all of these responses were substantially different than what was said about other politicians. They not only knew his name, but they could also describe specific actions from his personal and/or political life too. None of the students

¹⁸⁷ Harry S. Jaffe and Tom Sherwood's book can be useful for learning more about on Marion Barry and the impact he continues to have on the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area. Harry S. Jaffe and Tom Sherwood, *Dream City: Race, Power, and the Decline of Washington, D.C.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.

could recognize the name of the current mayor of Washington, D.C. and none of them could name the mayor in their own city.

One could chalk this up as simply part of the remarkable career, fortitude, and style of Barry, but I believe there are other parts of this phenomenon that need to be examined. Questions such as what policies, vision and style of governance Barry utilized that contributed to the way in which current students in the Washington, D.C. area understand him are critical to explore. A lot of the students picked up on the more sensational aspects of Barry's personal and political life; there were also students that conveyed an understanding and appreciation of what Barry had accomplished as a mayor. This would suggest that programs such as summer employment for youth would need to be examined from the standpoint of political popularity and enduring legacy. The summer youth employment program might be a poignant example to study because of the impact this program could have on people that would now be the age of the parents of the students I interviewed. Some of these parents might have found their first job in this program or in some other program that Barry initiated. Since the students were not old enough to remember when Barry was mayor, then it is possible to deduce that other sources of information, such as parents and relatives, might have been instrumental in the students learning about Barry's accomplishments and failures. This is a very important point when Barry is placed in the context of so many other local, state and national politicians and political leaders that none of the students could name or identify with when asked about them. If the way in which parents and relatives talked about Barry was the most significant conduit for the way these students learned about him, then it might mean that the parental role in the political socialization process is more potent than

previously thought of by scholars. It also might mean that there are ways that students can become turned on to politics and that students are receptive to learning about politics and political leaders in certain circumstances and from certain people.

3) SAME SEX UNIONS AND ABORTIONS AS SOLUTIONS

The class discussions and the individual interviews suggested that the debates that were waged over same sex unions and abortions might provide a model for a way to enhance or supplement a political socialization process for Black youth. Since so many of the students I interviewed had passionate feelings and strongly held beliefs about these issues, then it might be useful to develop lesson plans and curricula around these political interests. Put another way, the identification and the utilization of those hot button political and social issues might provide an excellent way to teach Black youth about politics. It was fascinating to watch these discussions transpire in class and to see no reference or acknowledgment as to how these issues were being tackled at the same time by local, state, and national politicians. An example of this could be seen in the way the Maryland state house government was trying to avoid having a same sex union proposition put on the ballot while many of the Black State Representatives were struggling with this process.¹⁸⁸ Another example could be seen in the recent Supreme Court appointments, and the impact that the selection of these judges might have on

¹⁸⁸ Matthew Mosk, "Gay Unions Fracture Md.'s Black Caucus: Civil Rights Pull as Strong as Church's," January 28, 2006.
<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/977402841.html?dids=977402841:977402841&FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&fmac=&date=Jan+28%2C+2006&author=Matthew+Mosk&desc=Gay+Unions+Fracture+Md.%27s+Black+Caucus>

abortion laws.¹⁸⁹ There appeared to be many openings into the larger political structure struggles that could have been taken advantage of, and this could have helped connect the students' political interest to current political leaders and events.

There also appears to be a larger role that educational institutions could play in the political socialization process for youth. I noticed this shortcoming when I interviewed April, and I asked her about local politicians. Although April could not name the mayor of Slopton she was the only student that told me she had met him. I expected this meeting to have been a part of her political activism, but her meeting the Mayor was due solely to the opportunity that was granted to her by Trenton High School. I was surprised to learn that she had met him at an honor role assembly and that this assembly was the only occasion on which a local official had to come to speak to the school. This suggests that the schools could have a much greater role in a positive political socialization process for youth, and, in the case of Trenton High School, this is a greatly untapped source. Whether or not this is something that should be initiated by local politicians, the school district, or some other entity is debatable. What is clear is that arranging for students to meet with political leaders has the potential to make a substantial difference in their understanding, appreciation, and knowledge of political leaders and events. It would be worth testing how much exposure makes a difference and what type of exposure is most beneficial. Whether or not small intimate classroom settings are more effective than large town hall settings is something I was not able to address in my research.

¹⁸⁹ Associated Press, "Supreme Court agrees to hear abortion case: At issue: Must parents be notified before minor ends pregnancy?" MSNBC.MSN.com, May 23, 2005
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7952555/>

Studying Black youth's political socialization presents a myriad of obstacles. As a way to address some of these obstacles, I utilized methodological and theoretical approaches that are rarely linked together. Instead of using previous theoretical models that had not been developed for a specific race or that were not sensitive to a racial discourse, I instead chose to use the theoretical models Abramson introduced for Black youth and that was developed by other scholars. Some of the variations in Abramson's theoretical model were incorporated into my research as I attempted to study not just Black youth's political socialization or the perceived weakness of this political socialization process, but also a way to examine what had been traditionally labeled as complicated and contradictory political behavior of Black youth.

The search for this type of a race sensitive theoretical model coupled with the utilization of an ethnographic approach that allowed me to interact with and observe Black youth provided the basis of the research. This ethnographic approach included participant observation and face to face interviews. Even though this approach also undermined the potential reliability and verifiability of my research results, in terms of traditional social scientific practices, my research was able to shed a great deal of light on the political socialization process of Black youth. From the standpoint of qualitative research being done on Black youth, my research occupied a unique space within the field of political socialization.

Most of the scholarly work done on Black youth's political socialization either supports the fact that Black youth have a distinct political socialization process or it takes this insight to the level of a classification as a dysfunctional or aberrant political process for a group (or an individual.) This unfortunate scholarly practice can be traced to the

initial positive work that Abramson accomplished in establishing Black political socialization as a legitimate area of scholarly study. In particular, the premise of Abramson's work was built around this previously mentioned insight:

The six million black schoolchildren in the United States, like their white counterparts, have virtually no political power. Yet, socialization research suggests that black children feel less politically powerful than white children do.¹⁹⁰

On the one hand Abramson draws attention to the fact that White and Black youth have no political power, but on the other hand he presents a convincing case for Black youth having a distinct political socialization process. Abramson also suggests that this political socialization process is marred by cynicism and efficacy.

Abramson's key insights can be challenged on methodological, as well as theoretical grounds. It is not just a matter of the lack of political power for all youth or Black youth's misunderstanding of this absence of power that needs to be addressed; but it is an understanding of the potency that a racial discourse continues to have on Black youth's political socialization that should be analyzed. Instead of attempting to contest Abramson's understanding of the political socialization of youth, I have decided to focus on the inadequacy of what Abramson deduces from this general understanding of youth: A shortcoming in the specific political socialization of Black youth. This insight can be seen in the work of Schley that was previously covered:

It is obvious, however, that the slum child, particularly the Negro slum child, acquires his political values and beliefs within a milieu of poverty and racial discrimination that differs significantly from that of white, middle-class children.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," 1243.

¹⁹¹ Lyons, "The Political Socialization of Ghetto Children: Efficacy and Cynicism," 290.

Instead of following the implied logic of Abramson's observation, Schley instead argues for the central place that a structural analysis of race and poverty must have as a starting place in any research. The focal point of analysis is shifted from an understanding of Black political behavior as an anomaly or as peculiar; Schley allows for Black youth's political socialization to be seen as a part of a survival strategy and technique in the context of an oppressive political and social structure. From a quantitative standpoint Schley successfully illustrates that the source of this cynicism and efficacy is in part due to the racial subjugation Black children encounter. This racial subjugation is a key factor in Schley's understanding of the variations in her research samples' response to questionnaires about their politics.

My research not only substantiated these points made by Schley, but it also supported the points that previous scholars mentioned about how race functions as an all consuming discourse in our society.¹⁹² Part of the explanation for the discrepancies and inconsistencies in the students' responses to my questions about political knowledge and activity can be understood when seen in this light. The cynicism and efficacy that Abramson, Long, and Schley referred to are not simply an inadequacy or a flaw in the political socialization process of Black youth. The political beliefs and behaviors that are exhibited by Black youth must also be seen as a reaction to occupying a subordinate position in our society. This means that quite often what Black youth are exposed to via the dominant society's taste and values do not necessarily fit or make sense for their lives. They are constantly made aware of the fact that there is not just a gap between the social conditions they live in and what they see on television, movie theaters, and in other

¹⁹² The arguments in Chapter 2 I presented, that were based on the work of Miles, Omi and Winant, establish the significance of race as a historically important contemporary force.

cultural outlets, but that there is also a substantial gap between what political outlets and results are presented to them inside and outside of the classroom. Unlike the political socialization process White youth digest, there is no clear and identifiable moment when the ‘textbook’ and ‘television world’ political powers will match the world that Black youth inhabit. Abramson’s presumption that Black children should adopt a similar youthful outlook as Whites would only make sense if our society was not still deeply divided along racial lines. Black youth’s political socialization incorporates strands of the cynicism and efficacy that Abramson, Long and Schley detected, but there is a much richer and more nuanced story that needs to be told about Black youth’s political socialization process.

Future research could focus on the aspect of political socialization for Black youth that I referred to as “schizophrenic.” This type of (political) schizophrenia presents itself in the form of an acknowledgment and interest in our political system, while at the same time displaying a high level of distrust and dislike of our current political leaders and system. This schizophrenia was most noticeable from the standpoint of students’ responses to my questions that appeared to contradict and devalue what they shared with me. Unlike the medical form of schizophrenia, this form of schizophrenia enjoys a much higher degree of agency and only makes sense when placed in a context of intense and powerful structural forces. My research suggests that this schizophrenia is not based on an absence of political understanding or a lack of political experience, but that this schizophrenia is more indicative of the way that minority races operate in this country on a daily basis and what this minority status quo imposes upon them.

Some of the areas of political interest also highlighted the significance that identity politics continues to have on political socialization. From the standpoint of Black youth, it was not surprising to discover the high level of awareness and interest in a public figure such as Councilmember Marion Barry, issues such as Hurricane Katrina, and interest in the ‘get out the vote’ campaign from the previous Presidential election that featured the slogan “Vote or Die” and was spearheaded by rap stars and moguls P. Diddy (Sean John Combs) and Russell Simmons. Even though this political interest was rarely articulated in overtly racial terms, it was clear that this political interest is connected to a racial identity and grounding that many students shared with me. This does not mean that their substantive lack of political knowledge about local, state and national politics is minimized by or could be corrected by a race based approach or analysis. I also do not mean to suggest that race was the only or even most significant factor in what political interests the students developed and shared with me, but the political interests they did share with me were laced with overt or subtle racial significance.

An identity politics filter is also extremely important to utilize and evaluate the results of scholarly research. Whereas results, such as lack of local, state, and national political knowledge, might appear alarming, it is critical to develop a frame of reference for these results. For example, it could be argued that these results are not surprising or unusual, and that it is not just Black youth that lack this political knowledge. In fact, this lack of knowledge of political issues and leaders might very well cut across racial, gender, and even class lines. Or one could advance the proposition that it does not matter whether or not these political trends apply to all races, genders, and class groupings. The fact that these traits exist for one race is in and of itself relevant and urgent. As a

proponent of this latter argument, I have attempted to draw attention to what single race research can provide. I also believe the potency of this narrow research approach will be inextricably linked to how successful a broader identity politics argument can be articulated.

The genesis of this argument can be seen in the work of Paulo Friere, and his work can serve as a launching pad to plunge into these larger arguments about identity politics. I began my work by presenting questions from Friere's work, and I would like to return to these questions now: "Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of the oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?" It is true that Friere was writing about Brazilian youth in the 1960's, but his description of what marginal populations encounter is still apropos for Black youth today. The students I interacted with described various forms of discrimination and racism that they and their relatives have struggled with. I conducted the interviews at Trenton High School at a time when police raids occurred on a frequent basis, and the use of pepper spray and clubs was not uncommon within school grounds. The time period in which I observed the school also spanned the period that hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf region, the Iraqi war continued to drag miserably on, and the passing of such notable leaders as Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King occurred. On a local level one could point to Prince George's County homicide rate hitting a record high, a rash of shooting of school buses, and the relinquishing of control over some public schools in Maryland (Baltimore region)

transpiring.¹⁹³ All of these social and political forces must be incorporated into the analysis and recognition of the weight of these forces on the lives of Black youth.

It is equally important to acknowledge that all of these political and social forces did not bend students in one particular or logical direction. Not all of the students expressed the same level of political consciousness that Ron and Simone did, nor did all of the students describe the same level of political activism and commitment as Malcolm and April exhibited. In this sense, the use of Friere to support a romantic notion of a political socialization process for minority youth that results in a Malcolm or a Simone needs to be resisted. Even if one wanted to make a case for students, such as Malcolm or Simone, representing a ‘model’ minority response to oppressive conditions, then one would still have to construct an explanatory model that includes the other students. There were many more students that expressed a dislike of traditional politics, were not knowledgeable about political issues and leaders, and were reluctant to participate in traditional political practices. The number of Tims, Celias, Jamillas, and Cliffs not only provided a counterbalance to a simple Frierian understanding of Black youth, but also suggested that a more nuanced and detailed account of Black youth’s political ideas and behaviors should be developed. The stories of this ‘silent majority’ also suggest that

¹⁹³ Some examples of how these issues have been covered can be found in the following places: Allison Klein and Del Quentin Wilber, “D.C. Area Slayings Climbed In 2005: Pr. George’s Set Record; District at 20-Year Low,” *washingtonpost.com*, Monday, January 2, 2006. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/01/AR2006010101049_pf.html Carol Motsinger, “Bill seeks more penalties for school-related violence: Official says law needed to combat gangs, inter-school violence,” *Gazette.net*, Thursday, March 9, 2006. http://www.gazette.net/stories/030906/carrcou161244_31946.shtml Allison Klein and Nick Anderson, “School Bus Violence is Common, Drivers Say: Two Pr. George’s Teenagers are Charged With Attempted Murder After Gun Was Fired at Vehicle,” *washingtonpost.com*, Feb. 4, 2006. <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/981213151.html?dids+981213151:9812>. What’s New, *The Official Home Page of the City of Baltimore*, Maryland, April, 2006. <http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/news/SchoolFacts.html>

Friere and many of the liberation scholars that have developed and applied a similar academic and political analysis to this subject matter might not have provided the most useful heuristic model for understanding Black youth now. It might also very well be the case that the connection between political engagement and minority status is more tenuous than what my work has suggested. This means that a subordinate status could just as easily not translate into traditional, or non-traditional, political beliefs and activity and that a lot more research is needed to substantiate whether there is a relationship between Black youth's identity formation and their political socialization.

Even with this acknowledgement of the variety and complexity of the individual responses I observed within the context of these larger social and political forces, there were still some more modest trends that could be identified. These trends included lack of local, state, and national political knowledge, substantial interest in some current political and social issues, and a desire to participate in our political system through voting. Instead of relying on previously discussed models, such as system stabilization, political-reality explanations, or even the social deprivation theory of political alienation, more emphasis should be placed upon developing explanatory tools that incorporates Schley's insights and Friere's universal approach. Being able to observe and document various political trends in Black youth's behavior is not as difficult an endeavor as attempting to make sense of what is being witnessed.

By highlighting this disjointed and confusing nature of Black youth's political socialization process, my research not only provided a way to examine some of the limitations and weakness of previous research done in the field of political socialization, but it also shed light on potential openings for future research. It might be worthwhile

then to continue to do research on Black youth political socialization that is methodological, designed for a specific race and that is theoretically sensitive to the influence that race and racism continue to have in the lives of people of color. As I attempted to present this confusion and these contradictions, I also tried to show some ways that this confusion could be addressed and studied in a more in-depth fashion. There are two specific areas that I would recommend for future research and two general areas of Black identity and politics that I would also recommend as future areas of study.

The first area would be an examination of educational institutions that have programs in place that support students' political socialization processes. In terms of educational institutional reform, I drew attention to how the level of interest in our political system and some current political issues could provide the basis for classroom material, topics, and areas of emphasis, as well as for school town hall meetings and the inclusion of local political leaders and politicians in school scheduling. Even though I pointed out how critical exposure to political leaders and politicians might be for Black youth's political socialization, there was no way to test the veracity of this claim at my research location. It was also apparent that at Trenton High School there was no program in place that allowed for students to meet with local, state or national political leaders. More research should be conducted that monitors and evaluates student exposure to political leaders and institutions. This research should examine not just a generic success rate based on students' attitudes or behaviors but should also take account of the larger social and political milieu of the students who participate in the program, and the students that do not participate in it.

The intersection of three areas could provide the basis for future research on Black youth's political socialization process: Cultural consumption, youth development, and the political socialization process. The cultural consumption component of this research could include such diverse forms as movies, books, video games, radio stations, DVDs, web sites, television shows and CDS. As suggested by the responses to the questions I asked the students, there is great deal of exposure to forms of expression the students were willing to share their feelings about. This leads to the necessity of including an analysis of youth development. Youth development could include general psychological theories, as well as specific theories about Black youth development. The last part could incorporate a definition of political socialization that Niemi and Sobieszek present and that I utilized in my own work. Instead of relying on a political analysis of media studies or of popular culture from a youth perspective, a more specific analysis of political beliefs and behaviors needs to be developed. As the Vote or Die campaign suggested there is a noticeable impact that overt political campaigns can have on youth behavior and ideas. There is less known about the impact that everyday cultural consumption has on youth's political behavior and beliefs and the impact that this cultural exposure has on minority populations.

A potentially more controversial area of study would be an examination of Black youth's sexuality, gender, and political socialization. If the information one student shared with me about the sexuality of her and two other students was accurate, then three of the fifteen students I interviewed were lesbians. This would also mean that almost half of the women I interviewed were gay. Besides some of the more obvious social implications these results might have if they could be substantiated on a larger scale,

there might also be some very intriguing political questions that could be raised. It was noticeable that many of the women had what could be labeled as more progressive positions on the social issues, such as abortion and same sex unions. Future research could be developed to address the strength of this relationship and what other factors might contribute to this gender bias. The inclusion of sexuality would allow the research to ask if there is any correlation between the sexuality of the students and the development of their (progressive) political positions. The same analysis could be applied to the male students and one could ask if they develop more conservative political positions. If they do develop more conservative political positions, then how much is this political development tied to their identity development as heterosexual or homosexual males? These questions suggest that there are new and even more potent research angles that could highlight and substantiate the nature of contemporary identity politics. This is especially true for the development of a multidimensional framework that could include race, gender, and sexuality as the basis. These questions were beyond the scope of my own research, and a research projects needs to be developed with these specific social and political questions in mind. Gender and sexuality study of youth carries a heavy ethical burden and many legal issues would have to be considered too.¹⁹⁴ Even with all of these potential obstacles in the way, it is also very clear that this type of research is needed and that minority students have not been studied in this regard.

¹⁹⁴ The stories Bonilla shared with me about the Black lesbian party she attended is testament to this fact. I could not substantiate this story in any meaningful fashion. If I asked her for names of other participants, then this, in essence, would be asking her to 'out' other people. As a heterosexual, Black male, I could also not expand my participant observation approach to incorporate this community. There is also the previous mentioned point about how reliability students at that age can be about their own sexuality. If a scholar did not want to rely on self-disclosure as a way to determine the sexuality of the participants, then there are not a lot of ethical and legal avenues available that could guarantee the accuracy of the participants' sexuality. This is very difficult issue to resolve if one thinks about male sexuality. I would imagine that Black men at that age would be less willing to discuss their sexuality during a research interview than Black women.

I believe that Black youth political socialization provides a profound and a rich subject matter to study and that there is still a lot more that could be learned about Black youth political socialization. I have attempted to highlight some areas of future research that can be based on a narrow study of a single race or on the more broad study of the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. The variety of these approaches is based on the limited knowledge of political socialization that still exist and how expanding the methodological and theoretical tools utilized in this field could dramatically enhance what is known about the political socialization process of youth.

And Finally, “Are You a Good Citizen?”

In being able to evaluate the political socialization process for Black youth, the question of what model to use is always lurking in the background. Suggesting previous models were inadequate did not diminish the need for and the significance of developing and applying models for scholarly research. This is especially true for Black youth that appear to test poorly when they are evaluated for their participation and interest in traditional political areas. My research illustrates the potency of the gap that exists between what Black youth learn about traditional political outlets and institutions and how these facets of our society tend to be missing or unavailable to them. The characterization of this process as “schizophrenic” should not be understood as referring to a disease or weakness. In fact, it should help to highlight the weakness that any attempt to create a model for political socialization will encounter. More specifically, it should serve as a potent illustration of how confounding any attempt to define good citizenry can be. As suggested at the beginning of this work, it is a common practice to

define good citizenry in introductory texts for political science classes as being based on a certain knowledge of and involvement in the electoral political process.

My work on political socialization suggests that not all Black youth meet this standard, but that it is not due to some deficiency or abnormality. It could be argued that Black youth are good citizens and that they meet or exceed the same standards that are applied to other groups. Given the social and political conditions Black youth live with and their cultural consumption habits, it would be reasonable to conclude that these systematic and institutional forces play a dominant role in their political socialization process. It would also be logical to conclude that these forces challenge the types of modeling that are pervasive in the field of political socialization. The severity and the intensity of these forces imply that an even higher standard could be established for what constitutes a good citizen. It could follow that what is necessary is not just a good citizen, but a super citizen.¹⁹⁵ A super citizen would be someone that does not just engage in traditional political matters but is someone that utilizes traditional as well as traditional means. Just as the Civil Rights Movement was built upon on the premise that the available legal and traditional means for political change were inadequate in the face of legally and socially sanctified racism, an equally poignant case could be made for what Black youth confront today. All of this makes the task of quantifying and measuring political socialization for youth more complicated.

I would like to believe that I am one of those super citizens who is actively engaged in electoral political activities and non-traditional forms of political action. I

¹⁹⁵ This addition of a super citizen does not resolve the underlying tension in defining citizenship or the quality of citizenship. The addition of this term does not help alleviate the pressure that already exists. The necessity of establishing a hierarchy of meaning and significance for the political socialization process would still exist even if more terms were added to the available lexicon. The term can assist in highlighting the limitations and weakness in the definitional and model development process for political socialization.

also know that the social and political conditions demand this level of engagement from me. Even though my current middle class status does not match up to the more treacherous and difficult political and social conditions that many of the students I interviewed struggle with. I still think it is reasonable expectation for all of us to be super citizens. Even if the Freirean model and some of the models used in the field of political socialization might not be able to elucidate why the students I interviewed were not super citizens, it is still a vital exercise to continue to search for more useful explanatory models. To the extent that there were a few students, such as Malcolm and April, that constitute as super citizens, then it is equally important to create models that can explain inter, as well as intra, racial differences in the political socialization process. Towards this end multiple methodological techniques and orientations would also be needed. Being able to document and observe the political socialization of Black youth is as important as being able to explain why it occurs in the way it does and being able to evaluate the overall health of this process.

Appendix I

FIRST INTERVIEW:

Identity

How do you identify yourself?
Do you consider yourself to be an American?
What does being an American mean to you?
Do you consider your racial identity to be important?
Do you consider your gender identity to be important?

School

How long have you been at this school?
What classes are you currently taking?
What is your favorite class?
What subject matters do you enjoy learning about?
What are your academic goals?
Have you received high, medium or low grades? (Wright, 251)

American Government Class

What are your feelings about this class?¹⁹⁶
Do you like the subject matter?
What do you think about the teacher?
What have you learned?
Is there subject matter that you are not comfortable with?

Community and Home Life

Where do you live?
How long have you lived there?
Who do you live with?
How do you travel to school?
Do you like your neighborhood?

Social Relations

Who are your friends?
What is the race of the people you hang out with?
What is the gender of the people you hang out with?
What kind of activities do you like to do with your friends?

Extracurricular Activities

Do you have any hobbies?
What do you do for fun?
Do you play any sports?

¹⁹⁶ All of the questions in this American Government Class section were based on the research that Ruth Jones conducted. Ruth S.Jones, "Community Participation as Pedagogy: Its Effects on Political Attitudes of Black Students." 397-407.

Do you play any musical instruments?
What are your favorite's places to hang out?
Are you involved in community activities?¹⁹⁷
What type of work do you do for this organization?
How do you feel about this work?

Work

Do you work?
How long have you had this job?
How do you juggle work and academic demands?
Do you enjoy your work?
Do you consider your work a necessity?

SECOND INTERVIEW:

Political Institutions

What do you think about our local and national government?
Is government helpful?¹⁹⁸
Does the government care about us?
Can the government be trusted?
What do you think about police officers?
Do you think they are helpful?
What do you think about the President of the United States?
Do you know this person's name?
Do you trust him?

Social and Political Issues

What social and political issues are important to you?¹⁹⁹
What do you think about your community?
Do you think that these issues will change?
Do you think that it is important to work on these issues?
Do you think your work will make a difference?
How do you decide what issues are important to you?
Do you know who the Mayor of the city you live in is?
Can you name any of the City Council members in the city that you live in?
Do you know any of the current issues that the City Council or the Mayor has addressed recently?

¹⁹⁷ The last three questions in the Extracurricular Activities section were also based on Ruth Jones research. Ruth S. Jones, "Community Participation as Pedagogy: Its Effects on Political Attitudes of Black Students." 397-407.

¹⁹⁸ The second to the ninth questions in the Political Institution section are based on Fred Greenstein's work. Greenstein, Fred I., *Children and Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.

¹⁹⁹ The first six questions in the Social and Political Issues section were based on Ruth Jones work. Ruth S. Jones, "Community Participation as Pedagogy: Its Effects on Political Attitudes of Black Students." 397-407.

African American Leadership

Can you name an African American leader?

Why do you think this person is a leader?

What issues is this person working on?

Do you think that they will be successful in their efforts on this issue?

Can you name an African American woman leader?

Can you name a famous gay African American leader?

Political Transformation

Do you vote?

When you become eligible to vote, will you take advantage of this opportunity?

Do you think that voting is important?

What type of candidate would you support?

What type of political party would you join?

Have you been to a political protest?

Do you think that political demonstrations are important?

Are you a member of a political organization?

Can you name a local, nation, or international political organization?

Do you think political organizations are valuable?

Do you think taking a personal stand on a political issue is significant?

What political issues do you have a position on?

Why did you choose these issues?

Do you think these are popular or common positions?

Do you know other people that have these same political positions?

Have you ever written to any public official giving them your opinion about something that should be done? (Wright, 251)

Have you ever written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine giving any political opinions? (Wright, 251)

Have you done any work for one of the parties or candidates? (Wright, 251-252)

During the campaign did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for one of the parties or candidates? (Wright, 252)

What do you think of violent protest? (Long, 443)

Do you think riots are helpful? (Long, 443)

Are you familiar with the term “political assassinations”? (Long, 443)

How do you feel about political leaders that have been murdered? (Long, 443)

How do you feel about peaceful protest?

Are you familiar with the terms non-violent direct action?

Do you think public protests are important?

Have you ever participated in a public demonstration?

THIRD INTERVIEW:

- 1) Jesse Jackson
- 2) Reparations
- 3) Colin Powell
- 4) Voting Rights Acts
- 5) 3/5 Compromise

- 6) Rosa Parks
- 7) National Council of Negro Women
- 8) Marion Barry
- 9) Al Sharpton
- 10) American Civil Liberties Union
- 11) Vote or Die
- 12) Black History Month
- 13) Martin Luther King
- 14) National Association of the Advancement of Colored People
- 15) Malcolm X
- 16) Stokely Carmichael/Kwame Ture
- 17) Tookie Williams
- 18) Black Panther Party
- 19) Huey Newton
- 20) Kwame Mfume
- 21) Mayor, Bladensburg, Walter Lee James
- 22) County Council Member, David Harrington
- 23) State Senate Representative, Gwendolyn Britt, Democrat, District 47
- 24) House of Representative, Congress, Albert Wynn
- 25) Senator, Paul Sarbanes
- 26) Senator, Barbara McKowski
- 27) President, George Bush
- 28) Vice President, Dick Cheney
- 29) Lt. Governor, Robert Steel
- 30) Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice
- 31) Driving While Black
- 32) Nation of Islam
- 33) Anthony Williams
- 34) Louis Farrakhan
- 35) School Vouchers
- 36) Apartheid
- 37) Fredrick Douglass
- 38) Charter School
- 39) Nelson Mandela
- 40) Montgomery Bus Boycott
- 41) Fannie Lou Hamer
- 42) Urban League
- 43) State House of Delegates, Doyle L. Niemann, Democrat, District 47
- 44) State House of Delegates, Rosetta C. Parker, Democrat, District 47
- 45) Robert Ehrlich, Governor of Maryland
- 46) Russell Simmons
- 47) Willie Lynch Letter
- 48) Hip Hop Summit
- 49) Death Penalty
- 50) Affirmative Action
- 51) Poll Tax

- 52) DL On the Down Low
- 53) Watts Riot
- 54) W.E.B. Du Bois
- 55) AIDs
- 56) Jim Crow
- 57) Ku Klux Klan
- 58) Million Man March
- 59) Lynching
- 60) Florida Vote 2000
- 61) 40 Acres and a Mule
- 62) Africa
- 63) Black Power
- 64) Afrocentric thought
- 65) Kwanzaa
- 66 Black Nationalism
- 67) Maulana Karenga
- 68) Nigger

FOURTH INTERVIEW:

Entertainment/Technology

1) Television

- Favorite TV show?
- How often do you watch?
- Do you have cable TV?
- Any restrictions?
- Discuss what you watch with anyone?

2) Computer

- Internet use?
- E-mail account/use?
- Do you have a favorite Web Page/Site?
- Anything else that you use a computer for?
- How often do you use a computer?
- Who do you talk with about your computer?

3) Movie

- Favorite movies?
- Favorite type of movies?
- Favorite actors/actresses?
- How often do you see a new movie?
- How often do you see a video/DVD?
- Do you rent or buy videos/DVDs?
- Who do you see movies with?
- Who do you talk with about these movies?

4) Music

- Radio stations?
- Favorite style of music?
- Favorite music?
- How often do you listen to music? On the radio?
- Who do you talk to about your music interests?

5) Video games

- Do you play video games?
- How often do you play games?
- Who do you play with?
- Do you discuss these games with other people?

6) Reading

- What do you read? Books? Magazines? School Material?
- How often do you read?
- What do you talk with about what you read?

7) Cell Phone

- Do you own one?
- How often do you use it?
- What do you use it for?
- What type of minute plan do you have?
- How long have you had it?

IDENTITY

American

- Do you consider yourself to be an American?
- What does being an American mean to you?

Religion

- What is your religious faith?
- Do you consider your religion to be important to you?

Race

- Do you consider your racial identity to be significant to you?
- Have you experienced racism before?

Gender

- Do you consider your gender to be important to you?
- Why or why not?

POLITICS

How would you describe your politics?

Do you think that you know a lot about politics?

What do you think is important know about politics?

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