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"They Give Teachers a Hard Time": Symbolic Violence and Intersections of Race and Class in Interpretations of Teacher-student Relations

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Abstract

A number of studies identify racial and class differences in disciplinary actions and teacher-student interactions; however, scholars place less emphasis on how race and class intersect to shape classifications of teacher-student relations. Using findings from an ethnographic study in a high school with significant racial and class stratification, I examine how teachers and black students of varying social-class backgrounds describe teacher-student relations and academic disparities. I show how middle-class and some working-class Honors black students shared their teachers' discourse about urban poor disengagement and "black" misbehavior with teachers. Meanwhile, working-class (primarily non-Honors) black students called out teacher mistreatment in light of experiencing punitive relations and problems with teachers. Some of their peers and teachers interpreted such calls of racism as "making excuses" for disengagement. Using Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and misrecognition, I demonstrate the power of language about black student-teacher relations as school actors routinely legitimate race-class stereotypes in a diverse school.

Keywords

symbolic violence, misrecognition, race and class, teacher-student relations

A number of studies have identified racial and class disparities in teacher[1]-student interactions, indicating that unequal interactions in classrooms and schools affect student access to resources and other educational outcomes (Calarco 2014; Morris 2005; Rist 1970; Stanton-Salazar 1997). Other work highlights the roles of teachers and administrators in categorizing and labeling racial minority students, especially black students, as part of reward and punishment systems in schools (Ferguson 2001; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Valenzuela 1999). Scholars have placed less emphasis, however, on how students attach meaning to teacher-student relations as part of the reproduction of racial and class structures in schools. While teachers have greater authoritative and distributive power to shape language and discourse, students are also active participants in the circulation of social categories and systems of meaning in schools (Bettie 2003; Morris 2012).

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Through language, students dovetail in a dominant set of discourses while also reworking those discourses in ways that are meaningful to them.

Using Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and misrecognition, I examine how middle- and working-class black[2] students and their teachers describe teacher-student relations and academic disparities at Hillside High[3]—a diverse school near an urban center with stratified disciplinary, curricular, and academic outcomes. In doing so, I address these questions: What type of classification systems do middle- and working-class black students and their teachers use to describe teacher-student relations and academic disparities? How are race and class interwoven (or not) in this language and what are the implications of this language? By examining how black students and teachers insert race and class (or not) in descriptions of teacher-student relations, I uncover the discursive mechanisms through which teacher-student relations become classified and structured as part of racial and class inequality in schools.

Symbolic Violence and Misrecognitions of Race and Class

Through the concepts of symbolic power, symbolic violence, and misrecognition, Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu and Thompson 1991) argues that language serves as the means through which power is subtly exercised. Power is not simply exerted through overt or external force but through the ability "to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:4). These meanings, while operating within power relations, take on a form of *symbolic violence* when "agents apply to the objective structures of the social world structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident" (Bourdieu 1989:21). Symbolic violence is the legitimating force in which the dominant and the dominated accept and take for granted the views, norms, and language of the dominant group. Symbolic violence occurs because our understanding of social structure is obscured by how we misrecognize arbitrary distinctions for assumptions and classifications legitimized by the dominant group and made to appear self-evident over time.

Thus, race and class, as social structures in schools, become reproduced not simply through actions and practices but also through how school actors—both students and faculty—misrecognize structural dynamics of race and class for what appears to be commonsense. This *misrecognition* occurs through language and discourse, or the cultural "systems of meaning," in which social actors circulate symbolic systems of categories and classifications as they interpret what surrounds them (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991; Mehan 1992). In schools, symbolic violence encompasses the process through which school actors take for granted racial and class-based (and gender-based) assumptions and classifications without recognizing the social structures that produced them.

First, using ethnographic and interview data in classrooms, I analyze educators' language about black students, demonstrating how educators frequently describe causal links between the assumed urban poor status of black students and their "misbehavior" and disengagement in the classroom. I situate this discourse within the school's disciplinary and curricular structures and national rhetoric about the imagined "ghetto," where a set of behavioral norms and traits symbolizing impoverished, crime-prone, dilapidated, and violent neighborhoods are ascribed to blacks in or near urban centers (Anderson 2012; Wacquant 2007). Within this discourse, problems with teachers and academics are attributed to "black" or "ghetto" "cultural norms" as part of a *race-class-neighborhood classification system*, where race, class, and neighborhood status are conflated and misconstrued in everyday language about black students.

Second, I show how middle-class and some working-class Honors black students circulated similar language and assumptions about urban poor disengagement and "black" behavioral problems. Meanwhile, working-class (primarily non-Honors) black students described teacher racism

and mistreatment in light of experiencing more punitive relations with teachers. However, this discourse of working-class black students lacked legitimacy in the school and was dismissed by some as "making excuses" for misbehavior and disengagement. Using Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and misrecognition, I demonstrate the power of language about teacher-student relations as school actors misrecognize, and simultaneously legitimate, race-class-neighborhood structures of inequality in a diverse school.

Race, Class, and Teacher-student Relations

Racial minority and working-class students face multiple barriers to establishing positive and productive relations with teachers in schools (Carter 2005; Stanton-Salazar 1997; Valenzuela 1999). On average, black students are more likely to receive negative teacher evaluations, disciplinary infractions, and referrals to remedial education, as compared with white and Asian American students (Downey and Pribesh 2004; McGrady and Reynolds 2013; Ramey 2015; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Skiba et al. 2002). Urban poor black students, especially boys, are often under constant surveillance and regulation as part of institutional systems of control, which routinely monitor and process their bodies and behaviors (Ferguson 2001; Rios 2011).

In addition to negatively affecting minority student relations with teachers, racialized disciplinary systems, as well as course-tracking disparities, reinforce normative ideas about black student low achievement and behavioral deficiencies (Ferguson 2001; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Tyson 2011). Working within these systems, students and other school actors learn to associate academic standing and behavioral traits as imbued with racial meaning—They equate whiteness with civility and motivation while conflating blackness with disorderliness, poor educational attitudes, and failure (Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015; Tyson 2011). In such stratified schools, blackness becomes oppositional to academic achievement, and "proper" attitudes and behavioral norms.

Yet black students do not represent a monolithic identity or group, and they interact with (and within) school systems reflecting multidimensional social structures (Ispa-Landa 2013; Morris 2012; O'Connor et al. 2011). Social class, for instance, shapes teacher-student relations as schools reward the social and cultural resources of middle-class students whose identities and styles align with those of teachers and other school officials (Calarco 2014; Lareau 2011). Teachers, with college degrees and a professional status, privilege and normalize middle-class styles of proactive and indirect communication and negotiation, which are often unfamiliar to many working-class and minority students (Calarco 2014; Delpit 2006; Heath 1983). Middle-class styles represent what is "proper" and expected in the classroom as teachers (often unknowingly) apply these standards to all students, and as students align their actions and beliefs accordingly.

Jessica Mccrory Calarco (2014) shows how elementary school teachers in a majority-white school expect active engagement from students, and in doing so, these teachers interpret working-class students' lack of communication as representative of disengagement. In Calarco's (2014:77) study, one teacher described a working-class boy as "lacking in motivation" because he "just kind of . . . floats through the day" (see also Ferguson 2001). This teacher's interpretation imposes deviant characteristics on the boy and reinforces middle-class classifications of student engagement. Calarco, however, misses an analysis of how race and class intersect in interpretations and classifications of teacher-student relations and how language serves to structure those same relations. Her research, while focusing exclusively on white students, misses how whiteness intersects with social class (see also Streib 2011). Meanwhile, studies of black student-teacher relations tend to center on the black poor or, more generally, on black student marginalization in education (Carter 2005; Ferguson 2001; Fordham 1996). These studies miss the experiences of middle-class black students and an analysis of how race and class intersect and become salient in the structuring of teacher-student relations.

Intersections of Race and Class in Classifications of Teacher-student Relations and Student Behavior

Using an intersectional approach, educational scholars argue that dominant notions about the "academic disengagement" of black youth are intricately linked to broader discourse about urban poverty and black "cultural" deficiency (Baldridge 2014; Lewis 2003; Noguera 2014). For urban poor black populations, the meanings and characteristics attached to race exist in relation to the stigmas of urban poverty and high-crime neighborhoods—the imagined "ghetto" in the eyes of the public (Anderson 2012; Wacquant 1993, 2007). Thus, in schools near or in urban centers, ideas and assumptions about blackness are often linked with ideas and assumptions about "the ghetto."

Moreover, in schools with curricular tracking and other forms of academic stratification, race and class are often so highly correlated that students use phrases about "ghetto" students or "blacks are not motivated" while equating those race-class classifications and stereotypes with academic distinctions (Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015; Tyson 2011). Minority students, in particular, may invoke these stereotypes as part of discursive strategies to deflect the stigma of urban poor "failure" or to elevate their social identity by exhibiting adherence to (white) middle-class styles and attributes (Bettie 2003; Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015). However, these studies pay less attention to how minority students with cultural, social, or symbolic advantages have greater power to dovetail in school discourse and legitimize race-class systems of meaning, as compared with their peers who lack such advantages. I add to this literature by showing how language, especially from teachers and middle-class and Honors black students, legitimizes taken-for-granted ideas about black urban poverty and problems with teachers.

Through language, we powerfully identify and classify traits while asserting and constructing group boundaries. Research on middle-class black *adults* argues that *boundary work*, or "the strategies group members employ, and the criteria that they draw on, to construct a symbolic divide between their group and out-group members," involves strategies of distancing from the black poor to more easily integrate in white spaces (Lacy 2004:912; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Such research demonstrates how boundary work operates in response to the conditions of racial discrimination and the necessity for blacks to show and achieve economic mobility in suburbia—a historically white, middle- and upper-class spatial setting. Through boundary work, middle-class black adults often reify preexisting race-class stereotypes in ways that have consequences for their own stigmatization (Lacy 2007; Pattillo 2007). In this study, I detail the language of middle-class and Honors black adolescents as they internalize and reproduce discourse that stigmatizes black students as a group. I attend to the specific circumstances of this stigmatization and the rationale for middle-class and Honors black adolescents' discourse in a stratified school.

Data and Method

The Research Study

I draw on ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with 44 self-identified black students, and their teachers and counselors at Hillside High. These 44 students came from six ninth- and 11th-grade English (one was Honors English) and social studies classes. I observed each class over the course of two months for two or three days a week as part of a larger project focused on social class and black student-teacher relations and college counseling (Gast 2016). I observed ninth graders new to Hillside along with 11th graders nearing their postsecondary preparations. With the exception of math and science courses, which had specific prerequisites, students could self-select Advanced Placement (AP)/Honors[4] 10th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade courses (i.e., Honors English) with teacher and counselor guidance.

While attending classes, I documented teacher-student interactions in a small notebook as they occurred or in the library or my car at the end of the day. I paid attention to what students and teachers said about one another, and although I did not initially focus on discipline, I found myself regularly noting these instances in fieldnotes. I surveyed all students in the observed classes and obtained data on gender, race, parent education and occupation, residential location, extra-curriculars, and college plans. I then selected black students who indicated plans for postsecondary education and who came from different social-class backgrounds for interviews ($N = 44$).

I also obtained transcript data and conducted follow-up interviews with 26 of the original 44 students, although, in this paper, I primarily focus on the initial 44 interviews. I interviewed most of these students' counselors (two) and teachers (14). Each interview occurred in a semiprivate space, such as an empty classroom, for roughly 40 to 90 minutes using a semistructured, open-ended format. I asked questions about barriers and factors related to academic success, college counseling, and teacher-student relations; definitions regarding "good," "successful," and "less successful" students; ideal types of teacher-student relations; perceptions of the school, educators, and students; and the roles of educators, students, and parents in student engagement, achievement, and college preparations. In interviews with teachers and counselors, I also asked about rewards and challenges at Hillside, relations with students and parents, and the provision of academic and college guidance.

Almost half the black student respondents were "working class"—they had one or more parents/guardians with no more than a high school diploma. Their parents/guardians typically worked in manual-labor occupations (e.g., construction worker or bus driver). About a third were "credentialed working class" and had one or more parents/guardians with an associate's (AA) degree or four-year university experience but no bachelor's degree (BA)—some of these parents were medical assistants. Most of these non-middle-class respondents lived in or near the urban center. A small proportion of respondents were "middle class" and had at least one parent or guardian with a BA degree or higher working in a professional or managerial occupation (e.g., engineer or lawyer). Most of these students lived on the outskirts of the urban center or in the suburbs, rather than in the urban center. As past research indicates, these categories based on parental educational attainment and occupational status reflect the hierarchy of economic, social, and cultural resources in the United States (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Lareau 2011).

I also obtained anonymous, school-wide data on race, grade point average, grade level, and parents' education backgrounds from student information cards. Further supplementary data includes fieldnotes taken throughout the school day, as well as the gathering of demographic and outcomes data from Hillside and school district reports. In classes and the hallways, I was mainly an observer and helped with organizational tasks such as passing out materials when necessary; I did not engage in discipline. While I had a staff ID card and could roam freely, students called me by my first name, and I dressed in casual clothing. I often talked to students and educators during passing periods, lunch, and afterschool. Overall, my prolonged presence before conducting interviews seemed to facilitate comfort and rapport, as well as my small stature and youthful appearance (see Gast 2017).[5] Still, I occupied a middle ground between teacher and student, and my Asian American identity may have both limited and enabled discussions about race. I was not an authority figure or a high school student (although some mistook me for one), and, in many ways, this middle-ground identity meant that I could more easily ask probing questions without appearing to "breach" the perceived role of a teacher or staff person.

Data Analysis

I initially analyzed the topics of teacher-student relations, counseling, and college to explore in depth. As the issues of discipline and language about student (dis)engagement, racism, and teacher treatment emerged during initial coding stages, I systematically studied fieldnotes and

transcripts paying attention to those themes, and whether or not and how race and other factors were discussed. I developed more codes and notes, as well as tables, to compare narratives within and across individuals, types of actors, experiences with discipline, academic standing, and social-class categories. This included a series of back-and-forth and sequential steps with coding, writing memos, and re-reading notes and transcripts. I then created additional notes summarizing conceptual patterns (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

Racial and Class Stratification at Hillside High

Hillside High is an average-performing public school that sits near an urban center in a middle-class neighborhood in California. In many ways, Hillside represents middle-class norms and culture, including an emphasis on four-year college enrollment (about half of seniors, mainly white and Asian students, go on to four-year colleges; see Gast 2016). The school was (almost) all white and middle class until, in the 1980s, after decades of racial segregation in the district, educators and community members fought for local desegregation. Hillside now draws from two segregated areas: a predominantly white (and Asian), middle-class suburban hillside and the outskirts of a predominantly black (and Latino) low-income urban city, which I call "Flatland City," and teachers and students frequently referred to as "the Flatlands." Based on school and interview data, I found that, on average, black students came from families and neighborhoods with lower social and economic resources than white and Asian students and most teachers.

Hillside today represents a diverse and stratified student population. Black students make up about 40 percent of the student body, and white students represent more than 20 percent; Latina/os, Asian Americans, and mixed or other students comprised smaller percentages. While black students represent the largest racial/ethnic group, roughly 70 percent of teachers are white, and less than 10 percent of teachers are black. For all students, high student-teacher (~30:1) and student-counselor (~550:1) ratios made it difficult to obtain guidance from educators or establish close relations (see Gast 2016). Yet black students faced unique problems as they received more than 70 percent of all 500 disciplinary infractions in the year of my study (not including truancy referrals), despite making up less than half of the student population. Black students also had the lowest average grades, test scores, and enrollments in college-preparatory and Honors classes compared with other racial/ethnic groups, and they were overrepresented in special-education classes (based on school district data). In comparison, white and Asian[6] students had the highest test scores and college-preparatory and Honors enrollments.

Similar to other desegregated schools, black students stood at the bottom of curricular, disciplinary, and academic hierarchies (Lewis and Diamond 2015; O'Connor et al. 2011). Differences in disciplinary patterns also intersected with differences in course tracking. I observed and heard about few referrals to administrators for disciplinary infractions in Honors classes, and teachers rarely mentioned behavioral problems when describing Honors students. In non-Honors classes, I regularly observed black students receiving referrals and corrective measures, indicating that a punitive disciplinary system existed at the non-Honors level, rather than at the school-wide level. For example, in non-Honors classes, black students (who comprised a numerical majority) frequently received referrals for tardiness or having cell phones out, whereas I rarely observed or heard about disciplinary actions for those same behaviors in Honors classes. As I later discuss, teachers and students described black student behaviors and relations with teachers within this context of racialized discipline and monitoring of behavior in non-Honors classes.

Furthermore, although Hillside offered a number of extra-curricular activities, such as the chess, guitar, and math clubs, few black students took part in these activities (with the exception of sports and dance). During the time of my study, the Black Student Union experienced problems with enrollments due to leadership changes and the loss of a teacher advisor. As a result,

black students, compared with other racial groups, had fewer opportunities (outside of sports and dance) to develop support-based relations with teachers.

Teachers Conflate Blackness, Urban Poverty, and Behavioral Problems in Non-Honors Classes

In school reports, racial disparities in disciplinary and academic outcomes were visible and salient. However, in conversations with teachers, I noticed that they overlooked or dismissed the issue of race by inserting language about "family" or "cultural norms" and "Flatland City." In everyday language, blackness represented urban poverty and the Flatlands as part of a commonsense *race-class-neighborhood classification system* in which teachers intermixed race, class, and neighborhood status while also rejecting or not acknowledging race as a factor in the school. For example, Mr. Jones (white general-education teacher) dismissed the idea of a racial "academic achievement gap" by focusing on differences in families' academic values:

> My impression is that it's not a racial dynamic . . . Like, some kid walks in, African American, or white, or Latino, doesn't matter, from like an academic family, the kid always does great . . . Kids coming from homes like that, regardless of racial or ethnic background, they do well in school.

Given the local racial and class segregation of families and homes, Mr. Jones referenced race-class-neighborhood differences by talking about different types of "family" and "home" life, even while he denied the existence of "racial dynamics" at Hillside.

Like Mr. Jones, other teachers did not use racial terms or dismissed race as a factor and, instead, referenced class-neighborhood status when discussing their predominantly black students. Mr. Martin (black general-education teacher) explained why many of his (predominantly black) students did not turn in their assignments one day: "The parents have a drug addiction, [they] don't want to be like parents. One dad is in jail for murder. They live on the edge of Flatland City. So the students are not doing well." Similarly, when Mr. Larkin (white teacher) lamented about his (predominantly black) general-education students, he used the term *ghetto* to describe their behaviors: "What can be frustrating is that some of these kids can be very hard, by which I mean sort of 'ghetto' hard, you know, 'tough' kids . . . I didn't sign up to be a cop." Here, both Mr. Martin and Mr. Larkin attached black students to "Flatland" and "ghetto" identities, as well as to criminality, without recognition of the stigmatizing consequences of their discourse.

Such references to the Flatlands carried with them ideas about impoverished black families and neighborhoods rampant with drugs and violence, even when teachers did not use racial language. In the local media and in national rhetoric, urban centers like Flatland City have reputations for high homicide and crime rates, police altercations, and drug arrests. Collectively, this rhetoric conflates black people and "ghetto-ness," while casting the "black/ghetto" identity as being antithetical to white, middle-class suburban people and traits (see Anderson 2012; Wacquant 2007). Importantly, when teachers subscribed to this rhetoric, they were unaware of or did not acknowledge how it legitimized hierarchical arrangements of race and class, and their dominant position, as (primarily white) middle-class and suburban teachers, within the social order.

Teachers' discourse represented a form of symbolic violence as they imposed their system of language, and its hierarchical arrangements, on black students without recognizing the consequences of that imposition (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). The following fieldnote, for instance, depicts an afterschool interaction between a black male student and Mr. Barner (black general-education teacher) in which Mr. Barner invoked stereotypes about the Flatlands to help motivate this student:

> As Mr. Barner opened the door to his room, I heard him lecture an African American boy who stood near the door and had on a shiny, plastic necklace with green beads in the shape of marijuana leaves. Mr. Barner said to the student, "God blessed you with talent . . . You don't want to be like these boys, 14, 15, 17, 19, 23 in a grave" and something about how "your friends will all be in tombstones." Then, Mr. Barner said, "I have a nice house. Where I live, it's not on the street, not in the hood. Where I live, it's 'Hello, Mr. Frank. Hello, Mr. Something . . .'" After I entered the room, Mr. Barner smiled to me and let the student leave the classroom.

I frequently observed Mr. Barner lecture black male students, using a mode of discipline similar to what researchers have found in many urban, minority schools, where teachers focus on correcting and transforming student behavior and attitudes as a way to improve academic achievement (Ferguson 2001; Golann 2015; Whitman 2008). While Mr. Barner intended to give advice to a struggling student, his language about avoiding death "in the hood" ascribed imagined "ghetto" traits to this black student. Meanwhile, Mr. Barner juxtaposed such traits with his own suburban identity of "nice houses" and polite behavioral standards, implying that this student could improve his academic achievement by following these suburban standards.

Like Mr. Barner, well-intentioned teachers circulated this discourse about blacks and the Flatlands even while seeking out diverse classrooms. One white (general education) teacher, Ms. Ryan, had grown up near the Flatlands wanting to teach in a school with "ethnic and racial diversity." While Ms. Ryan appreciated Hillside's racial diversity, she also conflated race and class to make assumptions about her predominantly black students. When asked about teaching challenges, Ms. Ryan said that she struggled with "kids [who] have no desire [to learn]," which she attributed to "the culture they come out of." She explained,

> I do not know how many live in [the hillside], with professional parents, but a lot of them live over in [Flatland City] . . . They're living where there are drive-by-shootings, where bullets and death and gangs are there. Parents are working two jobs, or they're living with grandma or with auntie. Now that's not true of all of them, I'm not sure what the proportion is that get bussed in. But those kids come from a whole different dynamic than the kids who live around the school and up here in the hills.

As other scholars have noted, even without explicit "race talk," this focus on the "culture" of black students reflects a racialized logic in which "cultural" values and choices act as markers of race and serve to explain racial disparities in academics (Lewis 2003; Lewis and Diamond 2015). At Hillside, the markers of "culture" and neighborhood "dynamics" operated within the race-class-neighborhood classification system in which black students represented the Flatlands and urban poverty.

When teachers conflated race, class, and neighborhood status in everyday language, they normalized a set of assumptions about black students' poor "cultural" norms. Teachers repeatedly misrecognized how their assumptions about race-class-neighborhood status helped to build a hierarchical system of classifications, which they used to explain academic and classroom disparities. Ms. Hessler, a white, long-standing Honors and general-education teacher, conflated race, class, "cultural norms," and student behavior when describing Hillside's demographic changes: "I think that students are poorer now . . . more troublesome students . . . students with personality problems and a history of violence." When asked to elaborate, Ms. Hessler referred to students whose "behavior is disrupti[ve]," which she tied to the "family life" and "cultural norms" of blacks:

> I have glimpses of family life. I can see where they, how they absorb cultural norms . . . It's a level of noise and shouting . . . I'm sure some of that is family . . . Again, it tends to describe my African American students more than my Asian students and more than my Caucasian students.

Ms. Hessler later said that she did not have such behavioral problems in her Honors classes ("In my Honors classroom, I have control of my students"), implying that these problematic "cultural norms" and loud student voices were particular to black *and* non-Honors students. Directly after this discussion, I asked about the role of social class, and Ms. Hessler replied, "a lot of middle-class black students don't go to this school," assuming a working-class or poor status for the majority of black students. For teachers like Ms. Hessler, it made sense that poverty and "cultural norms" explained black student behaviors and outcomes because most black students appeared to be poor and represented a distinct set of "cultural norms" and "disruptive" behaviors.

Similarly, when Ms. Ainsley (white general-education teacher) explained disciplinary rates in her classroom, she focused on "black misbehavior" and family socialization:

> It's mostly the boys, with an occasional girl or two thrown in there, who are black, that are misbehaving . . . I think with the black males it is a female authority thing. I don't know, but my guess is that no one has taught these people how to behave in a social situation or in a school situation . . . My also guess is that, in some cases, it seems to me that they feel that they are owed something. That they don't have to take responsibility for their behaviors; they are owed something . . . I don't know where that's coming from, other than it must be coming from their parents or maybe their society.

Like Ms. Hessler, Ms. Ainsley referred to deficient cultural norms ("no one has taught these people"). In this interview, Ms. Ainsley also stated that her black students unjustly blamed her for discrepancies in disciplinary actions, even though she believed she used a colorblind approach to discipline: "I'm an equal-opportunity-referral-giver. I give it to anybody who acts up." Through this "equal opportunity" discourse, Ms. Ainsley placed emphasis on race-class-neighborhood status ("their parents," "their society") at the same time that she made assumptions about the cultural values of her black students ("they don't . . . take responsibility").

Contrary to what many teachers expressed, 30 percent of black students had, based on school data, parents with some college experience—one measure of middle-class or nonpoor status. The teachers' discourse that conflated race-class-neighborhood status both normalized and obfuscated their racial and class stereotypes. These stereotypes, adopted by both white and nonwhite teachers, functioned as a form of symbolic violence as they represented misrecognitions of race-class-neighborhood classifications for "cultural" behaviors and values of black students, and were easily adopted in explanations for academic and classroom disparities (Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). Next, I show how this race-class-neighborhood and "equal opportunity" discourse operated, and was sometimes rejected, in the discourse of black students of varying social class and academic backgrounds.

Black Students Interpret Teacher-student Relations and Classroom Outcomes

"They Give Teachers a Hard Time": Middle-class and Honors Black Students Talk about (Urban) Black Disengagement and Misbehavior

Middle-class and some working-class Honors black respondents shared their teachers' discourse by focusing on the inferior values and behavioral "choices" of Flatlanders. All of these respondents were in Honors classes or, for the middle-class ninth graders, on track for those courses (based on interview and transcript data). Given that at Hillside 16 percent of black students enrolled in Honors classes, these respondents were a select group of "advantaged" black students as compared with the average-performing black student at the school. All but one of these respondents had parents with some college experience, indicated by their middle- and credentialed working-class statuses.

To explain academic and classroom disparities at Hillside, advantaged black students invoked their teachers' rhetoric by placing full responsibility on the norms, values, or "choices" of black Flatlanders for their low academic achievement and classroom problems. For example, Rhianna, a middle-class ninth grader, when asked why some students did not achieve as well as others, responded, "They choose and think they [will] not get anywhere after school." She further linked low achievement to traits stereotypically associated with the Flatlands: "Basically friends, drugs . . . guns . . . the streets, and gangs, all that stuff . . . Guys like the African American guys don't do their work . . . because stealing and all the violent things they think it's all like hip and cool." To be clear, I had not asked about the roles of peers or neighborhoods; Rhianna raised these issues on her own to make the point that African American boys in the Flatlands "chose" not to academically achieve.

These advantaged black students employed blaming-the-victim rhetoric while distancing themselves from the negative stigma attached to Flatlanders and low-achieving blacks (see also Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015). To illustrate, Lamar, a credentialed working-class Honors ninth grader, blamed disengaged "black students" for creating their own conflicts with teachers: "I'm a good student, and, not to be rude, but most black students are not like that. They want to give teachers a hard time . . . , but I'm not like that. I make sure I do all my work." Through phrases such as, "I'm a good student" and "most black students give teachers a hard time," Lamar drew boundaries between himself and those he classified to be low achieving and misbehaving, similar to how Rhianna chose to distinguish herself from the seemingly poor "choices" and values of Flatland "African American guys."

Other advantaged black respondents implied race-class-neighborhood status without references to race, yet still their references to the Flatlands or low-achieving students invoked racial and class stereotypes. Rasheed, a middle-class ninth grader, for example, subtly referenced the Flatlands when describing academically achieving students as those "who pay attention in class, listen to [their] parents, and do all [their] homework and just don't join gangs and stuff." Given that ideas about gang activity involved an imagination of the Flatlands in the local context, like many of his teachers, Rasheed unknowingly invoked the race-class-neighborhood stigma toward Flatlanders while explaining academic disparities at Hillside. Through this reference to the Flatlands, he implied that Flatlanders engaged in behavioral choices that were oppositional to academic achievement and positive classroom outcomes.

While blaming-the-victim rhetoric may have helped advantaged black students to elevate their identity in a school where blackness and the Flatlands were stigmatized, their discourse simultaneously reinforced a system of language to which blacks/Flatlanders were equated with inferior norms, values, and "choices," as well as with academic and classroom problems. Advantaged black students' use of race-class-neighborhood classifications when explaining academic and classroom disparities helped normalize the dominant system of language while concealing, or drawing attention away from, its hierarchical arrangements. As I show next, advantaged black respondents dismissed racial barriers and inequities in teacher-student interactions and the school, conceptualizing Hillside's classrooms as meritocratic and devoid of imbalances based on race and class. Through this discourse, advantaged black students maintained the surrounding system of symbolic violence, and the stigmatization and conflation of blacks and Flatlanders remained intact.

"They Make Their Own Barriers": Middle-class and Honors Black Students and Meritocracy in the Classroom

Advantaged black respondents frequently described their amicable teacher-student relations, few to no academic or disciplinary conflicts, and teacher encouragement: "I'm happy with teachers here," "Teachers encourage me," "A lot of good teachers [here]." In line with past research on

middle-class and academically advantaged students, these respondents named teachers as part of their network of support and did not indicate that they perceived status differences from teachers (Calarco 2014; Jack 2016). With overall positive teacher-student relations, these respondents believed in a system of meritocracy in the classroom, where all students had equal opportunities to engage in behaviors that would result in positive classroom relations and outcomes. In doing so, these respondents reinforced the symbolic violence surrounding them as they reproduced the race-class-neighborhood classification system and the prevailing negative assumptions about black and Flatland students.

When discussing teacher-student relations, advantaged black respondents made value judgments about their black peers while placing responsibility on student behavior and engagement for classroom outcomes. For example, Celina (a middle-class ninth grader, Honors) considered teachers to be her advocates ("When I have, like, a 'B' or something, they'll be like, 'You can do better than this"), believing that her own initiative and engagement facilitated these positive relations with teachers: "When I don't understand stuff, I ask for help. I just ask them to explain it better." While emphasizing her positive relations with teachers, Celina disparaged her peers for their lack of engagement with teachers, "If you want to know some clari[fication], an answer to something, [then] ask . . . I don't know why people don't ask teachers for help. [There's] a lot of knowledge around you, people, teachers, counselors, principals." In another instance, exemplified in the following fieldnote, Celina chided her friend, Shaquira (a working-class ninth-grade respondent), for failing to ask a teacher for help:

> Shaquira had just learned that she was failing math. Celina asked Shaquira, "Did you just not know you were doing bad in [math] class?" . . . Shaquira said she did not know she was doing that bad. Celina responded, "You've got to check in with your teacher. I check in with my teacher about my grade every day." Shaquira retorted, "Why are you trying to always make yourself look better than me or make me look bad?"

By blaming Shaquira for not checking in with her teacher to mitigate her failing grade, Celina invoked the blaming-the-victim rhetoric used by her teachers whereby responsibility fell on black low-achieving students to engage in positive behaviors with teachers to improve their classroom outcomes.

Other advantaged black students used their own amicable teacher-student relations to argue that there was meritocracy in the classroom. Simultaneously, they made assumptions about their black and Flatland peers' poor values and work ethic. For example, Lamar, the credentialed working-class Honors student noted above, explicitly denied the existence of racial barriers and suggested that black students lacked proper "caring" and "effort" to do well in school:

> Basically, all I have to do is show good effort and do the work that teachers require for me to do and they'll just give me the good grade, basically. I don't think nothing with my race has to do with it.

Comparable with how his middle-class peers used the word "choice" to refer to student engagement, Lamar stated that black students need only "to do" the work to succeed in the classroom. Furthermore, Lamar removed responsibility from teachers in classroom outcomes:

> With them not paying attention in class you know . . . if they're not . . . asking [teachers] what they need to do more and not showing an effort. Then, the teacher just says "Well, they don't care, so I guess I'm not going to care either then."

Jacob, a middle-class Honors 11th grader, also used his and his friends' successes to dismiss the existence of racial barriers and insist on the equal classroom opportunities: "No, there's definitely not [barriers]. There's just not that motivation, if that's a barrier. 'Cause I know plenty of African

American males or females that can do well in school." Ayanna, a middle-class ninth grader, echoed these sentiments when responding to a question about barriers affecting African Americans at Hillside in their college preparations. Ayanna said,

> They make their own barriers, because they think that after high school that's all they have to do to get a job and be successful . . . They think . . . they can also like sell weed or do other stuff to get what they need . . . Most of the [black] boys . . . who go here, they don't really care, and [they] get like Ds and Fs.

Ayanna further included black girls in the discussion and articulated the logic of meritocracy in the classroom: Black students could succeed if they only engaged and had high educational values and aspirations. She said, "Some [black] girls probably do care about their grades and where they're going, but a lot of girls I know don't really care and do bad in school." While invoking stereotypes about black Flatlanders ("they sell weed"), she went on to generalize that black students (both boys and girls) "don't really care" about school: "I know a couple of black students who like actually do well in school and want to go to college, but it's like very few."

Some advantaged black students lived in or near the Flatlands, and many, like Ayanna, were friends with low-achieving black peers. For these advantaged respondents, physical proximity to Flatland peers and the dominant race-class-neighborhood system of language at Hillside could have intensified the need to, through language, distance themselves from the Flatland identity. As others have noted, those living in or near urban poor communities feel pressured to emphasize their work ethic or values, as well as other traits representing virtuousness, especially when responding to racial stigma (Anderson 1999; Lamont 2000; Pattillo 2007; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). To illustrate, Daniel (working-class Honors 11th grader) lived on the outskirts of the Flatlands near a section 8 housing complex, which he described as full of families "not enforcing [education]." While drawing on his observations of these families, he made assumptions about their lack of educational values and laziness:

> Because their parents don't really enforce education as something you need to get a hold on to. If the parents don't enforce it, there's not that much that a teacher can do. Like, if the parents don't care, the kids look at it like, "Well, if my mom and dad doesn't care than why should I care?" [Parents] should be pushing their kids, like a lot of the kids just hang out around in [Flatland City], doing nothing like not even their homework and it's a waste of time really.

Daniel distanced himself from these section 8 families by noting that he had an "involved" mother who "cared" for his education—traits that he assumed these families in the housing complex lacked. While explaining achievement disparities, Daniel made assumptions about poor values or laziness ("wasting time") and disengaged parents—all common stereotypes represented in the dominant system of language built on race-class-neighborhood classifications. Daniel also denied race as a factor in teacher-student relations and blamed his peers for using calls of racism as an "excuse":

> Some people are like, "Oh, she gave me a 'D' 'cause I'm black." I don't really believe that . . . [They're] like making excuses 'cause they have nothing else to say. They don't want to admit that they're not working hard.

Daniel's assumptions about his peers' disengagement and poor work ethic helped him reject his peers' calls of racialized treatment. Prior to these comments about his peers, Daniel had described how teachers had provided him with educational opportunities that had resulted in his enrollment in Honors classes. Yet using the blaming-the-victim rhetoric, Daniel removed responsibility from teachers for black student outcomes and placed full responsibility on his black peers: "There's

not that much that a teacher can do." Thus, the race-class-neighborhood system of language and blaming-the-victim rhetoric helped him and other advantaged black students misconstrue and even dismiss the power of teachers in shaping classroom and academic processes of interaction.

However, advantaged black students were not blind to discourse about race and racism in broader society. For example, while Daniel stigmatized his black peers for calling out teacher racism ("they're making excuses"), in other interviews, he underscored racial oppression against blacks in the United States: "Our ancestors [went] through slavery and now, we go through a lot. Like driving while black, . . . the police, they pull you over and they're like, 'Is this your car?' They check if it's stolen." Similarly, one middle-class respondent used the term *we* to indicate that racism was part of the shared experience of blacks in society: "It's something we deal with out there." Another spoke about racial stereotypes among the public and in racial profiling in stores: "People think black people just try to steal." These excerpts indicate that advantaged black students were not resistant to discussing race and racialized experiences. Rather, the strength of using Hillside's race-class-neighborhood system of language allowed advantaged black respondents to misconstrue, and even dismiss, power dynamics and hierarchies inside classrooms. As a result, they internalized the dominant set of assumptions about blacks and Flatlanders without full consciousness of this internalization.

"Teachers Love to Get You in Trouble": Working-class, Non-Honors Black Students Talk about Racism

In contrast to their more advantaged black peers, working-class (mainly non-Honors) black respondents described many academic and classroom problems, including disciplinary actions, which they tied to the power and authority of teachers. I regularly heard the word "authority" or language about teacher treatment or power, exemplified by the following quotations: "I don't like teachers who try to do the 'sit down, right now, do this or do that.' I don't do well with authority figures." Another working-class respondent said, "Teachers . . . get so caught up in being a teacher and having power or authority over us." Although some expressed positive views of individual teachers, in general, these views were outweighed by the primacy of discussions about negative treatment or problems with teachers. Unlike their advantaged peers, it was clear that working-class black respondents perceived status differences from teachers and did not see classrooms as meritocratic spaces.

Working-class black students criticized teachers and placed responsibility on teachers for classroom problems, often noting that teachers treated them unfairly or negatively. Those experiencing more severe (i.e., suspensions) or frequent disciplinary actions presented the most biting views, indicating that the disciplinary system was integral to how they viewed teachers and their relations with teachers. Janelle, an 11th grader (one Honors class), portrayed teachers as overly authoritative: "There are like teachers every semester that I had problems with, but . . . it ain't like I did something to get in trouble . . . Certain teachers just abuse their privilege and having authority." Kiara (no Honors) stated that teachers "love to get you in trouble." Similarly, Jaydon (no Honors), another working-class ninth grader, described teachers as "assholes, dickheads . . . Trying to enforce the law."

While advantaged black respondents invoked racial and class-based assumptions when explaining academic and classroom disparities, working-class and non-Honors black students rarely mentioned class or neighborhood traits of students and, rather, focused on race and teacher treatment. For these students, disciplinary actions and problems with teachers intensified their use of racial language. As an example, Felisha, a ninth grader (no Honors), described her white science teacher as "racist": "She's white and she's an authority. That's what she can do . . . There's no white kids getting in trouble in the class and only the black kids, but they could be doing the same thing." In this description, Felisha noted that teachers regularly got away with

targeting black students ("that's what she can do") and blamed teachers for poor black student academic outcomes:

> Racism, oh yeah . . . They're supposed to be your teachers . . . But, if you don't like this person, why would you help them or pass them? . . . [Teachers be] just like, "Ok, you gonna mess with me? I'm gonna mess with you." Something like that. I think a lot of teachers do that because they can, and they get away with a lot.

By saying that "teachers can get away" with regularly mistreating black students, Felisha suggested that she and her black peers lacked power to address what she identified as systemic racism and the mistreatment of black students.

Other working-class black students talked about how teachers dismissed or negatively evaluated their beliefs and presentations of self in tutoring and academic relationships. Yemane (11th grader, no Honors) pointed out that because teachers automatically judged him as a "troublemaker," he had to manage his presentation of self in front of teachers (see also Carter 2005). He stated,

> Some teachers automatically just want to generalize, you dress a certain way or you got your hair a certain way, you look a certain way: "Oh yeah he's that type of kid, like oh yeah I know him . . . a troublemaker."

At another point, Yemane indicated that he changed his interactional styles to look like he was "smart" and "proper" when approaching teachers for tutoring. To Yemane, teachers read "smart[ness]" through styles of interaction involving tucked in shirts and an absence of slang and swear words ("You got to be cool with them to, you can't be . . . cussing and stuff like that"), and he had to adopt such styles to be seen favorably by teachers.

Many working-class, non-Honors black students also shrugged, rolled their eyes, or exhibited exasperation when discussing racism in the classroom with me and with each other, indicating that they felt a lack of power when interacting with teachers and in voicing their criticisms in classrooms. Martin, a ninth grader (no Honors), recalled how his general-education teacher, Ms. Anderson, favored "the white kids" while giving disciplinary referrals to him and his black peers:

> She kind of favors her little section of the kids that she likes. When they loud and rowdy she don't say nothing, but then . . . with us, when we're loud and rowdy, she gotta say something about us . . . This side of the room, they're like the white kids, then there's the Mexican kids, then on this side there's nothing but black people and one Asian . . . That class is racially divided . . . So, we [black students] over there just talking, . . . then, they [white students] over there clowning around and stuff, but Ms. Anderson, she only focuses on us.

Martin appeared exasperated and impassive as he went on to note that he and his friends often talked about getting referrals from Ms. Anderson. He listlessly described what seemed to be commonplace incidents in which his teacher disciplined black students while overlooking the "loud and rowdy" behaviors of white students.

As another example, Latoya (working-class ninth grader, no Honors) named teacher "racism" while describing the role of race in teacher-student relations: "I mean, I know there's racism. Teachers . . . they just really be out to get you, [even if] you don't even really do anything." Yet when responding to another question about African Americans and racial barriers at Hillside, Latoya said that she shied away from further thinking about "racism" since she could not do anything about it: "I don't know, I don't really think about it. I try and zone myself out from the negativity. I mean I know there's racism." Likewise, Jordan, a (non-Honors) ninth grader, explained matter-of-factly how one "racist" teacher gave failing grades to an entire class:

> I didn't like my English teacher . . . She was mean to everybody . . . she used to make like racist remarks to people, like my friend he was Mexican and he wasn't passing the class, so she was like, "I hope you play soccer or something because you're not going to pass the class." . . . She failed the whole class once.

While Jordan appeared adamant that this "racist" teacher was responsible for their failing grades, like other working-class respondents, he also shrugged the issue off, stating that it had only been for progress reports, rather than an official grade for his transcript. He said that, while other students "were mad," students "couldn't do anything" about the problem.

The following fieldnote demonstrates how the working-class black student perspective on teacher "racism" remained on the sidelines in classroom discourse. In the following, Mr. Barner (described previously) singled out two black boys by phoning their mothers during class to report on the boys' truancy problems:

> Mr. Barner is mad that Irvin and Martin skipped class yesterday . . . As class begins, Mr. Barner stops, walks over to his desk, and calls Martin's mom on her cell phone. All students are quiet and watching this scene. Mr. Barner introduces himself to Martin's mom and tells her that Martin skipped class yesterday . . . Mr. Barner then tells Martin to come talk to his mother on the phone . . . After Martin talks to his mother [and hangs up], Mr. Barner calls Irvin's mom.

As Mr. Barner called Irvin's mother, one working-class black female respondent said, "It's got to be a black boy's mother," indicating that this disciplining of black males was to be expected. Mr. Barner did not respond (he may not have heard) and moved on with the lecture; meanwhile, a couple of other students quietly laughed at her comment. Such laughter and the quickness in which Mr. Barner moved on with class material normalized the event and helped move away from the student's comment.

In summary, teachers and advantaged black students did not validate or circulate the working-class perspective as part of their discourse. In Bourdieu's terms, the working-class perspective did not operate as normalized "structures of perception and appreciation" adopted by both the dominant and the dominated, and therefore, it did not hold legitimacy in the school (Bourdieu 1989:21). As noted above, some teachers (like Ms. Ainsley) and advantaged black students (like Daniel) even dismissed calls of racism by non-Honors black students, invalidating those calls by referencing a system of meritocracy in the classroom. The working-class perspective remained particular to working-class, non-Honors black students—a group that was marginalized in the school.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I extend research on race, class, and teacher-student relations in schools by examining how language operates as a structuring force in shaping (and legitimizing) classifications and assumptions surrounding teacher-student relations. Using Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence and misrecognition, I analyze the various discursive mechanisms, and their consequences, as black students and their relations with teachers become classified and structured as part of a system of language built on race-class-neighborhood stereotypes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). As Bourdieu argues, language serves to reify and order social life through "antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects" (Bourdieu 1984:468). I show how teachers and advantaged black students unknowingly participated in symbolic violence that remained concealed through taken-for-granted ideas about urban black "cultural norms" and behavioral choices (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). Advantaged black students referenced their own positive teacher-student relations and behaviors and erected

boundaries between themselves and their stigmatized peers. In doing so, they misrecognized the set of assumptions contained within their discourse.

Past research has focused on racial and class disparities in classroom interactions and on teachers' evaluations and labeling practices as part of reward and punishment systems in schools (Calarco 2014; Downey and Pribesh 2004; McGrady and Reynolds 2013; Morris 2005; Rist 1970). Yet this research often ignores how both teachers and students participate in the classifying and structuring of teacher-student relations as they interpret those relations, and the academic and social distinctions surrounding them. While teachers hold a great deal of power in shaping school discourse and classifications of students, students are active participants in this circulation of language and social categories. Through language, students dovetail in, and simultaneously normalize, the hierarchical arrangements of race and class in dominant society. At Hillside, I argue that black students rationalize classroom disparities based on the available system of language in the school—one predicated on race-class-neighborhood classifications and assumptions about student behavior and engagement.

Working-class (primarily non-Honors) black students presented an alternative framework by focusing on teachers' social statuses (the "white teacher" or "teacher from the suburbs") and teacher racism and mistreatment in the classroom. Working-class boys more often discussed disciplinary infractions and teachers' "enforce[ment of] the law" as part of a system in which gender and class most likely intersected with race to shape processes of punishment (see also Ferguson 2001; Rios 2011). However, among the working-class black respondents, girls and boys equally presented views about racism and mistreatment in the school. Given the prevailing assumptions about their academic disengagement and their tenuous relations with teachers, working-class black students lacked the ability to have their perspective validated in the classroom. As evidence of this, some teachers rejected non-Honors black students' calls of racism as attempts to de-legitimize "equal-opportunity" practices in the classroom.

As others have noted, school practices act as powerful social forces in shaping language about students and divisions among students (Ferguson 2001; Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015; Morris 2005). Future research should further consider how discourse about teacher-student relations works within disciplinary systems structured by curricular tracks, helping us better understand how schools and school actors structure systems of meanings as part of intersecting organizational practices. Other research finds that students reify racial, class, and other social classifications while making sense of course tracking, and in doing so, they reinforce hierarchical arrangements in their schools (Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015; Tyson 2011). When students racialize academic and classroom hierarchies, this can create divisions among black students and impede on their building of positive support systems (Carter 2005; Tyson 2011). Building on this research, I demonstrate the power of language about race, class, and neighborhood status as it legitimates and conceals unequal systems of meanings associated with classroom behaviors and outcomes. Through this analysis, we see the hegemonic nature of discourse on urban poor blacks and the discursive conditions it can create for different groups of black students who, ultimately, are constrained in their ability to maneuver within and change the hierarchical arrangements surrounding them.

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Notes

1. In this study, I focus on educators who are in a teaching or counseling capacity; therefore, I use the term *teachers* to mean the broader category of school officials (i.e., teachers, counselors, and administrators) with institutional power to assist youth in education and administer discipline and authority (Stanton-Salazar 1997).
2. I use the terms *African American* and *black* interchangeably as the teachers and students in my study used both terms, although I primarily use the term *black* since both teachers and students regularly used that term. One student respondent is an African immigrant, but he had lived in the United States for most of his life, and another identified as biracial.
3. The names of all people and places have been changed to protect their anonymity.
4. Although Hillside High had both Advanced Placement and Honors courses, for the sake of clarity, I combine these courses into one term (*Honors*) to indicate this advanced-course status. I also use "non-Honors" status to indicate general- and remedial-education courses.
5. In addition, I paid each student $10 per interview, which facilitated which facilitated interviews with students across social-class background.
6. Teachers and black students in this study often lumped Asian and white students together or disregarded Asian students altogether when describing teacher-student relations, possibly reflecting the middle, but "outsider," position of Asian Americans in racialized hierarchies in the United States (Xu and Lee 2013). In addition, Latina/o students were often lumped together with black students as they represented a small portion of the student population and typically came from low-income backgrounds.

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