

Ethnic and Academic Identities:  
A Cultural Practice Perspective on Emerging Tensions and Their  
Management in the Lives of Minority Students

Na'ilah Nasir  
Stanford University

Geoffrey B. Saxe  
University of California, Berkeley

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### Abstract

Youth from minority groups often manage a tension between ethnic and academic identities as they are positioned and position themselves in relation to cultural practices in school and out. We argue that a framework that involves three strands of analysis is necessary to understand these emerging tensions and their management in the lives of minority youth. The strands include analyses of (1) shifts in positioning that take form in face-to-face interactions, (2) shifts in positioning over developmental time, and (3) shifts in the capital associated with practices themselves over the social histories of communities. We point to the importance of multi-method approaches to pursue such analyses.

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Students

Na'ilah Nasir, Stanford University

Geoffrey B. Saxe, UC Berkeley

Too often, some minority students feel that they must choose between a positive ethnic identity and a strong academic identity.<sup>1</sup> The research literature offers many compelling examples of such "forced choices" in the lives of African American students<sup>2</sup> (Davidson, 1996; Ferguson, 2000; Ogbu, 1987). Fordham and Ogbu (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1987) argue that students' bring ethnic identities into the classroom and document how some academically successful black students feel the need to become "raceless" in school to facilitate their success. Davidson (1996) documents how some students work hard to do well in school by masking their ethnic selves in the classroom, while others actively resist such conformity by maintaining ethnic affiliations and disengaging with school activities. Such tensions represent a relatively new phenomena, as historically African Americans have placed great value on education (Anderson, 1988; Siddle-Walker, 1996). For us, the complexity of these issues highlight the importance of understanding how minority students structure and manage emerging tensions as they construct and negotiate ethnic and academic identities in the course of their everyday activities. In this paper, we sketch a multi-level framework to guide the analysis of these emerging tensions and their management.

The approach that we adopt differs substantially from dominant psychological approaches in which ethnic identity, school identity, and school achievement are operationalized as distinct variables. To measure ethnic identity, investigators have used questionnaires and interviews about ethnic identification to measure the extent to which an individual affiliates with a particular ethnic group (Helms, 1990; Phinney & Alipura, 1990). Such indices are then correlated with measures of academic achievement in order to determine whether ethnic identification contributes to or hinders positive academic outcomes (e.g., Davis, Johnson, Cribbs, & Sanders, 2002; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997). Other work incorporates an explicit measure of academic identity (e.g., Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1997; Osbourne, 1997). These correlational methods have generated a large corpus of findings. However, they remove from view students' active engagement in creating a sense of themselves in relation to activities with which they are engaged and affiliated. In the

approach we sketch here, we build on work of others who argue that cultural practices – socially patterned activities organized with reference to community norms and values – are important arenas for the enactment and formation of identity. From a practice-oriented perspective, it is in cultural practices -- as people “do” life -- that identities are shaped, constructed, and negotiated (Holland, Lachoitte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Martin, 2000; Moll & Gonzalez, in press; Nasir, 2002, Nasir & Kirshner, in press; Wenger, 1999).

We begin our argument with an observation made by one of us (Nasir) as she was collecting data for a study of culture and cognition in everyday practices. The site was a courtyard of a major university medical school where seven African American men were playing dominoes, a cultural practice with a long history in many African-American communities. The practice of dominoes is often viewed within African-American communities as deeply affiliated with African-American culture, so much so that it can come to index affiliation with ethnic identity itself. This racialization is reflected in the local culture of play, which is loud and boisterous, characterized by a particular genre of humor and teasing. Domino pieces are slammed onto the table with great force, the slap of the ivory tiles providing a backbeat for playful slights and signifying activities<sup>3</sup>.

At this site, most of the players worked for the University in blue-collar positions. Daniel, in contrast, was a first year medical student. Medical and dental students rarely joined the group, and when they did, they seldom stayed for more than a few months. During the course of play, an administrator from the medical school (an African-American woman) walked by the group. She directed a query to Daniel, who she recognized, asking about the presence of Nasir’s camera equipment. Daniel replied...

- Daniel:     *(to the administrator)* I think she’s [Nasir] doing some sort of study or something.
- Player:     She be at home studying them things. *(referring to the tapes and fieldnotes)* (Laughter).
- Adminis-    *(to Daniel)* Ahh, exactly what you s’pose to be doin’, too.  
trator:
- She implies that he should be studying instead of playing dominoes.* (Laughter).

- Daniel: Is that right?
- Adminis-  
trator: [. . . .] out here getting a cultural experience.
- Observer  
s: The rain is coming down! It's raining on me! (loudly and with laughter)

As with any complex human interaction, there are many possible interpretations of what is occurring in this exchange. One interpretation is quite simple. An administrator encouraged a student to study instead of play. Success in medical school requires good use of time, and the medical school administrator may simply be reminding Daniel to stay on task. A second interpretation of this event focuses on issues of ethnic and academic identities. The administrator presupposes the impropriety of dominoes as a pastime for someone of Daniel's status as a medical student. In doing so, she alludes to and reinforces the racialization of the practice. Her comments can be taken as signaling cultural restrictions on the kinds of public practices in which an aspiring physician can participate, and offering advice about how to manage the inherent tension between being African-American (and working class) and becoming a doctor. The other players have similar interpretations, as is indicated by an exchange just after the administrator leaves the group.

Willie: You know they don't supposed to be out here. They don't allow y'all out here playin' those dominoes.

Daniel: What, man?!

Willie: Wait till you get in your second year. You ain't goin' to be out here.

Off-  
camera: You won't have time! (Laughter).

Willie: That's what they gon' tell you.

Daniel: I'll be all right.

Willie: Yeah, you'll be all right.

In this segment, Willie, a group leader, appears to second what he may take as the administrator's 'fixed choice' model of identity. He argues that Daniel will inevitably have to choose an identity associated with the practices of medical school over one associated with the practice of dominoes ("They don't allow y'all playin' those dominoes"). In response, Daniel positions himself as capable of managing the tension ("I'll be alright").

The view that dominoes, as enacted in the courtyard, is positioned by some as an racialized practice is corroborated by subsequent interviews and observations. In an interview with a dental student domino player, the student recounted remarks by professors and a student colleague who viewed his domino play as a practice that made salient his ethnic identity, setting him apart from other students. Additional evidence comes from reactions from the courtyard players to an event that occurred later in the year. The group was banned from playing in the courtyard, and the players were convinced that it was because the medical school administration did not want such a public display of African-American people and culture on the campus. For our purposes, the example of Daniel points to the importance of social interactions in local activity as sites where ethnic and academic identities emerge and are negotiated, as well as how the capital<sup>4</sup> carried by marginalized practices constrain and enable the construction of these identities.

#### *A Cultural Practice Perspective on Emerging Tensions between Ethnic and School Identities (and their Management)*

Below, we sketch a 3-stranded approach to the analysis of emerging tension between ethnic and academic identities in practices, drawing on the example of domino play to illustrate key ideas. These strands include positioning in local interactions, over developmental time, and in social history. We argue that an adequate understanding of emerging tensions and their management requires a coordinated approach, one in which each strand is conceptualized as partially constitutive of the others, but necessary to separate for purposes of analysis.

#### *Positioning in Local Interactions*

The first strand focuses on face-to-face interactions, interactions of the sort described in which Daniel was a participant. Interactional analyses have long been the province of ethnomethodological and sociolinguistic traditions (e.g., Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Bucholtz,

Liang, & Sutton, 1999; Morgan, 1996; Smitherman, 1977) though in these analyses there is little concern for emerging tensions between ethnic and school identities and their management by minority youth.

In one exemplary effort drawing on anthropological traditions, Davidson studied 55 minority students, exploring both institutional affordances for the development of identities as well as students' active role in negotiating such identities. Consider, for example, Davidson's account of "Johnnie," a black male student who maintains a strong ethnic identity through his language practices, friends, choice of clothing, and pro-black stance, while also taking pride in doing well in his classes. Davidson argues that this 'cool' but studious stance is not without conflict and requires continual negotiation. Not only did Johnnie negotiate the relations between his ethnic and school identity across the various classroom environments, but he also renegotiated this tension over time. Johnnie reported that before coming to California, he lived in St. Louis, where the school community was configured such that being both "cool" as an African-American young man and being a good student were positioned in tension. The shift that Johnnie reports is consistent with the idea that identities are not located solely in the individual, but rather are negotiated in social interactions that take form in cultural spaces.

Others point to how capital associated with particular practices (our third dimension) informs the local interactions and positioning that occurs (our first dimension). For example, Gee (1999) proposes that 'cultural models' (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992) are key to understanding the positioning of identity in local discourse. He uses the term cultural models to capture the way in which locally produced language is related to broader culturally-sanctioned ways of doing and knowing. Similarly, Ochs (1990) argues that talk also indexes and reinforces broader cultural values and meanings. These authors and others (Anataki & Widdicombe, 1998; Baquedano-Lopez, 1997; Holland, Lachoitte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Zimmerman, 1998) make the point that local discourse supports and is supported by culturally-held ways of knowing. In this process, individuals demonstrate and maintain identities in line with these social emblems.

In the case of Daniel, we can interpret the positioning that we observed in activity from a perspective of cultural models in discourse. In the dominoes interaction, the administrator positioned Daniel's participation in dominoes as oppositional to being a medical student. The

opposition might well be rooted in two complementary cultural models. One cultural model is that dominoes – including its language forms and gestures – indexes a lower class African-American identity. Another cultural model is that succeeding in school requires one to forego (or hide) this lower class African-American identity. It is through the employment of these (and potentially other) cultural models that the administrator attempts to pose a particular resolution of identity management to Daniel.

### *Positioning over Developmental Time*

A second strand concerns shifts in positioning over developmental time. Such an analytic tack captures change that occurs as individuals participate in the same practices in new ways and as they become participants in new practices. Daniel's play of dominoes is a part of his own developmental history that most likely dates back to his childhood, when dominoes may have been a part of his family life. This early play may not have provoked tensions with schooling (a practice with which Daniel also has a history). It may have been over particular turns in the events of his life that tensions emerge and that he creates ways of managing them.

The importance of understanding shifts in how one positions oneself with regard to issues of identity is supported by a good deal of scholarship, beginning with Erikson's (1967) seminal contributions in *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. It is also manifest in recent empirical work (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Worrell, Cross, & Vandiver, 2001). However, to date such developmental approaches have not addressed the emergence of tensions between ethnic and school identities related to cultural practices, nor have they explored these tensions in relation to developmental transitions. Additional questions can be posed at the intersection of our second dimension, positioning over developmental time, and our first dimension, positioning in local interactions. For instance, to what extent do early face-to-face interactions actually matter for later identity development? And, under what conditions? Developmental analyses can enable us to understand both continuities and discontinuities over time in the emergence and management of identity tensions in relation to practices.

### *Positioning and Social History*

Our third strand is concerned with the emergence, maintenance and shifts in the capital associated with practices over the social history of

communities. The focus on history in an analysis of practices has roots in the theoretical work of Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1986; see also Saxe, 1999; Saxe & Esmonde, in press). In current scholarship, writers employ the concept of cultural capital to understand how history influences individual identities in practices (Boykin, 1994; Holland & Lave, 2001; Moll & Gonzales, in press).

For us, an important idea is that capital evolves over social history associated with practices and plays a key role in the nature of the identities that participants construct. Consider, again, domino play. It dates back to ancient China, where it may well have been an activity among the elite. More recently, it was played in the pubs of England in the early 1900's. Interestingly, it has become over time (and space) not only a popular game in the African-American community, but it has come to index an affiliation to a working class or poor African-American community. The practice of dominoes comes to Daniel, not as neutral or ahistorical, but rather carrying a set of meanings situated in societal relations and economic processes. It is in part this meaning and the enactment of this socially positioned practice (as well as those related to the practice of schooling) that is a source of the tension that we observe in the interaction.

The prior point speaks to the sociogenesis of practices and the processes by which they become marginalized in the social history of communities. At one level, the shift in capital that practices carry can be linked to broad social processes (e.g., economic, political, religious). However, the local productive activities of individuals can also contribute to the reshaping and reinterpretation of practices. Indeed, critical theorists often cite local resistance as an important mechanism for social change (Friere, 1972; Hilliard, 1995; Turiel, 2002). Consider, for example, Daniel's resistance to the administrators' 'forced choice' model. In resisting at the moment and over his own history of participations, he locally creates an alternative path – one in which affiliation with activity deemed marginalized by some may co-exist with an activity deemed 'high status' by others. Such resistance may itself seed local shifts in community values, ones that may spread as others come to follow suit or create similar adaptations in varied social groups. Thus, the analysis of capital and the shifting capital associated with particular practices would involve analyses of both local interactions and the developmental pathways constructed by individuals as they structure and manage tensions in everyday cultural practices.

### *Concluding Remark*

We end with a final remark about methods. Though we argue for a disciplined approach to the analysis of ethnic identity, our methodological commitments are eclectic.

Ethnographic techniques are well-suited to identify important sites for analysis in which tensions between ethnic and academic identities may arise, and observational analyses are key data sources for the analysis of varieties of positioning in local interactions. However, systematic interviews of participants in the observed interactions are essential for making inferences about how individuals are conceptualizing tensions and their management. Well-crafted surveys/questionnaires of attitudes of others in school communities can corroborate hypotheses about the capital that targeted practices carry in different communities and may also be an important data source. We see each class of methods contributing to a synergy that would enable the generation and corroboration of claims about emerging tensions and their management in the lives of youth studied.

That said, neither observation, coordinated interview, or survey/questionnaire techniques can, in themselves, capture developmental processes, nor variations in the ways affiliation with different cultural practices may differentially support and mitigate varying tensions between ethnic and academic identities. To understand the emergence and management of tensions as they shift over developmental time and across different communities requires attention to research design. Longitudinal designs in which individuals are followed over time in their participations in varied practices in and out of school would be key, as would be contrasts across particular subpopulations of youth in which tensions and their management may differ systematically.

The perspective we have sketched offers one tack for building knowledge about multi-layered tensions and their management as individuals position themselves and are positioned in everyday life. We expect that such understanding can offer insight into how to move towards schooling practices that mitigate this class of tensions, and in so doing, support students' access to school as a resource to craft productive and fulfilling futures.

## Endnotes

1. We use the term ethnic identity to describe an affiliation with a common cultural ancestry and related distinctive cultural patterns (Liebkind, 1989). We use academic identity to refer to an individual's sense of affiliation with practices of schooling. Further, we treat the construct of identity (both ethnic and academic), not as purely essentialist properties of a static self, but rather as multifaceted and dynamic as one positions oneself and is positioned in relation to varied social practices.
2. We want to make clear that we do not view such a forced choice frame as an inherent property of minority students' lives in school. Rather such frames are constructed within institutional and classroom settings (e.g. Bowman & Howard, 1985; Lee, 1995; Ferguson, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994).
3. Signifying refers to a ritualized verbal activity common in the African-American community. In a signifying episode, one speaker uses discourse to indirectly convey a message to another speaker in a way that is often humorous or witty. Further, signifying episodes involve the exchange of an implicit message or social critique critically embedded in an alternative surface content or function (Kochman, 1969; Mitchell-Kernan, 1972; Smitherman, 1977, 1983).
4. Bordieu & Pearson (1977) define cultural capital as the body of knowledge and skills that the dominant groups in society use and reproduce over generations to maintain privilege. We use this term to make the point that some practices carry more of this capital than others and that cultural capital reproduced within non-dominant groups carry their own indigenous functions as well.

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