Race, Class, and Gender in America: Narratives of Opportunity Among Low-Income African American Youths

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The research literature has explored the relationship between marginalized students' perceptions of social opportunity and mobility and their academic orientation. However, little attention has been paid to the extent to which these students simultaneously represent multiple social identities and how they may differentially assess life chances in light of their different social locations. This article examines how low-income African American high school students situate race, class, and gender in the process of status attainment. In revealing the substantive variation with which these students account (or not) for social structure in the mobility process, the author calls into question the claim that perceptions of opportunity are related to academic engagement in predictable ways. She also suggests that personal experiences and knowledge of others' experiences are the bases for the development of multiple visions of opportunity.

Over the past 30 years, there have been substantial investigations of the relationship between marginalized students' perceptions of the opportunity structure and their achievement orientation (see, for example, Anyon 1983; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Dehyle 1995; Fine 1991; Foley 1991; Gurin and Epps 1975; Gurin, Gurin, Lao, and Beattie 1969; Gurin, Gurin, and Morrison 1978; Lee, 1996; MacLeod 1987; Mickelson 1990; O'Connor 1996, 1997; Ogbu 1974, 1987; Willis 1977). Qualitative and theoretical inquiries have often conveyed the idea that when individuals who are marginalized by race or social class are aware that others like them are disadvantaged in the status attainment process, they are less willing to accommodate to the norms and expectations of schools. These findings have been supported by a large number of survey-based inquiries (such as Felice 1981; D. Ford and Harris 1996; Mickelson 1990; Richardson and Gerlach 1980; Taylor, Casten, Flickenger, Roberts, and Fulmore 1994). However, there is also considerable evidence that perceptions of the opportunity structure are not predictive of academic performance (see Gurin and Brim 1984; Gurin and Epps 1975; Gurin and Gurin 1976; see also Graham 1994 for a review of the literature).

In their analyses, researchers often present an uncomplicated picture of how individuals perceive social opportunity and mobility. They have not adequately accounted for the fact that individuals simultaneously assume multiple positions in the stratification system and how these positions, sometimes referred to as social

identities, may influence their perceptions. Consequently, sociologists have limited understanding of the extent to which individuals' multiple social identities may lead to differential assessments of life chances across these different identities.

For example, there has been only limited research on how young people assess the relative salience of different social identities in the process of upward mobility or how they are sensitive to the different ways in which race, class, and gender may intersect to affect life chances. In the absence of such complexity, researchers may have masked the variation in perceptions within particular social groups and thus have oversimplified the relationship between young people's perceptions of opportunity and their achievement orientations.

This article is an initial foray into the variation with which adolescents who share the same social positionings and the same social spaces account (or not) for the structural constraints on upward mobility. The analysis presented here drew on interviews with 46 low-income African American students who were attending two public high schools in Chicago to show variations in their interpretations of the relative salience of race, class, and gender in the process of "making it" in America. The findings prompt a reevaluation of the current understanding of how perceptions of opportunity may vary with students' performance in school.

I identified three distinctive discourses of opportunity in my interviews with these youths: a *dominance discourse,* in which a particular social identity is viewed as a dominant factor in who gets ahead; a *minimization discourse,* in which a particular social identity is ignored or minimized as a determinant of who makes it; and a *contextualization discourse,* in which a particular social identity is described as influential in some contexts (such as the labor market), but not in others (like education). These discourses are more salient for the social identity of race than for gender and social class. I found a great deal of variability among the narratives of opportunity that these youths articulated. I also found little systematic association between the youths' achievement orientations and

their narratives of whether and to what extent social identities affect who gets ahead in American society.

RESEARCH ON OPPORTUNITY AND ACHIEVEMENT

Survey-based Inquiries

Survey-based inquiries of the relationship between perceptions of the opportunity structure and achievement orientation are rooted in early studies of internal-external locus of control (James 1957; Phares 1957; Rotter 1954) that gauged the extent to which persons "perceived contingency relationships between their action and their outcomes" (MacDonald 1973:169). In these early studies, an internal locus of control reflected an individual's propensity to explain his or her performance in terms of skill, ability, or effort and was positively correlated with motivation and academic achievement. On the other hand, an external locus of control expressed the individual's tendency to explain success or failure as a consequence of luck, fate, or chance and was negatively correlated with motivation and academic achievement (Bartel 1969; Coleman et al. 1966; McGee and Crandall 1968; Nowicki and Roundtree 1971; Rotter 1966).

Although it was not the intent of the investigators, one might argue that these early measures of external and internal locus control approximated the extent to which individuals accepted the tenets of the dominant ideology of status attainment. The dominant ideology (which is sometimes called the achievement ideology) maintains that individual effort and hard work (particularly if applied to educational pursuits) determine status attainment. Thus, those who have an internal locus of control presumably have views that are consistent with the dominant ideology, whereas those who emphasize that external factors limit personal efficacy potentially challenge the dominant notion that success is necessarily a function of individual merit and hard work. Because these studies were generally limited to investigating whether individuals registered the influence

of the unpredictable (chance, luck, fate, and hereditary) on achievement and performance, there was no insight into whether individuals believed that the efficacy of human action was mediated by structured opportunity and constraint—forces that have little to do with chance and account for the influence of racial, social class, or gender stratification and inequality.

A number of later studies provided a better approximation of whether students' beliefs about the mediators of success were consistent with the tenets of the achievement ideology. However, they often emphasized how students situated the role of education in the process of making it (see Felice 1981; D. Ford and Harris 1996). When attention was paid to students' recognition of systematic barriers to mobility, the studies most often explored students' cognizance of race-based barriers (Felice 1981; Richardson and Gerlach 1980; Taylor et al. 1994). Few studies (such as Mickelson 1990) included items that specifically gauged how marginalized individuals may have interpreted how social class and gender operated to affect life chances. And even then, the closed-item form of the questions did not allow the respondents to elaborate on the complexity with which they might have interpreted the influence and interaction of these structures.

Despite the limitations inherent in how survey-based inquiries captured students' response to the achievement ideology, there was mounting evidence that when students maintained perspectives that challenged the tenets of the achievement ideology, they were likely to experience academic failure. Research revealed that high achievers and those who persisted in school expressed the greatest commitment to the achievement ideology (D. Ford and Harris 1996; M. Ford 1992). However, low achievers, underachievers, and high school dropouts were more likely to believe that a differential reward and opportunity structure limited the social rewards available to the marginalized groups of which they were a part (Felice 1981; D. Ford and Harris 1996; Mickelson 1990; Richardson and Gerlach 1980; Taylor et al. 1994).

In the process of determining these relationships, researchers had accounted for students' interpretations of how the opportunity structure functioned in general (Ford and Harris 1996; Mickelson 1990; Richardson and Gerlach 1980), how it particularly affected the larger social categories of which they were a part (Ford and Harris 1996; Mickelson 1990; Richardson and Gerlach 1980), and how their significant others may have fared in the process of status attainment (Felice 1981; Mickelson 1990; Taylor et al. 1994). Hence, there was substantive evidence that students' recognition of institutional barriers to social upgrading, whether expressed through abstract, macro-, or micro-level interpretations of social opportunity and mobility, was likely to suppress academic achievement and motivation.

In contrast to these findings, earlier work by Lao (1970), Jorgenson (1971), and Gurin and associates (Gurin and Brim 1984; Gurin and Epps 1975; Gurin and Gurin 1976; Gurin et al. 1969) had provided evidence that perceptions of the opportunity structure did not predict students' performance in school. However, these studies focused on persons' perceptions of how the opportunity structure functioned in general or how it was mediated by race. By not attending to gender and social class, they were unable to determine whether students' accounts of class- and gender-based constraints also failed to predict their school performance.

Field Studies

Ethnographic research on working-class, minority, and female youths' resistance to schooling accounted for how students recognized class- and gender-related constraints in addition to race-related barriers. However, in contrast to the findings of Lao (1970), Jorgenson (1971), and Gurin and her associates, they again conveyed the idea that there was a consistent relationship between students' perceptions of the opportunities available to their social groups and their orientation toward school.[1] Although these inquiries may have mirrored the findings and assumptions of the majority of the previously discussed surveys, they captured students' views of the constraints on mobility with greater precision. That is, the qualitative method created the space for respondents to articulate in

their own words their interpretations of institutional barriers to upward mobility and gave the researchers the opportunity to capture nuances, qualifications, and contradictions in the students' visions. Despite the methodological advantages and the fact that these works often recognized that students are differentially situated along race, class, and gender lines, the researchers often limited the focus of their investigations to one (and, in some instances, two) of the multiple positions assumed by the population under study and explored how that social identity prevailed over others in students' imaginations (see, for example, Anyon 1983; Ogbu 1974; Willis 1977).

Ogbu (1974, 1986) emphasized the extent to which race-based constraints figure prominently in the imaginations and experiences of African American youths, limiting their optimism toward the future and therefore suppressing their academic motivation. His work was extended by Fordham (1988, 1996), who used the construct of racelessness to account for why African Americans who were likely to do well were likely both to disaffiliate from the African American community and to minimize race-related barriers to social mobility.

Researchers have attempted to explore how other social identities affect perceptions of opportunity, in some cases examining more than one simultaneously. For example, Ogbu (1988) and MacLeod (1995) considered social class and race simultaneously, and Fordham (1996) examined gender in the African American population. Others, such as Anyon (1983), Fine and Zane (1989), Fordham (1993), and McRobbie (1978), have examined gender identity (some attending to its intersection with social class) as a context for the development of orientations toward schooling and the future.

These inquiries provide limited insights into how people situate their multiple group positionings in their understanding of the process of getting ahead. They also suggest that there is a bipolarity in thought within marginalized communities. Subjugated individuals are portrayed as either recognizing or failing to recognize (or emphasizing or minimizing) the barriers that constrain the life chances of the social groups in which they find themselves. And although intuition would suggest that such dichotomies are artificial and individuals are likely to vary in their assessments of the presence, nature, and severity of constraints on mobility, this complexity has not been captured empirically.

Such a dichotomy is particularly troubling because it is then bound to how students do in school. That is, except for a few studies (such as Gurin and Epps 1975; Gurin and Gurin 1976; Gurin et al. 1969; Lee 1996; O'Connor 1996, 1997), most of the research suggests that perceptions of the opportunity structure vary with the achievement orientation in a predictable way. Thus, when youths believe that the life chances of their social group are constrained, they are said to perceive their own life chances as limited and thus do not strive to do well in school (see, for example, Ogbu 1987). But when they regard the system of mobility as meritocratic, they are said to be optimistic about their own life chances and hence are motivated to work hard in school. However, if there is substantive variation in how individuals make sense of status attainment, it is unlikely that such sense making would so readily "predict" academic orientation. Therefore, by reporting on the varied and complex ways by which students interpret the influence of race, class, and gender on the process of making it, I call into question the current understanding of how perceptions of opportunity vary with academic orientation.

RESEARCH METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

The data reported here were derived from the voices and life stories of 46 low-income[2] African American students who attended two nonselective public high schools in Chicago that I call Burnside and Parker. Burnside High School has an enrollment of less than 1,000. Except for one Hispanic youth, the student body is African American. More than three-quarters of the students reside in the three public housing developments near the school, and over 95 percent qualify for free or

reduced-price lunches. The school's average daily attendance is less than 70 percent, and almost 20 percent of the students are chronically truant. More than three-quarters of the students score below grade level on standardized achievement tests, and the graduation rate approaches 30 percent.

Parker High School is nearly 100 percent African American and over 90 percent low income. Compared to Burnside, it has a lower density of public housing within the surrounding community. Thus, Parker students are more apt than Burnside students to live in tenements, rather than public housing. Parker's average daily attendance is nearly 70 percent, and less than 15 percent of the students are chronically truant. Over 80 percent of the students score below grade level on standardized achievement tests, and the graduation rate barely exceeds 30 percent.

The respondents were all sophomores during the 1992–93 school year. They were almost equally divided between boys and girls, and each gender subsample was equally represented by "high" and "low" achievers.[3] I began to select the respondents using a school-generated roster of the name, rank, and grade point average (GPA) of each student in the sophomore class. I identified students who (1) were ranked within the top 5 percent of their sophomore class and had GPAs of at least 2.5 (prospective "high" achievers) and (2) had GPAs of less than 1.5 and were ranked within the bottom 25 percent of their class (prospective "low" achievers). I then visited homerooms to meet the prospective respondents, explain the nature of my study, induce them to participate, and give them permission slips for their parents or guardians to review and sign. Of the students I met this way, 93 percent of the prospective high achievers and 80 percent of the prospective low achievers returned their permission slips and were interviewed for the project.

Because the low achievers were often not in attendance, I attempted to contact a number of them via letters of introduction followed by telephone calls. All 10 of the prospective respondents with whom I spoke by phone, "agreed" to participate in the project with the verbal permission of their "parents." In one case, I spoke with the mother

first, and *she* determined that her son would participate because she hoped I might "rub off on him" and show him, through my own achievements, the importance of school. Teachers, counselors, and program officers often provided additional insights into the academic lives of these students through informal conversations and interviews.

I relied primarily on structured open-ended interviews because they afford a phenomenological inquiry by facilitating the respondents' "telling" of personal perspective, which reveals the explicit categories and logic by which they "make sense" of the world, as well as the contents and patterns of past experience that shaped these interpretations (McCracken 1988; Patton 1990). The interviews, which took place in the spring and fall of 1993, were audiotaped and ranged in length from 1 hour to 1.9 hours. In most cases, I interviewed the respondents in a room or private area off the school library. The students whom I contacted by phone were interviewed in their homes. Most of the settings were private, although during three interviews, family members were within hearing distance.

My being African American, young (aged 26 at the time), and wearing neat but casual dress (such as jeans and turtleneck sweaters) helped reduce the social distance between me and the respondents and provided some basis for rapport. In addition, elements of my history were often consistent with those of the respondents. I was born to parents who had achieved limited levels of education (less than high school), had lived in low-income neighborhoods that were racially isolated, and had grown up in a single-headed household with a mother who cared for three children with a series of low-paying jobs. Although these experiences provided some common points of reference, my West Indian heritage, New York accent, attendance at elite colleges and universities, and status as a doctoral student necessarily made me an outsider. Thus, I could not presume that what I had in common with my respondents "automatically indicated that I was a trustworthy member of the culture" (Nelson 1996:184). Consequently, I attended to methodological procedures (such as preinterview chatter and maintaining a conversational

tone) that were likely to facilitate the respondents' comfort with me and hence their willingness to be candid.

To capture the students' conceptions of the opportunity structure, the interviews explored how the students located race, class, and gender (if at all) against the role of hard work, individual effort, and education in explaining the process of making it. I asked the students open-ended questions, such as the following:

- What can prevent students from doing well in school?

- Are there any people that have an advantage when it comes to doing well in school? If yes, Who are they, and why do they have an advantage?

- What is the best way of getting ahead in American society?

- Are there any people who have a better opportunity to get ahead today than in the past? If yes, Who? What makes you think so?

- Which people have the worst chance of getting ahead and why?

In addition, I asked questions like these, which imposed social categories:

- Do you think that people of all races have an equal chance to do well in school? Why? Why not?

- Would you say that black males and black females are given an equal chance to do well in school? Why? Why not?

- Would you say that the amount of money in somebody's family affects how well they will do in school? Why? Why not?

I also asked the respondents to rate and explain how important factors, such as luck, effort, hard work, intelligence, race, gender, education, wealth, residential location, and personal contacts, are when it comes to getting ahead in the United States.

RESULTS

Did these students accept the dominant narrative of how one makes it in the United States? The simple answer is yes. When they were asked to discuss the best way of getting ahead in American society, without hesitation they discussed the importance of hard work, individual effort, and education. They emphasized, to various degrees, the importance of education, persevering through difficult times and circumstances, being committed to a goal, or simply working hard. In some cases, they discussed explicitly the importance of combining hard work and education. The following are a few examples of the centrality of hard work, individual effort, and education in the students' renderings of how one makes it in the United States:

> Basically anybody that tries [has the best chance of getting ahead]. Because if you try, you'll succeed. (High-achieving male student)

> You got to have hard work to get where you want to go. It's the root of everything. (Low-achieving female student)

> Well, if you stay in school and try—and you get your right grades—good or bad as long as you get them—but especially if they good and if you stay in school—you got it made. (Low-achieving male student)

> If you don't have an education, you don't have nothing. It opens the doors to jobs. More education, more jobs will open. (High-achieving female student)

To provide evidence that hard work, individual effort, and education were salient in the students' interpretations of the status attainment process is not to argue that the students had an unfettered rendering of the dominant narrative. In fact, the students constructed what might be called *conarratives*.[4] That is, they maintained an ideological commitment to many of the fundamental elements of the dominant theory of making it, but most of them modified the character and structure of the story by incorporating mitigating factors and circumstances that mediate the efficacy of the individual and affect his or her probability of realizing particular social and educational outcomes. Although they emphasized the function of individual attributes (hard work, personal effort, and educational success) in determining status attainment, their basic narrative was usually complicated by their interpretation of how race, class, and gender affect life chances. Thus,

most of them believed that individual agency *and* social structure simultaneously affected the individual's chances of making it. However, there was considerable variation in how the youths captured (or not) the significance and functioning of race-, class-, and gender-based constraints in the mobility process.

TWO CONTRASTING CASES

Two contrasting cases illustrate this variation—Charise, who was virtually silent on structural impediments to upward mobility, and Sharon, who was highly cognizant of the impact of race, class, and gender. These cases highlight the benefit of focusing explicitly on conarratives. These young women had much in common. They were attending the same school, living in the same neighborhood, and growing up in low-income homes. Most of their immediate family members had limited education, and those who had gone on to college had achieved modest social gains at best. Although they also similarly affirmed their ideological commitment to the dominant theory of making it, only Sharon offered conarratives that profoundly disrupted the dominant assumption that an individual, even if African American, poor, and female, operates without substantial social constraint in trying to make it in life.

Charise

Charise, a lifelong resident of Chicago, had lived in the same apartment since birth. Her father died when she was 2 years old. Her mother, the head of the household, had dropped out of high school in the 11th grade but had gone "back to school" three or four years before to receive her general equivalency diploma. The mother now "lift[ed] and pack[ed] boxes" for a living, and the family received both Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamps.

The last of six children, Charise had older siblings who had or were struggling with social trials that are common in the inner city: incarceration, teenage pregnancy, involvement in gangs, dependence on public assistance, dropping out of high school, and

unemployment. However, her oldest sister had graduated from high school and received an associate's degree. After the sister received her associate's degree, she had "lift[ed] boxes and stuff" for a living, but later had gotten a job with the post office "sorting mail."

Charise had always struggled in school. She recalled that the work in elementary school was hard, but because the academic demands of high school were even greater, she began cutting school. At first, she stayed home "like once and twice a week and then it became more and more." When I first interviewed her, she had not been to school in several weeks, and her GPA was 0.52 on a 4.00 scale. Charise explained why she had stopped going to school: "I was getting mad when I couldn't keep up with the work. And algebra really was too hard for me. I'm not good in math. That was my big problem." She had failed a number of classes during her first year in high school; nevertheless, she was promoted because, according to the policy of Burnside High School, all first-year students, irrespective of their performance, would be promoted to prevent less academically committed students from "contaminating" (in the words of school personnel) the incoming students.

Charise is not the low achiever who is commonly captured by the previously discussed studies. She resists engagement with school, but not because of any strongly felt critique of the limits of the dominant ideology. The following exchange exemplifies her virtual silence on how race, class, and gender mediate the process of status attainment:

> Interviewer: Do you think that people of all races are given an equal chance to do well in school?
>
> Charise: They can if they want to; they just don't want to.
>
> Interviewer: Why do you think they just don't want to?
>
> Charise: They probably just tired of it or just don't want to do no more.
>
> Interviewer: When you say "they" who are you talking about?
>
> Charise: Anybody.

Interviewer: Would you say that black males and black females are given an equal chance to do well in school? [Charise nodded yes.] Why?

Charise: Cause they probably just tired of it when they not doing well, so it ain't got nothing to do if they male or female.

Interviewer: How about the amount of money in somebody's family—do you think that can make a difference in how someone does in school?

Charise: Could be drugs. People selling drugs say they ain't got no time for school. They making too much money for school. But really they just don't want to go.

Despite this excerpt's focus on making it in school, not once in her interview did Charise suggest that race might make a difference in the mobility process. Although she had previously accounted for biological distinctions between men and women, she never registered that one's status as a man or woman might mediate the treatment one receives or one's ability to experience educational success or social mobility. When accounting for how "money in the family" might make a difference, she said that some might not go to school because they are likely to reap greater economic rewards by drug dealing. However, she quickly denied the legitimacy of such claims by conveying that such talk is only an excuse for not going to school. Nevertheless, she later maintained that economic standing might mediate mobility, as it might affect the individual's ability to pay the bus or train fare to school. But unlike the other conarratives featured in this article, Charise's did not challenge (at least in any substantive way) the efficacy with which individuals might pursue (or not) upward mobility. In fact, she expressed an almost unqualified commitment to individual effort or desire when it came to making it.

I conjecture that the reasons that Charise severely circumscribed the ways in which race, class, and gender influence making it in American society are rooted in her personal history. Since birth, Charise had lived in the same apartment in a poor African American community and attended schools in which all the students were African American and from families with low incomes. She had never visited an integrated or suburban school or other parts of the city in which there were people of other races or social classes. Her only reported encounter with difference (other than gender difference) had been with her white middle-class teachers. Consequently, she has had limited opportunity to experience overt racial discrimination personally or even to observe a difference between the world in which she lived and the schools she attended and the world and schools of those who were white and middle class.

Charise also knew no African Americans who had experienced substantial educational or social mobility and therefore either were in predominantly white settings in which racial discrimination was more likely or had reason to question why their own hard work and success in school had not paid off as was promised. Thus, Charise also did not have any vicarious experiences that provided reference points for interpreting the influence of structural constraints.

Charise reported that she had not talked to anyone about what life is or has been like for African American people in the United States. She did not recall having experienced any form of discrimination. She also stated that she had never been treated differently because she was female or witnessed women being treated differently from men. The absence of talk about and experience with differential treatment and opportunity provided few referents for complicating or circumscribing the dominant narrative of status attainment. This was not the case for Sharon.

Sharon

Sharon was born in Baton Rouge and raised in New Orleans and moved to Chicago when she was "7 or 8 years old." The third of four children, she resided with both parents in the worn but well-kept home owned by her grandmother. Her mother, who had graduated from high school, had returned to school four years before and obtained an associate's degree. However, she was "having a hard time finding work"; she received a small stipend for providing teacher assistance at the local elementary school. Sharon's father, who did not complete high school, once did main-

tenance work for a private residential complex, but had been laid off for several months and had little luck finding new work. Given the financial constraints on Sharon's household, her family relied on food stamps. Although they were not receiving AFDC, Sharon explained that her family was getting by because her grandmother did not charge them rent.

Sharon, one of the highest achievers in the study, has always done well in school. She was the salutatorian of her graduating elementary school class. With a GPA of 3.33, she ranked number one in her freshman and sophomore years at Burnside. She believed that she had experienced academic success because she was willing to "study hard," "work together" with her friends "to find the answer," and "do," and "turn in all [her] work." She added that it was easy to keep her grades up because her mother made her "do homework and study for at least two hours after school and then on Saturday and Sunday." Sharon was on the cheerleading and track teams and was the only sophomore among juniors and seniors to represent her school in citywide academic competitions.

Some researchers might interpret Sharon's engagement in school as a reflection of her acceptance of the achievement ideology and might predict that a high performer like her would either minimize or fail to account for the significance of race, class, and gender in the process of status attainment. But the way she perceived social opportunities was far more differentiated than the literature might suggest. She constructed a conarrative envisioning a multiple dynamic of how race, class, and gender made a difference in getting ahead.

Despite her engagement with school, Sharon stated the following about how race, class, and gender operate in the United States:

> Racism is everywhere. It's just everywhere.

> If you got money [in the family], you set. Like some people say, the world is yours for the taking.

> [M]ost people think that male is best.

Sharon maintained that it was harder for African Americans, women, and the poor to get ahead in this country. African Americans cannot escape racism because it is everywhere. Women cannot escape sexism because most people presume that men are superior. And in the absence of power, influence, or capital, the poor cannot readily make the world theirs.

In contrast to Charise, Sharon's heightened recognition of structural constraints was associated with the fact that she had personally encountered racial discrimination and witnessed structural inequalities. In addition, extended kin told Sharon of their own discriminatory experiences in white- and male-dominated contexts. Because many of them had experienced substantive educational mobility, they were more apt to face racial constraints and to be alienated from the American dream, as Hochschild (1995) suggested. Such alienation was conveyed (explicitly and implicitly) to Sharon. Therefore, both personal and vicarious experiences afforded Sharon vantage points for interpreting the salience of structural factors in the process of making it.

Taken together, Sharon's and Charise's perspectives suggest the importance of acknowledging that youths may have multiple visions of how race, class, and gender affect getting ahead in American society. In the next section, I report on the conarratives that Sharon constructed that further elucidate some of this variability and the ways in which these accounts may be tied to personal and vicarious experiences.

RACE-BASED CONARRATIVES

Race-Dominance Discourse

Through her race-based conarratives, Sharon conveyed that race profoundly shapes social opportunity and mobility in the United States. In doing so, she developed what may be called a "race-dominance" discourse in which she interpreted race as operating over time and via multiple domains and mechanisms to constrain the life chances of African Americans. This view is in contrast to two other discourses I describe later, a race-minimization discourse, which minimizes the influence of race on social opportunity and

mobility, and a race-contextualization discourse, which claims that the effect of race on opportunity is contingent on the specific opportunity context. The following exchange illustrates the race-dominance perspective:

> Sharon: [Whites] think they better than everybody. They stay fit to stay home and can't nobody come in they home and take what's theirs away. They think they supposed to get the education. They supposed to get the job. They think they—some of them, most of them—think they the only people that can do something. Everybody else have to be their secretary, their chauffeur—anything like that—that's what they think.

> Interviewer: How did you get the impression that most white people think like that?

> Sharon: Just like we went to Chuckee Cheese, they think we was going to spoil their food. They think we lower than them. Or like when you see 'em clutching their purses when they see you coming. Or like what happened to my cousin at college. Or how black people just live in this country. You don't see no white people up in Emerson Apartments or Merrit Court [pseudonyms for two neighboring public housing developments].

This exchange revealed Sharon's cognizance of racism. This recognition was not accompanied by an account of why whites *may* be racist or a view that some whites are racist and others are not. Sharon simply stated that whites not only believe that they are essentially superior to others (particularly African Americans), but feel entitled to both social opportunities and rewards, such as jobs and education, and to a dominant place in society. Sharon suggested that whites' deep-seated belief in their superiority and sense of entitlement ("They think [blacks are] lower than them" and "think they the only people that can do something") has consequences at both the microlevel and the macrolevel. At the microlevel, one may simply encounter the disdain of whites through everyday experiences—as was the case of her family's experience at Chuckee Cheese or her encounters with whites on the street. But Sharon also referred to her cousin's experience in college, which signified the institutional effects of racism. Earlier in the interview, Sharon had said

that one of her cousins had been attending a "mixed" college and had a white roommate who terrorized her. Her cousin would "come home from school and her bed had been tore up, her clothes tore up. Her bed had signs and stuff on it saying, 'nigger get out of here' and things like this. . . . They was threatening her life if she stayed there." But when her cousin took the matter to the college,

> the college didn't do nothing about it. They didn't believe it. Because the white girl she was getting good grades, all the teachers thought she was nice and this and that. So . . . [my] cousin just picked up and left because she didn't want to get herself killed over somebody stupidity.

From her cousin's experience, Sharon concluded that institutions, in this case, a college, sanctioned racist behaviors by denying their existence (even in the face of overwhelming evidence) and, in the process, denied African Americans educational opportunity. The institutionalization of racial inequality was also affirmed through the trips she made to suburban schools to participate in academic activities and athletic competitions. Sharon registered the sharp contrast between the facilities and resources available to white students in suburban schools and those available to African American students like herself who attended segregated inner-city schools. She complained, "Like the white schools—schools with mostly all white kids—it seem like they schools do more for them. They get—they have—the better books, better teachers, better everything. Better schools altogether."

Sharon also pointed out that race is important when it comes to getting ahead in general because as she said, "[W]hite people think they should do better than you. And if you doing better than them, they'll put you down through things like calling you names and try to kill you or try to harm you or not give you a job." She cited the overt hostility (including the vandalism of their home and the murdering of the family cat) her family had faced in Louisiana from one of their white neighbors who resented African Americans moving into what was once an all-white community. Thus, it was not due to chance or lack of merit that African Americans populated the housing projects near her home. Rather, given the assumption of

white supremacy, Sharon believed that whites are willing to use a number of strategies— ranging from symbolic violence to actual violence to outright denial of economic opportunity (or, as she pointed out previously, educational opportunity)—in the effort to maintain their structural advantage.

In addition, Sharon voiced the extent to which whites' structural advantage is derived from a long history of African American subordination. For example, having pieced together two history units in school—one on the immigration, migratory, and settlement patterns of whites and another on American slavery— she explained that "everybody who came here got a piece a land" except Africans:

> Like the Normans came here, they got North Dakota. The white people came here, they got mostly everything. The Quakers came here, they got Philadelphia. Everybody who came here got a piece of land except us—the black people. We the only people they didn't give a piece of land to. All we got was slavery. That's what we came to this world with and got—slavery. And we still on the bottom.

Despite Sharon's recognition of how a legacy of disenfranchisement helps account for why African Americans are still "on the bottom," she believed that since the civil rights era, affirmative action had created opportunities for African Americans at the individual level. First Sharon explained that

> most jobs they have to have at least—they have to have some minority in there. And it's like if they don't have enough minority and a white person and a black person go to the job, the black person will get it because they need some kind of minority in their job—in their work site.

She saw this situation in her own social world:

> [My] aunty had went for a job, and it was about four black people and one white person. And they needed at least two black people. So two of the black people got hired, and the white was left out in the cold.

But immediately after she acknowledged the increase in opportunities for African Americans, she conveyed the tentativeness of these social gains. "You can sue against racial discrimination," she said, "though it's harder now. I heard like on the news how you got to

show they did it on purpose. But you know that won't be easy because white people ain't always that obvious." Because racism is not always "obvious," Sharon maintained that antidiscrimination laws, particularly now that they require the plaintiffs to prove "intent," do not provide sufficient protection against racial discrimination. Therefore, affirmative action cannot ensure that African Americans will maintain their foothold.

Race-Minimization Discourse

Not everyone agreed with Sharon. Ray, a low achiever, thought that the emphasis on race was misplaced:

> Ray: Cause I don't think race—like some people always say if you got more education than a white man, they [white men] still going to get the job. That ain't really the case. Even a white man probably carry himself better than he did. [A black man] probably think that because he could raise a case [a civil lawsuit] or something and he can get anything by putting that charge.

> Interviewer: So do you think [that race] is not or somewhat [important]?

> Ray: I still think it's not because that might have been a onetime occurrence. It's like—it's not that it's equal between blacks and whites, but it doesn't happen a lot—when something hardly happens, it's as good as not.

Ray recognized the social inequality that exists between African Americans and whites,[5] but he did not attribute the inequality to a differential opportunity structure, as Sharon did in her race-dominance discourse. In contrast to Sharon, Ray believed that African Americans are exploiting the legal protections they have been afforded. That is, they are likely to claim systematic racial discrimination even when they lose jobs to white persons who were hired on the basis of demonstrating greater merit or ability than they did. Ray and the other youths in the study who minimized the influence of race did not ignore racism, but believed that racism poses a potential, not an inevitable, constraint on opportunities for African Americans.

The belief that racism poses only a potential threat was predicated on the interpretation that racism does not commonly operate

in an institutionalized form. Rather, Ray and others saw racism as a function of individual biases and thus, in contrast to Sharon, believed that *most* white people are not racist. As they put it, only "*some* people racist," "everybody *not* racial," "*a person might* be prejudiced and block you," or you might "run into the wrong *prejudiced person*—white person." Moreover, these students interpreted racist dispositions as a function of ignorance, not as part of a systematic pattern of white supremacy. Like the high achievers in Fordham's (1996) study, Ray and others who expressed a race-minimization discourse maintained that individual racists may be made to realize the error of their assumptions if they are confronted with the humanity, intelligence, or ability of African Americans. For example, one low-achieving female student explained that although it may be "kinda harder" to get ahead when you are African American, whites are likely to ignore a person's race when faced with a powerful demonstration of effort and talent:

> You got to know how to get over people with your color. Because if you black, it kinda harder. But if you really want that job, you got to show that white person that you want that job. You got to have intelligence, and you got to let that person know that you want to do that work and you want to work hard with it. If you do that, black won't be nothing but a color.

Having interpreted racism as a sporadic, individually based phenomenon, those who expressed a race-minimization discourse believed that the effects of racism could be avoided by seeking out nonracists. Thus, Tia, a high achiever since the seventh grade, explained that if "somebody don't give [her] a job because of [her] race, [she] can keep trying at some other job till somebody hire [her]—somebody who don't think color is all that [important]."

Even in the few instances when structured inequality was referenced via the race-minimization discourse, it was believed to be of limited consequence. For example, Mookie, who had visited all-white or integrated schools to participate in wrestling competitions, believed that African Americans experience disadvantage in school partly because "by most white schools being in such nice neighborhoods and stuff . . . for some rea-

son—I think white people . . . have better faculty than we do—faculty that care more." Although he was not clear about why residential location may affect the likelihood of encountering faculty who care more, he maintained that these school-based inequities result only in African Americans having "just a little harder" time when it comes to doing well in school. "It ain't like before," he said. "Blacks can do a whole lot now. It's just a lot of us not really trying [to get ahead]—that's all." Emphasizing the gains made since slavery and the civil rights era, youths like Mookie concluded that African Americans' limited experience with mobility could be more readily attributed to their own doing than to white oppression.

Race-Contextualization Discourse

These two discourses captured the views of many students. Still, in a few cases, there was a third discourse, claiming that the effect of race on opportunity depends on the context. This third discourse is a hybrid of the race-dominance and race-minimization discourses. Consistent with the race-minimization discourse, students articulating this discourse de-emphasized the influence of race on educational achievement, denied race-related barriers to African Americans' success in school, and argued that African Americans have only themselves to blame for failure in school. They still thought that race is a critical factor for getting ahead in the United States, but believed, much like the students who propounded a race-dominance discourse, that structured inequality and white oppression circumscribe the employment prospects of African Americans. The following excerpt captures the sentiment of this discourse:

> Interviewer: Do you think that people of all races are given an equal chance to do well in school?
>
> Earle: Pretty much, yeah. Like if it was a white guy or a Mexican guy and we had the exact same classes, why wouldn't he learn the same thing that I learned and try to go out in life. It's just that once you graduate from out of high school and college and you go out and try to get a job inside a white man's company, you know, it look like he going to hire that

white dude before he hire that black guy or the Mexican guy. So that's what pretty much it is—it's really—it's just the lack of people trying to get the education. That's probably it.

CLASS-BASED CONARRATIVES

Variations in discourses about perceptions of opportunity are not limited to the role of race. To help fill in the picture, I also report on multiple visions of how social class is implicated in perceptions of opportunity. The youths in the study described social class in terms of family wealth, prestige, and social connections. About one-quarter of the sample discounted the role of social class in getting ahead. Here, I focus on the remainder of the sample who believed that class makes a difference by providing examples of a class-dominance discourse, in which the students maintained that class operates broadly to limit the life chances of the poor, and a class-contextualization discourse, which emphasizes the ways in which family wealth affects educational opportunity alone. Again, I begin with Sharon.

Unlike the majority of the students in the study, Sharon, when accounting for social-class effects on social opportunity and mobility, did not restrict her analysis to how money in the family affects educational opportunity and therefore upward mobility, but instead offered a class-dominance discourse. Moreover, in making her elaborate claims, she registered the intersection of race and class. Her recognition of this intersection was foreshadowed earlier when she commented on the resource-rich suburban schools and the predominantly African American public housing projects near her home. Thus, her race-dominance discourse was also revealed via her recognition of how social class operates broadly to affect life chances. Class makes a tremendous difference in getting ahead, she thought, but does not do so independent of race, and African Americans experience both racial and economic disadvantage. Her cognizance of the articulation of race and class is not surprising because, as Hall (1980) argued, race is the modality through which class is experienced.

In the following exchange, Sharon referred to the situation of the Chicago public school system, a predominantly African American school district, which did not have sufficient funds to operate in the fall of 1992. The Board of Financial Advisers, which was charged with ensuring that the school system operated with a balanced budget, threatened to close the schools after the school year had already started late because of the financial crisis.

> Sharon: Because most people who have a lot of money they can afford for higher education and better education when you have more money. And them people be mostly white.
>
> Interviewer: What are you referring to when you say better education?
>
> Sharon: Like look what happened this year. We ain't have no money—I mean Chicago. We ain't know when schools was going to open or when they was going to close. Nobody can learn under that. Everybody thinking school closing tomorrow, so they first wasn't handing out the books and then when they did, people thought they classes was going to get changed anyway so they weren't doing the work. It was a mess. Private schools was open, and they knew they wasn't going to close. They were teaching and learning. So they learned more than we did since what? September.

Sharon's account of why money matters reveals the interweaving of race and class. No matter how hard Chicago Public School students might have been willing to work, their opportunity to learn would be interrupted by an inadequately funded school system, whose financial crisis was a function partly of inequitable funding that required Chicago's schools to rely on a shrinking tax base. Similarly, no matter how great a student's academic effort, in the absence of money to attend college, higher education is an unlikely option. Thus Sharon, like the majority of the youths in the study, had evidence that although hard work and effort are elements in getting ahead, their effect can be severely diminished by social-class constraints.

Sharon maintained that her chances of getting ahead were not as good as those of students whose families had more money because they can "buy they way into places

like to—like they want to get to a big firm and they daddy have a lot of money; they daddy could buy his daughter way into the firm if he wanted to [and] if his daughter really want it." By indicating how money determines power and influence and allows for the "purchase," rather than the earning, of occupational status, Sharon doubly contradicted the dominant theory of making it. According to this conarrative, one need not work hard in school to acquire desired social and economic rewards. In spite of these beliefs, Sharon *did* work hard in school. She reported (and her teachers confirmed) a steady pattern of effort. In this instance, as in others, there was a decoupling of perceptions of opportunity and academic effort—a decoupling not predicted by much previous research.

Other youths, who maintained that social class affects more than educational opportunity, focused on how the influential social connections of the upper classes could provide an entrée to attractive social and economic opportunities. Some suggested that children of the privileged replicate their parents' economic standing as a consequence not of individual effort but, rather, of receiving an "inheritance" or experiencing preferential treatment because their surnames are readily recognized. This class-dominance discourse was rare. The overwhelming majority of the youths in the study articulated a class-contextualization discourse. They focused singularly on how social class affects the individual's ability to meet the costs associated with attending college. Some also explained that money in the family enables individuals to purchase a private education, reside in "nicer neighborhoods," and attend suburban schools—all of which, they thought, is commensurate with a "better" education. Still others discussed how money in the family enables individuals to hire academic tutors and purchase materials (such as encyclopedias and computers) that can facilitate scholastic achievement. Consequently, the students who offered a class-contextualization discourse were less challenging of, and therefore more wedded to, the dominant theory of making it than were those who expressed a class-dominance discourse.

GENDER-BASED CONARRATIVES

Approximately two-thirds of the sample provided gender-based conarratives that referred to how gender makes a difference in the opportunities available to African American women. In this section, I consider two kinds of gender-based conarratives: a gender-dominance discourse, which accounts for how women's life chances were circumscribed via multiple domains and mechanisms, and a gender-contextualization discourse, which either accounts only for mobility constraints that arise from the sex typing of occupations *or* only for female subjugation in the home. I also show that a few students saw a unique intersection of race and gender for African American men. I begin with Sharon, who articulated a gender-dominance discourse. Sharon stated:

> It's harder for a black woman to get a job before it is for a black man . . . because they . . . think women can't work on construction—on things like that. Men can always get a job in construction. But women have a harder time. . . . [My] aunty wanted a job in construction. But she had went to some company, and they told her there wasn't a need or something for her and she suing now for discrimination. Cause she went, and my uncle ... got the job. But my aunty had better education, more experience than my uncle, but my uncle got the job.

This excerpt conveys Sharon's recognition that the sex typing of occupations contradicts the dominant theory of making it. Sharon's "aunty" had not only more experience than her uncle, but more education. According to this narrative, Sharon's uncle reaped economic rewards not because of traditional notions of "merit," but because his male body was presumed to be better suited to a particular kind of work.

In other instances, Sharon accounted for women's subjugation in the home. Again drawing on personal and familial experiences, she explained why she believed that it is more difficult for women to get ahead:

> Sharon: Because most people think it's a woman job to stay at home, cook, clean, and take care of the kids. Most people still have that attitude.
>
> Interviewer: How did you come to know that most people still have that attitude?

Sharon: Cause that's what my father thinks, but it seems that he is the housewife now since he don't have a job. And most of my uncles on my mother's side. Because my grandmother had 12 kids, and 7 of them was men. And it seem like all of them working and they wives sit at home cooking and cleaning. But . . . my aunties work, and they husbands sit at home and they cook and clean.

Returning to her father, Sharon explained:

All he know how to do is call out orders to women. That's why he and I always get into it. Like I come home, and both sinks piled high with dishes and he telling me to wash them. Well I ain't make them, so I ain't washing them. Like this how he is: Like he eat on one plate. Then he go back and eat more of the same food and get a whole new plate. Then he expect one of us to clean up after him. Like that's our duty or something.

Through her observations of kin, Sharon concluded that even in contemporary society, most people retain traditional notions of womanhood. But her critique of such circumscription seemed to derive from contrasting images. First, her mother and maternal aunts have inverted, to some degree, the traditional husband-wife relationship. In their households, it was the men who stayed at home while the women were the breadwinners. But she also observed that women can pursue nontraditional roles as well as actively resist efforts to circumscribe them in traditional domains. Sharon noted that one of her aunts not only pursued employment in a male-dominated field, but filed a lawsuit when she believed that she had not been hired solely because she was a woman.

Sharon also had personally experienced gender discrimination at school. When I asked her why she believed that African American girls do not have as good a chance to do well in school as African American boys, she stated:

Cause most of the—like one teacher that I had. Her name was Ms. Walters. . . . I don't know what made her think that boys could do better than girls. I don't know what made that lady think that . . . cause it seemed like the boys, I don't care if they did nothing in class, they always got the As and Bs. And girls got the Cs and the Ds. One time, on my report card she put all Cs, and then she put slash As.

. . . She said something about I could do "A" work, but she feel I'm a C student.

Sharon went on to explain that "the dumb boys was getting better grades than me, Felicia, the really smart girls. . . . And [the teacher] just wasn't right. I don't know what made that lady think that. She pulling down herself really because she think all men are better than her." Through this incident, Sharon had reason to believe that schools are another context in which life chances are circumscribed, this time on the basis of gender. She stated three times during the interview that irrespective of merit, "*most* people think that male is best."

In summary, Sharon suggested that gender operates significantly via multiple domains and mechanisms to constrain the life chances of women. This view was expressed by only one other youth (also a girl) in the study. The rest of the students articulated a gender-contextualization discourse. Although they acknowledged the existence of gender inequality, these students overwhelmingly limited their attention to the sex typing of occupations—indicating that women are likely to be discriminated against in male-dominated professions. They usually explained that jobs involving heavy machinery, hard labor, or the outdoors are commonly denied to women, whereas women receive preferential treatment when they seek employment in "pink-collar" professions. A handful of students limited their discussions to how traditional notions of womanhood circumscribe women in the home. And with the exception of one student, none of them conveyed the basis behind this subjugation, as Sharon did by invoking the prevalence of the presumption of male supremacy.

THE UNIQUE STATUS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN

Most of the students in the study, including Sharon, held the African American man accountable for his status in the United States. Sharon argued that in choosing gangs over school and illicit activity over respectable employment, the African American man had,

for the most part, created his own crisis. The only structural constraints she and most others considered in relation to this crises were constraints that were applicable to all African Americans irrespective of gender. But several other students, in attending to the intersection of race and gender, believed that the African American man experiences unique constraints—constraints that limit his life chances in ways that are distinct from those of African Americans, in general, and African American women, in particular.

One such student was Tia. Whereas most of the students believed that young African American men are free to choose whether or not to join gangs, Tia questioned the degree of control they actually have:

> Interviewer: To what extent do you think boys can choose to join or not join gangs?

> Tia: That question is kind of hard to answer, you know. They have control and then they don't. Guys could take control and not get in a gang. But then, like I said, they get beat up all the time. But if they can take them beatings, they the ones that get out. You know, they finish school, get a decent job, and leave out the neighborhood. But some of them try to take control by joining gangs. Then they got protection. They got less fear. But then what happens—they usually end up dead or in jail like my brother. At that level, I don't really know what control is.

Tia went on to explain that young African American women have greater free will in determining whether to participate in gangs and other illicit activities because

> when you a girl, people ain't as rough on you for not joining gangs or not doing drugs. . . . It ain't easy, but it's easier. . . . Cause you know [girl] gangs ain't really recognized or nothing—nobody really take them seriously; they ain't like established like the boy gangs.

Milo also articulated the uniqueness of the experience of African American men. Before he attended Burnside, Milo (who had been the valedictorian of his elementary school graduating class) had attended Emerson, a magnet high school, and thus one of the few integrated schools left in the city. At Emerson,

he not only had difficulty keeping up with the academic demands and found himself distracted by the "wrong crowd," but was resentful of the differential treatment and expectations he encountered because he lived in public housing and was African American and male. Implicitly referring to his own experiences, he responded in the following way to my query regarding whether African American boys and girls are given an equal chance of doing well in school:

> Milo: [pause] No, because black females are helped more. They are helped more cause black males are usually stereotyped. You know, all black males going to be in jail. And they think, well, since you going to be in jail, ain't no use of . . . really teaching you nothing.

> Interviewer: When have you experienced that or seen that for yourself?

> Milo: A lot of times when you will talk out in class [at Emerson]—and like if a white kid or a black girl says something to the teacher like the teacher is saying something out of pocket or out of hand or something, and you be like, "Well, I don't believe in that." And the teacher seems to think that because you raise your voice, and you be like, "Well, I don't like [that]," they think, well, he would hurt me or something. So they call security. But then it's different with the white kid or the black girl. The white kid or the black girl, they just talk to them. They be like, "I'm going to call your mother" or something like that. But if you be that way, they be like "I'm going to call security."

Milo not only conveyed that African American boys are stigmatized as being violent and headed for jail, but that such stigma affects their educational experiences in ways that are distinct from that of the "white kid" or "black girl." According to him, such a stigma (or stereotype) means that African American boys are less likely than white youths or African American girls to receive needed academic assistance and are more likely to receive severe sanctions for transgressing school norms.

Other youths recognized that the stigmatization of African American men also limits the

men's chances of finding work. For example, a low-achieving female student stated, "A black female will get a job faster than a black male cause it seem like . . . a lot of white people have like stereotypes that . . . black males they want to kill them [white people] or they want to do this or that."

In sum, the students who recognized the unique status of African American men articulated the prevalence with which African American men are "stereotyped instantly" as "convicts," "gang bangers," and "perpetrators" and how this stigma limits their life chances. Some pointed to the resulting constraints on educational opportunity; others, to the limits on their employment prospects; and still others, to their restricted movement in public space, given laws and police action that rest on the assumption that they are necessarily "up to no good." It is surprising that only three of the male students in the study described how external constraints and social stigma may limit the life chances of young African American men like them. But even though these three indicated that the life chances of their sex are uniquely constrained, they all believed that the impact of these constraints may be eased if the individual perseveres. According to Milo, "Black males have a hard way to go, but most of the time they be making that an excuse for not doing what they got to do to get on in life." Thus, like those who minimzed race, these young men believed that the unique status of African American men *may* matter in the process of upward mobility, but its relevance is of limited significance.

DISCUSSION

Although the youths in this study maintained that individual effort, hard work, and education are necessary for getting ahead in American society, most related conarratives that articulated how structural constraints limit the efficacy of individual action and influence life chances. These conarratives took three forms: a discourse of identity dominance, in which a particular social identity, such as race, was seen as an extremely powerful determinant of socioeconomic opportunity; a discourse of identity minimization, in which individuals minimized or ignored the ways in which a social identity may constrain opportunity; and a discourse of identity contextualization, in which individuals judged a social identity to be influential in structuring opportunity in some contexts, but unimportant in others.

The story of this article is one of complexity and variability. Some students, such as Sharon, invoked a discourse of identity dominance in accounting for the influence of race, class, *and* gender. Others, like Charise, articulated a discourse of identity minimization, in which race, class, and gender were minimized or negated in all opportunity contexts. But there were also cases in which students expressed a race-dominance discourse alongside class- and gender-minimization discourses. Some students voiced a race-minimization discourse, a class-dominance discourse, and a gender-contextualization discourse and accounted for the unique status of African American men. The permutations were many.

The variability in these accounts points to the limitations of relying on a single social identity, such as race, as a way of understanding the determinants of academic engagement and performance. There is, indeed, a great deal of substantive variation in how African Americans make sense of the American opportunity structure, and this variation stems from both the multiple social identities of African Americans and the variability in their personal experiences. In view of this complexity, it is not surprising that the students' perceptions of the opportunity structure did not vary in any recognizable way with the students' academic orientations or performance in school. Six of the nine students who saw the world as Sharon did were high achievers as she was. In contrast, none of those who interpreted the opportunity structure as Charise did were successful in school (although one was at least still attending school regularly). The fact that high achievers were highly attuned to structural barriers to opportunity is at odds with the predictions of researchers, such as Ogbu (1974, 1987), who have hypothesized that the perception of job ceilings and other structural barriers to the economic success of African Americans leads to the development of oppositional cultures that devalue academic success.

These findings suggest directions for future research. Race, class, and gender are but three of the many possible social identities that children and youths in contemporary society reflect. Other social identities, such as sexual orientation, immigrant status, institutional affiliation, and peer status, may also be implicated in narratives of opportunity and academic engagement. And there is still much more to be learned about the relative importance of personal and familial experience, on the one hand, and collective group consciousness, on the other, as determinants of the conarratives that individuals construct alongside more familiar accounts of the American dream.

Researchers must also continue to explore how some individuals, like Sharon, remain actively engaged in school, despite their recognition of how the social groups of which they are a part are profoundly disadvantaged in the process of social mobility. The work of Gurin and her associates has long suggested that one should not be surprised by these findings, but only a few studies (O'Connor 1996, 1997) have suggested why such relationships occur.

These findings, along with the many lingering research questions, remind one of the heterogeneity that is ever present in any social group. Moreover, they lead to a consideration of how heterogeneity may have been masked in reports of the life experiences and subjectivities of those who are black, brown, and poor. Despite increasing theoretical and empirical attention to the fact that people who are marginalized by race and class vary in their social encounters, worldviews, and social identities (even when they reside in the same social space), researchers' articulations of this variation often fail to capture the full degree of dynamism inherent in these communities. It is not simply an academic challenge to capture more precisely the variation in subjectivity, culture, and action that is present in marginalized populations. The policy implications are considerable. If researchers do not understand marginalized populations in all their complexity, they are not likely to develop policy initiatives that will maximize these populations' life chances. Under these conditions, prospective educa-

tional and social policies are likely to be unresponsive to the variation in experience, needs, thoughts, and behavior found within these historically disadvantaged groups and thus will prove less effective.

NOTES

1. Lee's (1996) ethnographic study of Asian American students who attended an urban public high school also showed that the recognition of race-related barriers does not always suppress perceptions of personal life chances and lead to disengagement from school. Although Lee focused on girls' recognition of gender-based constraints, she limited her analysis to how some girls interpret their subordination in relation to men, not within the mobility structure at large. O'Connor (1997) also found that the recognition of systematic barriers does not have to constrain perceptions of personal life chances, but she did not elucidate in sufficient detail the variations in the interpretations of her respondents and their response to school.

2. Although I did not have data on family income, I used the parents' or guardians' education and occupations and the students' free-lunch status as proxies. More than one-third of the respondents had parents' or guardians who had not completed high school, and fewer than one-quarter had parents or guardians who had gone to postsecondary school. In more than half the cases, the heads of the households were either unemployed or working at low-skilled and minimum-wage jobs (such as day laborers or baby-sitters). Some parents or guardians had semiskilled, nonunion jobs, and slightly more than a quarter were skilled or civil service employees (such as school bus drivers). All the students were eligible for free- or reduced-price school lunches.

3. The high achievers at Burnside ranked within the top 18 of their class of 335 students and had GPAs that ranged from 2.5 to 3.33, with a mean of 2.90. The low achievers ranked between 141 and 314 and had GPAs that ranged from 0.00 to 1.01, with a mean of 0.47. The high achievers at Parker ranked within the top 19 in their class of 441 and had

GPAs that ranged from 2.61 to 3.77, with a mean of 2.93. The low achievers ranked between 190 and 337 and had GPAs that ranged from 0.38 to 1.14, with a mean of 0.89.

4. Humanist scholars (such as Gates 1995) have used the term *counternarratives* to refer to "subaltern knowledge," which disputes the tenets of the dominant culture. I opted to use the term *conarratives,* since these students did not dispute the dominant theory of making it, but maintained the dominant narrative alongside other narratives. Thus, they complicated and circumscribed, but did not negate, the dominant theory of how one gets ahead in American society.

5. I compare African Americans and whites in this discussion of race because (1) this article is in response to the literature (such as Fordham, 1993, 1996; Ogbu, 1987, 1991, 1994) that focused on how African Americans situate whites as a reference group and (2) when race was raised in the interviews (whether in answer to a question or volunteered by the respondents), the students rarely mentioned racial categories other than "black" and "white," although in a few instances, some students referred to Mexicans and Asian Americans and categorized Latinos as white.

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