School Contexts and "Acting White"*

Peer Networks of Somali Immigrant Youths in an Afrocentric Charter School

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Introduction

Race is a social phenomenon in which people in a society are placed in a value hierarchy on the basis of socially constructed perceptions. Such perceptions are constructed on the basis of assumptions about heredity, "biological nature," or "culture." In the United States, blacks are often constructed as an inferior race vis-à-vis their white counterparts. This, in turn, seemingly leads to and justifies racial stratifications, which play an important role in conditioning people of color and immigrants in the United States (Ogbu 1994).

122

In this article, we will explore how racial stratification molds Somali immigrant students' perceptions about schooling (Bigelow 2007, 2008) in the United States. We do this on the basis of our research findings that the Somali immigrant students we studied did not seem to perceive their peers' high achievement at school as a performance of "whiteness" and hence a "betrayal" of their identity as "blacks" in American society. High-achieving Somali students were not socially ostracized by their peers; rather, they were popular at school. Our investigation is informed by John Ogbu's thesis (1987) that black students in the United States, when compared to other minority students, are more likely to perceive limited opportunities for school achievement and for social mobility in the economic and social structure. According to Signithia Fordham and Ogbu (1986), school achievement tends to be constructed from the perspective of black students as a privilege reserved for the whites only. In this sense, black students' academic success is often considered as a performance of "whiteness," that is, "acting white." Such success is thus negatively sanctioned by the black peer group (Fordham and Ogbu 1986), which rejects school success and promotes an anti-school "oppositional school culture." From this perspective, it is argued that black students are deterred from achieving at school to avoid the "burden of acting white," as manifested in pressure exerted by the black peer group. In this sense, the black peer group is considered to present a negative influence on black students' academic achievement.

Somali immigrants are often assigned the racial category as "blacks" and stigmatized (in the way that nonimmigrant American blacks are) when entering the existing system of racial stratification in the United States (Bigelow 2008). In view of this, we are interested in exploring whether high-achieving Somali students, like their nonimmigrant American black counterparts, are socially ostracized by their peers for their "acting white" behavior (i.e., their academic success). We look into patterns of friendship networks among Somali immigrant students and how the school context has shaped such patterns. We also conducted semi-structured interviews to capture the meanings students constructed about their social relationships at school. Our findings suggest that high-achieving Somali students did not seem isolated from their peers at school. We point out how school characteristics in terms of school culture, school size, and racial diversity all contributed to the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon among these Somali students. We highlight how this school context encouraged Somali students to embrace a positive ethnic self-conception (see Bigelow 2008) and to look to their fellow Somali peers as a reference group in social re-

lationships at school. This school context explained why the students were inclined to adhere to the value placed on school achievement that was shared among the students in the school and why it was highly unlikely that they would ostracize their high-achieving Somali peers. We call for further research in investigating the negotiation of identities among black (including black immigrant) students in specific school contexts and its implications for black students' academic orientation and achievement.

Understanding Black Students' Educational Achievement in the United States

The persistent achievement gap between black and white students has remained one of the gravest concerns of educators in the United States over the years (see, e.g., Jencks and Phillips 1998). In this regard, Ogbu's (1987) thesis has remained one of the most important theoretical frameworks informing our analysis of this black-white achievement gap. According to Ogbu, involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, adopt low school performance as a form of adaptation to perceptions of limited social and economic opportunities in their adult life. Such perceptions are informed by a history of being forcefully incorporated into the United States. More directly, such perceptions are shaped by experiences of historical oppression and systematic racism.

Ogbu's thesis draws our attention to the fact that it is not very helpful for researchers to understand the black-white achievement gap in terms of narrowly analyzing "deficiencies" in black students' competencies or practices. As Carla O'Connor and colleagues (2007) contend, what is more pertinent is the educational implications of how "blackness" is articulated through students' meaning-making. This is especially true when we consider that academic success is often socially constructed as a privilege reserved for the (middle-class) whites only (Lee 2008). Striving for academic success can be understood as a cultural survival strategy for racial minorities to gain access to institutional resources and privileges (e.g., in schooling). Nonetheless, in doing so, a black student essentially consents to the very institutions and practices that maintain white supremacy and discriminate against racial minorities like American blacks (see Akom 2008). It is in this sense that we can understand why black students' pursuit of academic success can be interpreted as "acting white" and as a "betrayal" of "blackness"; the "betrayal" could logically invite negative sanctioning (e.g., labeling, social isolation) from the black peer group. From this perspective, according to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), black students would rather not achieve

at school to avoid the added "burden of acting white" as manifested in peer group pressure. This model is also used to explain why some black peer groups tend to construct their black identity upon their rejection of school success and the celebration of an "oppositional school culture." For Ogbu (1994), this is what explains the cycle of underachievement among some black youth and the persistence of the black-white achievement gap.

Complicating Black Students' Educational Achievement:
The Case of Immigrants

Fordham and Ogbu's notion of the "burden of acting white" as a cultural mechanism underlying some black students' low educational achievement has been empirically substantiated. For example, in Erin Horvat and Kristine Lewis's (2003) ethnographic research, it was found that high-achieving female black students needed to camouflage their academic abilities when interacting with some peers. Such camouflaging behavior suggests that the female black students were trying not to appear as if they were "acting white" in order to avoid the "burden of acting white," that is, being socially ostracized by their peers. Given the status of Somali immigrant students as involuntary minorities (see Ogbu 1987) and the fact that they are often assigned the same racial minority status as nonimmigrant American blacks in the United States (Bigelow 2008), as we will explain below, we speculate that the cultural mechanism of the "burden of acting white" may apply to our understanding of their school achievement as well.

Somali immigrants mostly arrived in the United States as refugees. Somalia's civil war in 1988, which resulted in extreme poverty, famine, and genocidal outcomes, led a considerable number of Somalis to depart from their homeland. Somali refugees collectively settled in particular geographical areas in both non-Western countries and Western countries. A substantial portion of those Somali refugees (approximately 40,000) arrived in the United States, which is, according to Katherine Fennelly (2006), the largest of the 10 traditional refugee resettlement countries. In the United States since 1990, Somali refugees have mostly settled in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Atlanta, Seattle, and San Diego (Fennelly 2006). According to Ogbu and Simons (1998, 164), "Refugees who were *forced* to come to the United States because of civil war or other crises in their places of origin are *not . . . voluntary* minorities" (emphasis added). They may not share similar cultural models (or beliefs) about schooling upheld by voluntary minorities from East Asian, Cuban, and Caribbean backgrounds in the United States. According to Ogbu and Simons (1998, 170), unlike involuntary minorities

Moosung Lee et al.   125

who were forced to come to the United States, voluntary minorities tend to be willing to accommodate to their host societies' cultures (e.g., the emphasis on school achievement) to improve their chances for socioeconomic success (Ogbu and Simons 1998, 170). As involuntary minorities, Somali immigrant youth may be more likely to adopt cultural beliefs about schooling similar to those of their involuntary minority counterparts, nonimmigrant American blacks. This would translate into a belief that there is institutionalized discrimination in schools and that "individual effort, education, and hard work are important but not enough to overcome racism and discrimination" (Ogbu and Simons 1998, 172).

The above suggests that, like nonimmigrant American blacks, Somali immigrant students may be expected to adopt low school performance as a form of adaptation to their perceptions of the opportunity structure. This is even more plausible when we consider that, like other black immigrants, Somali immigrants are often assigned the stigmatized racial category as simply "American blacks" as they enter the system of racial stratification in the United States (Bigelow 2008). In the context of education, such a racialization process (Bigelow 2008) means that Somali students are often "blackened." They are socially constructed as deficient in their academic competencies, in their values toward school achievement, or in their family's parenting practices, and so forth in the way that American blacks are socially constructed to be (see Lee 2008). In addition, because of their limited socioeconomic resources as the poor working class, Somali immigrants tend to collectively settle in typically resource-accessible large urban areas in the United States. Such residential segregation, coupled with economic inequality, within a "blackened" context would increase the likelihood for Somali youth to identify with the racial minority status ascribed to nonimmigrant American blacks (see Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). This also creates a segregated schooling experience, where the Somali students are enrolled in a school where a vast majority of the population is black (Lee 2009). Thus, Somali youth could be prone to negative comparisons with their white peers in schools, as are most involuntary minorities (Ogbu and Simons 1998). Under such circumstances, Somali youths' perceptions of the route of socioeconomic success in the United States are speculated to align more with conventional stereotypes of successful black Americans.

Despite the fact that Somali immigrants are involuntary minorities (see Ogbu 1987) and are often assigned the racial minority status as American blacks in the United States (Bigelow 2008), the implications of their assumed racial identity as "blacks" should not be readily assumed. First,

unlike nonimmigrant American blacks, their "blackness" is not constructed upon experiences of historical oppression and systematic racism in the United States. Also, many Somali immigrant refugees actually share the attitudes and behaviors of voluntary immigrants. Ogbu and Herbert Simons (1998, 165) described this characteristic of refugees as "a tourist attitude": like tourists, refugees tend to be willing to accommodate to the cultural norms and behaviors in the host society "without fear of losing their cultural identity." In this sense, Somali immigrant youths are likely to perceive more educational opportunities in the United States than in their native country and to view school success as a key vehicle to "making it" in the United States (Ogbu and Simons 1998, 170–72). Such sentiments are in conflict with the way that the American black identity is constructed (and assigned to black immigrants like the Somalis) in the United States. In other words, as Guofang Li's (2008) study on Sudanese immigrants shows, being assigned a "black" racial category does not necessarily mean that African black immigrants identify with nonimmigrant American black culture. Moreover, according to Martha Bigelow (2008), a majority of Somali youths still hold national and ethnic identities (also see Kusow 2006; Kusow and Bjork 2007). They thus tend to resist the way the American society prescribes their racial identity as "blacks" (see Kusow 2006).

What emerges from the above discussion is that, as a newly immigrated group, Somali adolescents have to understand their "blackness" somewhere in-between the meaning of "blackness" prescribed in the context of racial stratification of the United States and their own national and ethnic identification. Some Somali youth adopt black American vernacular English and hip-hop clothing and celebrate the conventional role models of social success of many black American youths, such as professional athletes or entertainers (Lee 2009). Yet, in reality, the majority of the Somali youth often have to negotiate their racial identity as "blacks" in a more ambivalent way (Kusow and Bjork 2007). In view of this, we cannot assume that Somali immigrant peer groups identify with the "oppositional school culture" of many nonimmigrant American blacks as in the understanding of Fordham and Ogbu (1986). We cannot assume that they share nonimmigrant American blacks' perceptions of limited opportunities for social mobility in the society and of school achievement as a whites-only privilege. Following this, we cannot assume that high-achieving Somali students would be necessarily perceived as "acting white" by their peers and that Somali students would avoid achieving at school for the sake of avoiding the "burden of acting white."

Moosung Lee et al.   127

Contextualizing Black Peer Group Influence on Educational Achievement

Compared to adults and children, adolescents tend to be more easily and greatly influenced by their peer groups (Coleman 1961; Cotterell 2007). In this sense, peer groups are influential social actors who significantly condition adolescent development (Cotterell 2007). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) provide a useful framework for us to make sense of how peer groups may (negatively) influence minority students' school achievement. Nonetheless, the literature shows that the tendency of black students to negatively sanction the "acting white" behavior of their high-achieving black peers is likely to be identified under particular school contexts.

For example, using large secondary analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data (Add Health), Roland Fryer (2006) revealed more specific school conditions that he was able to associate with black students' tendency to perceive their black peers' school achievement as "acting white," or their tendency to avoid school achievement for the sake of avoiding the "burden of acting white." Fryer noted that such tendencies became more prevalent as the racial diversity increased within public schools. He thus contended that such tendencies were associated with two factors of school contexts—racial proportion (i.e., increased racial diversity) and school type (i.e., public schools). This is echoed by the study of Philip Cook and Jens Ludwig (1997), which concluded that as the proportion of black students increased in a school, the more advantageous it was socially to be a high-achiever. That is, it was less likely for a high-achiever in a majority black school to be perceived as "acting white" and to be ostracized by his or her black peers for academic success.

The literature cited above importantly sensitizes us to the fact that the way black peer groups exert influence on educational achievement is contingent upon the school context concerned. Nevertheless, we should be guarded against reducing this phenomenon to individuals' display of behaviors consistent with perceived white cultural norms (i.e., school achievement). Otherwise, we will lose sight of the close connection between the "burden of acting white"—the sense of one's "betrayal" of "blackness"—and American blacks' experience of historical oppression and systematic racism, which is precisely on which "blackness" is constructed (Akom 2008). The difficulties black students experience in maintaining dual identities as they navigate both the black (e.g., black peer groups) and the white worlds (e.g., the institutions and practices that maintain white supremacy and perpetuate the minoritized status of blacks) cannot be adequately captured. The point we are making here is that the school context should not be

merely treated as a factor that moderates the prevalence of the "acting white" phenomenon. Rather, it should be understood as what shapes students' identities, their interpretation of their status as racial minorities (see Lew 2006), and the extent to which black students associate school achievement with "whiteness." It is in this way that we can better understand why, in certain school contexts, black high-achievers are less likely to be seen as "betraying" their "blackness" and why black students may be less likely to avoid school achievement for the sake of avoiding peers' negative sanction.

Research Purpose and Questions

We highlighted in our earlier discussion that Somali immigrants often encounter an assigned "blackness" in the system of racial stratification. Such "blackness" is constructed upon skin color rather than and regardless of national, ethnic, or ideological identification. Despite this, Somali immigrant youth's racial identification as "blacks" cannot be taken for granted. We cannot assume that they identify with nonimmigrant American blacks and by extension the (negative) educational implications of the latter's assumed "oppositional school culture" as understood in Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) framework.

Our study primarily explored the extent to which academically successful Somali students who recently immigrated to the United States have to navigate against an "oppositional school culture" supported and sustained through peer labeling and social isolation of high-achievers. More specifically, by examining the friendship network patterns of these high-achieving students at school, our study helped us determine whether high achievement led to social disadvantage for students in the form of less popularity or increased social isolation in school. Also, through semi-structured interviews, we examined the meanings the students attached to their social relationships at school. This helped us investigate how the school context contributed to the dissociation between school achievement and "whiteness" and encouraged Somali students to look to their fellow Somali peers as the reference group in social relationships. In this way, we could better understand why it was highly unlikely for Somali peers to ostracize their high-achieving counterparts for perceived "acting white" behavior in the context of the school in concern.

In view of the above, our study helped us make better sense of why Somali immigrant students did not seem to encounter the "burden of acting white" in their pursuit of academic success. It also sensitized us to the possibilities for racial minorities to construct their identities in such a

Moosung Lee et al.   129

way that they complement rather than conflict with academic achievement and aspirations (see Horvat and Lewis 2003). To this end, our study contributes to the literature on the "acting white" phenomenon among recent black immigrant youths in the United States. It illuminates the variability of the "black" collective and the potential for error when one assumes that black peers are necessarily more likely to impede the academic excellence of other peers (Horvat and Lewis 2003). Also, given that there are only a small number of empirical studies on the school contexts facing Somali immigrant adolescents in the United States (e.g., Bigelow 2007, 2008; Hersi 2005; Lee, forthcoming; Lee and Madyun 2011),[1] our study offers more insights into an underresearched African immigrant student group (Bigelow 2007).

Our inquiry centered on the following questions:

- Are high-achieving Somali working-class immigrant students isolated by their fellow Somali peers because of certain "oppositional cultures" in school?
- If so, what school contexts promote the presence of the "acting white" phenomenon? Conversely, if not, what school contexts facilitate the absence of this phenomenon?
- How can we understand the impact of the school contexts on the presence or absence of the "acting white" phenomenon by examining (i) students' choice of reference group in social relationships and (ii) students' negotiation of their identities as ethnically Somali who share with their peers the language, customs, and ethos originating from Somalia as opposed to being racially "black"?

Research Design

A Case Study

We conducted a case study equipped with a mixed-methods approach to investigate the research questions. (More information about the survey questions, the survey administration, and the interview protocol is avail-

1. Martha Bigelow's research (2007, 2008) illuminates how Somali adolescents negotiate religious and racial bias in and out of school contexts, especially since 9/11. Afra Ahmed Heris (2005) reports that although education is highly valued in Somali communities, the limited English proficiency issue facing Somali students has a significant influence on the development of content knowledge (e.g., science and math) and academic skills. Moosung Lee and Na-im Madyun's (2011) case study shows how Somali students navigate institutional support embedded in their school social relationships and how they utilize these relationships for their academic success.

able from Lee [2009].) Specifically, the case study was based on a qualitative follow-up design in data collection for elaborating quantitative results (Creswell 2002; Creswell et al. 2003). That is, students' social network data gathered from a network survey served as the critical foundation for our exploration of the phenomenon of interest: "Are high-achieving Somali students isolated from their peers?" The finding of the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon among Somali students needed elaboration. We gathered different types of data and analytical tools in order to answer the second research question: "What school contexts facilitate the absence of the 'acting white' phenomenon?" We were also interested in investigating how the school context shaped peer relationships in such a way that high-achieving Somali students would not be perceived as "acting white" and hence be socially isolated by peers. To this end, we performed qualitative data analysis and conducted a series of individual interviews. We were particularly interested in how the school context shaped the meanings that the students attached to social relationships at the school.

Site Selection

Consistent with the primary purpose of this study, we chose a public school located in a large urban/inner-city area where comparably large immigrant populations reside in contrast to other areas in the upper Midwest, where such populations do not exist. More specifically, we chose a public school located in a typical, large urban/inner-city area, which is hereafter referred to with the pseudonym of "Baro School." The school opened in 1999 as a charter school in response to the fast-growing number of Somali immigrants in the school district. The major characteristic of Baro School is that it is an Afrocentric K–12 school in terms of its racial/ethnic composition and core aspects of the curriculum. Approximately 72 percent of the students were Somali. The rest of the students enrolled in the school were nonimmigrant African Americans. Also, of the regular school staff, 24 percent were Somalis, 62 percent were nonimmigrant African Americans, and 14 percent were whites. In this sense, the social context in which our sampled population is located reflects the typical racial residential and schooling segregation in the United States. As stated earlier, this in part explains why black immigrant communities like the Somalis are often assigned the racial minority status as American blacks in the society (see Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Bigelow 2008).

Besides the relatively large number of Somali students enrolled in the school, there were other characteristics of Baro School that were pertinent

Moosung Lee et al.   131

to our research interests. Reflecting the class stratification of Somali im-
migrants in the United States, a majority of the students (90.2 percent,
i.e., 395 out of 438) in the school were Title 1 students who received free
or reduced-price lunch services. Despite having large numbers of low-SES
students as compared to its counterpart public schools in the same school
district, the school had shown relatively high standardized test scores in
statewide assessments. For example, the average mathematics performance
of eleventh-graders at Baro School was higher than the statewide mean
score, and the school was one of the few charter schools that had made
Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) over recent years. This is quite impressive
for a school that has a large concentration of limited English proficient
(37.4%) and Title 1 (90.2%) students.

The small school size should be noted (438 students enrolled). Some
researchers (e.g., Bryk and Driscoll 1988; Lee et al. 2002) argue that school
size has a considerable impact on "the nature of social interactions" within
the school. Also, it is suggested that "social relations are also more positive
in smaller schools" (Lee et al. 2002, 4–5) because smaller schools provide
students with tightly knit and strong social ties, which are likely to be
linked to improvements in student achievement (US Department of Ed-
ucation 2001).

Coupled with its small size, the ethnic homogeneity in the school in
terms of student and staff composition is another distinguishing charac-
teristic that bears upon the nature of social relationships at school and its
educational implications. According to Lee and Friedrich's (2007) research,
small, predominantly Hispanic schools tended to contribute to improving
student achievement, and the academic improvement seemed to be asso-
ciated with the larger proportion of Hispanic students in general and of
Hispanic teachers and staff in these schools. Similarly, Monzo and Rueda's
research (2001) in Southern California reported that Hispanic teachers
and para-educators not only played a positive role in facilitating Hispanic
students' school performance but also served as critical resources for non-
Hispanic teachers in understanding Hispanic students. In addition, using
the National Education Longitudinal Study, Goldsmith (2004, 121) found
that Hispanic students' beliefs about education are particularly "optimistic
and . . . pro-school in segregated-minority schools, especially when these
schools also employ many minority teachers" (as cited in Lee and Friedrich
2007). As noted earlier, Fryer (2006) observed that the "acting white"
phenomenon is more prevalent in more racially diverse public high schools.
If we accept this observation, the research findings cited above can be in-

terpreted in terms of the lower tendency for Hispanic students to avoid school achievement for the sake of avoiding the burden of "acting white" in more racially segregated and ethnically homogeneous school contexts. Thus, conversely, these contexts facilitate Hispanic students' school achievement. From this perspective, we can speculate that high-achieving Somali students in Baro School are less likely to be socially isolated within their Somalian peer group. Reflecting these studies, the organizational feature of Baro School as a predominantly Somali school is expected to significantly influence students' social ties and academic performance.

In summary, our site selection for this study has two notable dimensions. While Baro School has certain unique organizational characteristics in terms of racial/ethnic composition and school size, it is also a typical public school located in a large central city with neighborhood disadvantages such as neighborhood poverty and neighborhood racial segregation.

Social Network Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, we gathered complete social network data for students' relations within the sample school. Because the school is the key social venue where students can access resources, we gathered complete network data from the school in order to capture substantial ties among students. There were 130 students enrolled from ninth grade to twelfth grade in the school. Due to funding limits, we selected for data collection a subgroup that shared at least one extracurricular activity.[2] As a result, we collected the complete social network of 47 sample students from Baro School.[3] The 47 students were asked to list their closest peers within the group through a self-administered network paper survey written in English. (The students were asked: "In order of importance, list the full names of your closest friends.") Because of the absence of missing actors within the subgroup, the complete network data had particular strengths in revealing complete social dynamics of actors within a group in terms of their network position in the whole network structure. Notably, while most of the students involved in the data collection were working-class adolescents, there were two

2. The 47 students participated in a student organization for community volunteering.
3. Of the 47 students, 6 were US-born black students (non-Somali students) because they were also involved in the extracurricular activity (i.e., volunteering in a political campaign for presidential candidate Barack Obama at that time). They were later excluded in grouping two Somali groups in order to focus on comparing network sizes of Somali students only.

Moosung Lee et al.   133

Somali middle-class students.[4] However, in our analysis, we placed an emphasis on working-class immigrant adolescents. The main reason for this focus was to reflect the current social contexts of Somali immigrant students, as described earlier.

For our analysis, we employed network techniques related to identifying network structure within the complete network context (e.g., network size and block modeling). More details of our analytical procedures are described in the following section.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative data collection in this study, we used a purposive sampling procedure for elaborating and expanding findings from network analysis. In other words, gathering qualitative data was designed for elaborating students' social relations based on network data (i.e., for providing elaborated answers to Research Question 2). Specifically, after analysis of the network data, follow-up qualitative data were garnered from semi-structured interviews of a subsample of the 47 students. To this end, we purposively selected 8 out of the 47 students for follow-up data collection and analysis. Specifically, after the analysis of the network data, follow-up qualitative data were garnered from semi-structured interviews of a subsample of the 47 students (see Lee [2009] for interview protocol and interview questions). Based on the students' achievement levels (i.e., high or low GPA [grade point average]) and network type (i.e., large or small), we purposively selected the 8 students (6 females and 2 males), representing three groups: high achievement with large network (4 students), low achievement with large network (2 students), and low achievement with small network (2 students). Note that among the 47 students there were no students showing high achievement with a small network.

This small-scale narrative research based on semi-structured interviewing was designed to complement our network data by reconstructing the participants' cumulative school and immigration experience. These interviews sought to explore how these Somali students interpreted the social contexts

4. In defining working class, we used two criteria: parents' occupation (i.e., professional vs. manual labor) and socioeconomic status (SES, i.e., school lunch status). Based on these criteria, two Somali students turned out to be middle-class students, given that their parents' occupations were professional (e.g., teachers) and they did not receive free/reduced-price lunch services.

surrounding them, such as school characteristics, social interactions, and relationships. In particular, the interview data usefully complemented the social network data because the interview data could capture the nuances of how the school contexts shaped (i) the meanings students attached to school achievement and (ii) how they identified themselves, whether racially and/or ethnically, in relation to their peers. It helped explicate why or why not the sampled students ostracized high-achieving peers socially.

Each student was interviewed individually by the first and fourth authors for about one hour in a conference room at Baro School. Two interviewers were involved for all interviews. This ensured that the interviews could cover all key issues; a single interviewer sometimes might digress from key interview questions during the interview. In addition, this approach enabled one interviewer to generate impromptu but important interview questions, while the other interviewer kept to standardized interview protocols (Lee 2009). All interviews were audio-recorded. In principle, all interviews were transcribed verbatim for us to examine primary themes, although some parts of the verbatim transcripts were edited for clarifying the contexts of interviews. We also prepared memos, including analytic reflections, after conducting each interview. After conducting multiple readings of each transcript and memo, we began seeking and developing a coding scheme related to the research questions.

Additionally, several efforts were made to address validity issues in our qualitative data analysis. First, the first author cross-checked certain interview information with the principal of Baro School to minimize factual errors. Second, we sought feedback from each other as we reread the transcripts repeatedly. Because the authors' ethnic backgrounds (African American, Asian, and Somali American) were diverse, this process particularly helped us identify our mis- or overinterpretations of the interview data. Importantly, this feedback-solicitation process allowed us to accommodate alternative interpretations of the same transcript, which contributed to a better understanding of seemingly discrepant statements. For example, as "outsiders," the first and second authors were relatively free from certain preconceptions (i.e., "taken-it-for-granted" views) and values embedded in Somalis. Equipped with knowledge of existing theories and research, the first two authors' vantage point enabled us to look at emerging patterns or phenomena from the sociostructural contexts of ethnic immigrants living in the United States. Furthermore, as an "insider," the fourth author provided relevant explanations for interview data interpretations, based on his experiences as a Somali student in the US public school system.

Moosung Lee et al.   135

Results

Network Size by Achievement Level

Figure 1 illustrates the social relationships among the 47 students, that is, it is based on the complete network. Interestingly, despite being a complete network, three actors were identified as isolates within the group (i.e., S7, S12, and S24). This is because when they were asked to list close peers within the group (i.e., complete network), they only chose their close peers who were outside the group. In the sociogram, the size of nodes is proportionate to each student's network size.

To link the peer networks in figure 1 to academic achievement, high-achievers and mid-/low-achievers are indicated by rectangles and circles, respectively: high-achieving group (grade point average [GPA] is higher than 3.2), mid-achieving group (GPA is between 3.2 and 2.3), and low-achieving group (GPA is lower than 2.3). Because state testing data were not available for many of the students in this study, we used GPA as our
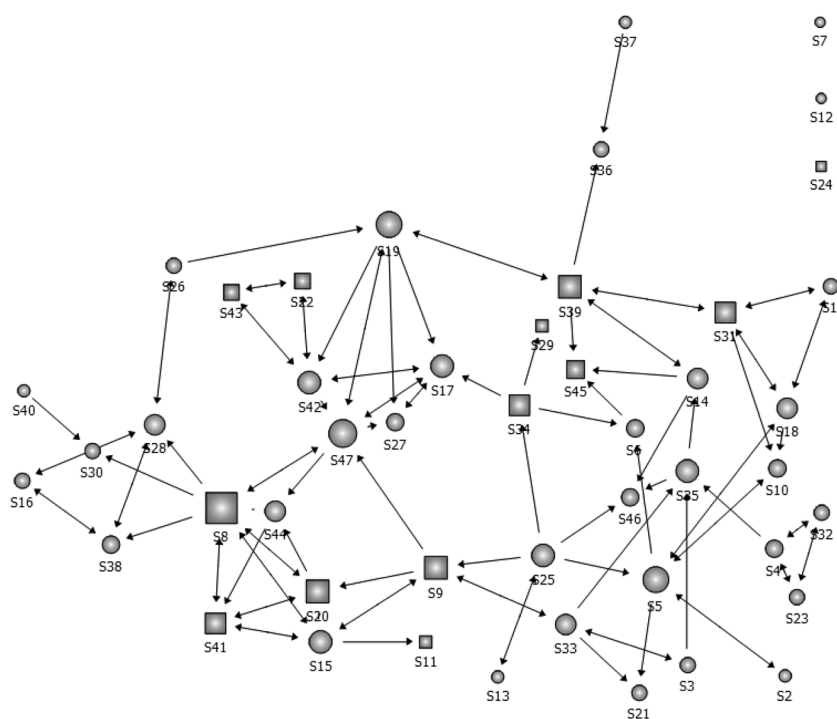

Fig. 1. The complete peer network by the 47 students. NOTE: $N = 47$ actors with 108 ties. Rectangles represent high-achievers and circles represent mid-/low-achievers.

outcome variable. However, grouping students appropriately by GPA required contextualizing. Part of this context came through consultation with the school principal. According to the principal's data and experience in the school over the years, a student whose GPA was higher than 3.2 had a higher chance of going to four-year universities, including major state universities. Conversely, a student whose GPA was lower than 2.3 had a much lower chance of college attendance. This GPA demarcation of 3.2 also fits well with Fryer and Torelli's (2005) network analysis study that found a dramatic decrease in popularity for black students once the GPA climbed above 3.2.

As a result of this grouping, we identified 19 low-achievers, 15 mid-achievers, and 13 high-achievers. For a focused comparison of the number of peer ties by achievement level, we combined the low- and mid-achievement students into one group. Additionally, consistent with our target population, 6 US-born African American students were not included in our statistical analysis.

As illustrated in figure 1, high-achievers were not isolated from the main network. Although S24, a high-achiever, was isolated from her peer network, she was a US-born African American (not Somali). Table 1 further provides detailed information on peer networks by achievement level within Somali working-class students. In the table, "degree" refers to the number of social ties incident to an actor (or node). Because the network was a directional network, we needed to specify the direction of each degree. A nodal in-degree is defined as the number of social ties "incident to" one particular actor, and a nodal out-degree is defined as the number of

Table 1. Comparison of the Number of Ties in Peer Networks

Network Properties	Mean	SD	df	t	p-Value
In-degree ties from complete network:					
Mid-/low-achieving working class	2.11	1.61	37	−1.52	.136
High-achieving working class	3.09	2.25			
Out-degree ties from complete network:					
Mid-/low-achieving working class	2.14	1.29		−.887	.381
High-achieving working class	2.55	1.21	37		

NOTE.—$N = 39$ (28 low- and mid-achieving vs. 11 high-achieving students). Consistent with the purpose of the study, 2 Somali students with middle-class backgrounds (S45 and S47) and 6 non-immigrant American blacks (S13, S24, S25, S35, S44, and S46) were not included. In-degree ties were determined by the number of nominations that students received from their peers as close friends. Vice versa, out-degree ties were determined by the number of nominations that students made for their peers as close friends.

Moosung Lee et al.   137

social ties "incident from" the actor. In other words, in-degree ties refer to "chosen" ties (incoming ties), representing "popularity" in the context of our data set and out-degree ties means choosing ties (outgoing ties) indicating close friends.

Findings indicate that there were no significant group differences in the number of peer ties by the achievement levels. Specifically, the high-achieving students' network size on average was slightly higher than their counterparts' network size, although it was not significantly different in statistical tests. For example, the high-achieving students had about one more tie (3.09) on average than the low- and mid-achieving students (2.11) in terms of in-degree ties. Given that in-degree ties are counted by the number of ties chosen by other peers as close friends, the high-achieving students seemed to be more popular. In terms of out-degree ties, the high-achievers showed a slightly higher point; the meaning of out-degree ties here can be interpreted as indicating respondents' perception of the number of peers whom they recognize as close friends. Thus, the higher number of the out-degree ties, the more close friends they believe they have. This perceived network is important because it could indicate a feeling of connectedness. All of these results imply that the high-achieving Somali working-class students may not be isolated from their peer groups both structurally and perceptually.

The following interview excerpts reflect the results described above. When we asked what students consider important when they choose their friends, most of the interview participants indicated personality (e.g., nice character) as the most important criterion. At the same time, some of the low-achieving students indicated school performance as a key aspect they consider in choosing their friends.[5]

> INTERVIEWER 1: Do you think high-achieving students are popular?
> STUDENT 21 (LOW-ACHIEVER): You could say that.
> INTERVIEWER 1: How so?
> STUDENT 21: Everybody knows they're smart. . . . I think people want to be like [them].
> INTERVIEWER 1: Why do people [students] want to be like them?

5. Students in Baro School do not necessarily know other peers' exact GPA, as long as their peers do not share the information about GPA. Nonetheless, student interviews revealed that they can usually recognize who performs better through their class experience (e.g., peers' answers to teachers' questions).

STUDENT 21: They know the results [of] that person who is educated and has a successful future.

INTERVIEWER 2: When you choose your friends do you want to be friends with some students showing a very high GPA?

STUDENT 27 (LOW-ACHIEVER): Yeah, I want to have someone who studies very well, writes the best, and is a good student. I want to work with someone who knows good things, can help me when I need something.

INTERVIEWER 2: How do you choose your friends?

STUDENT 47 (LOW-ACHIEVER): Because they [Student 47's friends] are nice, they are hard workers, they have good grades.

Similarly, some of the high-achieving students responded that high-achieving students are popular:

INTERVIEWER 1: Are high-achieving students popular?

STUDENT 41 (HIGH-ACHIEVER): Yeah, they are. You get to know them, and you hear their names, this person did that and this.

Peers Connected with High-Achieving, Working-Class Somali Students

At this point, it is fairly clear that the individual high-achieving Somali working-class students were not isolated from their peer networks. One issue of interest in our inquiry was the types of peers connected with these high-achieving students. It was important to specify this because it is the type of friends rather than the number of friends in social relationships that mattered as to why or why not these high-achievers might be socially connected rather than isolated.

To investigate this issue, we explored network connections among different achievement groups in the complete peer network by using block modeling techniques, illustrated in table 2. Specifically, the 11 high-achievers had only 5 out-degree ties to the low-achieving group, whereas the high-achievers had 12 in-degree ties linked to themselves. The numbers in the parentheses showing density within and between achievement groups display this pattern again. For example, the density of peer ties within the high-achieving students was the highest (.109) among various density scores. This suggests that the high-achieving students were more connected with themselves than the low- and mid-achievers. In other words, there was a pattern of network connections among the high-achievers that appears to adhere to the idiom "birds of a feather flock together."

Moosung Lee et al.   139

Table 2. Ties and Density within and between the Achievement Groups in the Complete Peer Network ($N = 39$)

		Out-Degree Ties			
		Low-Achievers	Mid-Achievers	High-Achievers	Total In-Degree Ties
In-Degree Ties	Low-achievers (13 students)	8 (.051)	13 (.067)	5 (.035)	26
	Mid-achievers (15 students)	11 (.056)	6 (.029)	12 (.073)	29
	High-achievers (11 students)	2 (.014)	10 (.061)	12 (.109)	24
	Total out-degree ties	21	29	29	79

NOTE.—$N = 39$ Somali working-class students with 79 ties. See table 1 for exclusions from the original 47-student sample and definitions of "in-degree" and "out-degree." Density is shown in parentheses. For formal calculation of density, see Wasserman and Faust (1994). See the text for further details.

Additionally, there were certain patterns of in- and out-degree ties among the three groups. That is, the low-achievers mostly had ties with the mid-achievers as a peer group; there were 13 in-degree ties and 11 out-degree ties. The mid-achievers were balanced in their connection with both the low- and high-achievers. While the high-achievers were mainly connected with themselves, they were relatively more connected with the mid-achievers than the low-achievers in terms of both in- and out-degree ties. Drawing from these findings, it can be argued that the peer network formation of the high-achieving group was based on their achievement level.

To capture the general pattern of within- and between-group connections, we calculated the overall mean network density of within and between groups, which was .055. We used the mean density as a threshold in order to simplify the within- and between-group connections. For example, the density within the mid-achieving group was .029, which is lower than .055. It was coded as zero. Conversely, the density between the mid- and high-achieving groups was .073, and it was coded as one because it is greater than the threshold value. Based on this coding, table 3 illustrates simplified relations within and between the groups. One salient pattern is that the high-achievers again had more dense connections within their own group.

These results support that there is a friendship pattern among high-achievers in the peer network, which supports our earlier observation

Table 3. Simplified Relations within and between the Achievement Groups

		Out-Degree Ties		
		Low-Achievers	**Mid-Achievers**	**High-Achievers**
In-Degree Ties	Low-achievers	0	1	0
	Mid-achievers	1	0	1
	High-achievers	0	1	1

NOTE.—Based on the overall mean network density of within and between groups (i.e., .055), we simplified the within- and between-group connections. As such, blocks with the density lower than the threshold value (.055) were coded as zero, whereas blocks with the density higher than the threshold value were coded as one in this table.

that a similar achievement level functions as a common thread in high-achievers' social networks. Importantly, as described below in the interview excerpt, it appeared that some of the high-achievers benefited from their connections with other high-achievers (e.g., supporting one another's homework if they miss class).

S8 (high-achiever) reports:

> Hadi [S20, high-achiever] is a cousin, and Sala [S41, high-achiever] is a friend I know from ninth grade.[6] Hadi, we've known each other since kindergarten, and her mom and my mom are very close. . . . When I am at home, they [Hadi and Sala] call me and tell me to do this page, and they give me examples of what the teacher was doing on the board.

Two observations can be made out of the above interview excerpt. First, the tendency for high-achievers to connect with one another among themselves and the density of such connections explains why high-achievers did not seem socially isolated in school. Second, that these students could benefit from one another academically not only explains their dense connections but also hints at why they would look to each other as their positive reference group in their social relationships at school. This is discussed in further detail later.

Another distinctive feature from the block modeling results presented in table 3 was that both of the high- and low-achieving groups were predominantly connected with mid-achievers. In other words, the high-

6. The names in this interview are pseudonyms.

achievers seemed to prefer to have connections with achievers of the same level, and the high-achieving Somali working-class students were connected with the mid-achieving students. Drawing upon this pattern, the high-achievers did not seem to be isolated in their school social relationships.

School Contexts Influencing the Absence of "Acting White"

By this point in our analysis, we have found that the Somali working-class high-achievers are not isolated in their peer networks. Rather, they have a slightly higher number of in-degree ties and out-degree ties; interview data further suggest that the high-achievers are relatively popular. Additionally, most of them are connected with other high-achievers. All of these findings confirm that high achievement is not connected to a burdensome identity or negative behavioral labels. Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) notion that school achievement is perceived as "acting white" from the perspective of the "oppositional school culture" of black peers does not seem to apply to the Somali students in this case study school. This explains why the Somali high-achievers were not likely to be socially isolated. Now, we are interested in exploring the underlying reasons for the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon. Through our interview data analysis, we sought to explore the key school contextual characteristics contributing to the absence of this phenomenon.

First, the popularity of high-achieving students in the school seemed to stem from a positive school climate that valued earning good grades and attending college. Interviews revealed that earning good grades and attending college were the most important values shared by all interview participants, regardless of their achievement level. For example, as the following interview excerpts suggest, earning good grades and going to college were taken for granted as central to the school culture and as highly valued by both the students and the staff of Baro School"

> INTERVIEWER 1: What is valued in your school?
> STUDENT 21 (LOW-ACHIEVER): Good grades, good behavior.
> STUDENT 27 (LOW-ACHIEVER): It is important for students here to go to college, because if you don't have education, you don't get money, and you don't have a good life.
> STUDENT 20 (HIGH-ACHIEVER): Going to college, making sure you graduate . . . getting good grades.
> STUDENT 41 (HIGH-ACHIEVER): SAT and high grades. . . . They [S41's friends] all think it is important to get grades and go to college.

The above interview excerpts suggest that the popularity of high-achieving students can be explained in terms of the academically-oriented and college-bound school climate of Baro School.[7]

Another distinctive school characteristic was Baro School's small size (438 total students in grades K–12). This structural feature seemed to contribute to scaffolding a positive peer context, that is, enabling students to know almost all students in the school. Indeed, the positive perception of the small school size of Baro was commonly identified in the interviews.

> INTERVIEWER 1: Do you think the small size of this school is better?
>
> STUDENT 5 (LOW-ACHIEVER): Yeah. . . . because you get to know a lot of people better, and you get to know the teachers better.
>
> STUDENT 21 (LOW-ACHIEVER): Yeah, small is good. It's small; you know everybody, and you could get help when you need more attention. We're in a big family; everybody knows each other.
>
> STUDENT 47 (LOW-ACHIEVER): Yeah, because you know its small, the classes are like 20, or 27, or 25. The senior [classes] are like 15. You know the teachers, when they talk, you're understanding, you can ask questions.
>
> STUDENT 8 (HIGH-ACHIEVER): Yeah . . . because I feel closer . . . everybody that knows me knew me when I was little.
>
> STUDENT 20 (HIGH-ACHIEVER): I like it [Baro School] because you know the people, and it's better; you know more people. . . . If I went to a different school, I would be more shy and not outgoing. If I know the people I could talk more, and if I don't know the people I wouldn't talk more.

The above interview excerpts suggest that the small size of the school contributes to better communication and closer connection among students in the school. Under such circumstances, the norms and values supporting an academic culture, as indicated earlier, appeared to be more easily shared among the students.

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7. Drawing on our interview data including both low- and high-achieving students, we observe that these students value academic work and high aspirations of college attendance regardless of their levels of academic performance. As noted earlier, the school was one of the few charter schools that have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in recent years. Reflecting its academic orientation and accomplishment, Baro School received a Bronze medal awarded by the *US News & World Report* for its academic performance in 2008, a year before this study started.

Additionally, it should be restated that Baro School is Afrocentric in terms of its student body composition. Considering the absence of white students enrolled and the aforesaid academic and identity orientation within the school culture, it was very unlikely for Somali students to ostracize high-achieving peers by analogizing them with (presumably) academically-oriented white students, with the implied disconnection from black culture. This resonates with Fryer's (2006) observation that the "acting white" phenomenon is more prevalent in "racially diverse" public high schools rather than in racially homogenous schools. This also echoes with observations in Cook and Ludwig's study (1997) that the higher the proportion of black students in a school, the more advantageous it was socially to be a high-achiever (i.e., the lower tendencies for high-achievers to be ostracized for "acting white"). Moreover, there was a substantial presence of Somali institutional agents, including the school principal and many African American teachers. This should be noted in our understanding of the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon in Baro. It is because these institutional agents are less likely to extend the racist assumptions about low-academic achievement of American black students to immigrant black students that often lead to little encouragement at school (see Lee 2008). Rather, as the following interview excerpt shows, these institutional agents were perceived to be equipped with cultural sensitivity as they offered the Somali students support in their studies.[8]

> INTERVIEWER 2: Do you have some important teachers here?
> STUDENT 21 (LOW-ACHIEVER): Yeah. Mr. Tuda [T18, an African American chemistry teacher],[9] Mr. Logos [T11, a Somali math teacher]. One teaches math, one of them teaches chemistry.
> STUDENT 41 (HIGH-ACHIEVER): Mr. Williamson [African American], he supports me a lot, he is a good guy. Well, he asks me how my grades are, he looks after me, and shows me what I did wrong and what I didn't.

The above comments resonate with previous studies' observations of the association between school size, schools' racial homogeneity, and school

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8. For example, S8 (high-achiever) described their teachers as having good knowledge and sensitivity about the Somali culture: "We [students] are from the same country. They [teachers] know us, that we have different tribes." The student went on to state that teachers treat students fairly regardless of their tribal background but that they also teach students by recognizing differences of students' tribal origins such as Somali or Oromo.

9. Pseudonyms were used for the names of institutional agents.

performance or achievement, as we mentioned earlier (Goldsmith 2004; Lee and Friedrich 2007; Monzo and Rueda 2001). In summary, up to this point of our analysis, it is fair to suggest that the "acting white" phenomenon may not be applicable to a small and racially/ethnically homogenous school where an academically-oriented and college-bound culture is shared by students. This is true even though Baro is an inner-city public school with a low-SES student population and a high proportion of ethnic minorities.

Somali Peers as a Positive Reference Group

Alongside the school contextual factors discussed above, the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon can be attributed to the ethnic cohesion of Somali peer networks. As the discussion below shows, on the basis of their shared understanding of their ethnic identity, Somali students look to their fellow Somalian peers as their reference group in social relationships at school. Thus, it is highly unlikely for high-achieving Somali students to be perceived as "acting white," as "betraying" their "blackness" and be subsequently ostracized.

First, Somali students in the school tended to have a positive ethnic self-conception as a Somali. For example, when we asked interviewee students to describe themselves in 10 different ways in order of importance, "I am from Somali" or "I am proud of being a Somali" was typically the first statement we heard from the majority of the students. Similarly, the following interview excerpt demonstrates that this Somali student, S8 (high-achiever), upheld a positive image of Somali ethnic origin:

> My mom is a Somali, and my dad is a Somali. They tell me good stories back when they were like my age. They used to say that Somali was a good place and stuff like that. What really hurts the most is my mom told stories of how great it was, and when she left, they had a war, and everything got bombed. . . . Some people denied that they're Somali. They say most of them are very embarrassing, and I've seen with my own eyes, not most of them, just some, it's how they act. If they act different, let them act different.

The above interview excerpt attests to the way Somali students identified themselves in terms of the cultural heritage, as embodied in their parents' "good story" and memories of the "good place," of their native origin in Somalia. This shows that the Somali students held identities reflecting their

Moosung Lee et al.   145

parents' national and ethnic origin (see Bigelow 2008). This also shows that these students were bringing their cultural history (of "how great it was") into the system of racial stratification as their families enter the United States. In view of this, it is less likely that they would identify with the stigmatized American black identity, which is one constructed upon an entirely different history (of nonimmigrant American blacks' experiences of oppression and systematic racism; Ogbu 1987). This is true despite that it is this stigmatized "black" identity that Somali immigrants are assigned in the United States. In contrasting the stories told and memories shared by parents with those people who considered a Somali identity an embarrassment, the student also conveyed a sense of national and ethnic pride.

Given such positive ethnic self-conception, it is not surprising to see that Somali students view their Somali peers as a positive reference group in their social relationships. Evidence is found from figure 2, showing strong ethnic cohesion in their social relationships.[10] Notably, figure 2 is based on combining the complete peer network data (presented in fig. 1) and the egocentric networks of the 47 students.[11] This means that the combined network charts peer groups formed within the subgroup and other peer groups generated not only within but outside the extracurricular activity group. In the figure, the largest block, demarcated by dotted lines, is the Somali students' peer network. The second largest block, one marked by the same dotted lines, is the black (not Somali) students' peer network. The five small blocks marked by the dotted lines are other ethnic peers, such as Asian, white, Hispanic, biracial (white and black), and a missing value. Although there are some social ties crossing ethnic lines (such as 10 ties from Somalis to nonimmigrant Anmerican blacks and 17 ties from nonimmigrant Anmerican blacks to Somalis), as illustrated in the figure, the peer subgroups are crucially conditioned by ethnicity.

The ethnic cohesion of Somali students suggests that Somali students viewed their fellow Somali peers, who shared a positive ethnic identity, as a positive reference group in their social relationships. From this perspec-

10. Coethnic peer networks are also found in other immigrant populations, such as South Asian immigrant adolescents in the United States (Bankston 2004; Lee and Madyun 2008; Madyun and Lee 2010). In particular, Carl L. Bankston (2004) explains how ethnicity comes to play as "social capital" among some South Asian immigrants. See Lee (2010) for more details about the conceptual and analytical relationships between social capital and networks.

11. Unlike complete networks, egocentric networks show all the social ties surrounding one particular student, a so-called focal node (Scott 1991).
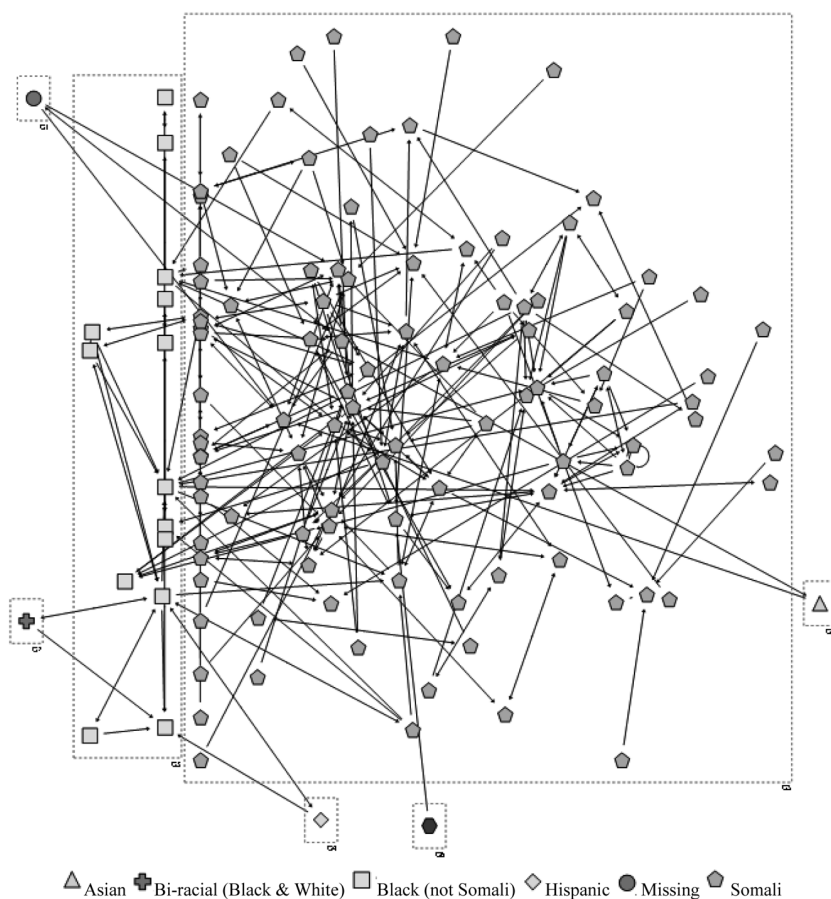
△ Asian ✚ Bi-racial (Black & White) □ Black (not Somali) ◇ Hispanic ● Missing ⬠ Somali

Fig. 2. The combined peer network by ethnicity. NOTE: $N = 120$ actors (including the 47 students) with 304 ties.

tive, Somali adolescents were more likely to adhere to the norms and standards of other Somali peers, such as their emphasis or value on "earning good grades" or "going to college," as revealed in their interviews. Rather than comparing themselves to white peers (who were absent in the school in the first place), these students were more likely to see competition among fellow Somalians as a source of inspiration and motivation in their studies. Under such circumstances, achieving at school and going to college was likely to be interpreted as more about acting in a culturally appropriate way as ethnic Somalis than as "acting white" in Baro (see Li 2008). Understandably,

Somali high-achievers were unlikely to be ostracized for "acting white" by their peers; hence, the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon.

What should be noted is that while the ethnic homophily in Somali peer networks seems to result from a peer selection process conditioned by ethnicity, it can also be attributable to the socio-organizational setting surrounding Somali students. This pertains to the predominantly Somali school, the size of which was sufficiently small to allow students to know almost all of the students in the school. This also pertains to the segregated nature of Somali communities. We speculate that the students' identification as Somalis in ethnic terms is in part a result of the ethnic ethos embraced in their ethnic communities (see Lew 2006; Rong and Brown 2002). In this sense, ethnic cohesion should be understood as a double-edged aspect of Somali students' social relationships. While it contributes to the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon, it also reflects the few alternative routes available to Somali students for gaining additional resources (e.g., educational and employment information or values on education and achievement ideology) from outside the Somali community (see Lee [forthcoming]). This is likely to reflect the current socioeconomic situation facing the whole Somali community in the United States nowadays.

Limitations and Future Directions

We acknowledge that the findings from this study may not necessarily be applicable to other school settings, given that this is a single-school case study. As such, findings from this study should be substantiated through a large-scale data analysis (e.g., Add-Health data) focusing on similar school contexts. In this regard, the findings from this case study should be used for hypotheses for such quantitative investigations.

Second, close friendship and student popularity were assessed in this study as a key indicator for us to capture the "acting white" phenomenon in the studied school (Fryer and Torelli 2005). Despite this, we acknowledge that the burden of "acting white" is closely associated with achievement ideology or attitudes (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). This is addressed only to a limited extent in our study.

Third, the analysis of our interview data suggests the possibility that black students' racial or ethnic identity is intertwined with the extent to which they associate school achievement with "whiteness," or with a disidentification with "blackness." Specifically, Somali students felt proud of

being Somali, and this positive ethnic identity was also identified from other high-achieving Somali students. Indeed, research such as Bergin and Cook's study (2002) found that racial minority high school students who upheld their ethnic identity did not avoid academic achievement because of the intimidation of an "acting white" label. What is at issue here is that black immigrants like Somalis do not necessarily identify with nonimmigrant American blacks in racial terms (Kusow 2006), even if this reality is often ignored by the mainstream society (Bigelow 2007, 2008; Kusow 2006). Although similar in many respects in how they are socially categorized, Somali immigrants seem less similar to nonimmigrant American blacks in terms of language, culture practices, socioeconomic status, and achievement-ideology vulnerability. Indeed, as shown in our interview data, it seems that it is Somali students' ethnic identity rather than their racial identification with nonimmigrant American blacks that mattered to their orientation to schooling and hence to the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon. This suggests that we cannot take for granted what race (i.e., "blackness") means for black students' educational outcomes (O'Connor et al. 2007).

In this regard, future studies may benefit from unpacking the way school contexts shape black students' racial or ethnic identity construction in such a way that this discourages the "acting white" phenomenon. Previous research, such as Li's (2008) on Sudanese immigrants, has already shown that being assigned a "black" racial category does not necessarily mean that African black immigrant students identify with the culture of nonimmigrant American blacks. From the perspective of the Sudanese students, school achievement was not about "acting white" but about "acting ethnically Sudanese." Further investigation into this issue would be particularly important for offering better understanding of how African immigrant students construct their self-identities and how this shapes their achievement ideology and outcomes.

Conclusions

In this study, we found that high-achieving, working-class Somali immigrant students were not isolated from their peers in school. Rather, on average, they had relatively larger peer network sizes when compared to their lower-achieving counterparts. In particular, they tended to be chosen more often as close friends, and they seemed to be popular in their peer networks. There was also no substantial difference between the high-

achievers and their peers in terms of their perception of the number of close friends they had.[12]

In addition, the high-achievers were most sociable with other high-achievers but not in isolation with them. In other words, the peer networks of high-achieving Somali students were primarily based on their relatively larger social ties, connected with peers mostly having a similarly high achievement level. High-achieving students seemed to benefit academically from one another within their own network. However, the high-achievers were not entirely disconnected from other peers having different achievement levels (e.g., the mid-achievers).

Based on these findings, we argue that there was no "acting white" phenomenon existing among the Somali immigrant students in our case school. That is, high-achievers were not ostracized by their peers for "acting white" (see Fordham and Ogbu 1986). It appears that three school contextual characteristics are associated with the absence of the "acting white" phenomenon. First, as the interview data showed, earning good grades and going to college were part of the school culture, and they were shared and valued by the students. Second, interview data showed that the relatively small school size seemed to contribute to a healthy school climate that promoted student familiarity between every peer. Third, there was a strong presence of African American institutional agents in the Afrocentric school. These agents were perceived as providing the students with culturally-sensitive support. This likely discouraged students' perception of school achievement as a white privilege and of high-achieving peers as "acting white." Fourth, Somali students tended to view fellow Somali peers as a reference group in their relationships at school on the basis of their shared positive ethnic self-conception. This can be attributed to the aforesaid school characteristics. Looking to fellow Somalis as their reference group, Somali students were more likely to adhere to their shared college orientation and standards of academic achievement. This made it highly unlikely for high-achieving Somali students to be ostracized by their peers.

12. The 41 Somali students are very homogenous in terms of social class status and residential areas. In addition, 35 out of the 41 students fall within the second generation category of immigration: "native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent or foreign-born children who were brought to the United States at an early age and have resided here ever since" (Portes and MacLeod 1996, 258). Additionally, of the 41 students, there were no students participating in ESL classes during our research period, although most of them used to be in ESL classes when they first came to the United States. Based on all these homogeneous characteristics of the sample students, we believe that we could ensure our rigorous account of students' social networks.

What our findings imply is that we should not assume that black peers are necessarily a negative influence on one's educational achievement. That is, we should not relegate the racial category "blacks" to "a unified and stable social category" that "predicts blacks' educational outcomes" (O'Connor et al. 2007, 543) based on an assumed automatic vulnerability to an "acting white" phenomenon. In order to interpret how race bears upon educational outcomes, researchers should first make sense of whether and how an assigned "black" identity matters to black immigrant communities under particular (school) contexts. According to our interview data, particular school characteristics appeared to have minimized the possibility for Somali immigrant students to interpret their schooling in terms of their assigned "black" identity (which, in dominant imaginations, is associated with poor school achievement; see Lee 2008). Rather, it was their Somalian peers, who shared with them a positive ethnic identity, who were seen to provide the cultural frame of reference for their schooling. In other words, under particular (school) contexts, it is possible for racial minorities to construct their identities in such a way that defies stereotypes associated with their assigned "blackness" and complements their schooling achievement and aspirations (see Horvat and Lewis 2003). It is the specific ways school contexts shape students' negotiation of identities and in turn their educational outcomes that deserves further investigation.

One implication of our study for teaching practice is that, in order to boost black students' achievement, teachers need to rid themselves of assumptions of blacks' poor academic achievement (see Lee 2008). Not all minority students assigned the racial identity of "black" identify themselves with the presumably homogenous American black culture. It is thus unlikely that all of them would, as understood by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), celebrate an "oppositional school culture" and discourage peers' school achievement through labeling and social isolation.

Another issue of note is that, according to previous research, black immigrant students in the United States can benefit from the achievement-oriented ethos promoted in their ethnic communities and the national pride and ethnic cultural heritage espoused by their parents (see, e.g., Rong and Brown 2002; Waters 1999). Such findings not only help explain why these students do not necessarily identify with the "oppositional school culture" of American blacks. These findings also show that ethnic identity may matter to black immigrant students more (when compared to the racial category of "blacks") in the context of schooling. This may also suggest a more vulnerable identity in the context of school for American blacks and a need to provide spaces that strengthen black identity devel-

opment. Most importantly, these findings suggest that both the families of black immigrant students and their ethnic communities provide important conditions and resources for these students to construct identities that complement academic achievement and aspirations. These are important resources that culturally-sensitive schools and teachers should tap into in their effort to boost black achievement and to narrow the black-white achievement gap.

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