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Richard Buttny, Syracuse University

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DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF RACIAL BOUNDARIES AND SELF-SEGREGATION ON CAMPUS

RICHARD BUTTNY
Syracuse University

This discourse analysis examines North American college students' discursive constructions of racial boundaries, difference, and voluntary segregation on campus. Participants watched the documentary, Racism 101, at home with others and immediately afterwards taped-recorded their discussion about the video and related race matters. None of the participants disagreed with the existence of separateness on campus; they did, however, offer different accounts and positions. Some criticized such self-segregation while others justified it as understandable due to commonalities or differences. Still other individuals were ambivalent or avowed conflicting accounts, which seemed to reflect a dilemma, such as wanting more meaningful interracial contact but being unable to know how to achieve it. African Americans cited preserving group identity as a justification for boundaries. The findings fit with racial formation theory in that participants are partaking in different discourses so as to articulate, explore, or criticize different positions on interracial matters.

Thirty years ago... black and white Americans... and members of many ethnic groups tended to lead, culturally and socially, largely segregated lives. Today they do so, for the most part, only as a matter of choice. Down on the ground, though, there is a lot of friction, since persons who never worked side-by-side before are finding themselves in situations of professional intimacy unimaginable... a generation ago. (Menand, 1994, p. 21)

Present institutions of higher learning in the United States are more diverse than ever before, but, at the same time, there are reports of a climate of separateness, a “new segregation” (Asante & Al-Seem, 1984; Duster, 1992; Gitlin, 1995; Steele, 1996). On university campuses, it is not uncommon to see different groups socially clustering among themselves, for example, when sitting in the cafeteria, at social events such as dances, or by joining separate Greek organizations. In the student gym, I once observed three pick-up basketball games running concurrently—one with Whites only, one with African Americans only, and one with Asians only.

There are different views about this self-segregation. One is the social support model: Students of color are numerical minorities on most university campuses, so in social life they need the support of their own...
cultural groups and organizations to succeed in higher education. Another approach is the integrationist model, involving the supposition that if children of different backgrounds could grow up and be educated together, they would get to know one another and not develop the prejudices and stereotypes of their elders. Ultimately, these models may not be conflicting, though rhetorically they have been used to point in different directions. These models provide a rationale for the present investigation, which examines how current university students make sense of the discourses of separateness, boundaries, and difference on campus, in particular, between White and African-American students.

PERSPECTIVES ON BOUNDARIES

In public and work life, society has become increasingly integrated; yet in the private or social realm, Whites and African Americans lead largely separate lives (Hacker, 1992). It is not surprising, then, that university campuses would reflect society’s broader patterns of residential and social segregation. A 1992 Columbia University study confirmed this pattern and revealed some mixed feelings about current intergroup conditions on campus.

Students tend to see the campus as quite fragmented in general, and they perceive different groups as more or less isolated. Of all respondents, 65 percent think spending a lot of time on campus with people of one’s own racial or religious group is a “natural thing to do,” but 61 percent feel that it reduces the quality of the Columbia experience and 50 percent think it encourages antagonism among groups. At least half of the undergraduates are ambivalent about separatism. (Cose, 1997, p.88)

Intergroup relations theory claims that the greater the perceived dissimilarity, the greater the subjective intergroup distance (Tzeng, Duvell, Ware, Neel, & Fortier, 1986). Out-group members may be perceived as “too different” to motivate one to communicate with them. Perceived difference may result in increased levels of uncertainty and anxiety, which leads individuals to avoid contact with out-group members (Gudykunst, 1995). Groups with a history of conflict will less likely be motivated to converge in their communication with out-group members (Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995). Communication accommodation theory points out that convergence across group boundaries can have rewards and costs, the latter being the potential loss of social identity (Giles & Coupland, 1992). Minority group members with a strong sense of group solidarity and dependence will perceive communication boundaries as stronger. Diverging in communication can underscore group differences and assert group identity.

When there is contact, if the communication is not of sufficient quality and depth, it may not disconfirm existing stereotypes of out-group
members (Rose, 1992). In other words, the quality of communication needs to be interpersonal rather than intergroup so that interlocutors can get to know each other as individuals, rather than social or cultural-level categories (Gudykunst, 1995).

Groups that have little history of face-to-face contact will be more likely to misread each other’s cultural communication style (Kochman, 1981) or contextualization cues—paralingual markers such as volume, speech rate, or intonation (Gumperz, 1982). For example, some Whites perceive African Americans to have the communicative traits of being argumentative, aggressive, defiant, and hostile, while some African Americans see Whites as being evasive, boastful, aggressive, and arrogant (Rich, 1974, cited in Pennington, 1979). The resulting “difficult dialogues” (Houston, 1994) and communication failures arising from misreadings of the Other increases levels of anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1995), decreases levels of communication satisfaction (Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994), and reinforces existing stereotypes (Chick, 1990). It is not surprising that avoidance is the most frequently used strategy among Whites and African Americans (Martin et al., 1994). The orientation toward separation may be distinguished in the following ways: (a) nonassertive (e.g., avoidance), (b) assertive (e.g., expressing the self), or (c) aggressive (e.g., criticizing assimilation or accommodation) (Orbe, 1998).

Many have theorized about the continuing significance of race in North America (Frankenberg, 1993; West, 1994). At the same time, the idea of race as a scientific category has largely been debunked (Miles, 1989; Sanjek, 1994). Still, race continues to have social significance as part of our “racial common sense.” In this article, race will be understood as a social construction, roughly equivalent to the notion of ethnicity. While there have been historic changes in North America over the past 40 years, racism in different forms still persists. Even middle-class African Americans report on the commonplace occurrence of subtle forms of racism in public places, such as not receiving service in stores and restaurants, receiving excessive surveillance while shopping, or being treated less well than Whites during service encounters (Buttny & Williams, in press; Cose, 1993; Feagin, 1991).

Whites also tell of racial incidents that are largely critical of people of color. van Dijk (1987, 1992) found that Whites often tell racial narratives structured around a complication that is not resolved by the end of the story, suggesting continuing problems with minorities. While much of this discourse on racial incidents is critical of Black people, it is not unequivocally so. Often the discourse is structured as reasonable, it uses rationale argument, bases claims on first- or second-hand experience, and is qualified in various ways (Buttny, 1997; Dixon, Reicher, & Foster, 1997; Wetherel & Potter, 1992; Verkuytem, Jong & Masson, 1995). Billig and colleagues (1988) characterize these conflicting
discourses as an ideological dilemma, with Whites being critical of minorities on one hand, but not wanting to appear prejudiced on the other.

In general, there seems to be this asymmetry of perception; African Americans report on the continuing problems of racism, while Whites deny seeing it or claim that it is exaggerated (Essed, 1991; Pinder-hughes, 1989). Blauner (1989) explains this asymmetry of perception by examining how each group takes racism: Whites conceive of racism as individual prejudice or discrimination, while African Americans see it not only as individual, but as the way institutions are structured to privilege Whites.

Racial formation theory attempts to capture both the processes whereby “racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p.55). “Processes of ‘racial signification’ are inherently discursive. . . . Inevitably, many interpretations of race, many racial discourses, exist at any given time” (Winant, 1994, p.24). The present investigation attempts to empirically develop this notion of the discursive features of race by looking at college students’ conversations about interracial matters.

DATA AND ANALYTIC METHOD

Participants in this study watched the hour-long documentary, Racism 101 (Lennon & Bagwell, 1988), at home, with at least one other person. Immediately after viewing the video, participants discussed it (the researcher was not present). These discussions were audiotaped. The recordings provide the data for the discursive conversation analysis.

The documentary, Racism 101, investigates the state of race relations and racism on North American university campuses and is organized around the theme of continuing problems of interracial contact on campus. This documentary was selected as a stimulus material because it is provocative yet balanced. When using it in other contexts, Racism 101 seems to generate conversations about difficult questions of interracial relations. The documentary includes many voices and presents multiple discursive positions on race matters. It addresses the headline-grabbing incidents of racial epithets (e.g., racist jokes on a campus radio station) and violence (racially motivated fist fights), as well as the mundane, everyday, racial realities (e.g., separate Greek organizations, the experience of being an African American on a predominately White campus).

After viewing the videotape at home, participants were requested via written instructions to discuss their reactions to it in their own words. The instructions read, “After the video, please discuss on the audiotape your opinions about the quality and quantity of interracial communication on college campuses, such as U. For example,
problems with interracial friendships, voluntary segregation, and so on.” The participants were given a tape recorder and asked to record their discussions.

Participants were solicited from two undergraduate courses on a voluntary basis. Volunteers were asked to contact others—people outside of the class (e.g., roommates, friends) whom they considered to be members of their own cultural group—to watch and discuss the documentary. The group size ranged from 2 to 5 participants. A total of 38 students participated in the study: 20 African American, 12 White, and 6 Latino students. The group composition was African-American groups, Whites, Latino, and groups of African Americans and Latinos. Within-group formations were selected so that it would be easier for participants to discuss potentially sensitive issues. These post-viewing discussions ranged in length from 15 minutes to over an hour, with a median length of approximately 30 minutes. The audiotapes were transcribed using a simplified Jefferson format (see Appendix for transcription conventions).

Given the interest in the participants’ discursive constructions of racial boundaries, separateness, and difference, we draw on the analytic approaches of racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 1994), discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), and social accountability (Buttny, 1993). The interest is in how participants talk about race matters and thereby discursively construct interracial realities through their accounts. Accounts provide a useful resource for discursive analysis because they involve participants’ criticisms, justifications, or explanations for racial boundaries and interracial contact. Accounts also display participants’ positioning: their understanding, evaluation, or alignment with other interlocutors. In addition to participants’ accounts and discursive positions, we are also interested in how participants engage in this talk. What conversational practices are used to talk about race matters? The research questions are: What are students’ discursive constructions of separateness, boundaries, and difference? How do Whites and African Americans account for these constructions?

Transcripts of conversations about boundaries, self-segregation, or differences were exerted for analysis. The audiotapes were repeatedly listened to and the transcripts were read numerous times. This method of discursive conversation analysis involves a tacking back and forth between the transcripts, audiotapes, and claims in order to check, refine, and better formulate analytic claims. From these observations, claims were formulated about what the participants are doing; in particular, how participants account and position themselves on race matters.

This is the third study from this collection of materials. The first examines the use of reported speech in discursively constructing a portrait of interracial contact (Buttny, 1997); the second looks at the
African-American discourse of respect (Buttny & Williams, in press). The present investigation examines the discursive constructions of racial boundaries, separateness, and difference on campus by examining previously unanalyzed excerpts from the tapes and transcripts.

RESULTS

When notions of racial boundaries or separateness enter students’ conversations, they are generally not mentioned in a neutral way. Such divisions are evaluated as either problematical and deserving of some criticism, or as justified and readily explained. In this study, we examine how participants account for racial boundaries and how they discursively position themselves.

ACCOUNTS OF VOLUNTARY SEGREGATION

Throughout the transcripts, one finds mention of voluntary segregation among groups on campus. None of the participants explicitly disagreed with the fact of such separation, but they accounted for it in different ways and took different positions towards it. For instance, in the following transcript we see a student bemoaning voluntary segregation but her interlocutor justifying it.

Excerpt 1: Two African-American Students

A: you know I feel a lot of time I feel campuses and especially at U campus that we practice voluntary segregation
B: Yeah
A: Just think about when you’re sitting in the classroom Blacks will be sitting in one area Whites will be sitting in another area you know maybe on one side of the room and you don’t mingle you don’t interact with each other
B: Like that girl was saying before I don’t think that has a lot to do with race I think it just has to do with the whole different mentality that we have like I’m here I really don’t have much in common with the White people here=I mean I have some and I talk- but as far as really like music and just general interest (it’s all) different.
A: [That’s true too that’s true too because outside of Black and White you do have Greeks that sit with each other
B: Yeah
A: Athletes who sit with each other but it is voluntary segregation

A’s assertion of voluntary segregation on campus, and her observation of it reflected in seating patterns in classrooms can be heard as criticizing such separateness. The terms A uses in describing class seating implicates her critical evaluation, “...you don’t mingle you don’t interact
with each other.” The criticism arises from the noticeable absence of what is expected from the membership category of fellow students, such as “mingling” and “interacting.” The very mention of these seating patterns can be heard as both an example and a criticism.

B takes A’s utterance, not as a mere description or detached social observation but as a criticism of campus racial relations. This recognition is displayed in B’s account. B disagrees with the racial aspects of A’s criticism, where “racial” involves racist intent. B questions if the separation is a matter of “race,” or rather due to a “different mentality,” not having “much in common with the White people here.” B begins her response by invoking what “that girl” from the documentary had just said.² B’s summary reported speech is used within her account to justify voluntary segregation, due to differences. The social distance is not due to racism, but a result of cultural difference. These interactional patterns are normative because people sit by and talk to those with whom they have more in common.

A seems to find B’s account convincing, as she cites other groups (e.g., Greeks, athletes) who congregate and sit together. But A does reassert the label of “voluntary segregation,” which seems to carry for her some implicit criticism of current intergroup patterns.

White students also notice the group separateness on campus. In the following excerpt, we see a similar explanation to the previous excerpt: namely, that people “feel more comfortable” with those whom they have more “in common” with.

**Excerpt 2: Three White Students**

A: Do you think people are separating themselves by choice or the separation is more forced

B: Well first of all I think it’s by choice I mean I think people (.) feel more comfortable with people who they have a lot in common with ya know people ( ) cultural values ya know

what you call separation or segregation I mean I think a lot of it’s by choice when it comes to the social (arena) and there’s nothing wrong with that. I don’t feel like all Black people are being prejudiced by choosing to hang around with other Black people (.) to a degree I think it might be forced to the degree that Black people come to the campus they’re such a small minority that it’s kind of intimidating and so they gravitate towards people who they have a common experience with

It is interesting how A formulates separation in his question as being “by choice” or “more forced.” Although he does not specify in what sense separation is “forced,” he may be drawing on an episode from the documentary in which an African American who joined a White fraternity tells of the criticisms he received from other African Americans, such as “you are forgetting a part of who you are,” becoming “an oreo” (Racism 101 transcript, pp. 21-22).
B’s answer offers the familiar commonality explanation for separateness. Furthermore, he challenges the implicit criticism that African Americans are “prejudiced” for exclusively socializing with other African Americans. B picks up A’s term, “forced,” but uses it in a different, broader context—as African Americans being a numerical minority on a predominately White campus, and turning to others with “a common experience.” So “forced,” in this sense, does not convey the acrimony suggested by A’s prior usage.

B’s sensitivity to word choice is also reflected in his hesitancy to adopt A’s description, “what you call separation or segregation” (see arrow). The vocabulary used to describe a state of affairs can color how we evaluate it. Student B does not offer another term but simply uses “it.”

**ASCRIBING RESPONSIBILITY FOR SEPARATENESS**

In the first two excerpts, racial separateness is posed as a problematic condition by the initial speaker and the interlocutor responds by justifying separation with an account of association based on commonalities. In the following excerpt, we see the discursive construction of voluntary segregation taken in a different direction. These White students perceive voluntary segregation as originating from the African-American community and being problematic.

**Excerpt 3: Two White Students**

A: Yeah ironically enough I think it’s funny? like one of the students on TV said- on the video said something about how (.) how- about this segregation thing how that you know he said I’ll probably get heck for sayin’ this or whatever but I think there’s some voluntary segregation on the part of the African-American community? I think that’s true? not necessarily that I blame them =

B: Right

A: = but I definitely think that’s true an:::d: in the beginning of the video it was almost like UMass had these racial incidents therefore we should increase the minority population which I don’t know necessarily in my experience and with talking with other people increasing the minority population would just increase the number of people who would segregate themselves

B: Right

Here we see A introducing the topic of voluntary segregation by reporting the speech of a White student from the documentary who attributed it to the African-American community. It is a common conversational practice to broach a delicate topic by citing what another has said, thereby giving oneself the option to align or not with the quoted
position. A agrees with this reported speech from the documentary but qualifies it as not a “blame.”

A initiates her turn by framing her ascription of voluntary segregation as “ironically enough I think it’s funny?” While what is “funny” here is not spelled out, the implication seems to be that it is ironic that African Americans would self-segregate given the historical legacy of imposed segregation. A may not “blame” African Americans for segregating themselves, but she does take it as problematic. Having asserted the existence of voluntary segregation, she goes on to formulate a claim from “the beginning of the video” that more recruitment of minorities is needed. A rebuts this by arguing that it would only lead to more unwanted segregation.

It is interesting how A remembers the documentary. In reviewing the documentary transcript, the segment which contains the call for increased African-American enrollment came in response to racist jokes on the student radio station at the University of Michigan (Racism 101 transcript, pp. 6-7). Presumably a larger critical mass would improve conditions for minority students on campus. Our aim here is not to portray A as a “judgmental dope” (Garfinkel, 1967) but to show how participants can use the documentary to form accounts for their own positions.

In the following excerpt, we see an African-American student formulate a perception held by Whites on voluntary segregation (arrow 1), and then challenges it and offers a counter-explanation and criticism (arrow 2).

Excerpt 4: Three African-American Students

A: it’s like the Black people are very aware of all the racial issues that go on and the White people just have this tendency to think that nothing’s wrong that everybody’s happy-go-lucky and

1◊ that we as Black people are separating ourselves from them,

2◊ but they don’t realize that they are the ones who because of their ignorance basically that they are separating themselves from us.

I’m not saying that every Black person necessarily wants to be friends with a White person because it’s not true.

A uses the rhetorical device of an appearance-reality distinction in her account: Racial realities appear fine to Whites, but they are actually problematic. Also, African Americans appear to be the source of segregation, but it is actually due to the Whites.

A’s ascription of “ignorance” (arrow 2) to Whites seems to be a central account in African-American discourse about Whites: “ignorance” in the sense of Whites’ myopia to racial problems on campus. This ascription of ignorance is consistent with the finding that Whites deny
seeing racism in their everyday experience, while Blacks encounter it regularly (Essed, 1991). Given that Whites generally take racism as individual prejudice or discrimination, from an African-American perspective, Whites’ failure to see institutional aspects of racism may be glossed as “ignorance” (Blauner, 1989).

DIFFERENCE AS BOUNDARY

In the transcripts examined thus far, participants have offered various generalizations or recurring patterns from their everyday experience to account for racial separateness. In the following case, we turn to a participant recounting a narrative of going to White fraternity parties. Narratives offer many particulars and concrete details of interracial events, as well as the narrator’s evaluation of them.

Excerpt 5: Three African-American Students

9 A: . . . so I guess it’s never going to change if you have that attitude
10 C: Do you think it’s because of what they do socially?
11 A: I mean that’s one reason because we don’t have like-
12 B: = Do you think it’s a matter of color or just a matter [of
13 A: [I don’t know
14 15 like
16 C: [I think it’s a matter of soc- I mean () my freshmen
17 and sophomore year I went to a lot of White fraternity parties up here and
18 had a ball:
19 B: I know I think White people know how to have more fun than Black
20 people we tend to just argue amongst each other
21 C: It was definitely different but it was never a problem of goin’ up in there
22 you know that’s because they don’t play the right type of music and =
23 B: Right
24 C: = everything else now we’re not into the same music I won’t be around
25 I mean I couldn’t see going out with you if you listening to rock

C questions A’s critical upshot statement by suggesting an account of social differences (line 10). C initially suggests this account to A, then comes back to assert it before A can venture in a different direction (lines 14-16). This, of course, is a familiar conversational strategy—ask a question about a topic you wish to discuss. C cuts her general assertion short and moves to tell a narrative about going to “a lot of White fraternity parties” and favorably assesses that experience as “had a ball” (lines 16-18). She continues by claiming that there was no problem of going to White fraternity parties but for the fact that “they don’t play the right type of music” to which B immediately concurs (lines 21-23).

In addition to the music problem, C adds “and everything else” (lines 22-24), an etceteras clause (Garfinkel, 1967) for all the other racial
difficulties. She articulates the upshot of these differences by switching footings (Goffman, 1981), and assuming the voice of addressing the White male from her past, “now we're not into the same music I won't be around I mean I couldn't see going out with you if you listening to rock” (lines 24-25). In this story, C’s reported speech of explaining to a White male why she would not go out with him can be heard as an explanation of a boundary, an explanation both to the White male and her current interlocutors.

Such sociocultural differences are mentioned at various points by African-American participants and are discursively used to warrant social distance. This mention of music signifies a readily identifiable popular culture difference.

IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

Throughout the transcripts, there seems to be competing discourses on identity, between a discourse of group identities and a discourse of personal identities. People can draw upon multiple identities in interacting with others. How do participants discursively construct these different identities? In the following excerpt, we see B offering a storied account for why she is not involved in Jewish organizations and peer groups, and instead taking a more individualistic approach.

Excerpt 6: Two White Students

11 B: . . . I mean the only thing I can kind of compare it to is being Jewish
12 but at U all the Jewish people pretty much stuck together and
13 integrated themselves a little bit I think and then there were stragglers
14 who pretty much did their own thing and didn’t worry about it
15 but there was ((fraternity name)) which was an obviously Jewish fraternity
16 and friends of mine would often say you’re Jewish but you don't hang out
17 with anyone who's Jewish and friends of mine who were Black
18 who didn’t necessarily go with- who we’re part of ALS and
19 part of all the Black oncampus organizations so they got a lot of the
20 same reactions from their friends like
21 why aren't you hanging out with all the Black people =
22 A: Um huh
23 B: =and stuff like that, and it’s sort of a weird feeling but I’ve never hung out with
24 a lot of Jewish people so why would I have done that when I went to college
25 ya know it was never anything I thought about is this person Jewish or Black
26 or whatever I just hang with someone if I like hanging out with ‘em
27 A: Um huh
28 B: But if someone comes up to me and says I’m White and proud to be White and
29 everyone should proud to be White I’m like who the hell is his freak get outta my
30 face ya know so if a Black person comes up and says that to me I’m Black =
31 A: [Hhhh
32 B: =I’m proud to be Black whatever I’m going to be like yeah whatever ya know
33 if a Black person comes up and hey let’s go get a beer or something
34 I’m like cool that’s fine ya know Hhhhh
35 it just turns me off when people are in your face about what they feel
B contrasts being identified with a group versus being individualistic, and also contrasts being Jewish and being African American. She tells of receiving questions from others about why she does not socialize with other Jews (lines 16-17) and also of her African-American friends receiving parallel kinds of questions (lines 17-21). B accounts for this lack of within-group association by mentioning that she never did it in the past, so why do it now; she does not consider a person’s group membership, but rather “I just hang with someone if I like hanging out with ‘em” (lines 23-26). B draws on a color-blind rhetoric to support her account of interpersonal relationships.

To illustrate her point, she imagines a hypothetical situation of two ethnically-identified people, one White and one Black, talking to her and expressing White and Black pride respectively, and her negative reported thought in response to each in turn (lines 28-32). By contrast, if an African American approaches her as an individual, she would be receptive to that (lines 33-34). As B says in her evaluation of this hypothetical scenario, “it just turns me off when people are in your face about what they feel” (line 35). In other words, she does not like ethnically-identified individuals who express nationalistic sentiments. Her account can be interpreted as reflective of a kind of White privilege (Frankenberg, 1993), meaning that as a White person, she has a greater degree of freedom in whether or not to make relevant her group membership.

B’s hypothetical encounter is interesting for what it leaves out. The membership categories of comparison are ethnically-identified and non-ethnically identified, and African American and White. She imagines responding to three of the four categories of persons but does not consider a non-ethnic White approaching her. Presumably, this case is too obvious; it is taken for granted that she would be receptive to such a person. According to her practical reasoning, what shows her color-blindness is her receptivity to a non-ethnic, African American and her dislike of an ethnically-identified White.

A different positioning on group identity is evident in the following excerpt. A accounts for his avowal that he is going to send his kids to “a predominately Black institution.” He recounts a dialogue from a movie and then compares it to his own background in terms of being an African American growing up in a White environment.

**Excerpt 7: Two African-Americans Students**

A: … I’m probably gonna send my kids to a predominately Black institution
B: So you’re planning on sending your kids to a predominately Black institution
A: For their undergraduate studies yeah
   ()
B: I don’t agree with that
A: Hhhh see I always think of that movie Holl- not Hollywood Shuffle, I'm Gonna Get You Sucker you know that dude that does the interview? I don't know if you remember that movie but there this one part where they interview the big black hair in the neighborhood and the guy: from the TV station interviews him and after the interview is over and the hero says something you know blah blah ya know what I mean brother? then he goes ((with cleansed media sounding voice)) ha ha actually I don't know what you mean my mother was a lawyer my father was a doctor[ all my friends =

B: [Okay I get it

A: =were White] hhhhh =

B: [I get it

A: =I went to Harvard you know

B: Shut up I get it stop teasing me (. okay now =

A: =I mean my life was like that my life was like that?

B: Right

A: I moved from a predominately Black neighborhood in New York City in the South Bronx what's considered the South Bronx now to S., VA nothing but White kids I came down wanting to place basketball and they was all about playing soccer it was a completely different mind-set for me I grew up in a completely White neighborhood and a predominately White environment all through my high school and up until I went to college.

In Racism 101, one of the African-American students talks about the psychological costs of attending a predominately White university and says that he will send his kids to a traditionally Black college. Although it is not specifically marked as such, this may be the backdrop for A's initial statement of sending his kids to a predominately Black institution. After B expresses disagreement, A attempts to justify his position by recounting a movie in which one of the characters is comically portrayed as "acting White" and lacking African-American cultural traits. This reported exchange from the movie echoes the cautionary tale of "forgetting who you are." The cost of social mobility may be losing your ethnic identity.

B takes the evaluative point of this recounting of the movie as "teasing" her, presumably for associating with Whites too much or not being "Black enough." A does not pursue this line but continues with his account by telling the story of moving from "a predominately Black neighborhood" to a "completely White neighborhood" and attending a White high school. As he evaluates it, "it was a completely different mind-set," to underscore the cultural differences. He gives the example of each area playing different kinds of sports, the implication being that basketball is an African-American identified game and soccer is White. Differences in popular culture, such as basketball versus soccer or listening to different music (as in the following excerpt), may not seem like major cultural boundaries, but they are readily identifiable by young adults. These popular cultural differences appear to be further taken as emblematic of more profound cultural differences.
DILEMMAS IN ACCOUNTING FOR BOUNDARIES

In the previous section, we saw participants offering accounts negotiating responsibility for the self-segregation and separateness on campus. Participants discursively positioned themselves in various ways by criticizing, justifying, or explaining such boundaries. Conflicting accounts are held, not only between groups (Whites and African Americans), but also within these groups. In this section, we learn that conflicting accounts are avowed by the same individuals. For example, some participants say that voluntary segregation is only natural, but that racial separation is problematic. These seemingly conflicting views reflect, not only the complex and contested character of these issues, but also the participants’ attempts at trying out and working through various discursive positions. As seen in the following excerpt, seemingly conflicting accounts are avowed by A.

Excerpt 8: Two African-American Students

A: if you see someone hanging around with all these White people you feel like oh they lost their identity =
B: Yeah
A: = they’re not Black enough and stuff like that I personally don’t hang around with White people except in my classes I mean- I guess I’m to the point which is bad I’m not making any efforts- I’m not bending over backwards to make strong relationships or bonds with White people and they’re not doing the same to me but I don’t feel that I’m prejudiced, I feel that I have more interaction with Whites than other Black people that I know I can’t explain it it’s just like I really never felt the need to establish those relationships although I say- I know a lot of White people and I consider them acquaintances but we don’t call each other up on the phone and stuff like that.

In this excerpt, A displays ambivalent feelings about race relations. On one hand, she reports her critical thoughts in the hypothetical situation of seeing an African American associating with Whites, “you feel like oh they lost their identity.” On the other hand, she notes that she has no White friends, only acquaintances, no one she would call up on the phone. A assesses her motivation as “bad” in the sense that “I’m not making any efforts- I’m not bending over backwards to make strong relationships or bonds with White people.” But, she explains that this lack of White friends is not due to prejudice; she has “more interaction with Whites than other Black people that I know.”

A discursively portrays her own interracial relationships as conflicted, while at the same time claiming some limited success in crossing racial boundaries. Her reported situation can be heard as a kind of dilemma (Billig et al., 1988), in that she reports being unable to form friendships with Whites even though she would like to, to a certain
degree, and even though she has more interracial contact than most. The dilemma seems to reflect a gap between an imagined ideal and her everyday reality. No resolution is offered for this interracial dilemma.

Other accounts reveal similar kinds of dilemmas: Participants would like more interracial contact but there is some barrier that prevents it. In the following excerpt, we see an account of the problem of crossing racial boundaries and a complaint reconsidered:

**Excerpt 9: Two White Students**

1. B: in some sense I’d like more integration on campus and
2. I’d like more equality but I get really intimidated and
3. I get really turned off: if I’m going to have ya know-
4. if integration and equality means I’m going to have to go to Black rallies
5. where Black people are arguing about how angry they are,
6. to me you know that’s not what I think of as integration
7. that’s not how I think of equality
8. but it’s hard for me to even judge because I don’t know
9. what they’ve been through, ya know I’m sitting here talking about it
10. but I- I have absolutely no idea what they’re going through

Continuing with the previously mentioned notion of accounting dilemmas, we see B expressing a desire for more “integration” and “equality” on campus, but not finding these at “Black rallies.” B avows a kind of disappointment in her complaint about attending a “Black rally.” She contrasts “integration and equality” with “Black rallies” and Black anger. It is interesting to note what B makes relevant in her characterization of the Black rally. Kochman’s (1981) description of cultural differences in conflict style and affect display could inform her account. Also, the expectation of achieving some interracial solidarity at a political rally, given the historical legacy of grievances, may be somewhat naive.

In Excerpt 8 and 9, the speakers’ accounts display a kind of dilemma in that they would like more meaningful interracial contact, but seem at a loss to know how to achieve it. Again, the gap between an imagined ideal and the real seems to work as a gloss for these accounts.

In many of the accounts, students complain of being unable to change, of being stuck in a larger pattern of intergroup distance. In the following excerpt, we see an account of this intergroup distance, with one interlocutor suggesting a differing account for it.

**Excerpt 10: Three African-American Students**

1. A: It’s like a rule when you come here you hang out with Black people
2. White people hang out with White people and there’s no exceptions
3. to the rule you know so I guess I fit into that little circle because
4. I’m following right along with everybody else not that I don’t want to
5. but like everything I do everywhere I go:: is predominately Black people
A’s initial account may be heard as betraying a certain ambivalence toward the current state of racial separateness. Her description implicates a reflexive self-criticism: Having formulated a “rule” of racial separation, she describes her own actions, “I guess I fit into that little circle because I’m following right along with everybody else.” A’s word choice of “fit into that little circle” and “following right along with everybody else” are clearly critical ways of accounting for her actions, a kind of self-deprecatory admission of group conformity. She complains of the problems of group association that result in the absence of social contact with Whites. In her complaint, A uses extreme-case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) to make her case: The use of “everything” and “everywhere” and the repetition of “never” all work towards portraying the problematic circumstances on campus.

In response to A’s problematic description, C suggests that this separateness is due to social differences. A seems to readily concur with this, as she formulates the explanation of not having “the same interests.” A moment ago, A had offered an explanation of conformity, which is clearly more critical than this different-interests account. Instead of charging A with inconsistency or changing her mind, we need to consider the communicative situation. When discussing such contested issues as race relations, participants try out different accounts to see what works and what stands up to scrutiny from interlocutors. Indeed, over such complex issues, some participants display ambivalent feelings and offer competing accounts. Examining these accounts as they arise in conversation—as responses to interlocutors—makes their conflicting character more understandable.

**DISCUSSION**

At the end of the day, what have we learned about the discourses of racial boundaries, separation, and difference? First of all, none of the student participants disagreed with the existence of racial boundaries or voluntary segregation, although not everyone actually used these labels. There were a range of accounts and discursive positions. Some explicitly criticized voluntary segregation, while others implicitly took such separation as problematic, evidenced by the way they characterized the phenomena (e.g., “you don’t mingle you don’t interact,” Excerpt 1). Some participants disagreed with their interlocutor’s
criticism and offered justifications to normalize self-segregation. A discourse of cultural difference—in music, sports, or general interests—was drawn upon to account for voluntary segregation. Others justified separation, not by appeal to difference, but to commonalities, citing the norm that people socialize with those who they have more in common. Broadly speaking, these divergent accounts can be heard as criticizing or ascribing responsibility for racial separation, or as defending it as normative.

Some accounts involved discourses of social identity. This was most apparent in those African-American accounts that argued the need for boundaries so as not to lose ethnic identity (Giles & Coupland, 1992; also cf. Cerulo, 1997). Other accounts suggested a sense of dilemma in African-American students wanting more meaningful contact with Whites, while expressing concern over maintaining ethnic identity or receiving criticism from other African Americans (Excerpts 7, 8). Social identity issues were the most noticeable difference between African-American and White accounts. Identity was virtually not an issue for Whites, who have “the privilege” (Frankenberg, 1993) of being the dominant group. An exception was a Jewish student who told of how she, as a Jew, received questions from others for why she did not associate more with her own group (Excerpt 9). Her account involved a discourse of personal identity in contrast to group identity. In this case, and in others, White students drew from a so-called “color-blind rhetoric” to bolster their avowals of individuality.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that some participants hold seemingly conflicting accounts; they are ambivalent about self-segregation. This is consistent with the previously mentioned Columbia University study. Students voice conflicting accounts, reflecting the multiple discourses on race (Omi & Winant, 1994; Winant, 1994). Some students spoke of separation as problematic, but when challenged by interlocutors, claimed that it was understandable. Or, some participants voiced the desire to have more interracial contact, while at the same time, they seemed unable to know how to achieve it. These conflicting accounts fit Billing and colleagues’ (1988) notion of “ideological dilemmas,” the notion that various and even opposing accounts can be avowed by participants to make sense of their circumstances. Recall in Excerpt 10, an African-American student criticizes her own seeming conformity in racial separation and then, in response to her interlocutor’s suggestion, offers the justificatory account for such separation as being due to different interests from Whites. This dilemma, articulated through participants’ conflicting accounts, adds needed contextual understanding to the psychological, anxiety/uncertainty management explanation (Gudykunst, 1995) for interracial avoidance.

The project here has been to approach the discursive constructions of boundaries from the bottom up (participants’ talk), rather than from...
the top down (macro-level categories of race, class, history). Such macro-level approaches render talk into epiphenomena of causal structures, or at best, treat dialogue as ideology. But, by looking at dialogues about race, we can examine the discursive practices participants engage in when making sense of and evaluating interracial relations. Participants’ discourse is much more varied, nuanced, and contextual than suggested by traditional macro-level approaches (Singelis, 1996). The intergroup relations thesis of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Tzeng et al., 1986) is not born out in these transcripts. The picture is more complicated: While in-group favoritism and out-group hostility persists, some participants are critical of their own group or are understanding of out-group positions, while others are ambivalent and avow conflicting views.

The notion of ideology comes closer to the present project, to the extent that ideology can be taken as a preexisting discourse which participants formulate in their own terms, try out, assess, and take positions on. The discursive social accountability model used here takes students as engaged in the normative enterprise of accounting for and making judgments about contested matters of race (Buttny, 1993; Edwards & Potter, 1992). These accounts are not simply a verbalization of participants’ cognitive contents, for example, attitudes (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) but rather an engagement in a discourse in an attempt to articulate, explore, or criticize different positions on race. By offering accounts, participants are attempting to make more explicit their understandings, evaluations, and positions on these matters, which in turn allows interlocutors to align or diverge with the emerging discursive constructions.

Documentaries, film, and other mass-media productions would seem to be outlets for raising issues of race relations and racism, and opportunities to make viewers more empathetic about the different groups’ experiences. As we have seen, viewers can take oppositional positions or resist the dominant reading of the documentary. When participants’ positions get examined in the postviewing discussions with peers, having to account for a racial position moves one to formulate reasons, stories, and other discursive means to flesh out his or her emerging views. The many conflicting accounts suggest that students’ racial thinking is still fluid and that they are trying out different discourses from a variety of sources.

How participants use the documentary in their accounts could be a study in itself. Of the dialogues excerpted here, there are three points in which Racism 101 is explicitly referenced, though all of the excerpts discuss issues that were shown in the documentary. Looking at the three explicit references (Excerpts 1, 3), participants report what someone said in the documentary and then agree or disagree with it and
elaborate. Other participants reported dialogue from a popular movie (Excerpt 7), from their own past experiences (Excerpts 5, 6), or constructed hypothetical dialogue (Excerpt 6). Reporting on another's speech allows the reporting speaker to raise a sensitive topic without having to embrace it as one's own view. Also, reported speech opens up a slot for the reporting speaker to evaluate what was said (Buttny, 1997).

There are limitations to using volunteers for this study because those most interested in the topic are most likely to volunteer. Another limitation is that participants' discussions followed their watching Racism 101 and these discussions occurred with a tape-recorder running. However, it is extremely difficult to find naturally occurring discussions about race matters to record. Most prior discourse analyses of race employ an interview format. Given these limitations, the procedures used in the present study seemed successful in getting discussions going in the participants' own terms, without the immediate presence of the researcher.

Many have observed how North Americans like quick solutions to problems, but over contested matters of race we do not seem able to achieve consensus. As a result, we need to teach respect for differences (Scott, 1992) and also to see current tensions in a broader historical context. As one reviewer (Marwell, 1988) of Racism 101 pointed out, improved institutional changes on university campuses provide the conditions for conflict: African-American students are more middle-class than ever before, they are more of a critical mass on campus, and they are more willing to express grievances and demands.

To conclude with a note on the applied significance arising from this study, given those students who expressed desire to cross racial boundaries but felt unsuccessful in doing so, university communities should continue to seek out more venues and student organizations for promoting such contact and communication. While increased interracial contact is no panacea, it does provide an opportunity to hear each other's accounts. This is especially important for Whites, because they generally know less about African-American discursive positions and culture than vice versa. It is also important for African Americans, particularly to the extent that they identify as a muted group (Orbe, 1998). Telling Whites about their racial positioning can be an empowering discursive act. Given the legacy of racism in America, such conversations should be part of one's higher education.
APPENDIX

This transcription system is a simplified version adopted from the Gail Jefferson system (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, pp.ix-xvi).

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[Colon(s):] Extended or stretched sound, syllable, or word.
[Underlining:] Word said with increased emphasis.
[Micropause:] Brief untimed pause.
[Timed pause:] Silences within or between turns.
[Double parentheses:] Scenic details.
[Single parentheses:] Transcriptionist doubt.
[.] Period: Falling vocal pitch.
[?] Question mark: Rising vocal pitch.
[,] Comma: Continuing intonation with slight downward contour.
=[Equal signs:] Latching of contiguous utterances.
[Brackets:] Speech overlap.
[-] Hyphens: Abrupt cut off.
[hhh] H’s: Audible outbreaths, possibly laughter.

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NOTES


2. The documentary segment A refers to is the following: “I don’t think that Blacks on this campus separate themselves from Whites—exclude Whites from any parties because they’re White. They may exclude them because they’re different, because they have different values, or because they are, you know, just basically different” (Racism 101 transcript, p. 22).

3. The original documentary segment is: “And I think, and I might get raked over the coals for this by some people—but I don’t know how much of the minority community wishes to expand their vision to include Whites. And that’s pretty disturbing” (Racism 101 transcript, p. 19).

4. The portion from the documentary A may be referencing is: “It would be wrong for me to send my children to White institutions especially for their undergraduate experience. I think I’ve seen enough, as a Black student at a White institution, both undergraduate and in law school, to realize that there are too many negative trade-offs. It’s supposed to be a building experience. And I think I’ll send my kids to a Black school so they would experience that reinforcement and that, that self-building,” (Racism 101 transcript, p. 23).

5. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer’s suggestion that the conflict between “the ideal” and “the real” is a central dilemma in these accounts.

REFERENCES


