

Race and Discipline at a Racially Mixed High School: Status, Capital, and the Practice of
Organizational Routines¹

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² This article is adapted from a chapter in Lewis and Diamond (2015). Several passages and evidence that appear in that book are duplicated here.

Abstract

In this article, we use research from a diverse suburban high school to illustrate how racial inequality becomes embedded in school disciplinary routines and shapes students' disciplinary experiences. Focusing primarily on the experiences black and white students in Riverview High School,¹ we build theory about the relationship between race, school discipline and racial disproportionality. Drawing on organizational theory, contemporary race theory, and status construction theory, we argue that school adults are influenced by broader cultural narratives that associate blackness with criminality and whiteness with innocence. These beliefs shape how students' behavior is treated, leading to racial differences in students' experiences.

“All kids do something wrong. Why do the blacks have to be the ones that always have to be disciplined and the white kids are supposed to be understood?”

Ms. McDaniels (senior administrator, Riverview High School)

Ms. McDaniels, a long-time teacher and administrator at racially diverse Riverview High School, observes that all kids make mistakes. However, she argues that black students’ transgressions are often perceived as necessitating punishment, while similar actions by white students are met with understanding. At the core of her statement is the belief that discipline practices at Riverview, the school where she has worked for decades, are racially unequal.

Racial disproportionality in school discipline is a problem nationally and in metropolitan school districts particularly. Over the last three decades, research in U.S. schools demonstrates racial disproportionality in school discipline (Rios, 2017, Wun, 2016; Shedd, 2015; Morris, 2016; Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Ferguson, 2000; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Morris, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011; Wu et al., 1982). Black students in particular are punished more often and more vigorously than white students in the same schools (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010, Ferguson, 2001), and these differences cannot be accounted for by differences in social class or student behavior (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010; Irby 2014).

In this article, we draw on 171 interviews with Riverview students, parents, teachers, and administrators to illustrate how racial inequality becomes embedded in organizational routines. More specifically, we build theory regarding how racial disproportionality in discipline happens, why some groups of students are selected to be disciplined more often than others, and why students from different racial groups experience different disciplinary outcomes. In doing this, we take up the challenge presented in previous scholarship to “develop theory about the

conscious and unconscious processes that result in differential treatment of some racial and ethnic groups” (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 64).

Drawing on research on race (Smedley & Smedley, 2005) and unconscious bias (Quillian, 2006; Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, et al. 2016), we argue that in carrying out the school’s disciplinary routines, school adults are influenced by broader anti-black cultural narratives that associate blackness with criminality and whiteness with innocence (Kendi, 2016; Dumas, 2015; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Shedd, 2014; Morris, 2015). These beliefs about black and white people shape how students’ behavior is perceived and responded to and contribute to racial differences in students’ experiences. As Ms. McDaniels’s comments above suggest, how students’ behaviors are perceived at the micro-level shapes how discipline is practiced in schools.

Background

Much of the research about race and school discipline emphasizes racial disproportionality in school suspension and expulsion rates (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2012; Losen, 2015; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Reyes, 2006; Skiba et al., 2000; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Skiba et al., 2006; Wu et al., 1982). For instance, recent data shows that black students are much more likely to be suspended and expelled from school than their white peers (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Schott Foundation, 2015). In fact, during the 2009-2010 school year, 1 in 6 (17%) African American students were suspended from school as compared to 1 in 20 (5%) for white students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p. 12).

These racial patterns begin in pre-school and continue throughout students’ educational trajectories (Losen, Hodson, Keith, et al., 2015; Losen, 2015). This disproportionality is not the

result of black students' behavior. Instead, as Skiba and colleagues put it, "African-American students are ... more frequently exposed to harsher disciplinary strategies ... and are less likely than other students to receive mild disciplinary alternatives" (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 319). These practices contribute to stark patterns of racial disproportionality. Similar to national data, black students at Riverview High School are suspended at much higher rates than their overall representation in the school. In 2003-2004 (the year we began our research), black students made up 35% of the students in the high school but 70% of those receiving in school suspension and 60% those suspended outside of school.

While suspensions and expulsions patterns are troubling, and are the focus of much of the scholarly research and public discussion, they are not the primary focus of this article. We instead focus on these daily interactional dynamics – all the formal and informal rules and practices regulating movement through school buildings, and the racial patterns associated with them. This includes both the explicit rules encoded in official policy and all the "disciplinary moments" that transpire over the course of a school year. The fact is, most students are never suspended or expelled from school. However, all students have daily interactions with school staff in which their behavior is subject to regulation or they observe their peers being regulated. We focus on these interactions for three main reasons. First, these moments communicate to all who is and is not a full member of the school community and highlight important things about the sociocultural context and the manifestations of anti-blackness (Morris, 2016; Shedd, 2015; Dumas, 2013, Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Carter, 2003, 2012; Yosso, 2005; Noguera, 1995). Second, differences in suspension and expulsion rates originate from large differences in how minor, often subjective, offenses are treated by teachers and administrators (Skiba et al., 2011).

Therefore, understanding these less dramatic disciplinary moments is vital to understanding broader patterns.

Third, focusing on how students' actions and behaviors are regulated (rather than simply on suspensions and expulsions) allows us to more carefully unpack how race and gender intersect and diverge in the practice of school discipline (Wun, 2014; Morris, 2016). Boys are much more likely to be suspended than girls. However, black girls' experiences with school discipline are often distinct from those of other students in contemporary landscape of school and community. Morris (2016) for example, demonstrates how schools and the criminal justice system target Black girls throughout their educational trajectories in distinctive ways. Likewise, Wun (2014, 2016) shows that when we place black girls at the center of the analysis we can see the oppressive nature of school discipline and the implications of pervasive anti-blackness for young Black girls. This highlights the need to bring an intersectional lens to the analysis of discipline (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 2016).

Why Study Suburban Schools Like Riverview?

Traditionally, a sharp distinction has been drawn between urban and suburban contexts. While often thought of as a geographic distinction, urban and suburban symbolize racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics rather than simply place and space. Parliament's (1975) classic funk track "Chocolate City" suggests that cities are black and "vanilla" suburbs are white – exemplifying that the urban/suburban divide is as much a symbolic boundary as a physical one (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007). Central to conception of the urban education are the demographics of the people who attend the schools, perceptions of those people's characteristics, and the contexts in which they live (Milner, 2012).²

During the past thirty plus years, we have seen major demographic shifts in metropolitan areas including suburbs (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). In fact, suburbs are the most rapidly changing areas in the United States (U.S.) in terms of population demographics (Frankenberg, Ayscue, & Taylor, 2016; Lewis-McCoy, 2018). Currently, suburban students are the largest proportion of students in the United States (compared to urban, rural and small town students) and 40% of suburban students are Asian, Black, Latinx, or Native American and more than half of Latinos and almost half of African Americans in large metropolitan now attend suburban schools (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2008).

Recent scholarship examines the implications of race and class in suburban districts (Possey-Maddox, 2016; Possey-Maddox, forthcoming; Lewis & Diamond, 2015, Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Diem, Welton, Frankenberg, et al. 2016) and highlights how suburbs are currently grappling with issues of race, class, language, and student outcomes that used to be primarily associated with city districts (Milner, 2012). Likewise, patterns of residential mobility in many metropolitan areas have led to former city residents moving to suburbs while increasing gentrification in cities (with middle and upper income whites moving into urban contexts) underscores that important overlap exists across city/suburban boundaries.

With the boundaries between cities and suburbs becoming increasingly permeable and fluid, several recent books have examined these metropolitan changes focusing on suburban schools (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Frankenberg & Orfield 2012) and grappling with the very definition of race and geography (Hunter & Robinson 2018). There is also an increasing recognition that racial inequality in suburban schools is important. There are currently several school district research/practice partnerships across the US focused on issues of race and school outcomes.³ Moreover, the Starz television network has a 10-episode

documentary series entitles “America to Me” on Oak Park River Forrest High School, a racially diverse suburban school, focused on the role of race and education in that context.⁴ In sum, there is significant interest in race and education in the suburbs.

Sociologists and education scholars have also sought to discuss types of urban and suburban districts generally related to demographic and community characteristics (Lewis-McCoy, 2017; Frankenberg, Ayscue, & Taylor, 2016). Likewise, Milner (2012) identifies three types of urban districts – urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic. Urban intensive districts are in large cities like New York and Los Angeles and characterized by their size and population density. Urban emergent districts (e.g. Columbus, OH) are large but have fewer than one million residents and less population density. Urban characteristic districts “are not located in big cities but may be beginning to experience increases in challenges that are sometimes associated with urban contexts” (Milner, 2012: 560). We believe that Riverview, while traditionally considered suburban, fits what Milner’s refers to as urban characteristic. It is a racially and economically diverse district where issues of race and class disparities in educational outcomes are a central focus. It also has other “urban” characteristics such as higher population density than stereotypical suburbs (though less than most large cities) and its own relatively robust downtown area. We argue that studying suburbs like Riverview is important to our understanding of the dynamics that shape metropolitan areas, our theorization of race and social class inequality, and our understanding of urban education.

School Discipline as an Organizational Routine

Schools (and all organizations) partly function through the operation of organizational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). These routines include the collective daily practices that

people engage in to get things done. We can think about the typical morning ritual at a school, the changes of class on the hour, or teacher faculty meetings as examples of organizational routines. Discipline practices like teacher referrals are also organizational routines. Recent work has identified two key “aspects” of these routines – the *ostensive aspect* or the ideal of the routine and the *performative aspect* or the routine as practiced (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Sherer, 2007). As Feldman and Pentland (2003, p. 101) put it, “The ostensive aspect is the...abstract, generalized idea of a routine” or the narrative in the organization about how things *should* be done.” They continue, “The performative aspect of the routine consists of specific actions, by specific people, in specific places and times.” It consists of how the routine is *actually* performed in everyday practice. The performative aspect of a routine may be highly aligned with the implicit intentions of the ostensive aspect, or it may diverge dramatically. Attending to the distinction between these two aspects is critical because,

“without making this distinction, the parts – either the ostensive or the performative – can be mistaken for the whole. The most common mistake is to take the ostensive for the performative, or to mistake the summary of the way tasks [should be] performed for the ways the tasks are *actually* performed” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 103; emphasis added).

As scholars of organizational routines point out, one should *not* assume that the ostensive and performative aspects are identical (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). For instance, Feldman and Pentland (2003) use the example of the hiring routine to illustrate this distinction. Hiring is usually broken down into three related activities – attracting candidates, screening applicants, and hiring the most qualified candidate. However, the performance of the hiring routine is much more complicated. An informative study by Pager, Western, and Bonikowski (2009) sent black,

Latino, and white field testers to interview for jobs with the same credentials. Whites were more likely to be called back for a second interview than blacks and Latina/os, even when whites reported felony records and blacks reported clean records. In this case, it is critical to distinguish between the ideal of the routine and how it is actually practiced.

Race, Status, and School Disciplinary Routines

Just as with the hiring process, school discipline routines operate on both the ostensive and performative levels. While all school community members we spoke to aspired to enact discipline fairly, almost everyone acknowledged that race influenced these processes. As one teacher put it, “So, I would not say that [students] are all treated equally. But I do think, for most of us, we try to treat them the same. And I think for some of us, we have good intentions.” He then paused and finished his thought, “But you know what they say about the road [to hell]...it’s paved with good intentions.” The question is, why?

While discipline routines are stated in race-neutral terms, their practice can deviate from the ideal. This is because of the way race works symbolically (the meaning and values people attach to members of different racial groups) and structurally (affecting who has access to certain kinds of resources), when real people interact in specific contexts. The key here is understanding how everyday interpersonal interactions are racially inflected (Lewis, 2003). Race is one of the few primary categories that are cognitively processed “quickly and automatically without the need for conscious thought” (Ridgeway, 2011, p. 40). This processing makes a wide range of cultural beliefs or racial stereotypes an implicit part of social interactions. Racial categories emerged as “folk theories” between the 16th and 18th centuries and became codified and standardized in the early 18th century as a way for Europeans to justify slavery, genocide, and

colonialism (Zuberi, 2003; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). A wide range of racial narratives and stereotypes developed over time and became widely shared cultural beliefs, part of our collective common sense (Ridgeway & Erikson, 2000). These cultural beliefs are sustained and widely held because of their relationship to racial structures and hierarchies. As Cecelia Ridgeway (2011, p. 12) argues, the power and taken-for-grantedness of cultural beliefs depends on our collective daily experience with positional inequalities like substantive racial hierarchies, which provide the “evidence” and justification for such cultural beliefs or stereotypes. These include the racial common sense that suggests that African Americans are inherently criminal (Rios, 2011; Eberhardt, 2005; Graham & Lowery, 2004; Gyimah-Brempong & Price, 2006; Russell, 1998). Recent work in sociology and social psychology demonstrates how these racial narratives can shape how key adults understand and respond to black youth (Eberhardt, 2005; Ferguson, 2000; Goff et al., 2014).

School Discipline as a Process

We frame discipline as an organizational routine rather than as discrete moments of rule breaking and punishment. We see discipline as a process that is influenced by school policy and by the various people involved in carrying out discipline routines (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, parents) (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010, p. 63). This process includes at least three components – selection for discipline, moving through the discipline process, and enforcement of consequences (Piquero, 2008; Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). Racial differences in disciplinary experiences can emerge at any moment during the process, from *differential selection* (institutional practices that might lead minorities to get picked out for wrongdoing more often despite episodes of misbehavior similar to those of white students) to

differential processing (institutional practices that might lead minorities, once picked out for wrongdoing, to get different sanctions despite transgressions similar to those committed by white students) (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010; Piquero, 2008; Skiba et al., 2011). In what follows, we argue that race, gender, and class can shape selection, by signaling guilt or innocence, and processing, by shaping how students' and parents' resources of various capital are valued in the discipline process. As we will show, widely available cultural beliefs are a part of daily life in schools and play out within disciplinary routines. Respondents we spoke to consistently reported that black students' behavior was more closely scrutinized than the behavior of their white counterparts. As a result, when black students did break the rules, their behavior was often interpreted differently. As one white student put it, "Because when people look at me they probably don't see me as any kind of threat. They don't have as many stereotypes about me as if they were to meet a black person or a Hispanic person" or as another 16-year-old junior explained, "I think, as a white student, I get away with a lot more. I'm not a target of racial profiling"—white students most often receive the benefit of the doubt. In this way, discipline was "racialized" not only in terms of the often-discussed pattern of treating black youth as inherently suspect, but also in terms of a pattern of treating students as inherently innocent.

Black students were also treated differently than students once they were cited for disciplinary infractions. As we will show, race shaped students' (and parents') access to valued resources (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) in ways that led white students to receive better treatment. Thus, black students were more likely to be sanctioned for bad behavior *and* to receive more punitive sanctions when they did receive them. Of course, while race mattered, it did not function in isolation. Instead, as we will discuss further below, there was an

intermingling of race, class, gender, and cultural style that “colored” students’ interactions with school officials.

Setting and Methods

The setting for this research is Riverview High School, a suburban high school that borders a large city. While Riverview is located in a suburban context, we believe it is an important context to understand for those interested in urban education. First, Riverview is, relative to most communities in the metro area, quite diverse. The student body of over 3,000 is primarily black and white with a significant minority of Latino students. Just over 30% of the students come from low-income families. The school boasts many academic accomplishments including very high graduation rates and college attendance. In some ways, the school is a picture of racial integration and relatively high student achievement.

This image, however, belies important differences in school experiences. Black students are underrepresented in the higher-level honors and Advanced Placement classes. While white students make up less than 50% of the student population, they account for 80% of honors students and nearly 90% of Advanced Placement students. Similarly, with regard to discipline patterns, in 2009, black Riverview students represent over 70% of those facing in-school suspension and over 60% of those facing out-of-school suspension even though their overall representation in the school hovered around 35% (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2012).

We chose to study these dynamics in Riverview in part because prior work suggests that disproportionate punishment patterns are pervasive in racially diverse schools. Riverview was also interesting because it is located within a middle class, liberal community. Therefore, it is not

a place in which racial patterns in students' experiences with discipline can be easily attributed to stark social class inequality or overt racism.

Data

The data for this study come from interviews with Riverview students, parents, teachers, administrators, and staff. In total, between 2003 and 2007 we interviewed just over 170 members of the Riverview community. We also spent regular time at the school participating in various formal and informal activities including conducting workshops, consulting formally and informally with personnel, and working with different classroom teachers. One of us worked for an organization housed in the school for two years. While we did not conduct systematic participant observation, our regular participation in and around the school helped us secure participation in the research from a wide range of the school community.

For our student interviews, we selected 10th and 11th grade students at random from a list that included three GPA categories on a 4.0 scale (below 2.0, between 2.0 and 3.0, and between 3.0 and above). We then used this list of student interviewees to select parents -- we contacted all the student respondents. We selected staff for formal interviews based on a range of recommendations we received from administrators, students, and other staff, managing to include staff from all the major academic units and departments in the building. These semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 and 150 minutes.⁵

In addition to our formal interviews with staff and students, we had numerous informal interviews with a wider group of staff during our time at the school. These conversations often helped us to test out emerging themes, pointed us in new directions for further data collection, or provided background information about the school's history, policies, or politics. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Research assistants "cleaned" all of the

interviews following transcription to ensure that the transcripts accurately captured the interview exchanges. Please see Table 1 for details about those we interviewed.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the project was an ongoing process that started early, while we were still collecting data. For instance, in our preliminary analysis of student interviews we coded for multiple emergent categories, some of which emphasized students' relationships with other key individuals like teachers, administrators, and other students. This process helped us identify key school personnel to interview and informed the questions we asked parents and school staff. We analyzed our data using multiple complementary coding processes and with assistance of several different data analysis software packages NVIVO, AtlasTI, and MAXQDA. Our analysis included open, inductive coding of each individual interview as well as a more deductive secondary process of re-reading through transcripts to test out emerging themes, and look for confirming and disconfirming evidence. We also engaged in descriptive coding to organize the data by status and demographic category, and then used the searching capabilities of the qualitative data analysis programs to aid our exploration of patterns within and across these categories. Were students and teachers identifying similar patterns? Were white and black parents describing similar experiences? We used emic codes that emerged from the interviewees' conceptualization of discipline processes and etic codes that emerged through our analytic process of moving back and forth between interview data and the research literature. We also wrote memos on ideas and themes that emerged from our analysis and regularly discussed these memos and ideas.

Findings

School Rules

All schools have rules of conduct that dictate how students interact with each other and with teachers and administrators. These rules and regulations, the ostensive aspect of disciplinary routines, typically are written as if they are neutral, beneficial to all students, and applied fairly across groups of students. The following passages from the Riverview student handbook captures the tone in which school rules are crafted.

- Students are expected to behave in a responsible and cooperative manner at all times. Appropriate dress and grooming are critical to the maintenance of a safe, educationally conducive school atmosphere.
- All students need their current picture ID card to enter or leave the building.
- Students who ... leave the room during the period must get a valid pass from the teacher or supervisor.... Students without a valid pass ... face school consequences.

Behavioral expectations are written to apply to *all* students. They are explained as essential for providing “an educationally conducive environment” and are therefore viewed as important for facilitating student learning. In her book *Bad Boys*, Ferguson (2000, p. 52) argues that disciplinary rules “bear the weight of moral authority. ... Rules are spoken about as inherently neutral, impartially exercised, and impervious to individual feelings and personal responses.”

In part, school rules’ perceived impartiality and fairness gives them a certain level of legitimacy. As Mr. James, one of the Riverview security guards argued,

The [handbook] book ... This is our guide. It tells us the discipline rules. It tells us the consequences ... We don’t care if you’re white, black Hispanic, Russian, Asian, Hebrew,

Chinese. We're going to follow that book. When I come into this building, I don't see colors, I see people.

Here, Mr. James statements reflect the *official stance* on how school rules work – they reflect agreed upon rules and regulations that are applied equally to all students. But like organizational routines more generally, behavioral policies have two components, how the rules and regulations are supposed to be enforced (ostensive aspect), and how they are enforced in practice (the performative aspect). In fact, as Mr. James admits later in the interview, all students may not be treated exactly the same.

I don't think the have-nots are always treated the same. I think if your parents can afford lawyers and can talk very loudly, and are very educated and the like, you might stand a great chance of getting away with something or having something overturned ... have-nots, they're seen as rude, disrespectful, impolite... And they don't generally get away with it.

The “have-nots” here are generally understood along both race and class lines – those who are not among the high-powered, mostly white, upper-middle-class Riverview families. Here Mr. James identifies some of the key ways in which he believes that students' background comes into play in disciplinary enforcement. Parents' economic resources help determine if they can afford or would even think to retain a lawyer (which he believes amplifies their voice in the context of the school). Parents' education can help them assist their children in “getting away with something or having something overturned” or reframing the infraction so that it is understood (and recorded) differently. In contrast, the have-nots are less likely to get away with negative behavior because they are “seen as impolite, rude, and disrespectful,” and their parents are less likely to intervene in part because they have less skill with or time for negotiating with the school and are more likely to accept discipline as appropriate treatment for undesirable behavior.

Mr. James' observations echo some of what we know about the role of parents' resources in influencing what happens in schools. For instance, college-educated parents with higher incomes are more likely to intervene in the school context, customize their children's school experiences, feel entitled to make institutions, respond to their specific desires, and find schools to be receptive to their involvement (Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In this way, social class clearly matters. However, class and race are hard to disentangle. With regard to school discipline, race matters above and beyond social class differences (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010). Riverview teachers and staff often read class through the lens of race, assuming much more than continental ancestry when they mentally categorize a student as white or black.

One can think of schools as a marketplace where people trade various forms of capital in an effort to secure educational resources for themselves and their children. The educational marketplace is characterized by economic capital (money and material resources) as well as the exchange of other forms of capital like social relationships and networks (social capital), cultural style (cultural capital), and symbols of competence, innocence and legitimacy (symbolic capital). These forms of capital are used to access educational resources, and those that possess more valued forms of capital maintain advantaged positions (Hallett, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Mr. James's assertions that parents' economic capital provides access to social relationships with lawyers, which can be leveraged for their children's benefit. Others have shown how middle- and upper-class parents act collectively (as opposed to individually) to secure benefits for their children in school settings (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). Likewise, schools tend to reward certain cultural styles or interaction, linguistic expression, hairstyles, and clothing. Mr. James argues that have-nots are seen as "rude, disrespectful, and

impolite,” perceptions of behavior that have consequences for them in the disciplinary domain. Thus, certain cultural styles (or resources) become converted into cultural capital in the contexts of Riverview (Lareau, 2003; Lewis, 2003).

Beyond economic and cultural forms of capital, whiteness itself also operates as a form of *symbolic* capital (Connolly, 1998). School personnel draw on widely available cultural belief systems about race as they go about their daily work in schools. For example, as Paul Connolly (1998, p. 21) wrote about in a study of multi-ethnic schools in Britain, “Some teachers may ... think of white children as being more intelligent and well-behaved than black children. In this sense, having white skin represents a form of symbolic capital.” As Connolly captures, race primes certain stereotypes about intelligence and behavior that can translate into as he puts it “better treatment and more educational opportunities.” Thus, while it is sometimes true that white parents and students operate with greater resources when negotiating with the school around disciplinary outcomes, it is also true that white parents and students often do not have to deploy such resources, but can benefit by simply being white.

Differential Selection for Discipline: Race and Negotiating School Spaces

White privilege in the hallways. One arena where the differences in experience were most apparent was in how security guards reacted to students in the hallway. Most students reported that the hallways were a vastly different terrain for white students than for black students. For example, during class periods, Riverview students must have a hall pass if they are not in class. However, virtually all students reported that black students are commonly asked to present hall passes by security guards and punished if they do not have them. White students, on the other hand, are questioned less often. As one white student says, “I’ve been walking down the hall without a pass and a black guy’s been walking down the hall without a pass and the black guy

gets stopped and I walk by. That's not fair." Samantha, a white sophomore, identifies a similar pattern, "I think security guards ... point out African Americans a lot more than like white. ... Like I'll walk down the hall without a pass, and they'll just let you go." According to Tim, a white junior, "[black kids] just get singled out. ... white kids have been trained more to get away with it. I don't ... think there's that much of a difference in actual degree of rule breaking but ... white kids ... there's always been an expectation that they're not gonna do it."

For these students, the racial pattern is clear. Black students are more likely to be sanctioned for behaviors that students engage in commonly. There are lessons here for both groups of students. Black students understand that they have to be ready for scrutiny and white students learn, as Timothy put it, that the rules can be bent, they "learn how to get away with it." Teachers and administrators also recognized these patterns. Ms. Hicks, for example, stated that "I've had a number of the majority students say – when I ask, 'Do you need a pass?' – 'No, because I never get stopped.' Black kids are like, 'I need a pass because they're going to stop me.'"

As we will discuss later, at times in the differential unfolding of discipline, the rules themselves seem to be the problem. In other cases like this one, the enforcement of the rule is what generates unfair outcomes. In both cases, however, these are matters of school policy and practice – institutional problems; it is not only the school's responsibility to make sure the ostensive aspect of organizational routines or the rules *as written* are fair, but it is the school's responsibility to ensure that the rules *as practiced* are fair. Importantly, the challenge here is not ill will. As with other staff, the security guards claim to operate with the best of intentions and many see themselves as advocates within the school for minority students. Abundant social psychological research on various participants in the criminal justice system has found that all

actors, black, white, and other, operate with implicit bias against black “suspects” (Eberhart, 2005; Eberhardt et al., 2004; Eberhardt et al., 2006; Graham & Lowery, 2004). Social psychologists have shown that even people who express egalitarian views about race often still carry what are called implicit biases or unconscious racism toward African Americans (Quillian, 2008).

The problem then is not how specific school roles are staffed, but rather the problem is a widespread set of ideas or stereotypes about Black criminality and white innocence that shape daily interactions. Nico, a white junior reports his perception of how stereotypes play out in how student behavior gets read and responded to and in which students get punished:

Well, it gets back to that old stereotype. If you’re a good student and you’re rich and if, and if you’re white and something comes up like – and you’re accused of something, usually they will get away with it ... But if a black person with some baggy clothes came up there you know, bam ... you’re out.

Similarly, when asked whether some groups of students cause more trouble in the school Ms. Jackson responded that there were certainly some groups who were sanctioned more often:

There are certain groups of kids who are labeled and who tend to get written up more. You can have six white kids in a hallway being loud and teacher will ... say, “Move along.”

Okay? You can have six black children in the hallway being loud and they call security.

Okay?

Both Nico and Ms. Jackson discuss the ways that students engaged in similar behavior receive different reactions, in part, because of teacher expectations and perceptions. Racial stereotypes shape whether a group of loud adolescents is understood as a minor nuisance, requiring a verbal

admonition, or as threatening, warranting a more serious sanction from the safety department (Ferguson, 2000; Goff et al., 2014).

Taking these patterns into consideration, it becomes clear that within organizational routines, it is in the performative aspect in which biases have their greatest impact. The rules, written with careful neutrality and legitimizing universality, are undermined by the social meaning of race in social interaction. Attending to the daily performance of disciplinary routines is essential to understanding the experiences of students within them and challenging the racial disproportionality that often results.

Race and the dress code. Similar to the issues related to hall pass rules, members of the community also reported that the dress code was enforced differently. In this case, black girls' dress was more closely scrutinized than white girl's dress. The discipline code is very explicit regarding how students should dress: "Brief and revealing clothing are not appropriate in school. Examples include tank or halter tops, garments with spaghetti straps ... clothing that is 'see-through,' ... or exposes one's midriff ... or skirts ... shorter than 3-inches above the knee." However, one teacher discussed how race shaped the enforcement of this policy. "We had a policy that the girls couldn't have their belly showing. All you saw walking in the hall [was] girls with their white bellies out, black girls sent home. They [black girls] were pissed off."

Tiffany, a junior, argued that the dress code is not enforced equally for black and white girls. "We're not allowed to wear spaghetti straps. But you see a lot of white girls wearing spaghetti straps, halter-tops, tube tops stuff that we [black girls] would get sent home for." Tiffany argued that a number of her friends had been sent home for the clothes they wore to school and that security guards had disciplined her for her clothing as well. Here different stereotypes are likely at play – in particular the long history of reading of black females bodies as

hyper-sexual, while white female bodies are seen as innocent (Collins, 2000). In both ways, assumptions about white innocence – physically and metaphorically – yield a payoff as their whiteness buys some students the benefit of the doubt and leniency for both their dress and their behavior in the hallways.

Race in the classrooms. Students reported similar patterns in their classrooms. As with other areas of the school, teachers have substantial discretion when enforcing classroom rules. Previous research has found that much of the racial disproportionality in student discipline originates with different patterns in teacher referrals from the classroom: with black students often being referred for more subjective (e.g., defiance) and less serious offenses (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2011). What we report here is how these patterns develop and how students experience them. Students reported that black students' behavior is monitored and regulated more closely in classrooms than the behavior of whites. These differences occurred when students came into class, asked to leave the classroom, and participated in class.

For example, many respondents reported that teachers enforced rules about entering and leaving the classroom based on students' race. Terrence, a 16-year-old black sophomore, indicated that when black and white students are late to class, teachers respond differently. He offers one example in which, a black student was late to class and not admitted, while a white student who was also late was admitted, "the teacher lets the white kid in, but not [the black kid]." He also reported that when students ask to go to the restroom, white students are more likely to be allowed to leave the classroom than black students are. When talking about students in the classroom, he discusses "the bathroom thing" as if it is something he and his peers complain about regularly. Andre, another black male student, shares examples of "the bathroom thing," "My girlfriend, her ... teacher treats this one white girl like... if she wants to go to the

bathroom she can go right then and there. My [black] friend, like if he wants to go to the bathroom, he can't go.”

Students like Terrance and Andre believe that race matters when students want to leave the classroom, and their perception of the school is based on that belief. We don't believe that any teachers consciously intended to deny black students the ability to go to the bathroom. Rather, implicit mechanisms may lead teachers who are operating in the moment to react to students differently.

Other students reported additional examples of how the enforcement of classroom rules operated differently for different groups of students. Cursing is considered against the rules in all classes. However, students perceived that black and white students who cursed were sometimes treated differently. As Darin, a bi-racial (black/white) male sophomore argued, “[teachers] will be lenient ... if a kid curses ... the teacher will be like to the black kid, ‘Watch your mouth!’ Or... they'll kick you out. But the white kid they'll get away with it.” Megan, a high achieving white student, also observed that these rules are enforced differently for black and white students in one of her classes. “My [first period] teacher, he tells the class not to swear, and gets angry at the black people when they swear. But then there's this white kid I know, this white kid, he sits next to me, he swears all the time and doesn't get in trouble.” Megan and other white students receive a pass as they negotiate these classroom contexts. In all of these cases, white students receive the benefit of the doubt. They are allowed to have more autonomy in movement and behavior than black students. Mr. Webber, a school administrator who'd been at the school for decades spoke to this,

I believe that in many situations when teachers deal with students who are breaking the rules, they handle black students and white students and Latino students differently. That in many

cases they will ... talk to the white student and give them an opportunity to do the right thing. Whereas, with the black student or Latino student they will write them up.

We have shown that in the hallways and classrooms, race has implications for students' experiences. As Mr. Michaels [a long time teacher at the school] talked about above, "in some situations, [being white] is a privilege." White students report navigating the hallways freely without having their intentions questioned – an unearned benefit of whiteness. In this sense, whiteness functions as a silent benefit of the doubt, a positive estimation of competence, esteem, and honor or what Mr. Webber described as "an opportunity to do the right thing." With regard to rule breaking, for white students "there's always been an expectation that they're not gonna do it." That expectation of good intentions is part of the unearned privilege that white students enjoy. As Peggy MacIntosh (1990) writes, it's a part of the "invisible package of unearned assets" enjoyed by whites (p. 31). Race is relational (as are other inequalities). For every privileged group, there is another group that is penalized. As whiteness leads to racial privileges (unearned assets or credit), blackness leads to equally unearned racial penalties for individual Black students. Contrasting with white students' freedom of movement is black students being actively scrutinized. Such scrutiny can be experienced as racial microaggressions and may lead students to feel frustration, anxiety, and partial alienation from the educational environment. It signals to them regularly that they are not equal citizens within the school (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007).

What students and administrators report above reflects some of what other research shows. Black students are disciplined more, including for infractions involving what Vavrus and Cole (2002) refer to as violation of "implicit interactional codes" (p. 87). Similarly, Skiba and colleagues (2008) found that black students were more often referred to the office for subjective

offenses such as disrespect or excessive noise, threat or loitering (also see Ferguson, 2000). Again, these are the interpersonal interactions that are a part of the performative aspect of the discipline routine.

Differential Processing: Race, Class and the Enforcement of Discipline

As discussed earlier “the rules” for school behavior are often presented as if they are neutral. This perceived impartiality gives these rules their legitimacy and power (Ferguson, 2000). We have already shown patterns of *differential selection* at Riverview, the ways that race shaped how and when students get in trouble. In addition, race and class mattered quite a bit for the *processing* of discipline – what severity of sanctions a student received once he/she had entered into the schools’ disciplinary system. For example, Julius, a black student, whose parents are both professionals, talks about how race and class are intertwined in the handling of drug violations: “white kids get caught with pot all the time ... The school can’t be dealing with these folks’ parents, because their parents are going to start suing the school ... When you get a black kid, and you suspend them for having pot ... what are the parents going to do?”

At play here are not only families’ actual differences in resources but teachers and administrators perceptions of families resources. Here, race and class get conflated such that personnel often presume white students to have highly resourced and powerful parents; it does not matter then, whether an individual white student being processed has wealthy parents, because whiteness itself is being acted upon (Morris, 2006). During disciplinary processing, Riverview personnel assume they are likely to face parental intervention when they deal with white students. Thus, while staff reported that white parents intervene more often and in particular ways, they also report how the expectation of that intervention shapes the disciplinary process from the very beginning. As scholars have discussed, it is in the “moment-by-moment

interactions that decisions are made” about discipline (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, p. 109). In these moments, status categories shape perceptions through often-unconscious processes going on in the heads of very well-intentioned people.

Like Mr. Webber, a number of those involved in the school’s disciplinary bureaucracy acknowledged and lamented the ways that race and class significantly impacted what kinds of sanctions students would eventually face. Mr. Webber, who is often the first stop for those accused of drug-related offences, confirms that Julius’s conjecture above has some basis. He experiences racial differences in how black and white parents interact with school people around such offenses.

I have had parents come in to appeal white students’ discipline... Their issue is ... ‘Can we not call it that because we don’t want it to impact college admissions.’ ... I’d say I hear it twenty times a year. A student got caught in possession of some marijuana. ... The parent argued that we call it possession and possession means you have it and ... it’s yours to manipulate and to sell... ‘It was never his. He was just looking at it. It was in his hands. So that possession is not real possession.’ And they want the possession charge taken out of the record.

This is very similar to what Ms. McDaniels, a principal, called the “entitlement game,” whereby parents argue that no matter what their child did or is accused of doing they are inherently “good kids” who have bright futures. Here, Ms. McDaniel describes her frustration watching white parents’ behavior in the review board where serious disciplinary infractions are brought: “It’s always the entitlement that, *‘yes, they did wrong, but it really wasn’t that wrong. And they’re good kids. And they’re in honors classes ... and please don’t let them have a record...’* but, for the black kids, [white parents say] *‘you need to discipline them.’*”

Here, both administrators describe white parents arguing that, in their specific child's case, the rules are too punitive and should not be applied. These parents then negotiate with school officials to benefit their children in discipline procedures. Here, there is a certain level of cultural capital that benefits them in negotiation – the knowledge of legal jargon that they can wield to benefit their children. One of the school safety staff members, Jim, talked about how family resources matter this way:

Students who come from low-income families are...more likely to receive the full weight of disciplinary action than a child who has a father who is a downtown lawyer or some – a person who has connections to the Board. This ... issue doesn't only address the accused, it addresses the victims. The child of a *downtown* lawyer who comes in to complain that they have been a victim ... is more likely ... to have his or her case investigated to the fullest.

It is powerful to hear from different school personnel – deans, principals, school safety staff – that the system they run, oversee, and implement does not operate fairly. These reports are not limited to a list of complaints from minority students or parents about perceived mistreatment, but also include anecdotes from those who are “in charge.” To be sure, some personnel perceived the problem to be larger or more widespread than others, but almost all agreed that students are differentially processed and sanctioned. Many were annoyed, if not dismayed, about the ways that they perceived teachers to be differently selecting students for punishment, but they also recognized that sanctioning, which they governed, was also deeply flawed. What left them baffled in different ways was trying to imagine what to do about it.

Conclusion

The apparent fairness and neutrality of the ostensive aspect of discipline routines contrasts with the substantial discretion in the performance of these routines. At Riverview,

the *practice* of organizational routines reproduces inequality, while the idealized version of these routines (race-neutral rules) continues to justify or legitimize the routine itself. Because the ostensive aspect is sometimes presented as the whole of the routine – “this is how we do discipline” – there is little space to confront how differently school actors enact rules in practice. It is in the performative aspect that social status and unequal access to various forms of capital plays out through social interaction – the moment-to-moment exchanges through which behavior is assessed and meaning is attached to it. As it stands, the Riverview disciplinary routines lead to differential selection and processing of students, but also multiple pernicious consequences for both school outcomes and students developing understandings about race and justice (Morris & Perry, 2016).

The *differential selection* and *differential processing* we describe does not emerge because adults at Riverview are mean-spirited; racism today is not the same as it was in the past. As a number of scholars have recently outlined, older understandings of racism that focused primarily on ill will and faulty racial thinking do not properly diagnose what we are faced with today (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Forman, 2004). Instead we have a system in which most operate with the best of intentions and are invested in doing the right thing. Yet, widespread cultural beliefs and pervasive racial stereotypes about all groups penetrate deeply into school buildings and shape interactions. Research on the role of status characteristics and implicit bias tells us to expect the kinds of patterns we found. Race works symbolically to shape how we understand each other, whether or not we imagine those we are confronting to be well-meaning and inherently “innocent,” and whether we imagine that they are highly resourced and thus possibly deserving of careful treatment.

Race also shapes groups' relationships to institutions, their expectations of treatment, and the resources they have to enact their expectations. White middle-class parents were able to take full advantage of their various forms of capital (financial, cultural, social, and symbolic) to gain advantages for their children, and their children were granted more freedom of movement and the presumption of innocence by virtue of these same forms of capital.

While we have conducted this work in Riverview, a suburban, "urban characteristic" school, we believe the lessons here apply more broadly. Discipline routines are common across urban and suburban school contexts and status beliefs about Black youth permeate the U.S. society and therefore all schools and organizations. Beliefs about African Americans as inherently criminal and Whites as innocent shape how school discipline is handled, but also how police/citizen interactions unfold (ACLU of Illinois, 2015), how job applicants are treated (Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009), and how criminal sentences are handed out.

What, in fact, should a school like Riverview do to address these challenges? One of the major problems here has to do with how rules are implemented – with the divergence between the ostensive and performative aspects of organizational routines. If the rules are good rules they should be uniformly applied – if being in the hall without a pass should lead to detention, if having drugs in school should lead to suspension, if cursing in class should lead to referral, then it should be so for all students. In his book on race and crime, Law professor Randall Kennedy advocates for what he calls a kind of "colorblind" approach to policing:

[I]nstead of placing a racial tax on [minorities], government should, if necessary, increase taxes across the board....[It] should be forced to inconvenience everyone...by subjecting all...to questioning. The reform I support, in other words, does not entail lessened policing.

It only insists that the costs of policing be allocated on a nonracial basis (as quoted in Butler, 2010, p. 122).

In this model, all students would be stopped in the hall and asked for verification that they have permission to be there. All students would be referred out of class for infractions of school rules such as cursing or coming in late. All students would be suspended for possession of illicit substances. If, on the other hand, the rules aren't good rules – if they're too punitive, too cumbersome to enforce, or too burdensome on those scrutinized – then the rules themselves should be changed. The problem with the current system is that rules are too often selectively applied to those students who are deemed more in “need” of punishment, or who do not have the resources to defend themselves or to question the rules. In fact, we believe that if rules were enforced in the universal fashion as Kennedy advocates, without exception or discretion, it might quickly lead to demands for the rules themselves to change rather than just demands for exceptions to rules in the case of a “good, well-meaning child.” In this case, the interventions of highly resourced parents would pay-off for all children, rather than just for their children.

At minimum, more schools need to recognize how racial meanings become part of how the institution functions such that certain groups get denied full access to rights and privileges. The result of this institutionalized discrimination is similar to what scholar Nancy Fraser (2000, p. 113-4) has termed misrecognition, “to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.” The experience for youth of being misrecognized in this way in *school* is a potent one. Disciplinary routines are just one arena in which blackness carries a kind of racial penalty that leads to increased surveillance, restricted freedom of movement, and suspicion about one's intentions (Randolph, 2012). As Fraser (2000) discusses,

the impact of disciplinary unfairness goes beyond the realm of disciplinary routines, however, to convey clear messages to youth about their status as full partners or members of the community. More and more we are coming to understand how a sense of belonging can be vital to academic achievement (Walton et al., 2012). Disciplinary patterns serve as a hazard to creating such a sense of belonging among students when they contribute to creating a “threatening environment” – “settings where people come to suspect that they could be devalued, stigmatized, or discriminated against because of a particular social identity” (Inzlicht & Good, 2006, p. 131). The kinds of racialized patterns in discipline that we find in Riverview, and that exist widely, negatively affect not only how targeted students feel about the school, but also their ability to thrive academically (Morris & Perry, 2016; Steele, 2010).

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Table 1. Riverview High School Interviewees by Race, Ethnicity, and Status

Students	
Black	42
White	28
Latino	13
Parents	
Black	27
White	27 ^a
Latino	7
Staff	
Black	15
White	12
Total	171

^a These 27 parents represent 21 families as, in several cases, both parents participated in the interview. This was not the case for either Black or Latino families.

¹ Riverview High School, and all of the names of participants reported here, are pseudonyms.

² Leonardo and Hunter (2007) argue that the urban imaginary is fraught with potential pitfalls. There is the potential for us to uncritically accept demographic categorizations or urban and suburban in ways that reify racism. For instance, with regard to urban schools, the “urban jungle” analogy is often evoked which highlights racist notions of cities as “teeming with Black, Brown, and Yellow bodies, which are poor and dirty, criminal and dangerous. Gangs, violence, and drugs closely tied to any image of the urban for most people” (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007: 789). Demographic transitions then become seen as bringing “urban” problems to suburbs. We distinguish our notions of race and class transition from this more pernicious set of beliefs.

³ School district consortia across the country have emerged over the past 20 years as a result of the challenges of addressing race and school outcomes in suburban schools. Some of these include the Minority Student Achievement Network, (<http://msan.wceruw.org/>; Cooper 2007), the University of Pennsylvania Excellence and Equity Consortia which includes schools in Pennsylvania, Long Island, NY, and New Jersey (<https://pcel.gse.upenn.edu/content/penn-excellence-equity-consortia>), and the Closing the Achievement Gap Consortium in Suburban Milwaukee (<https://www.cagcwi.org/>) among others.

⁴ For more information about the documentary series “America to Me” please see this link: <http://kartemquin.com/films/america-to-me>.

⁵ Protocols were semi-structured. Parent interviews included questions about the following topics: Personal, family & educational background, educational aspirations and expectations for students, child’s current school experiences (e.g., what classes students are enrolled in, have they

had a good experience), educational orientations (beliefs about role of school & school involvement, beliefs about relationships between family and school), family social networks and child peer networks, and their perceptions about racial dynamics at the school including the racial achievement gap. Teacher & School Personnel interviews similarly started with a focus on staff members personal, family and educational background and then shifted to questions about their experiences working at Riverview, their beliefs about student achievement, and their perceptions about racial dynamics at the school including the racial achievement gap. Student interviews began with questions about their families and home life and then shifted to questions about their orientation towards school (e.g., what kind of student are you?), their peer relationships, their sense of important influences on their school engagement and achievement, their parent involvement in their education, their experiences in the school and with Riverview teachers, and finally their sense of race relations at the school. The interview protocols are available upon request by contacting the first author.