Working-Poor Mothers and Middle-Class Others: Psychosocial Considerations in Home-School Relations and Research

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This article draws from a three-year ethnographic study of girls and their mothers in a high-poverty, predominantly white community. Informed by critical and feminist theories of social class, I present four cases that highlight psychosocial tensions within the mother-daughter-teacher-researcher triangle and argue that white, middle-class female teachers and ethnographers need to be particularly reflexive when working with children across the social class divide. [gender, social class, mothers, psychosocial]

On a spring day in 2002, I was routinely reading children's writing samples and taking note of already emerging themes, when a girl's notebook entry demanded a reconsideration of data from the beginning of this three-year study forward. Faith (all names are pseudonyms), a second grader at the time, wrote the following in her writer's notebook during an after-school "girls' group" meeting that I facilitated as part of this research:

> Mom,
>
> I like girls group because Mrs. Jones is nice to me. I don't know why she is, maybe she's trying to be nice. But I care about you mom. Okay? I'm trying to be nice.
>
> —Faith [spring of second grade]

In this short piece of writing, Faith forced me to think critically about the complications investigated in this article: suspicion or fear of me as a teacher and researcher ("I don't know why she is [nice]") and tensions experienced by young girls as they negotiate loyalty to their mother ("but I care about you mom") and a relationship with a teacher-researcher ("I'm trying to be nice").

The significance of this entry will be unpacked as I develop the argument that the construction of the white middle-class woman as ideal mother and the working-class or poor woman as less than ideal positions little girls living between two such women to negotiate complex social and psychological terrain. In addition to particular challenges faced by children, the psychosocial landscapes in which their working-class and poor mothers find themselves can be wrought with pain, fear, anger, and suspicion as they recognize the relations governing power and privilege in educational institutions and society at large. Hegemonic ideals of "good mothering" are problematic in any fashion, but the fact that such ideals exist and are used against

working-class and poor mothers are not to be ignored in analyses of women's performances, including female teachers and researchers, as they interact with children.

Contributing to the growing body of critical ethnographies and other qualitative inquiries around social class and schooling in the United States and United Kingdom (Bettie 2003; González 2001; Heath 1983; Hicks 2002, 2005; Lew 2004; Reay 1998; Skeggs 1997; Willis 1977, among others), this article foregrounds a construct that has rarely been researched explicitly: the potential threat of a white middle-class female teacher–researcher to the mother–daughter relationship in a working-class or poor community. Focusing specifically on home–school relations through analyses of language, power, and positioning, this article adds to our understandings of the challenges and possibilities lying between two important worlds of young girls (e.g., Delgado-Gaitán 1991; Lewis and Forman 2002; Reay 1998). Vignettes from four cases focused on young girls and the adult women in their lives will be presented here as I draw on critical feminist theories that push Bourdieu-inspired conceptualizations of social class as produced and embodied through social practices to include psychological implications of living on the margins of a socially stratified society (Hicks 2005; Luttrell 1997; Probyn 2004; Steedman 1987; Walkerdine 1990; Walkerdine et al. 2001). This push for researchers and practitioners to theorize and act beyond the four forms of "capital"—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—put forth by Bourdieu (1984) has largely been a feminist one looking to ground analyses of women's lived realities in both the psychological and the social.

Ethnography, and more specifically critical teacher ethnography, framed this three-year project as I studied the language, literacies, and identities of eight girls between home and school in a high-poverty urban, predominantly white community in the Midwest of the United States. Informed and driven by my girlhood experiences of working-poverty and constant readings of social class dissonance and discrimination, my intent in the larger study was to better understand the complex negotiations that children from working-class and poor families perform as they cross the threshold to a middle-class institution each day. Toward the end of the second year in this study, a key piece of data (Faith's journal entry) reshaped a major research question around the constructions of "others" between home and school in general and moved the focus to a more narrow, localized, and practical question about the adult women in a little girl's worlds of home and school. Specifically, the mothers and grandmothers of the girls in this study and my own positioning as teacher and researcher will be the focus along with data about the girls themselves. The work of ethnography provided the space for such an extensive and permeable investigation with an emphasis on time for multiple and ongoing analyses, reflection, reflexivity, and circling back to the field for unanswered questions or uncertainties. Faith's journal entry did not emerge for two years, but when it did I was offered the opportunity to dig deeper into a phenomenon that may have been missed in a short-term study with a narrow focus.

Following a discussion of the theoretical perspective undergirding this study, the introduction of the community I call St. Francis, the participants in this study, data collection and analysis methods, and influential literature in my reading of the data, vignettes from four cases will be used to consider the psychosocial landscape among mothers, daughters, and white middle-class female teacher-researchers. The conclusion will consider implications for educational practice and anthropological research that focuses on the impact of relationship building across race and social class divides on psychosocial realities.

A Theoretical Perspective

Bourdieu (1984, 1994) has helped to establish a theoretical understanding of social class that extends economic analyses of individuals' locations within a market economy. Arguing that economic capital (e.g., income, wealth) is important (but by no means sufficient) in understanding social class, Bourdieu has offered additional forms of "capital" that are exchanged in a society that works as a market: cultural capital (e.g., taste, linguistic resources, style), social capital (e.g., networks of people and institutions to which one has access), and symbolic capital (e.g., recognition of competence and of being competent within a particular arena). Individuals acquire various kinds of capital across time and locales and engage or exchange these resources at different times and in different places for power, prestige, and access to exclusive groups. Capital is distributed unevenly throughout society, and different forms are appreciated—or unappreciated—differently, depending on time, place, and sociocultural context. Bourdieu's deepening analyses of social class, then, have provided an understanding of class not as a "position" within a stratified society but as something that is lived, embodied, performed through various social practices, and judged against expectations for such social performances. Although productive in many respects, Bourdieu's work has been reworked to recognize the psychological implications of living class socially (e.g., Luttrell 2006; Probyn 2004; Walkerdine et al. 2001). This push for a psychosocial lens on class is an interdisciplinary endeavor—largely a feminist one—focused on better understanding the lives and perspectives of girls and women.

A psychosocial lens assumes that sociality and social experiences (including the exchange of various kinds of capital in different contexts) affect that which is lived psychically, just as the psyche and psychological experiences affect social relations and practices (e.g., Luttrell 2006; Reay 2005a, 2005b; Walkerdine 1990, 2006). Whereas Bourdieu's work is grounded in the physical and social nature of practice, Reay refers to a "generative dynamic between thinking, feeling, and practices" (2005a:912), making clear the importance of viewing the social as shot through with the psychological and vice versa. To investigate such complexities, Walkerdine (2006) writes about the necessity of border crossing between critical psychology and anthropology to better research and understand the production of the dynamics between subjectivity and social worlds. An investigation of the relations among language, identities, and literacy is where this ethnographic study began, with an assumption that a critical social analysis would not lend enough depth to get a sense of how lives are lived on the margins of mainstream class privilege. Instead, this study was grounded in the belief that lives are lived psychosocially and therefore research methods should aim to get at those psychosocial realities as experienced by the participants. For example, participants not only recognized the *social* difference between themselves and institutional workers in the community school but also experienced this difference psychically, as they *felt* objectified and inferior and lived with constant fear and suspicion of middle-class others (including myself) who were working with their children.

Psychosocial analyses of class can not only deepen our understandings of how social class is produced, performed, and experienced but can also offer greater insight to the research process, particularly when researchers are working with participants across the social class divide. Foregrounding the significance of class difference between researchers (and educators) and participants from working-class and poor

communities, this article points to the imperative practice of recognizing and changing interactions that produce detrimental psychosocial tensions in the lives of participants (and students). As Reay (2005b) suggests, all qualitative research does not allow for "affinities of the field," but in those studies in which ethnographers are immersed in the field, such affinities might be considered inevitable, lived psychosocially, and should therefore be critically examined.

St. Francis: A Working-Poor Community

Quite small in land area (0.57 square miles), St. Francis was home to many families who had lived in and around the community for generations after migrating from rural Appalachia. But it had also been claimed as home by a small number of families landing in St. Francis after seeking housing in a nearby homeless shelter. Because of the economic shift away from industrial work in recent years, local factories and warehouses had been closed. Residents who walked to work in the past were forced to find transportation to and from service centers throughout the metropolitan area if they were to work outside of the home. Official unemployment numbers in St. Francis hovered around 16 percent, but this number was only inclusive of those people receiving unemployment benefits and looking for work at the time of the study. The jobless rate, which took into consideration those who had been out of work for long periods of time without unemployment benefits as well as those who had stopped looking for work after unsuccessful attempts, was 50 percent in St. Francis, where the median income was slightly above $17,000 a year. With fewer people from outside St. Francis coming into the community to work at industries of the past and a number of residents not venturing out of the neighborhood to work elsewhere, one of the major points of intersection with "outsiders" was within the walls of the neighborhood school, Bruger Elementary.

Unlike the stereotypical urban enclave of poverty that too often pervades the social imagination, St. Francis was a community made up of 92.5 percent white residents, 7.3 percent African American residents, and a small population of Guatemalans and Mexicans. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the white families in St. Francis were of Appalachian descent, having had families who migrated to and around the center of the city between the 1950s and 1980s looking for safer and more stable work than they could find in the mountainous and rural regions of Appalachia. Reflective of the community, one girl in this study is African American, and seven girls are white and of Appalachian descent.

The Girls and the Study

Bright, engaging, and sometimes feisty, the eight elementary-aged girls in this study demonstrated tremendous insight into social class difference and class vulnerability from their perspectives as girls in working-poor families. From selectively silencing stories from their lives that did not align with perceived values of school (Jones 2004, 2006) to altering the "facts" to represent themselves and their families as less vulnerable to the surveillance of the outside world, the girls were privy to the discriminatory practices of a social hierarchy stratified by class-specific experiences. Rose, Sarah, Faith, and Cadence will be highlighted throughout this article as data collected from them and their families' practices or from school authorities about
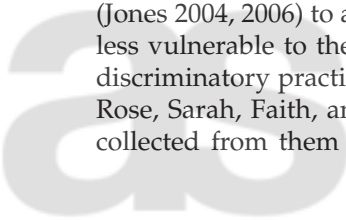
them are analyzed around home–school relations and the relationships among mothers, daughters, and white middle-class female others.

Rose is a tall, thin white girl with deep brown eyes and dyed-blonde hair. Like several of her peers in this study, Rose lived fluidly between households including her grandmother and grandfather's home, her mother and stepfather's (next door to her grandparents' house), and the home of her father and stepmother one block down the street. Rose loved going to work at the corner store with her grandma; writing stories about her mom, whom she described as "an angel"; and being doted on by the adults in her family, who sometimes sacrificed needs to satisfy her strong material desires for items such as Mary Kate and Ashley clothing from Kmart, Britney Spears CDs, and accessories with any kind of sparkle or glitter.

Dark brown–haired Sarah had lightly freckled fair skin and piercing blue eyes that seemed to watch everything and everyone. Sarah lived fluidly between her mother's house, which was shared with a long-term male partner and Sarah's maternal grandmother, and her paternal grandmother and grandfather's home, where she lived with an older sister, an aunt, and two cousins. Sarah's father had been in jail since Sarah was a toddler but was released at the end of her third grade year, making for a celebratory event. Immediately following his release, Sarah added his household that he shared with his brother to her network of "home."

Enthusiastic and energetic Faith had glowing dark brown skin and a wide, contagious smile. In addition to being the only African American girl in the study, she was unlike the others in many ways given the fact that she did not have historical ties to the community but, rather, had been "placed" there along with her family when a tragic accident at her father's work left him paralyzed from the waist down and without income. Disability and Social Security funds did not come fast enough, and Faith and her father, mother, older brother, and younger sister found themselves homeless. Although their transition to a predominantly white working-poor community was not always easy (another African American student called this the "white ghetto" before she and her family moved), Faith's family believed in the love of Jesus and felt that they were destined to become a part of this new neighborhood.

Cadence, a white girl who tanned to brown in the summertime, lived between her mother's home, grandmother's home, and step-grandfather's home, seamlessly navigating three households on any given day. Like Sarah's, Cadence's father had been incarcerated since her youngest years but was released during her fourth grade year. At that time, again like Sarah, Cadence began living with him. At school Cadence was perceived and constructed as the "bad girl," and she could be found sitting in the hall, on the playground bench, or in the office as punishment.

Each of the girls was fascinating in her own right and in many ways performed identities that were unique within the group both during school hours and outside of school. Generalizations were impossible to make, although some prevalent themes did emerge, including the deep relational bonds they experienced with their mothers and grandmothers (Jones 2006), a fact important to the reading of the data and analyses in this article. These rich, complex relationships with their mothers and grandmothers, however, did not preclude significant and powerful relations with their fathers and grandfathers. Each of the girls was living with her biological father at least on a part-time basis by the end of this study, and, except for Faith (whose grandfathers were deceased and from another part of the country), each of the girls had regular, if not daily, contact with a grandfather. I make this contextual nuance explicit for three

reasons: to counter mainstream discourses around poverty, children, mothers, and fathers; to understand that the focus on mothers in this article is not a result of the absence of fathers; and to offer a sense of the potential love, support, and extensive familial resources available to the girls.

A Similar Girlhood

Like a number of feminist researchers with poor or working-class histories conducting studies around social class, gender, and race, I engage my insider–outsider status drawing on cultural knowledge and resources gained from at least two disparate class locations (e.g., Adair 2005; Bettie 2003; Finders 1997; Hicks 2002; Luttrell 1997; Reay 1998, 2005b; Steedman 1987; Walkerdine et al. 2001). No matter how hard I tried to make it otherwise, given that my similar history was helpful in many respects during this research, the power dynamics between researcher and participant existed. I was thus keenly aware of various kinds of capital, resources, and other privileges to which I had access. Close living quarters characterized all of the girls' homes, in which living rooms doubled as bedrooms, kitchens were often too small to hold a table and chairs, and dining rooms were nonexistent. As I sat on a sofa in Faith's apartment and listened empathetically and knowingly as her parents told stories of economic devastation following a tragic accident at her father's workplace, I knew that I would be driving back to my spacious home where the bills would be easily paid at the beginning of the month. Much like my family situation as I was growing up, small, sparsely furnished living spaces that required relatively low incomes to maintain did not ensure that families were going to make ends meet when it came time to pay the bills. This point of connection I felt with the participants was coupled with a point of contention—things were different in my personal life at the time. Say what I would about understanding struggle, I was not presently struggling, and that made me radically different from the families in St. Francis.

Although it did not always matter to the families, I had also lived through similar experiences, including the classed, raced, and gender-specific performances and complexities that many of them knew well. A white girl living in a trailer park, for example, is not exactly the picture of white privilege often conceptualized in the academy. Whiteness, in my case, was lived on the margins of privilege and power and in the center of judgments, stereotypes, and discrimination. Phrases such as "white nigger," "lowlife," and "white trash" were common in my young world, demarcating that which whiteness was *supposed* to signify and the whiteness that was sometimes performed in working-class and poor communities. My social and cultural experiences of a raced and classed life have impressed upon me the importance of pursuing nuanced understandings of students' and families' encounters with social and political institutions such as school. Layered and intermingling with my whiteness and working-poorness, my gendered location within an Appalachian family provides another lens for considering the complicated psychosocial nature of education and research.

Having lived a working-class and poor girlhood in a similar urban context served as points of mutual understanding, insightful analyses, and empathy, as well as being a helpful tool to see and have access to details that may otherwise have been concealed during this study. But this personal history and my insider–outsider perspectives did not protect me or the participants in this study from the classed and raced differences that existed between us, as will be discussed in this article.

Teacher-Researcher Roles, Data, and Analysis

This study began in summer 2001 when, as a doctoral student and former primary school teacher, I gained entrée to the school and community through teaching summer school at Bruger Elementary. Shortly afterward I met a first grade teacher (Ms. Rully) and began my role as participant-observer in her classroom, followed by a full-time stint as the students' regular classroom teacher for 11 weeks in the second grade. As the person responsible for their success in school during this time, I made every effort to build relationships with each student's family, and more than any other experience, these 11 weeks taught me about the children, their families, and the community. Following full-time teaching, I facilitated an after-school program for the eight focal girls and continued to observe in their classroom, visit families, and engage in various community events. In spring 2003, I held a three-week summer program for the girls wherein we worked together to publish a magazine, create a website, and plan an exhibition of their photography, writing, and favorite readings from the past year. Slowly pulling out of the field, I met with the girls once a month and less frequently with families throughout their third grade year (2003–04) and have maintained contact with the girls and their families to varying degrees through letters, phone calls, and biannual community visits through the 2005–06 academic year.

Numerous data sets were constructed across the three focus years of this study, with interpretative analyses beginning immediately upon leaving the field each day through the writing of reflective narratives. Highlighted in this article are data collected through audio-taped interviews, field notes written during classroom participant-observation and during the after-school girls' group, and roughly transcribed conversations written during observation in the classroom and in the girls' homes. Only data that were audio-taped and transcribed are presented as "transcriptions," whereas the roughly transcribed notes were used to construct narratives and inform thick description. Data were analyzed on a cyclical, weekly basis through open coding and analyses of emerging themes (Miles and Huberman 1994) informed by critical discourse analysis (Gee 1999; Rogers 2003) and a psychosocial lens (Hicks 2005; Reay 2005a, 2005b; Walkerdine 1990). The analyses in this article, however, did not emerge as themes during open coding; nor were they a focus of my initial research questions. They were instead stimulated by the collection of a key piece of data that highlighted a potential issue that I then investigated, tracking and interpreting themes across multiple contexts, data sources, participants, existing literature, and autobiographical experiences.

The Good Mothers

The hypothetical white, middle-class woman has been constructed as the ideal mother who turns work into play, disciplines using nurturing strategies of progressive child rearing, interacts with her child through ongoing negotiations of relations and rules, and uses social networks to ensure her child's success in school and in society: in other words, parent–child interactions that are similar in many ways to the interactions of progressive educators and young children. Although literature has criticized the raised—and impossible—demands on white middle-class mothers who attempt to reach the pinnacle of the ideal mother (Reay 1998; Walkerdine et al. 2001),
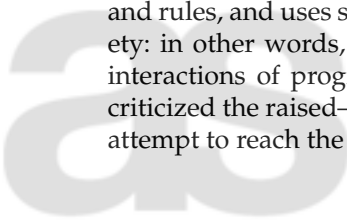
the standard is still set. And although permeable and changing with time and place, the criteria for reaching ideal motherhood are based on the economic, social, and cultural resources of the white middle class (Collins 1989, 1994; Luttrell 1997; Reay 1998; Walkerdine et al. 2001). Walkerdine et al. write:

> Texts on education are constantly full of the need to make parents responsible for getting it right for their children from infancy onwards. . . . It is middle-class women who are understood as the purveyors of normality and have to be strictly regulated, and indeed to regulate themselves through what counts as love and guilt. . . . By contrast working-class women demonstrate a number of tendencies in their child-rearing practices that are considered abnormal. This means that they have to be policed by educational, social welfare and medical agencies (indeed middle-class women). [2001:114]

The policing of working-class women by middle-class women in an attempt to regulate household and parenting practices is reinforced by mainstream beliefs about women living within particular groups in society. Oppressive stereotypes of white and black working-class and working-poor women perpetuate strongly held notions regarding assumed different and deficient mothering practices, practices that must be surveilled and regulated. In the following two sections I explore the specific construction of the St. Francis female as "white trash" and the more broadly constructed black woman as superhuman and consider the implications in their positions as mothers of daughters in this study.

White Trash: St. Francis Females as Unfit for Mothering

As I sat down to my computer in fall 2003, I read the type of e-mail message that I typically delete, but this "joke" caught my attention. New, limited edition Barbie Dolls were (hypothetically) going to be released in the Midwestern city where this study took place, with dolls created to correspond with each neighborhood. Although meant to be humorous and entertaining, this e-mail message sets up the social, psychological, material, economical, and respectable (e.g., Skeggs 1997) divide between working-class women in St. Francis and their more affluent counterparts who enter the community to teach at Bruger Elementary each day. The following description is of the Barbie Doll that would represent girls and women of St. Francis:

> [St. Francis Barbie Doll] available with your choice of 70s bitch-flip hairdos, a Ford Ranger pickup, and a pit bull. Another "Classic" version has a mouth that is firmly closed so as not to show her summer [some're here—some're there] teeth, Daisy Dukes so tight you can see camel toe, and a half T-shirt that guarantees you can see her navel piercing and at least 5 tattoos. Both versions swear incessantly and are not recommended for children.

Similar to the girl and women participants in other critical ethnographies (e.g., Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine et al. 2001) and qualitative inquiries (e.g., Adair 2005; Steedman 1982, 1987), this Barbie ad stereotypically constructs working-class girls and women in St. Francis as heterosexually promiscuous (tight Daisy Dukes and navel piercings), linguistically deviant (swears incessantly), outside societal norms of femininity (Ford pickup and a pit bull), uncaring of personal hygiene (missing teeth), and not fit for mothering (neither versions are recommended for children). The description of the two St. Francis Barbies would fit many people's perceptions of a

"white trash" female, aligning with stereotypes that more affluent outsiders have of the women in this neighborhood.

The Black Working-Class Woman: Superhuman and Unfit for Mothering

Like working-class and poor white women, working-class and poor black women find themselves overregulated when it comes to raising a family (Collins 1994; DeParle 2004). The color of their skin, however, produces images in the social imagination that differ from those of white working-class and poor women. For the white women in St. Francis, this image is one of white trash and all the tacit understandings associated with such a stereotype, including the deviation from what whiteness is supposed to signify. For Chestina, the only African American mother in this study, this image is one of female blackness, a superhuman phenomenon (hooks 2000:15) signifying unusual physical and emotional strength, aggressiveness, and power. This portrayal includes deviance from white middle-class femininity while focusing on performances that might better correspond with mainstream white masculinities (Adair 2005; Collins 1989). The following description of black working-class and poor women as represented by a hypothetical Barbie is a part of the same e-mail "joke" previously referenced:

> This recently paroled Barbie comes with a 9 mm handgun, a Ray Lewis knife, a slammed Chevrolet with oversized wheels and tinted windows and a Methadone Clinic Ken. Also available in a jailbird version with orange coveralls.

Much like the constructions of white working-class and poor women of St. Francis, this Barbie constructs black working-class and poor women as pathological. However, the deviance here is represented as criminal (recently paroled or with orange coveralls), violent (comes with a 9 mm handgun and a Ray Lewis knife), concerned with selfish material desires (slammed Chevrolet with oversized wheels and tinted windows), and perhaps as provider for a drug-addicted man (Methadone Clinic Ken). Although a specific warning is not attached regarding children (e.g., not recommended for children), the message is implied throughout the description. This stereotype of a superhuman black woman who is to be feared and suspected as not parenting appropriately has a long history in the United States.

Historical versions of the African American slave woman who physically fought for her children, risked her life for her children, and sometimes murdered her children to protect them from the white barbarian who represented supremacy are played out in contemporary stereotypes of black women. One example is represented in the e-mail "joke": physically aggressive, resistant to extremes, and capable of inflicting great pain, even death. This all-powerful and dangerous image is complicatedly interwoven with images of sexual promiscuity, a drug-induced carefree nature, laziness, and a sense of entitlement (DeParle 2004; hooks 1992): images, in other words, that do not reflect the white middle-class "ideal mother."

Aligning with the race- and class-specific constructions of the hypothetical Barbies representing white and black working-class and poor women, the following sections highlight data demonstrating class-specific tensions between St. Francis mothers and white middle-class women. Enduring tensions between the two groups were both subtly and overtly articulated by teachers, mothers, grandmothers, and the girl participants themselves. The ensuing narratives link teachers' perceptions of home lives to child-protection service workers and the real threat of psychological and social disruption of mother–daughter bonds and the family structure.
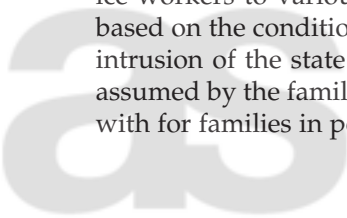
Rose, Her Mother, Daisy, and Her Grandmother Carol

Late in second grade, Rose's classroom teacher told a story about Rose "flat-out" refusing to write a word on her state proficiency test. Ms. Hart informed Rose's mother, Daisy, that Rose would be staying after school to finish the writing section of the test, but after school Rose again refused and slung her test materials across the room. When her hands were empty, Rose threw herself on the ground and kicked, cried, and screamed. Ms. Hart called for assistance, and two women entered the room to carry Rose to the office. While they were trying to control Rose, Daisy came walking toward them. In Ms. Hart's words, "She didn't say a word, she didn't do anything, she just sat there and watched."

Engaged in a popular discourse of the school and mainstream society that working-class and poor parents do not care, Ms. Hart's narration of a scene in which the mother approaches a traumatic event involving her daughter and does not "do anything" reinforces her perception of the stereotype while she infantilizes the mother through shaming her inaction. This process of reducing the adult to the status of a child was prominent in Diane Reay's (1998) study of mothers' involvement in their children's schooling as well as similar studies of motherhood and schooling (e.g., Lareau 2000; Luttrell 1997). Mothers reported being "scared to death" and were even reprimanded for inappropriate behavior in school such as giggling (Reay 1998:120–121). There are alternative, psychosocial readings of Daisy's reaction, however, including the possibility of considering Daisy's own experiences with school authorities.

Although we have no way of knowing, Daisy may have been watching the scene in terror, on the edge of tears herself, hurting for her daughter who was now navigating a similar social experience as Daisy had. In the past Daisy may have been accustomed to Rose's temper tantrums (as I became) and may have dealt with them differently at home. Daisy did not know the three women and may have been intimidated by their looks, their perceived education and social status, and their perceived power that they were visibly exerting over Rose, even in front of the mother. She may have felt helpless as she watched the scenario play out in front of her without knowing how to intervene, or even if she was *permitted* to intervene, in a school hallway. Her response, or lack thereof, may be better understood when we look carefully at how Daisy positioned class-privileged institutional others as in control of her family.

Sitting in Rose's grandmother's house, Daisy towered above me as she walked between the stove and refrigerator preparing the evening meal and pausing to answer my questions or add to the conversation. She told me, "I'm constantly on them [the kids] to keep the house clean so 888-KIDS [Child Protective Services number] won't take my kids away from me." She described the numerous times that this child-protection agency had been called to report the kids' living conditions while they were residing in a bordering state. Daisy's concerns were not new for working-class and poor families; Carolyn Steedman (1982:129) documents a long history of "relentlessly visited" working-class homes in the United Kingdom. From social service workers to various kinds of police, mothers were either praised or condemned based on the conditions of the living space and the cleanliness of their children. This intrusion of the state into private affairs of family life was not only feared but also assumed by the families in this study to be a natural occurrence and a fact to be dealt with for families in poverty.

In a discussion months later, Rose's grandmother Carol told me that Rose came home and reported that her teacher told her to "go sit down" instead of helping her solve a problem, and she told her family, "My teacher don't like me." Daisy and Carol portrayed both the child-protection services agency and the school authorities as others who are closely connected and positioned as powerful and largely in control of the destiny of their family. Child-protection services can come and take the children away, and a teacher can choose not to like a child and let her fail academically. From this perspective, representatives of institutions cannot be trusted but, instead, are considered to be the undesired other who can intervene in the private life of the family without invitation.

Their narratives serve not only as vehicles to justify their disdain for institutions and the people who work within them but also as tools to implicitly teach their beliefs and values to children and grandchildren. Each time I spoke with either Daisy or Carol, Rose and other children were nearby. Often they would be in and out of the apartment, but sometimes they were sitting in the same room for the entire conversation and would interject their opinions when I thought they had not heard enough to know the topic of discussion. While Rose's family was actively constructing workers in school as other, a similar process was happening within the school, as all the girls and their families were judged, including the girl who was considered to have one of the "better" lives.

Sarah and Ms. Rully

In an audio-taped discussion with the girls' first grade teacher (Ms. Rully) I asked about Sarah, who had consistently slipped beneath my radar during my participant-observer role in their classroom. "What about Sarah? She seems so quiet to me," I asked.

Ms. Rully answered with a description of Sarah as more mature than the other girls and not willing to play their games, and she added, "She lives with mom; mom's young. And I think she's around a lot of adults. She is quite concerned about her work. She wants to do well. I'm not sure who pushes her at home, but uh, but the rest is just the maturity difference. She seems more mature than the rest of them."

"Does she have a sister?" I asked, not knowing for sure at the time but vaguely remembering a story Sarah had told about a sister.

"I can't remember. I kept thinking she was an only child for a long time. She's talked about how her mom had to move her mattress up from the basement and into her room. And Sarah rolled off and bumped the alarm clock, and mom didn't wake up."

"Maybe she is [an only child]. Maybe I'm wrong," I inserted.

"I gave Sarah a book bag, and her mom's car got stolen that night with the book bag. Mom has retrieved the car, but the book bag and everything else in the car is gone," Ms. Rully continued.

"Yeah. So, really, she's probably dealing with a lot of issues, too—that don't come out really. . . ."

"Right, her mother has a boyfriend. You know, by looking at her I would think that she probably had one of the better lives, but I don't think she does," Ms. Rully told me with wide eyes.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Well, because mom had her sleeping on a mattress, and they had to bring the mattress in and put it on the floor, and I don't know, I just can't imagine," Ms. Rully faded off with laughter, shaking her head.

The discussion began with a question about Sarah's quiet nature in the classroom but moved rather quickly to a discussion around Sarah's home life, a seemingly logical shift because understanding children's lives outside of school is imperative for powerful education to occur within school (e.g., González 2001). The description of her home life, however, ended with Ms. Rully's laughter and a comment, "I just can't imagine," that makes clear her construction of Sarah and her family as an undesirable other, far different from her self. Sleeping on a mattress on the floor, having a car stolen, a young mom with a boyfriend—these are conditions of living that Ms. Rully truly could not imagine and would not want to experience herself. She admits that she had considered Sarah to have one of the "better lives" based on her physical appearance, grooming, and wardrobe, yet comes to the conclusion, "but I don't think she does."

Sarah and her mother are being constructed and positioned as the other about whom Ms. Rully has come to learn, and the specific aspects of their lives that Ms. Rully has collected align with her understanding of the stereotypes of families in St. Francis. Single parents living in less-than-desirable material conditions, engaging in casual (perhaps perceived as promiscuous) relationships (a boyfriend in this case), and subjecting children to inhumane treatment (sleeping on a mattress on the floor in the basement) all fit the stereotypical caricatures Ms. Rully envisions as St. Francis families. Learning these intimate but isolated and decontextualized details of Sarah's life may reinforce Ms. Rully's generalized images of the St. Francis other.

But where does this leave little girls who cross the social class divide each day to spend several hours with a white middle-class woman who (implicitly or explicitly) judges the girls' mothers in general and their parenting practices in particular? And what kinds of relationships are developed inside an institution that is known to represent white middle-class expectations and values of childhood and family life? The answers are complex, multilayered, and to some degree represented in Faith's journal entry that began this article.

Faith and Her Mother, Chestina

In returning to Faith's notebook entry in spring 2002, Faith may have been writing about an actual dialogue with her mother, or perhaps she was constructing a letter that dealt with a hypothetical issue. Either way Faith's mom is being presented as wanting to know why I was being so *nice* to Faith, and Faith wanted to reassure her mother that *she* (her mother) is the one Faith cares about. Faith writes that she is simply "trying to be nice" to me. Someone (I) was positioned to wield the power of an institution and was making a move toward the private sphere of the family. I was slowly becoming someone who seemed to care for, nurture, and teach a black woman's little girl: not only an intruder into the goings-on of family life but a white, middle-class woman who was potentially gaining the admiration and respect of a young daughter of a working-poor African American mother. Different social positions being constructed and taken up within this triangular web of relations can be analyzed through a lens of critical social theory, but Faith's letter also hints at the psychological implications of such sociality. The following is an attempt to layer on additional insight to the psychosocial experiences between Faith's mother and myself.

Chestina, unlike many of the mothers in the study, never seemed completely comfortable during my visits to her home. We sat on a couch together and exchanged social niceties, but she distanced herself physically and angled her still body awkwardly. Over time I decided that Chestina may have been studying me with what bell hooks (1992) has called the ethnographic gaze, or the practice of researching the white other. Likely adding to Chestina's discomfort, I did not always feel comfortable and was often intimidated by her stare. Although time eased the tensions between us and we gradually built a friendly acquaintanceship, Chestina was not always home when I had scheduled a visit.[1]

Without a trusting relationship with Faith's mother, I found it impossible to ask her how she felt about me being a part of Faith's school life. And although my class history was similar to Chestina's, the fact that she is African American and I am white made me reluctant to attempt opening a conversation using my personal experiences of marginalization as a starting point (something I did do from time to time with some of the white mothers). In the end, the psychosocial experiences of skin color, and undoubtedly white guilt and shame (e.g., Probyn 2004), inhibited me from engaging with Chestina in the same ways I did with the white working-poor mothers. Put another way, my hyperawareness of our racialized social locations and my personal experience with the painful psychological implications of feeling marginalized or "less than" hindered my work in this context. Instead of forging forward with important questions relating to the study, my work with Chestina was sometimes a bit like walking on eggshells. As a result I was never able to open a conversation around the tensions Faith so aptly narrates in her journal because I would not dare broach the topic. I assumed it would have been painful for Chestina (although perhaps it would not have), and I knew it would have been painful for me.

However, moving on with the study, ignoring data that are symbolic of the layers of relational complexity among teacher-researchers, mothers, and daughters, was not an option. Because I could not muster the strength to speak with Chestina about such complications, I turned to another mother in the study to help me further understand the complexities articulated in Faith's writing. Lori, Cadence's mother, helped to shed some light on Faith's entry, and her narratives serve as yet another look at the enduring tensions between working-class and poor mothers and white middle-class females who care for their daughters. Lori's narratives and my analyses pull together the overarching themes of this article: ongoing constructions of *others* between institutional workers and black and white working-class mothers, the intertwined nature of school authorities and the state, and the psychosocial realities of marginalization and power, including the threat of white middle-class women to working-class and poor mother–daughter bonds.

Lori and Cadence

Nearly two years into the study Lori, Cadence's mother, began to call me from time to time to schedule visits for informal talks and interviews. A tall, outwardly confident, strong, and articulate woman, Lori did not seem intimidated by me as she talked openly about a variety of personal and professional issues. After several weeks of thinking about Faith's journal entry, I decided to ask for Lori's advice about the discomfort between Faith's mother and myself. Immediately Lori told me blatantly, "I didn't trust you at first," and as she continued talking she began to fidget, making

me nervous and fidgety (something I had not experienced with her before). Lori said she considered herself a good mother and thought that Cadence had a good family life but implied that perhaps some mothers (but not *she*) were uncomfortable with me because I was offering their daughters something that the mothers were unable to provide: "Somethin' they're not gettin' at home." The idea that Lori would suggest that I, a white, middle-class female schoolteacher and researcher, would have something to offer girls that their working-poor mothers could not echoes the rhetoric presented earlier in this article that economic privilege buys parenting power.

Lori had internalized at least parts of the argument that middle-class mothers parent in "normal" or superior ways, producing rational, successful children in school, and working-class mothers are somehow "abnormal" or inferior, producing children who are less successful and less rational. Therefore, she envisioned me as someone who would fit the category of ideal mother, having something to offer the girls that the mothers simply were not (or could not) provide. Lori suggested this as one reason why Faith's mother may not have trusted me, but I want to argue that in some way, Lori also perceived me as an ideal mother who offered her daughter something she could not. This position, the enduring psychosocial tensions between mother and the white female middle-class teacher and researcher, can present a threat to the mother–daughter relationship. The threat can be either indirect (as in the case of Faith's journal entry) or very direct, as discussed in the following narrative.

When Cadence was two years old, she and her sisters were attending a child care facility that Lori considered to be "high-fallutin'." Single and working two full-time jobs at the time, Lori was relieved to have a nice caretaking arrangement for her daughters. Only two weeks after her girls began attending the day care, however, one of the care providers called Lori in the middle of the day and requested that she pick up her children. Accused of carrying lice into the day care center, the girls were required to stay home for one week. In addition to this, the care providers complained that the girls wore dirty clothes and needed to come to school better groomed. Upon their return to the facility, a teacher reported Lori to Child Protective Services because of a bruise on one of the girls.

Lori said: "Social services came in the house and saw dog poop. The court took the kids. Cadence was only two years old. They said, 'You don't have clean clothes, and your house is filthy.' " The girls were taken from their home not seeing or talking to their mother until supervised visits were permitted.

Lori said: "They [social services] saw dirty clothes on the floor in a basket, dishes in the sink, and food on the counter. They saw stains on the carpet. I said, 'I work two jobs!' " The court ordered Lori to work only one job and to change the conditions of the girls' living before she was able to petition for custody. After moving, giving the dog away, and losing one of her jobs as a result of missing work, Lori began the long haul of getting her children back. Describing and enacting the frustration and violation she felt, Lori reported telling the judge, "Fuck you, you can't tell me how to raise these kids!" Following the winter break (a full month after her daughters were taken from the home), the girls were reunited with their mother and received regular home visits from social service workers for six months.

Lori said: "And this is how we fell into this thing." This single statement set up a clear discussion around the tensions between middle-class and working-class women. These tensions, as Lori articulated them, were grounded in standards of

mothering and assumptions around what kind of (classed) woman is most capable of performing mothering duties.

Lori then told the story about a miscommunication between her and her mother that left the three girls home alone (the oldest in third grade at the time), a neighbor woman calling Child Protective Services, and the children landing, for a second time, in foster care. Lori said: "They had a very nice foster mother. She bought them new clothes and everything. She was single and lived in a beautiful mansion. They had all the brand new things that I couldn't give them. Cadence didn't want to come with me."

Lori and I both dabbed at the tears rolling down our faces as she divulged details of her perception of this foster mother. After Lori regained custody of the girls following a number of months of them living with Janeene (the foster mother), the court ordered supervised visits for Janeene and the girls. Later Janeene was determined to adopt the girls and petitioned the court for full custody.

From Lori's perspective, Janeene believed that she could "provide *all* this" and questioned what Lori could possibly provide for the girls in comparison. Lori's hypothetical response was, "I'm their *mother.* I can provide more than you!" But Lori was not always so confident and began to believe, herself, that the material life that can be purchased with middle-class economic buying power might be better for the girls.

Lori said: "I thought it was better for them. I thought I was worthless. I had a three-room apartment; she had a big mansion. [The girls] had their own bedrooms." Lori then began considering giving up the girls to a woman who was perceived as an "ideal mother." In the end she was not able to follow through with such plans, and Lori fought Janeene in court and was eventually awarded full custody of her three girls.

A direct connection is articulated by Lori among the harsh judgments of the high-fallutin' white middle-class female child care providers at school, Child Protective Services, foster care, and the real threat of losing one's children to a white, middle-class woman who has been constructed as a better-qualified mother. Just as in the work of a number of scholars writing about parenting and social class including Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001), Lori's experiences were saturated with her surveillance and regulation by middle-class women. These experiences lead many mothers who parent on the margins to create, maintain, and justify fear and suspicion of institutional others. Lori blatantly said, "I live in constant fear [of Child Protective Services]."

Discussion

In several examples portrayed in this article, mothers recognized institutions as arms of the state and feared them just as they abhorred and ridiculed them. This ongoing preoccupation is lived socially and materially, but it is also experienced emotionally and felt in a deeply psychic way. A social analysis of such dynamics, then, only begins to untangle the web of psychological and social implications of living on the lower rungs of a societal ladder and being constructed as an undesirable other and less-than-ideal mother. Interactions that are saturated with fear (or suspicion, or anger, or resentment) can be detrimental in the educational experiences of children and families and unproductive for teachers and school authorities who work to transform systemic inequities. Attentive, particularistic responsiveness is necessary to move beyond the processes of continuous othering and toward a moral coming together of those who have been othered. With this moral philosophy in mind, I began working

as a teacher-researcher to dismantle the carefully constructed barriers between institutional workers and the residents of St. Francis. Building genuine relationships with the young girls is where I began, often sharing my personal history as a girl growing up working-poor. This relationship building, however, created new complications that I had not consciously considered as a former classroom teacher or as an activist ethnographer focused on class relations. Instead of conjuring fearful images of a white middle-class woman reporting a family to Child Protective Services, the relationships I constructed with the girls left at least some of the mothers fearful of losing a daughter's love to someone who could provide class-specific experiences that may have been out of the reach of the mothers.

As demonstrated in the narratives, mothers' and grandmothers' thoughts and opinions are rarely kept hidden from children. Instead, the girls in this study were often present, and even included, when families constructed school authorities as not trustworthy, unethical, and even to blame when family members experienced failure or trauma. Girls are then positioned quite strangely as they listen to and engage in such discourses at home and then respond to a teacher at school who might be trying to break down home–school barriers and build responsive relationships. This kind of relationship is exactly what scared Lori the most and perhaps the other mothers too, who never felt comfortable enough to articulate it to me as a white middle-class female teacher-researcher.

Enduring tensions between white and black poor and working-class women and the white middle-class women who work with their children are inevitable as long as constructions of the ideal mother are grounded in the resources of white middle-class women. Teacher-ethnographers are well positioned to study such tensions as well as to engage in projects aimed at reducing those tensions and informing the larger community of educators, researchers, and policy makers. Regardless of how progressive they might be, classroom practices and school reform efforts that ignore the psychosocial dynamics of poor and working-class women, their children, and their traditional surveillance by white middle-class women (including teachers and researchers) will not address the historical and present strains between home and school that make school success elusive and an ambiguous journey for many marginalized students.

Implications for Teacher Education and Educational Anthropology

Critical ethnographies that work toward understanding participants' perspectives are valuable tools in the education of future teachers. Coupled with conscious deconstruction of privilege in our society, reading and engaging in lively discussions around such research could be an important starting point for future teachers to gain enough knowledge and confidence to challenge mainstream discourses around working-class and poor children and families. In addition, future teachers can learn and practice anthropological methods and conduct miniethnographies or case studies around one particular child and family within their student-teaching placements; but perhaps most importantly, critical reflection and reflexivity throughout the ethnographic process will help future teachers gain insight to how and why they are being positioned in particular ways, how they are positioning others, and what they can do to build trustworthy relationships across the social class divide.
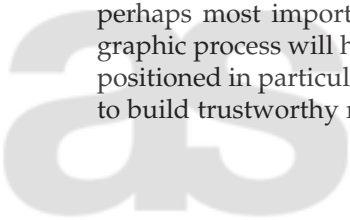
Two implications important for anthropologists to consider include deep, nuanced analyses of social class and critical reflexivity when working with participants across the social class divide. Class analyses within educational anthropology are significant and need to include not only the material living conditions, social practices, and various forms of capital (e.g., Bourdieu 1994) of individuals and groups but also the complex psychosocial dynamics of ongoing interactions with middle-class others in institutions. This serious consideration of how social class is lived both psychologically and socially would deepen our understandings of constructs such as social reproduction and better inform practice across disciplines, including education.

In addition to the ways in which we analyze data and understand social and psychological phenomena, I would argue that white middle-class females engaging in ethnographic research with children need to be especially reflexive about their positionality as representative of an "ideal mother" and the psychosocial implications for the children and mothers as participants. This critical reflexivity would incorporate race, class, and gender analyses of the potential tensions between researcher and participants, as well as purposely locate sites of precarious positionings of young girls between a privileged researcher who may be constructed as an ideal mother and working-class or poor mothers who know they are perceived as less-than-ideal mothers through the eyes of mainstream society. As Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody remind us in their critique of Bourdieu's exclusion of the psychological experiences of social class marginalization, "It would be ridiculous to assume that the targets of . . . pejorative evaluations would not also be able to [recognize the reasons for such evaluations] in themselves and others" (2001:39). Ignoring the effect of such constructions of a self by others attempts to tease apart that which cannot be unraveled, the inextricably linked physical, social, and psychological effects of experience. It would be "ridiculous" then to assume that working-class and poor mothers and their daughters would not be able to recognize in themselves differences from white, middle-class females who work as educators and researchers. Attending to such tensions is imperative for ethnographers working in the psychosocial landscapes of mothers and daughters.

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Note

1. Chestina surprised me with a phone call in fall 2005 to report that Faith had one of the highest scores in the fifth grade on the high-stakes state test. Only maintaining loose and informal contact since spring 2004, I had not seen Chestina or talked with her on the telephone in nearly a year. The passage of time and my physical absence (having moved to a different state in summer 2004) perhaps created just the space and distance necessary for Chestina to feel that I was no longer an immediate threat.
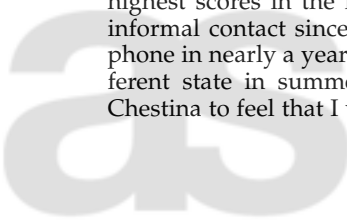
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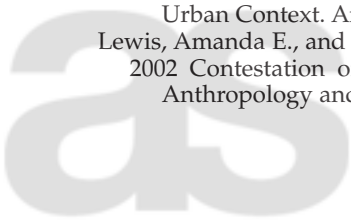
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