

Book Review
An Unexpected Minority:
White Kids in an Urban School

By Edward W. Morris
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Edward W. Morris' book, *An Unexpected Minority: White Kids in an Urban School*, is an excellent example of how various modes of difference and inequality intersect with Whiteness, suggesting new ways to understand Whiteness, White privilege, and more importantly, sites for potential change. This book is based on a two-year ethnographic study of a Texas middle school, in which Morris observed students and interviewed teachers. The school, which is located in a low-income urban area, was attended by a predominantly African-American and Latino student population, with Asian-Americans and Whites as the numerical minority population. The study of White students who attend a predominantly racial and ethnic minority low-income, urban school enables Morris to challenge hegemonic notions of Whiteness, a continual process which marginalizes non-Whites and denigrates White people who do not fit the hegemonic ideal, and reveals the ways in which White students are nonetheless advantaged by the school's racialized institutional organization.

In addition to problematizing hegemonic notions of Whiteness, Morris's ethnography makes significant contributions to Whiteness theory and research on White advantage in education. Previous ethnographies have either underscored structural practices such as tracking, limited school resources, and decaying buildings (Dance, 2002; Ferguson, 2000; Ogbu, 1978; Valenzuela, 1999), which disadvantage racial and ethnic minority students, or highlighted social class positions and locations which challenge the normative value of Whiteness (Hartigan, 1997; Perry, 2002). However, Morris provides a new perspective in his ethnography

by addressing how schooling practices and place—“someone’s regional and residential location” (Morris, 2006, p. 21)—combine with race, class, and gender to construct, alter, and maintain meanings and advantages associated with Whiteness. Morris contributes to the existing body of literature on Whiteness and White educational advantages by using this intersectional conceptual foundation to focus on the experiences of White kids in an urban rather than suburban school.

Morris writes that a triadic framework of hegemony, reproduction, and hidden curriculum “provides a way for us to conceptualize differences and inequalities within and without Whiteness and focus on the practices through which schools may actually reproduce these various inequalities” (Morris, 2006, p. 29). His book explicitly draws from contemporary theories of hegemony and reproduction to illuminate the ways in which cultural capital and disciplinary procedures construct hegemonic notions of Whiteness, thus conferring educational privilege (Bourdieu, 1977; Farkas, 1996; Ferguson, 2000; Foucault, [1977] 1995; Lareau, 1987). Morris explains that these theories suggest “different expectations of cultural competency from students and different procedures of discipline” (Morris, 2006, p. 29) which construct Whites as the norm and African-Americans and Latinos as deviations from this. Moreover, Morris builds upon these theories when he merges them with the concept of hidden curriculum. He also expands the reader’s understanding of the ways in which Whiteness is rearticulated through the students’ performance and presentation of race. Morris focuses on student interaction and peer culture, sites which are frequently ignored in research when attempting to re-interpret the meaning of Whiteness and social power relations. His observations demonstrate that the White youths who attended this school were aware that Whiteness required certain kinds of material support, such as residential location and financial resources. Lacking such support, the White students challenged and negotiated hegemonic norms of Whiteness, defining themselves more on the cultural terms of the African-American and Latino students. In addition, Morris’s ethnography identifies schooling processes as significant determinants in the reproduction of hegemonic Whiteness and educational inequity. Morris describes the structural characteristics of schools by comparing teacher perceptions and disciplinary procedures for White students with those for African-American and Latino students.

Considering the important role that youths play in accepting or resisting hegemonic definitions of race, class, and gender only works to strengthen Morris’s theoretical arguments. Previous scholarly works indicate that many White kids in multiracial settings deviate from stereotypical, hegemonic notions of Whiteness (Hartigan, 1999; Perry, 2002).

Therefore, it is essential to understand their stories and perspectives in order to suggest possible sites for resisting and subverting the social reproduction of White privilege. The experiences of White students who genuinely value the opinions and friendships of their non-White peers contribute to more comprehensive and edifying perspectives about race, racial distinctions, and race relations.

In addition, the focus on marginalized White youths in a low-income, urban school complicates Fordham's (1996) notion of "acting White." According to Fordham (1996), "acting White" is an African-American critique of other African-Americans who have accepted and endorsed the dominant, White norms and ideology which are generated and maintained by institutions such as schools. Generally speaking, most African-Americans abhor the idea of "acting White" because it implies an attempt to control and dominate the Other, sometimes including other African-Americans (Fordham, 1996, p. 23). This concept suggests an adoption of a worldview as well as a racial and cultural identity that is particular to the Black community. The White youths in Morris' ethnography also opposed the notion of "acting White." Through their behavior, interaction, and stylistic sensibilities, White students rejected cultural forms that emblemized White dominance. Perhaps because they were marginalized from the mainstream White community, the White students in Morris's study had a more progressive and flexible understanding of race and racial identity. Their behavior and style of dress implied an understanding that "acting White" was associated with certain ideology, forms of domination, and racist values. Thus, they rejected embracing hegemonic notions of Whiteness and moved beyond the rigid boundaries of race by embracing African-American and Latino forms of culture.

Morris's theoretical and methodological findings support the claim of his book: while the intersection of race, class, gender, and place connote new meanings of Whiteness, the rewards and privileges associated with Whiteness remain intact. The first chapter describes the reasons for the study and the previous research on which the book is based, and introduces the organization for the book's remaining chapters. More specifically, Morris establishes the theoretical context of his book by introducing the study of Whiteness, and the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. He explains this theoretical context in relation to education and sources of educational inequity and difference. Morris also provides a review of changing immigration trends that are relevant to meaning of Whiteness and reproduction of White advantage in education. However, the content of the introduction could have been more effectively organized. For example, it does not offer detailed explanations or definitions of the theories, such as Whiteness, hegemony, and reproduction,

which Morris weaves throughout the remaining chapters. The reader must wait until chapter two before Morris explains and defines the ethnography's theoretical framework. While the theories and research woven throughout Chapter Two are quite voluminous, his tone and writing style are accessible to both academic and nonacademic readers who are interested in theories of Whiteness and in disrupting the reproduction of White privilege in education. In addition, Morris neglects to establish the historical and contemporary context his research. The reader must wait until chapter three before Morris discusses the changing economic and cultural demographics of the school's community. Given that the book draws heavily upon observations and interviews, such a discussion may have helped the reader better understand Morris's approach to both the theoretical and methodological aspects of his research.

Chapter Four of the book describes the teachers' perspectives of students in relation to the historical and contemporary context of the school. It focuses on the discourse used by African-American and White teachers to interpret the social class background of both White and non-White students. A critical finding of Chapter Four is that while teachers' interpretations of class background appeared to slightly alter the educational advantages associated with Whiteness, closer analysis revealed that such advantages—higher-track placement and academic awards—largely remained intact. According to Morris, while social class may “cloud the projection of privilege associated with Whiteness” (Morris, 2006, p. 130), it does not disrupt this privilege.

In Chapter Five, Morris addresses the dress code and disciplinary procedures as part of the hidden curriculum which normalizes Whiteness, and demonizes African-American and Latino students. Exploring the intersection of race, gender, and social class, Morris finds that Whiteness remains the normative category that, when combined with gender, defines appropriate masculine and feminine behavior. Compared to African-American and Latino boys and girls, White boys and girls were disciplined less, their behavior appearing either harmless or docile. Moreover, Morris asserts that the effects of this hidden curriculum subverted the goal of providing all students with an education and a means for upward social mobility by pushing African-American and Latino students away from school.

However, a limitation of Chapters Four and Five, which Morris candidly discusses, are the ways in which African-American and White historical relations, as well as Morris's presence as a White, male researcher, may have affected how teachers talked about and disciplined students. He asserts that African-American teachers perpetuated White institutional privilege by disciplining White students less than African-

American and Latino students. Morris suggests the African-American teachers' actions may have been based on apprehension of historical White retaliation against African-Americans who criticized Whites. Moreover, White teachers may have been trying to demonstrate that they weren't playing racial favorites, thus speaking more pejoratively about the White students. Although it is not likely to be known the degree to which historical relations and Morris's presence affected teachers' perceptions, readers may want to keep in mind what such limitations suggest about the research findings and the potential for change. By not including an insider/outsider research perspective, Morris forecloses opportunities for deeper reflexivity and richer analysis.

In Chapter Six, Morris focused on peer culture and student interaction to examine the racial perspectives adopted by the White students. One of Morris's findings is that Whiteness did not represent power or privilege within the culture of both White and non-White students. Whiteness became a fluid concept as it intersected with class and gender, and White kids tended to distance themselves from stereotypical definitions of Whiteness, which enabled them to establish closer emotional ties with African-American and Latino students. White students were active agents who rearticulated Whiteness to establish relations across race, class, and gender lines. In essence, the students created a concept of Whiteness that was not built upon a foundation of dominance. However, the findings also indicated a danger of romanticizing White border crossing. Given the findings of the previous chapters, which demonstrate the mechanisms whereby White advantage in education is protected, the reader may be dubious when Morris alludes to the possibility of these new forms of Whiteness to disrupt White educational privilege. Despite the students' rearticulation of Whiteness, schooling practices by teachers and administrators still protected White privilege. This raises more questions not sufficiently addressed by Morris about agency, rearticulation, and the continuation of White privilege in spite of the fluidity of Whiteness and resistance against it.

Despite the limitations, Morris's book makes a valuable contribution to the existing research and literature on race and White educational privilege. By examining the intersection of race, class, gender, and place in schooling processes, the book describes how students construct and alter meanings associated with Whiteness. In doing so, it adopts a language of hope for the possibility of one day ending racial dominance and privilege, creating truly equitable educational opportunities. The book is a recommended read for those seeking a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of cultural and structural factors which affect students' school experiences.

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