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Source: *Social Problems*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (November 2002), pp. 544-562

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society for the Study of Social Problems

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2002.49.4.544>

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Classed Out: The Challenges of Social Class in Black Community Change

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The growth in the black middle class since the Civil Rights movement has spawned an interest in the relationships between the black middle class and the black poor. Scholars are interested in understanding how social and cultural capital among the black middle class both ameliorate and/or sustain the conditions of the black working poor. While this literature provides us with an understanding about the role of social and cultural capital in the lives of poor and middle class blacks, it says little about how ideology functions in intra-racial, multi-class coalitions. Through materialist and culturalist frames of community problems confronting the black working poor, I argue that culturalist frames of community problems fail to address black working class issues. Drawing on a case study of a community's effort to use Afrocentric ideology to improve an urban school, I demonstrate how black middle class community members misdiagnosed the problem at the school through culturalist framing. Findings indicate that social class plays a significant role in how problems are defined, interpreted and addressed.

In 1957, E. Franklin Frazier argued that the black middle class in America suffered from an identity crisis. He believed that while new middle class blacks enjoyed the benefits of higher income, education and social status, they suffered from a loss of cultural identity brought on by assimilation into the American mainstream (Frazier 1957). Since that time, there has been a dramatic growth in the black middle class in the United States. The growth in income levels, educational attainment and middle class lifestyles spawned a burgeoning interest among researchers about the experience of the new black middle class (Landry 1987; Pattillo-McCoy 1999).

Recently, scholars have focused their attention on understanding the relationship between the black working poor and the black middle class (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Wilson 1996a). Scholars are interested in understanding how social and cultural capital among the black middle class both ameliorate and/or sustain the conditions of the black working poor (Wilson 1996a). The prevailing argument here is that the black middle class escape the confines of urban communities, and in their exodus, take with them valuable social and cultural resources. Along with urban problems such as unemployment, the removal of black role models and the displacement of middle class values all contribute to urban decay (Anderson 1999; Wilson 1996a, 1996b).

While this research is useful in our understanding of the role of social and cultural capital among the black middle class and working poor, it presumes that an out-migration of the black middle class from urban communities severs pre-existing social ties with the black working poor (Wilson 1996a). Pattillo-McCoy (2000) demonstrated that while upwardly mobile blacks leave poor communities, they often maintain relationships with poor and working class blacks through neighborhood organizations such as churches, non-profit community organizations and other forms of civic engagement.

While Wilson (1996a) and Pattillo-McCoy (1999) provide us with an understanding of the role of social capital in cross-class relationships, we know little about how class-culture

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS, Vol. 49, No. 4, pages 544–562. ISSN: 0037-7791; online ISSN: 1533-8533

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functions in black multi-class coalitions. A deeper understanding of class-culture in black multi-class coalitions might highlight how social class influences how racially homogenous communities interpret and respond to community problems. This paper examines the challenges of divergent class interests in ethnically homogenous grassroots organizations. Specifically, the paper demonstrates how black middle class members of a small grassroots organization frame community issues in ways that fail to address the needs of the working poor. First, I argue that the middle class use their skills, and other forms of human capital to define community issues, but overlook the interests of working poor. Borrowing from Fred Rose's (1997) class-cultural theory of new social movements, I demonstrate the ways in which the black middle class use their education, occupational skills and other forms of social capital to articulate community issues. Second, I present a case study of how middle class blacks, influenced by Afrocentric ideology, impacted a community attempt to improve a working class neighborhood high school in Oakland, California. I examine the Afrocentric transformation initiative at McClymonds High School, and argue that the local black working class effort to improve the school was co-opted by middle class blacks who changed the original intent and potential outcomes of the initiative.

Data Collection and Methodology

There are two primary sources of evidence: (1) published materials from periodicals, newsletters, official school documents, and the project's literature and (2) informal interviews with local community members involved in the project to improve the school. The first source of evidence included reports, newsletters, unpublished manuscripts, memorandum curriculum, training manuals, and community flyers. I also utilized the Oakland Public Library's archives of the various local newspaper articles about the Afrocentric transformation of McClymonds High School. These articles were commonly found in the *Oakland Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Oakland Post* and *The Montclairian*. Annual Performance Reports from OUSD, economic trend reports from the City of Oakland and West Oakland neighborhood associations and various demographic reports published by local community/economic development agencies all constituted data for this study.¹

The second source of evidence came from 40 interviews that I conducted between October 1997 and September 1998. There were two types of respondents for this study. The first, consisted of administrators, teachers, and school faculty who initiated and/or participated in the Afrocentric transformation. The second category of respondents was Oakland community residents who possess knowledge of political, economic and social changes in Oakland over the past ten years. Interviews were conducted in administrative offices, homes, and other locations such as parks that were chosen by the participants. The interviews were generally one hour in length and were recorded for content analysis. In general, these interviews usually were arranged with an initial phone call. The intent of these interviews was to learn about the Afrocentric Transformation project itself and to construct a general picture of key players in the project. Using techniques suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), I would jot down notes, ideas and concepts that emerged immediately following each interview. My field notes contained two types of information: first, a general description of what happened with particular attention given to the person's role in the community change effort, and second,

1. These reports include the following: The Urban Strategies Council and Youth Development Initiative Working Group 1996; The Urban Strategies Council 1996; Oakland Unified School District 1992, 1996; California Department of Employment 1963; Urban Strategies Council and Youth Development Initiative Working Group 1996; Gushiken, Hillmer, and Noguera 1988; Landis and Guhathakurta 1989; Nobles 1992; Oakland Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR) 1990; Commission for Positive Change in the Oakland Public Schools 1992; Detroit Public Schools 1992; Wilson 1970; Yee 1998.

Table 1 • Data and Sources of Evidence

<i>Type of Data</i>	<i>Quantity and Content</i>
Administrator interviews	15 transcribed interviews ranging from 1 hour to 2 hours in length
Community interviews	25 transcribed interviews ranging from 1 hour to 3 hours in length
BUFFER meeting minutes	8 transcribed meetings ranging from 2 to 5 hours
BUFFER newsletters and flyers	13 newsletters and flyers date range from October 1985 to December 1991
Oakland Public Schools superintendent memoranda	3 two page memos
Oakland Public School Board meeting minutes	5 two-hour meetings during 1992
Oakland Public School OUSD performance reports	Approximately 200 pages of data ranging from 1987 to 1994
Various reports (economic trends, black population demographic information about blacks in Oakland)	14 reports ranging from 40 to 100 pages

what I learned from the interview or something particularly interesting that was said during our interaction.

Finally, information comes from numerous informal conversations with community residents. Having worked in Oakland for approximately five years as an educator and as the Executive Director of a youth development agency, I developed relationships with a number of community residents, Oakland Unified School District officials and administrators, and a number of youth in several local high schools. My role, as both a researcher and an educator, was helpful in developing relationships with potential informants because I had already worked with them in other capacities. These contacts served as my primary source of interviews. In 1995, my wife and I purchased a home in East Oakland and during the process of looking for a home, we made a conscious effort to live in an area of Oakland where we wouldn't be completely removed from the black working class. The neighborhood where I live is comprised of both working class and middle class residents. In qualitative research, I would certainly be considered an insider. By living and working in Oakland, I have a distinct advantage with regard to knowing "the lay of the land." Consequently, I experienced few problems getting around and was well aware of the major changes occurring in Oakland. For example, in West Oakland, my primary site, I witnessed the removal of thousands of units of federally subsidized housing over a period of three years, and I have become acquainted with some of the displaced residents of this redevelopment. Some of this ethnography borrows from the informal conversations I had with residents of West Oakland and from acquaintances who work in the West Oakland community.

Defining the Black Middle Class

There have been many proposed definitions of the term black middle class. For some, it is primarily an economic construct (Landry 1987), for others, it is a social and cultural category that incorporates values and norms (Rose 1997). Attempting to define the black middle class is a difficult task for two reasons. First, the black middle class is not a monolithic category. In fact, many scholars fail to acknowledge that the black middle class itself is fragmented. The

black middle class is comprised of an array of incomes, professions, and educational levels. One main distinction, however, between the black middle class and the black working poor is that the black middle class have professions, income, and educational levels that differ, in some way, from that of manual laborers (Abercrombie and Urry 1983). Second, the black middle class is not a fixed category. The black middle class experience economic shifts that move back and forth between blue-collar and white-collar income levels and occupations (Pattillo-McCoy 1999).

In this paper, the term black middle class will refer to as both an economic and a cultural category. As an economic category, the black middle class are those who share similar occupational identities through intellectual labor, rather than manual labor (Cotgrove and Duff 1980). Here, I make a distinction between the type of labor, rather than the amount of income, because income can obscure conceptual differences between working and middle class culture. For example, Hochschild (1995) found that the black middle class held strong beliefs in formal credentialed education because their credentials contributed to higher incomes and ultimately a higher quality of life. Their knowledge, skills, and abilities that accompany formal education are used to write, publish, and influence policy. As a result, their personal identity and self-worth is intimately tied to career accomplishments (Eder 1993; Ehrenreich 1989). In contrast, Rose (1997) noted that while working class salaries could sometimes be commensurate with middle class salaries, the working-class find less personal fulfillment in work that is mechanical, tedious, and dedicated to others. Working class culture tends to view work as something one does to make a living, rather than a symbol of one's identity. For example, a plumber might earn more than a schoolteacher; yet, I classify the plumber as working class because he/she shares a set of beliefs, behaviors and tastes that differ from that of the teacher.

Revisiting The Out-Migration of The Black Middle Class

As an economic and cultural category, the black middle class experienced dramatic growth in the post civil-rights era largely due to expanded opportunities in government sector jobs (Benjamin 1991). This growth raised questions about why some blacks seemed to take advantage of economic opportunities made available by civil rights legislation and others did not (Pattillo-McCoy 2000). Wilson's (1978) seminal work, *The Declining Significance of Race*, spawned healthy debate about the forces responsible for growing numbers of the black poor. Wilson's central thesis was that structural changes in the economy made it possible for some blacks to take advantage of affirmative action programs in education and employment which was then translated into higher incomes. For other blacks, the affirmative action opportunities were out of reach. Wilson argued that as a result, there is a growing chasm in the black community, one middle class and the other poor or "underclass." Wilson's (1987) position was that middle class blacks translated their socio-economic success into residential mobility by seeking safer neighborhoods, better homes, and higher quality schools (Pattillo-McCoy 2000). One of the reasons why the black underclass failed to take advantage of affirmative action opportunities, according to Wilson, was that the migration of middle class blacks from the ghetto to the suburbs removed social capital and resources which could be translated to employment and consequently stable incomes necessary to sustain healthy communities.

Pattillo-McCoy (1999) challenged Wilson's out-migration thesis. She argued, "Wilson's discussion of black middle class out-migration did not include sufficient consideration of out-migration outcomes, thus giving the impression that the black middle class had escaped the constraints of racial segregation and separated from the black poor" (p. 5). Through an analysis of geographic, census, and ethnographic data, Pattillo-McCoy illustrated persistent patterns of racial segregation within a black middle class neighborhood in Chicago. She argued that the increase in the number of black middle class families led to a geographic expansion of black

middle class enclaves. What marks the post civil-rights era, according to Pattillo-McCoy, is not the out-migration of the black middle class, but rather the downward class spiral of black middle class neighborhoods brought on by persistent racial segregation.

Pattillo-McCoy's thesis raises several questions about the relationship between black middle class and poor communities. First, if relationships between middle class and poor blacks are not severed because of out-migration, how does class ideology (i.e., values, beliefs, perceptions) function in cross-class coalitions? Second, how do black middle class and black poor residents define and address civic and community problems? Third, what opportunities and challenges exist in intra-racial, cross-class collective action?

Scholars have noted that the growing gap between the black working poor and the black middle class fostered divergent ideological positions on how to achieve racial equality (Glasgow 1981; Marable 1994). For the black working poor who are ravaged by low-wage work, poor housing conditions, and unsafe neighborhoods, equality is realized by addressing the material reality of their everyday lives. Hence, raising wages, increasing school spending, and providing quality housing all contribute to a "materialist" ideology.² For the black middle class who are less concerned with day-to-day survival strategies, racism and racial discrimination continues to be the most significant barrier to racial equality (Cose 1993). From the black middle class perspective, equality is realized by the elimination of institutional and systemic racist practices. For example, Hochschild (1995) found in a comprehensive survey of opinion poll data and attitude surveys over a 40 year period, that the black middle class were less confident than their working class counterparts about full participation in American society. The black working poor, despite economic hardships, maintained faith in meritocratic ideas. Similarly, Tripp (1987) argued that as blacks experience economic mobility, their political and ideological perspectives about how to address social issues change.

Neither Wilson's nor Pattillo-McCoy's out-migration thesis adequately address this process. While Wilson presents a powerful explanation about the relationship between the economy, race, and social class (Wilson 1978, 1987, 1996a), his out-migration thesis oversimplifies the role of black middle class culture because it presumes that the presence of black middle class culture is a marker for productive working class communities. While middle class blacks provide social resources to poor communities they also employ an ideology that sometimes silences the voices of the working poor. Similarly, while Pattillo-McCoy presents a more in-depth exploration into social and kinship networks between both classes, we know very little about how social class and class culture function in black multi-class coalitions.

Identity, Ideology, and Interests: Defining Black Middle Class Collective Action

The post-civil rights era is marked by dramatic class differentiation within the black community (Pattillo-McCoy 2000). In 1970, the percentage of black families earning more than \$75,000 per year was 4%, by 1998 the number tripled to 12% (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). In addition, the percentage of blacks who earned a bachelors degree in 1970 was 6.1%, by 1994 the percentage of blacks who earned bachelors degrees was 16.1% (Hornor, 1994). While the quality of life for middle class blacks has dramatically improved, they have worsened for the black working poor (Allen and Farley 1986). For example, between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of black families earning less than \$10,000 per year grew from 17% in 1980 to 20% in 1990. Similarly, one-third of all blacks lived below the poverty line in 1980. By 1992, that increased to nearly 35% (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

2. This term is borrowed from Marable and Mullings (1994). They use the term to refer to racial equality attained by improving the material everyday conditions such as wages, quality of housing, neighborhood safety.

The widening class cleavage in the black community raises questions about the how class ideology translates to class action?³ Rose (1997) argued that collective action reflects evolving structure of social class and the particular strategies adopted by its members. He viewed collective action as class-based, meaning that social class provides an ideological framework by which its members interpret the world. Similar to Bourdieu's conception of habitus (1984), his class-cultural theory argued that the structure of social class is experienced through internalized values, beliefs, and strategies. The internalization of these values, beliefs, and strategies influence the ways in which people interpret their environment. It is class "habitus, the internalized form of class condition" and the conditioning it entails (Bourdieu 1984) that informs ideology and collective action. Similarly, Inglehart (1990a) noted that for the middle class, who are free from preoccupation with economic sustainability and day-to-day survival, shift their attention toward the search for personal meaning, and quality of life issues. As a result, the "postmaterialist" generation discovered new cultural values and engaged in new forms of collective action.

Regarding the black middle class, Tripp (1987) examined the shifts in the ideological patterns of former low-income black student activists who now comprise a sizable sector in the black middle class. His longitudinal study found that participants experienced ideological shifts in their views, strategies, and tactics toward improving the conditions for black people. He concluded that although former students (activists and non activists) were less collectivist and militant, their commitment to advancing the interests of the black community remained strong.

What is significant here is that Tripp documented how class position translated to class mobilization. He argued that upward mobility accompanied changes in one's ideology, values, and strategies for improving the conditions for poor blacks. He concluded that although middle class blacks remained committed to ameliorating the conditions for poor blacks, they became more conservative in their view about how to bring about social change. Volunteering in after school programs, mentoring youth, or joining black civic organizations were social change strategies that did not call into question fundamental beliefs about economic inequality and poverty.

Similarly, Stafford (1995) noted that for the black middle class that emerged after the civil rights movement, progress meant not only a stable income, but also the ability to define itself around black culture lost through integration. He maintained that for the black middle class, reclaiming and defining their identity became a form of collective action for those blacks who are constantly torn between fitting in with white mainstream America and asserting their own cultural identities.

This is attributed to the fact that middle class blacks expressed far greater resentment toward a system that continues to discriminate based on race. Cose (1993) attributed this discontent to the fact that middle class blacks have worked hard, earned an education, saved money to buy a house and, "paid all the dues," yet, they are still subjected to racial discrimination. Castells (1997) noted that, ". . . by and large, affluent African Americans do not feel welcomed in mainstream society. Indeed, they are not. Not only racial hostility among whites continues to be pervasive, but gains by middle class black males still leave them way behind whites . . ." (p. 56). Additionally, as previously discussed, Wilson (1996a) suggested that many middle class blacks escape the inner city by moving to the suburbs and leaving behind masses of urban poor. As a result, many middle class blacks, are caught between being racially stigmatized by whites and viewed as removed and disconnected from the plight of poor blacks. Castells (1997) stated:

Most middle class blacks strive to get ahead not only from the reality of the ghetto, but also from the stigma that the echoes from the dying ghetto project on them through their skin. They do so, particularly, by insulating their children from the poor black communities (moving to suburbs, integrating them into white-dominated private schools), while at the same time, reinventing an African-American identity that revives the themes of the past, African or American, while keeping silent on the plight of the present. (p. 57)

3. The relationship between ideology and collective action is explored by many social movement scholars (Eder 1993; Fantasia 1988).

Social class shapes how the black middle class interpret and assign meaning to social problems and collectively act to bring about desired social change. Snow and Benford (1988) label the process of interpreting and assign meaning to social problems as collective action framing. Collective action frames allow individuals to simplify and interpret the complex social world in ways that are meaningful and functions to organize belief systems that encourage collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974). Building from Goffman (1974), Benford and Snow (2000) argued that frames “are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate” social movement activities (p. 614). Snow and Benford (1988) argued that successful mobilization is contingent upon “its ability to affect both consensus and action mobilization” (p. 199), which can be achieved through specific framing processes.

Considering Materialist and Culturalist Frames

Collective action frames are useful analytical tools because they highlight the ways in which movement participants interpret, assign meaning to, and act toward particular social movement outcomes. Within black communities collective action frames reveal consensus, conflicts, and tensions that emerge from divergent framing of class-informed, race specific social problems. I suggest that there are materialist and culturalist frames within black collective action.

Materialist frames are rooted in day-to-day material conditions. They are informed by the lived reality of low wages, high rents, and or poor quality schools and focus on immediate change of concrete conditions. They establish clear relationships between the ways that outside groups use power to control systems of reward and punishment. Materialist frames attribute tangible forms of inequality to the use and misuse of power. Therefore, struggles over power, resources, and access are common themes within materialist frames.

Culturalist frames challenge ideas and values, rather than power and people. Through a shared set of ideas and values, culturalist frames focus on symbolic meaning and abstract theories of the social world and attempt to change social meaning and personal identity. They promote specialized ideas about community and social issues and encourage expert-based social change through highly skilled, educated professionals. Culturalist framing draws upon segments of the population who resist the authoritarian control over social and cultural meaning (Melucci 1985). Thus, while a materialist frame might attribute high drop out rates among black students to poor quality teachers and facilities, a culturalist frame might attribute academic performance to the lack of black culture in the curriculum.

Materialist and culturalist frames emerge from distinct class-based forms of politics and collective action (Rose 1997). Rose (1997) noted that “Working-class labor and community-based movements generally focus on the immediate economic and social interests of members, while middle-class movements more often address universal goods that are non-economic” (p. 478). Thus, social class becomes an important variable in how blacks frame pressing community and social issues. Materialist frames allow for community members to act to solve concrete community issues while culturalist frames provide opportunities for the blacks to challenge ideas about pressing problems in the black community. One form of culturalist framing can be found in Afrocentric ideology.

Framing Afrocentric Ideology

In this context, Afrocentric ideology is conceptualized as a collective response to modernity that ascribed particular cultural meanings to black identity. For example, Omi and Winant (1995) argued that new meanings of black identity were responses to assaults on personal rights brought on by postindustrial society. They remind us that the Black Power movement during the 1960s represented the assertion of new social meaning of black identity. Similarly, racial

meanings were ascribed to blacks during the late 1970s and early 1980s economic recession and mass unemployment. Omi and Winant (1995) maintained that economic transformations alter our "interpretations of racial identities and meanings" (p. 65). During this period, mass black unemployment and the consequent dependence upon the state helped to define blacks as the "underclass," "undeserving poor," and "state dependents." Deflecting attention away from more important macro economic realities, the conditions of poor urban blacks were seen as the result of defective and disorganized families, cultural degradation, and lack of motivation (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). In this view, the construction of black identity was based on an inherent pathology that placed blacks at a disadvantage compared to other racial groups.

One response to these deleterious notions of blackness (black racial meaning) is to challenge these racial meanings through an assertion of positive black identities. As such, Afrocentrism emerged as one way of redefining black identity and reconstructing a more positive black image. In black urban communities, the struggle for reclaiming a positive racial identity was played out through the expression of new and/or revived cultural forms such as Hip Hop culture, Rap music and/or various forms of political or religious nationalism (Kelley 1996). These cultural forms redefine, reassert, and constantly reestablish what it means to be urban and black (Haymes 1995). These forms of identity are organic expressions of racial meaning that emerge out of a context of nihilism and urban decay. For example, during the Black Power movement, the "Godfather of soul music," James Brown, captured the essence of the era for many urban blacks in the slogan "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!" The term "Black Power" itself was coined by Willie Ricks and made popular by Stokely Carmichael, both leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the height of black frustration with the pace of the Civil Rights movement. During the mid 1980s, a rap group called Public Enemy seized the attention of many urban black youth because of the group's scathing criticism of American racism. Known for their political messages and provocative lyrics, Chuck D, the group's leader, called for black youth to raise their consciousness about American society and become more critical about the conditions of poor urban blacks.

Akin to these expressions of black identity is Afrocentrism. The common theme between all these expressions of black identity is that they all define blackness as a form of resistance. As in other ideological movements, identity and ideology becomes a central feature in framing the movement's goals (Inglehart 1990b; Melucci 1980; Touraine 1985). Here, the cultural war regarding how blackness is defined emerges from an ongoing struggle with white supremacist notions of blackness and positive representations of the black image. Afrocentrism, then, draws from the legacy of defining black identity by both resistance to white supremacist notions of blackness by a reassertion of racial identity, and by fostering symbolic connections with poor and working class communities.

Taken together, the black middle class experience both racial exclusion from whites and class criticism from poor blacks who view middle class mobility as "leaving the rest of us behind." This dual isolation prompted many middle class blacks to articulate the struggle for inclusion in ways that depart from both the 1960s demand for civil rights and the late 60s assertion for black power. Afrocentric ideology attempts to redefine black identity by focusing on ancient Egyptian cultural values. Afrocentrism is described as a set of principles that place Africa at the center of political, economic, cultural, and spiritual life for African Americans. At its most fundamental level, Afrocentrism challenges modernity's implicit epistemological claim that knowledge resides in the Western world (Asante 1987). Proponents of the Afrocentric movement assert that the hegemonic forces that emanate from a European centered or a Eurocentric paradigm are ill-equipped to interrogate the African American experience. They argue that Afrocentricity rejects a Eurocentric worldview and places Africa at the center of discussions regarding civilization (Oyebade 1990). In short, Afrocentrism is an ideological movement that places Africa at the center of African American identity.

Afrocentric ideology, however, fails to address the needs of large segments of poor and working class blacks. It remains silent on issues such as poverty, the obscene incarceration

rates of black males, and pervasive police brutality. All of these issues create a hostile environment, which further marginalize poor blacks. In order to examine how Afrocentric ideology functions across class lines, I explore a community's effort to improve a local urban high school in Oakland, California. I demonstrate how black middle class community members, through culturalist frames (Afrocentrism), shape and direct efforts to improve a high school in one of Oakland's poorest communities. By focusing on a grassroots community organization, this study illustrates the ways in which the organization's black middle class members co-opted a working class community's effort to improve a struggling local high school.

Black Middle Class Ideology and Collective Action

In 1992, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) embarked upon an initiative to transform one of the district's lowest performing high schools into an Afrocentric academy. Attempting to ameliorate some of the conditions facing this primarily African American high school, the surrounding community, the school, the school board, and local community based organizations drafted, designed and implemented an African centered academic program.

Leading the effort to improve McClymonds High was a group of community advocates who fought for educational equity for African American students in Oakland. The Black Front For Educational Reform (BUFFER) began as a coalition of working class parents and concerned citizens. Because of its tactics (i.e., pickets, protests, media coverage), BUFFER played a critical role in the effort to transform McClymonds High School and was successful in designing a curriculum that was approved and adopted by the school board and implemented during the Fall of 1994.

A Glimpse at Oakland and West Oakland Community

McClymonds High School is located in one of Oakland's poorest communities—West Oakland. West Oakland is notorious for its poverty and isolation. It is located between downtown Oakland on the East and the San Francisco Bay on the West. To the South rests an industrial park with a major shipping port and railroad, and to the North and East it is confined by a major freeway. Along with other factors, this isolation has given West Oakland a unique character.⁴ Most of West Oakland residents are low-income people of color (77% African American, 9.2% Asian, 8% Latino, 2% Native American, 5.6% White) with nearly 35% of them living below the poverty line. The unemployment rate is 32% higher than the rest of Oakland. Nearly one in every three West Oakland residents is unemployed. Approximately 60% of West Oakland teens between the ages of 16 and 19 do not attend school or hold a steady job (The Urban Strategies Council 1995; The Urban Strategies Council and Youth Development Initiative Working Group 1996).

Low enrollment (approximately 600 students) and low academic performance prompted the OUSD to propose to close the school and reroute students to other schools in Oakland. McClymonds High is the only high school in West Oakland and the proposal to close the school provoked many West Oakland residents to challenge the school board's decision and offer a more appropriate solution to the community's problem.

Behind the Effort to Transform McClymonds High

Members of a small grassroots organization, local branches of Black Nationalist organizations, black churches, and some community organizations came together to develop a plan

4. Adapted from literature from the West Oakland Community School.

that would pressure the school district to keep the school open. In 1987, BUFFER began organizing the local community to challenge the school board for failing to provide African American students with decent educational facilities and equal academic opportunities. BUFFER's mission was to promote equality, justice and equal access in education for black children in Oakland. The organization was comprised of a cross-section of Oakland's black working class community. Parents, community activists, church members, and clergy challenged both individual schools and the school district to provide a more equitable education for Oakland's black students. The organization worked to gather documentation that demonstrated that Oakland public schools unfairly tracked black students into low performance classes. BUFFER sponsored numerous community meetings, workshops, and conferences to raise community awareness of Oakland Public School's racial educational inequality.

Many of the issues that BUFFER addressed revolved around school suspensions, expulsions, and general low academic performance in schools where black students were the majority. Members of BUFFER found numerous cases where black students had been removed from school for minor behavioral problems. Reviewing the district's documents and attending disciplinary hearings, BUFFER sought to influence district policy regarding suspensions and expulsions, particularly because the existing policy disproportionately affected black students. For example, in 1987, BUFFER began to build a case where they could show that the district was ill equipped to educate black students.

During the fall of 1989, members of BUFFER met with the superintendent of OUSD to discuss the gap in resources that existed between McClymonds High School and other high schools in Oakland. BUFFER's leadership disclosed information about deteriorating facilities, inferior curriculum and materials, and general lack of concern on the part of the school district. The president of BUFFER stated that:

We said to him [the superintendent] that something needed to be done at McClymonds and we wanted to sit down and we wanted to come up with an academic program that would make sure that black kids at McClymonds are brought into the mainstream of American education.

BUFFER was prompted to meet with the district after learning about McClymonds High's failure to provide students with Advanced Placement (AP) courses, college preparatory science and other issues regarding educational inequality. The issues that BUFFER was concerned about were (1) academic performance, (2) educational equity in school and district policy regarding discipline, and (3) equal opportunity and access to higher education. BUFFER's demands included more college preparation courses, better materials and curriculum, a review of the district's suspension policy, and an improvement of school facilities. For example, McClymonds High offered no college preparation courses in Chemistry, Physics, or Biology because they lacked the facilities and materials. Although the district and school records indicated that students utilized a computer laboratory at McClymonds, the school had no computer lab nor did it have plans to implement one.

BUFFER's original plan was to address the issue of educational inequality at McClymonds High by (1) increasing the number of college preparation courses, (2) providing computers and technical assistance, and (3) providing new text books to all of Oakland's students. Their demands involved the immediate and practical rectification of the educational inequality at McClymonds High by demanding concrete changes in the school. For example, a long time West Oakland resident and a member of BUFFER commented,

I've lived here (West Oakland) for more than 20 years. A lot has changed since then, you know. The kids now, sometimes don't have parents at home; a lot of the girls are pregnant. When I was a volunteer at the school, I was able to help them. Now the school don't have books, no nurses or counselors. I wanted to focus on getting the kids some jobs and help them with some of their day-to-day problems you know, like childcare and stuff like that. I also said to them that we needed to make sure they (the students at McClymonds) could find jobs, had good teachers and decent books. My

niece would come home and tell me that the school didn't have textbooks for her English class because the school couldn't afford them.

BUFFER's original strategy focused on the amelioration of specific issues related to the day-to-day experiences of students at McClymonds. The initial strategy was aimed at improving the school by examining not only what the school lacked, but also what students at the school needed to survive. Another member of BUFFER commented:

At McClymonds, we needed intense programs because of the needs of the kids. Most of them were just making it day to day. We needed to do a lot with basic things like how to fill out job applications, tutoring programs, and activities that went beyond the regular school day.

In the past, BUFFER was successful in pressuring other Oakland schools to make improvements in their curriculum, materials, and facilities. The superintendent urged BUFFER to take these demands to the board of education in a public forum because he (the superintendent) was not in the position to initiate those types of changes. From past experience and knowledge of BUFFER's sometimes-radical tactics, the superintendent also was well aware of the type of pressure BUFFER could exert on the school board. As a strategy, BUFFER members knew that after they presented their concerns to the school board, they would be asked by the school board to draft a plan to address the issues that they raised.

Transforming BUFFER

Preempting the board's request, BUFFER recruited African American professors, educators, and attorneys to assist them with the development of an educational plan for McClymonds High. From 1987 to 1990, BUFFER's membership had grown from 30 to as many as 125. BUFFER was successful in recruiting a highly educated group of professionals that included professors, educational administrators, doctors and lawyers. The president indicated that after they had become a visible and well-known community organization in Oakland, many of these new members were attracted to BUFFER's organizing efforts at McClymonds High. By 1989, BUFFER had created a diverse membership with professional, poor, and working class membership. One BUFFER member indicated:

We were able to bring in many scholars and professors with Ph.D.s. We had doctors, lawyers, and educators; we had carpenters and plumbers, janitors, custodians—everyone was an active member of this organization.

The recruitment of new members for the organization was a strategic move to solidify its already wide community support and to exploit the credibility of credentialed experts in the area of education. Having members who were lawyers and professors added more credibility to the organization's original platform, which was to demonstrate the district's willful neglect of black children. BUFFER's diverse membership, however, created two strategic problems for the organization. First, although many of its members shared the same ideology about the need to improve the conditions for black students at McClymonds High School, there was conflict about which strategy would best serve the needs of the students. For the original working class members of BUFFER, the best way to improve the school was by addressing the material issues that had been raised prior to the recruitment of the new members. The founding members advocated better textbooks, improved facilities, access to computers, and the inclusion of college preparation courses. However, BUFFER's newer middle class and professional members defined the problems at the school as a lack of positive ethnic identity and racial pride. The newer member's concern was that the school lacked a cultural inclusion of African identity. Some of the new members wanted to address educational inequality at McClymonds High by implementing an Afrocentric curriculum. In short, the working class members viewed the problem in concrete terms, while the middle class members viewed the

problem as ideological. Second, though some members of BUFFER were residents of West Oakland's working class community, many of the new members were middle class and lived as far away as Sacramento (over 150 miles away). A BUFFER member who lived near McClymonds explained:

There were a lot of educators and folks who weren't really from West Oakland. Most of the people that came to the meetings were teachers, professors, lawyers—you know, from good jobs and professions. Some of the people on my block seemed not to really care to get involved. They were working hard everyday, going to work or looking for work and just trying to make ends meet, trying to make it everyday you know.

Some of BUFFER's new middle class members had been well known in the African American educational community as key players in the Afrocentric movement. In 1990, the movement to utilize an Afrocentric framework in urban schools had blossomed in several urban school districts across the country including Washington D.C., Baltimore, Milwaukee, New York, and Detroit. Some of the same scholars that were influential in promoting Afrocentric education across the country had become key members of BUFFER's leadership. Some had published books, others directed institutes that focused on Afrocentric research, and most of them had access to resources (i.e., research, funding sources, institutional name recognition) available at their respective universities and places of employment. An attorney who had recently joined BUFFER commented about how the newer members understood the problem at McClymonds:

You know, they [founding BUFFER members] basically said, "let's just take the best educational system out of a white community and just give it to blacks, and then we'll say 'now we're equal.'" But they did not consider any of the cultural needs of the students. If you have a school district, or a school that is 90% African American, you can't assume that a school district that is 90% white will have the same needs. You can't leave out the issue of race and cultural development. I mean a lot of those issues haven't really been considered in terms of providing an educational curriculum for black children in Oakland.

Another middle class member of BUFFER commented:

From the very outset, racial identity was a relevant and direct issue. We basically analyzed where we were and where we wanted to be. I mean, when you talk about giving a proper education, a relevant education, you had to talk about African history, Afrocentric culture.

The comments here reflected the ideological framework of BUFFER's newer experts. This ideology promoted the idea that McClymonds students, among other black students in Oakland, suffered from a damaged self-esteem brought on by an educational system that exclusively promoted and celebrated European culture. In fact, other newer members expressed the view that academic failure among African American students could be attributed to a curriculum and pedagogy which was based on European ideology and was in conflict with how black students live and learn. This viewpoint was reflected again in minutes from a School Board meeting where Dr. Wade Nobles, one of the new key players in BUFFER, was asked to present a progress report on the plan. He commented that:

McClymonds has decayed and has become a place of educational failure. Children learn best and achieve their maximum when the learning environment reflects and respects their image and their interests. The way children thrive is when they see their own image and interests in the proposition.

Wade Nobles had published numerous articles and books and was well known for his work with African American boys. The Hawk Federation, the name of his "manhood training" project, received national attention for being a model for working with young black males. Nobles was also a vocal advocate for Afrocentric strategies for educating black children. He was also the director of San Francisco State University's Center for Applied Studies in Educational Achievement and the head of the Oakland based, Institute for the Advanced Study of Black Family and Culture. Nobles believed that by using ancient Kemitic or Egyptian philosophy, black

teen-age males could excel academically and become leaders in their community. His Afrocentric approach is based on the belief that “while everyone can be taught the same information, they cannot learn it in the same ways because of differing cultural experiences” (Jackson 1991:3).

While the new members continued to advocate for implementing an Afrocentric curriculum into the school, the local working class members continued to question its relevance for the school. They all agreed that the curriculum needed to be improved, but they were unclear about how it could be accomplished through an Afrocentric ideology. BUFFER’s president explained,

Now there were people like Dr. Nobles, and people like Dr. Oba and other professors who had been involved in Black Studies and African things you know. They suggested that we call it an Afrocentric program. I had no knowledge of that term. I had never heard of Afrocentrism before . . . when they first [the new members] talked about Afrocentrism, it didn’t make sense to me because the students and school needed books, computers, job training, and childcare, you know things like that.

BUFFER had always debated about what they wanted for African American students at McClymonds, but these discussions never included Afrocentrism. Prior to 1993 and the influence of the new middle class members, BUFFER focused on the concrete issues regarding educational inequality such as the type of courses, use of computers, and quality of books. One BUFFER respondent indicated that the new experts needed to explain and teach the working class members about Afrocentrism.

I explained to them [newer members] my position. I simply asked, when you talk about Afrocentrism, that term, Afrocentric, what do you mean? I told them what I thought they meant, you know. They talked about, you know, the history of Africa and people from the beginning of Egypt and Kemet and so on. They needed to explain to me what they meant by Afrocentrism.

BUFFER’s concern was to provide African American students with the tools necessary for them to compete with their white counterparts. This involved a sophisticated understanding of admission requirements, college preparation courses, and access to pre-college curriculum—not necessarily Afrocentrism. The president indicated:

I understood that the state, the federal government, and everybody else had already written the rules. They wrote the curriculum like the college prep requirements. They said in order to be able to enter into college, you have to get so many units of mathematics, and they specified the different types of mathematics. Now if you don’t have these you’re not going anywhere. That’s what I was interested in.

While the new middle class members felt that these curriculum requirements were necessary, they also indicated that merely concentrating on college preparation was insufficient because it lacked a cultural identity. The critique from the newer members was that providing the same educational opportunities as higher performing white schools did not go far enough to challenge the damaging content of what was actually being taught—which was, as some members put it, white supremacy. Yet, the working class members of the organization held their position and advocated that the plan needed to provide students with the same educational opportunities (i.e., college prep courses, better facilities, and curriculum) as students at higher performing schools. However, eventually some of the new members assumed leadership roles in the organization which gave them more leverage among BUFFER’s membership in advocating for an Afrocentric program. In most cases, the “experts” had been recruited for their knowledge and understanding of issues confronting African American students. Consequently, it wasn’t difficult to convince other members for the need of Afrocentric education—after all, the experts knew what was best. After several debates and discussions with the Afrocentric proponents in the membership, BUFFER’s president concurred with their plan to design and implement an Afrocentric curriculum.

In March 1992, Dr. Wade Nobles testified to the school board about the need to use an African centered curriculum at McClymonds High School. He stated,

With African centered education, the task of educating African American children is guided by the understanding and utilization of African centered traditions, values, history, and beliefs to stimulate and reinforce educational excellence . . . Children learn best and achieve their maximum when the learning environment reflects and respects their image and their interests.

During the same March 1992 meeting, the school board adopted BUFFER's proposal to use McClymonds as a pilot project. The school board approved a plan that would use Afrocentric practices to transform the school and focus on educational excellence in science, culture, and technology. Both the new membership and the founding members of BUFFER worked together to develop a plan for McClymonds. In 1992, Dr. Nobles and his Center for Culture and Achievement, along with the local State University became proprietors of the three-year project, leaving BUFFER on the periphery of the effort.

The Outcome of the Project

The implementation of the project was met with teacher and community resistance. During the first year of the program, many of the students were oblivious to the changes in their "new" Afrocentric school. With the exception of a new course on African history and a new Swahili course, many students were unaware of the Afrocentric project. One of the counselors at McClymonds indicated,

They [Dr. Nobles and his colleagues] weren't dealing with the students' issues, they were trying to get the students to think about Africa, you know, wearing Kenté cloth and all that, but the students were like, "what the hell does this have to do with me?" The effort didn't validate their experience on the streets.

For many of the students at McClymonds, Afrocentrism was a foreign concept that had little relevance to their lives. The everyday lived experiences of many of McClymond's students were not addressed through the Afrocentric curriculum. Teen pregnancy, poverty, and drug use were realities many of the students confronted, yet these issues were never addressed in the curriculum. One McClymonds student commented,

There was really nothing like constructive or fun, or anything to do after school. The school used to have the music program and the choir, and a lot of other things, but they didn't even have that anymore, so it's like if you weren't into the African stuff, you just go home, or you get into whatever.

The project included a series of lectures from internationally renowned Afrocentric scholars held in the school auditorium Friday afternoons and on Saturday mornings. The lectures were open to the teachers, parents, and students of the West Oakland community. The purpose of the lectures was to "stimulate, create, and reinforce educational excellence and the attainment of maximum educational achievement for all children attending McClymonds High."⁵ Though the senior class sponsored the project, many of these lectures were poorly attended by local students and parents. Many of those who attended the lectures were black bookstore owners, African crafts vendors, college students, and black scholars from nearby universities. One of the new middle class BUFFER members commented,

I would have liked everybody to have attended these lectures, especially the people in the neighborhood. They [neighborhood people] just didn't come. I guess they did not understand the purpose of the effort.

5. Excerpt from *The Project to Make McClymonds High School a School of Excellence*.

The year 1995 marked the last year of the project to transform McClymonds High, and unfortunately, the school showed little academic improvement. The students at McClymonds still scored below national averages on standardized tests. The number of students who graduated and went to college had shown no significant improvement. Many of the students had limited exposure to college preparation curriculum, and some students still had no books for certain courses. For example, in 1992 the grade point average for college preparation courses at the school was 1.56. A year later, it dropped to 1.10, and by 1996, it was 1.41. While the plan did attempt to reduce the unusually high suspension rate, the project had no impact on the number of students who were suspended. In fact, in 1992, the suspension rate was 28%; by 1996, it was 32%. Additionally, the drop out rate at McClymonds nearly doubled from 11% in 1992, to 22% in 1996 (Oakland Unified School District 1996). While the new members of BUFFER had well-meaning intentions for improving McClymonds, the emphasis they placed on Afrocentric education diverted valuable resources to what could have been an effort to redress the pervasive inequality at McClymonds High.

Black Middle Class Ideology and Symbolic Identities

There are a number of reasons why the project failed, but the most salient is how culturalist framing led to a misdiagnosis of the problem confronting students at McClymonds. The newer black middle class members of BUFFER are in part responsible for this misdiagnosis because while they attempted to improve the conditions of the school, they framed the issues in such a way that they overlooked the more immediate needs of West Oakland's poor and working class people. Culturalist frames emerges from a symbolic identity that legitimates class privilege and attempts to bridge an ideological class gap by identification with the plight of the poor. Thus, while members of the black middle class and the black working poor sustain relationships through extended family, churches, schools, and community based organizations, these relationships, particularly in community organizing efforts, are strained by ideological differences. For example, some middle class members of BUFFER, no longer resided in West Oakland, but many of them still had friends and family who lived in the community. For some of the newer middle class members, their connection to McClymonds was through their own personal histories with the community.

We used to have a lot of doctors and lawyers that lived in our community. They all moved out and just rent out their places now. I remember that my neighbor's mother was a nurse. Everyday her mother would get off that bus with that white uniform on and walk down the street to work. Well almost every girl in that neighborhood wanted to be a nurse because that's what she could identify with.

Another former West Oakland resident commented,

There use to be shops and parlors, you know, shoeshine parlors and grocery stores and butcher shops, and a pharmacy, and they were all black-owned. Now, you see what's happening to our old community? Everything has been taken out. You go down there now, the old Supermarket hasn't been open in years and folks gotta go two or three miles to go to buy groceries. Some of us that moved out of there need to do more stuff for the community.

By constructing a symbolic identity through personal histories, relationships, and organizational affiliations, some of the middle class members of BUFFER expressed both disappointment with the academic outcome of the project, and also satisfaction that they reconnected to their community. By using their resources, contacts, and professional skills, they expressed a sense of meaningful accomplishment despite the fact the school had experienced very little change. The comments of another attorney for BUFFER reflected this.

Even though the school didn't change that much, it was still a good experience in my mind because it (BUFFER) was involved in community activism. You know, we weren't just educators sitting

around just meeting. We were out there going door to door, in the community. We would hold educational forums around the community to educate people on issues that were going on in their schools. We would give out statistical information on school problems, we invited speakers to come and speak on community issues. It was beautiful because we worked with the community. You know, people are tired, people are burned out, and people have a sense of hopelessness about these conditions. So BUFFER was very effective and successful in that regard.

Success for some of the middle class members then, was also defined by a sense of re-claiming community and a responsibility of serving residents in the West Oakland community. Community building and community organizing activities, despite their results, were viewed as successful because these activities ostensibly mitigated class differences and fostered a common experience of racial commonality.

Discussion and Conclusion

This case study augments our understanding of Wilson's out-migration thesis by explicating the relationship between class culture and how black communities frame community issues. By examining materialist and culturalist frames, we can better understand how the intersection of race and social class in black America shapes community change efforts. Identity, ideology, and interests are important variables in conceptualizing community and social problems because they uncover how actors collectively define, interpret, and finally address community issues. Additionally, social stratification within black communities creates dramatic differences in how community members frame community issues. For the black working poor, solutions to community problems are often shaped by the day-to-day lived experience of work, paying rent for housing, and neighborhood safety. For the black middle class, which is less concerned about paying rent and neighborhood safety, solutions to community problems are framed in expert-based knowledge, ethnic identity and interest in maintaining symbolic connections with the working poor. This is due to the fact that some members of the black middle class continue to face racial barriers despite the fact that they have earned advanced degrees, secured a home, and accumulated wealth. Thus, while members of the black middle class can avoid the hardships that come with urban poverty, they continue to be racially marginalized. Resisting cultural marginalization thus becomes a salient aspect of black middle class ideology. As a result, some black educators, scholars, and middle class professionals frame issues in ways that misdiagnose complex urban problems.

The tendency for the black middle class to use culturalist frames to understand and solve community problems avoids a serious analysis of significant material conditions facing the working poor. Struggling to pay rent, making enough money to keep food on the table and clothe children are substantial barriers to community change. The tensions between materialist and culturalist frames were evident in how working class and middle class members of BUFFER collectively worked to transform McClymonds High School. BUFFER and all its working class members attempted to address the gross inequality that existed at McClymonds High School, but ultimately came under the influence of black middle class professionals who themselves were committed to improving the conditions for West Oakland's working class students. Ultimately, the middle class members of BUFFER used a culturalist frame to conceptualize the problems facing poor and working class students at McClymonds and as a result, the school and the surrounding community remained largely unchanged.

This case study provides us with three important lessons that deepen our understanding about the intersection of race and class in community change. First, while racial identity fosters solidarity within black communities, social class often filters how one frames community problems and conceptualizes solutions to community issues. Class culture plays a significant role in how community actors assign meaning to social problems. As a result, middle class and working class blacks frame community issues in divergent ways that often thwart effective

community change efforts. Second, failure to investigate the influence of class differences in ethnically homogenous organizations obscures important ideological class differences within racial and ethnic groups. As demonstrated in this case study, middle class blacks can respond to community issues in ways that overlook the concerns of working poor blacks. Black middle class social capital (professional relationships, expert-based skills, and educational credentials) privilege and legitimize culturalist frames over materialist frames. Third, the ways in which community issues are framed are often shaped by complex intersection of identities. However, we know little about the relationship between identity formation and the framing process.

Further research should explore the intersectionality of other identities such as race and sexual orientation, gender and class or other forms of diversity within seemingly homogenous groups, in order to better understand how converging identities shape how frames are constructed and legitimized. Future research should also explore the role of social capital and collective action and the ways in which they present opportunities and or barriers to social movement activity among communities of color. More research in this area is needed to explore the ways in which social class and racial politics within communities of color come to influence the local political arena. Research that explores how competing forces within and among communities of color such as age, class, racial identification, and sexual orientation come to bear on social and community change will be useful.

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