Research Critique

This article, “Youth culture of hostility: discourses of money, respect, and difference,” describes the youth culture of hostility in two public high schools. It focuses on discourses of money, respect, and difference that exist in the context of high school, and are symptoms of class and poverty socioeconomic factors. The high schools are located in the same de-industrialized city and are racially polarized in that their populations consist of mostly African-American and White youth. The researcher follows six high school seniors and collects data for over the course of two years. The results are presented through the autobiographical method which includes descriptions of the students, demonstrative quotes, and researcher propositions.

This article was chosen for the critique over three others because of its comparative comprehensiveness. The article has a well-defined conceptual framework, detailed data collection and description of subjects, researcher subjectivity, and a thread of transparency that ties all of the sections of the story together. Yet it exposes areas where the study might not be as robust as it could be.

The conceptual framework provides a thorough history of the conception of youth culture and the evolution of theories that researchers have applied to the youth culture over the course of time. The theories begin with deviance in the 1960s, are challenged by adolescent alienation, compared to resistance theories in the 1970s and 1980s, and evolve into hostile response theory of MacLeod. The socioeconomic and cultural factors are addressed with reference to neo-Marxists, Ogbu, and Wilson, to name a few. Discourse is defined in general and with respect to the three major themes, and superimposed onto the high school context. This foundation occurs on pages 292-294.
I appreciate the researcher’s willingness and demonstration of allowing the question to change in situ, (Spindler and Spindler, 1987). The original research purpose was to “explore coming of age in U.S. high schools as a two-pronged process of identity formation and community integration,” (pg. 294) but after the topic of school violence kept recurring in conversations, the researcher changes the question. The researcher is a White, middle-aged female professor studying low-income high school students of color. She does not ignore the fact that her status as an outsider might have impacted the results and her interactions with the subjects, but her subjectivity is openly addressed through an explanation of her own identity story from childhood through graduate school. She reveals her sensitivity to the topic and the target group as the muse for why she studies this topic, yet she knows that she cannot assume any complimentary roles as researcher. She describes a methodology shift in how she approaches practice:

I used to mute the issue of my “Whiteness” and other positionings because of the tradition to “view the self of the …observer as a potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled” (Weis & Fine, 2000a, p. 34.) But I am pushing aside the veil of neutrality because who I am and how I present myself in the field very much affect how my data are recorded and ultimately presented. (p.296)

She uses this to guide herself in establishing rapport without ignoring the impact that her presence has on the situation or expecting that she can minimalize this impact in her collection of data.

She also has a view of ‘doing no harm’ that involves a very hands-off approach to intervention unless absolutely necessary to prevent harm of participants. Yet, she provides tangible help to the participants in ways that could be contradictory to this opposite hands-off approach. The purpose of this assistance through giving rides and helping with homework might have served the purpose of trading services to build a trust
that might not be automatic, but it seems as a potential source of inconsistency for participants and outsiders.

Data collection appears to have been thorough unless all of the data that was presented is the complete dataset, while data analysis is not explicitly presented. Statistics about the community and schools assist us in creating a context, and the six participants are described with histories. Quotes from interviews are included, but the corresponding questions are rarely shown. If I were a skeptic questioning authenticity, I would need some transcripts, lists of actual questions, or a descriptive stage with props and actors that map to these quotes because they could be out of context. The methods of analysis are not included for readers, but described as poststructural. It is possible that the purpose of the article is to present findings as a priority over analysis methods, and that is done well. I would be more comfortable with the same level of detail to the poststructural analysis as the data collection methods.

The findings and conclusions really just support the theories of hostile reactions to conditions outlined in the conceptual framework. The fact that students can move in and out of discourses is displayed by the participants, but I now wonder if the students were chosen because they demonstrated this phenomenon prior to the study, because this cross-movement never occurred over the course of the study. Three of the students (Adam, Lona, and David) had been in trouble but had found the right track, and the other three (Nay, Monica, Michael) had been stable in the position that they held during the study for some time before it started. This might be because each student was followed for a minimum of two weeks to a maximum of over a month. “Suddenly seeing the light” probably does not happen as suddenly as two weeks or a month, and movement probably
does not occur like a flipping a light switch. Were there outliers to these assumptions of the ability to traverse discourses, and it is possible to be an outlier when studying occurrences that are fluid? The question of whether the study of each participant was long enough is a concern, and I feel like this was neglectful.

The representation of the research in an autobiographical method seems appropriate. The article has a balance of comprehensiveness in foundational research, and this might be why I had such high expectations of presentation of analysis methods and duration of study to the point where I consider equal neglectfulness on the part of the researcher in the practice. The question and purpose are sound, and reading the article was educational and entertaining, but I do not leave this reading confident enough to cite the study as a true and robust.

Bibliography
