Lona’s Links: Postoppositional Identity Work of Urban Youths

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The postoppositional identity work of urban high school students is described. The youths had engaged in oppositional identity work that led to breakages with their worlds. Lona was a central figure who forged symbolic and social links that enabled the youths to construct “true” selves and to express identities in ethical relation to others. Lona’s links engendered a politics of reconciliation that empowered marginalized youths to resituate their selves within, and transform, their worlds.

Educational anthropologists have long recognized the importance of identity work among adolescent high school students. And yet, as Mehan (1992) points out, the nature and consequences of student identity processes are frequently neglected in mainstream educational research. This is an alarming omission because to ignore student identity work as it unfolds in schools and other contexts is to dismiss one of the most significant reasons why so many promising youths fail academically and ultimately face a lifetime of self-defeat.

I spent two years, from 1995 to 1997, studying the identity work of urban high school seniors. I was especially interested in how historically marginalized youths managed to work out identities that carried them to the brink of graduation. My first research site was Jefferson High, a racially desegregated school serving working-class students. It was here that I was introduced to Lona Young, an African American youth, and her friends. Lona’s clique was large, numbering around 20 members, and included black and white teenagers, homosexuals, a brain-injured boy, mothers and expectant mothers, high achievers, and low achievers. The composition of the group was odd in a school where students typically separated themselves into peer cliques divided along strict racial, gender, and other social lines. But their identity work, at least initially, followed typical patterns of opposition presented in theories focusing on historically marginalized students. Members at some point in their lives had resorted to oppositional identity work marked by a politics of resistance that led to breakages with their schools, families, churches, and other worlds. They put up resistance in order to protect what they regarded as their “true” selves. Rather than construct viable identities, they became outcasts isolated within, or banished from, their worlds.


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The youths changed their tactics, and their lives, when they met Lona Young. Lona was a young woman who played an instrumental role in creating symbolic and social linkages that laid the foundation for what can be aptly described as postoppositional identity work. Lona’s links enabled marginalized youths to assert their true selves in ethical relation to others and empowered them to reenter and change their worlds through a politics of reconciliation. They paved the way for urban youths to move beyond oppositional identity work into other, more self-affirming realms of possibility.

Identity Work

Oppositional Identities

The term identity work emerged in Wexler’s (1983, 1988) writings on contemporary social movements. Wexler explains how social movements no longer are being conceived as large-scale socioeconomic revolutions but, rather, as microlevel sociopolitical processes. These movements occur in local contexts such as schools and are marked by struggles over identities which ideally empower people to transform their own lives and the lives of others.

Theorists in educational anthropology traditionally have viewed identity formation as primarily a cultural process. Identity work is construed as processes of enculturation and cultural transmission with attention to understandings of what it means to become a person in a particular cultural context (Hoffman 1998). Theorists in the 1970s and 1980s began to recognize the sociopolitical dimensions of identity work and focused more attention on the effects of unequal social relations and power. High school students who are from historically marginalized groups are portrayed in many of these theories as engaging in oppositional identity work during which they resist enculturation into traditional or dominant sociocultural categories. Sociocultural categories are symbolic systems comprising norms, values, and other cultural prescriptions intended to script individuals’ social representations, roles, statuses, and relations. Marginalized students oppose those prescriptions they regard as oppressive.

Among these theories are those explaining the underachievement patterns of racial and ethnic minority students. Ogbu’s well-known cultural-ecological theory of school performance (1978, 1987; Ogbu and Simmons 1998) posits that African Americans and members of other “involuntary minority groups” have formed collective oppositional identities and cultural frames of reference in response to white-imposed job ceilings. These groups reject white categorizations of who they are and their place in the economy, and they express their opposition through symbolic and physical acts of resistance. Resistance is emphasized as the main strategy adopted by involuntary minorities to fight white domination.
Fordham uses Ogbu’s theory to frame her initial analysis of the identity work of African American students at Capital High (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Students internalized a collective black identity, which they expressed by resisting conventional norms for classroom achievement. They saw compliance to these norms as “acting white” or as behaving in ways deemed inappropriate for black people. In later analyses, Fordham (1996) finds that student identity work at Capital High took the form of conformity as well as avoidance. Students who conformed to school expectations did so under the deprecating belief that whites are smarter than blacks. Those who avoided schooling saw the educational system as hostile to black culture and familial values.

Mirón and Lauria offer more pointed analysis of the political nature of black students’ oppositional identity work. They construe identity processes as identity politics whereby resistance is viewed as an “ideologically organized expression of power” aimed at opposing white hegemony. Accommodations, on the other hand, are political concessions whereby students surrender their agency by complying with teachers’ busy work or other demeaning demands (Mirón and Lauria 1995:30). Patterns of black student resistance and accommodation are often collective and take different forms in different schools (Mirón and Lauria 1998).

Other researchers focus on the impact of social class on students’ oppositional identity work. Willis (1977) in his classic study describes how working-class boys in an English high school scoff at middle-class prescriptions. The “lads,” as the boys called themselves, identified with their manual laborer fathers. They showed off their affinities by minimizing their classroom efforts and by making fun of their more studious peers. Other studies conducted in U.S. schools indicate that working-class student resistance is fueled by the discriminatory practices of middle-class peers and teachers. Brantlinger (1993) finds that low-income youths were extremely passive students who erupted into “periodic outbursts of anger” because they were being humiliated and ostracized by affluent peers. Working-class students in Fine’s (1991) study resisted mistreatment by silently withdrawing in their classes and eventually by withdrawing from school altogether. Metz (1978) observed working-class students adopting bolder, more openly rebellious strategies of resistance. They disrupted classroom activities in ways that caused teachers to lose control, lower standards, or abdicate their instructional responsibilities.

Gender prescriptions also have an impact on the formation of oppositional identities. Feminist scholars point out that adolescent girls are constantly subjected to cultural messages that place constraints on their ability to develop strong senses of self and agency (Martusewicz and Reynolds 1994). These messages are reinforced in schools. Valli (1986) observed girls in a high school clerical program being assimilated into a “culture of femininity” that stressed attractive physical appearance,
suggestive-yet-contained sexuality, domestic-like service, and subservience to male authorities as ideal for women. While some girls accommodated to these restrictive prescriptions, others set out to explode them. Among the girls Lesko (1988) observed at a Catholic school were those who engaged in an “outlandish politics of the body.” They opposed constraining images of the “good girl” with expressions of dirty language, provocative dress, and outrageous makeup and hairstyles.

These theories and supporting research construe the identity work of racial minorities, working-class youth, girls, and other marginalized students as an either/or process that ultimately boils down to a choice between political resistance or accommodation to oppressive sociocultural categories. While insightful, such inquiries are limited in that they provide few explanations of, or strategies for, youths working to overcome oppositions. This is not the case for perspectives recognizing the critical role of the self.

**Situating the Self**

Spindler and Spindler were among the first educational anthropologists to address the role of the self in student identity processes (1977; Spindler 1978). They developed the concept of the enduring self, which they define as individuals’ most deeply held psychocultural commitments. The enduring self is a person’s innermost psychological orientation and culturally patterned ways of “relating to others; to the material, natural, and spiritual worlds; and to time and space, including notions of agency, mind, person, being, and spirit” (Hoffman 1998:326). Identity is the situated self. It is the perception and expression of self that come about as people adapt to surrounding environments. Identity is the symbolic interface between the inner self and external sociocultural categories, which include cultural norms and values as well as prescriptions about class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other social traits.

The process of situating the self can be smooth or extremely painful. Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1993, 1998) developed the “Multiple Worlds Model” to analyze how high school students adapted to and made transitions among the worlds of their families, peers, and schools. The model includes a typology of four adaptation strategies. Students who made Type I adaptations had little difficulty sustaining a consistent sense of self because they perceived cultural congruence and neutral social boundaries between their worlds. Ryan Moore, for example, was a white middle-class teenager who made easy transitions because the cultures of his worlds were highly compatible (Phelan et al. 1998). At the other extreme, students making Type IV adaptations found it almost impossible to situate their selves within all of their worlds. Sonia Gonzales was a Mexican American who belonged to a Mexicano peer group characterized by subcultural norms, such as skipping class and causing trouble, which opposed those required for school success (Phelan et al.
1998). As Sonia immersed herself in the world of her peers, she became more resistant to schooling and more distant from her family. Her cleavages with school and family hardened her sense of self as an alienated Mexicana and prevented her from taking advantage of educational and other opportunities.

The Spindlers (1993, 1994) recommend cultural therapy for students like Sonia. Cultural therapy includes methods of dialogue intended to raise students' awareness of the conflicts between their enduring selves and the cultures of their worlds. As Trueba describes it, "cultural therapy is a process of reflection on one's own ethnicity, race, class, and status. It is an effort to come to terms with one's reality in the surrounding cultural context. The purpose of cultural therapy is to heal" (1994:388). Cultural therapy not only heals; it also fosters a sense of agency. Dialogue makes students aware of choices in cultural responses that they can make to take advantage of what schools and other worlds have to offer. If all goes well, students will heal psychological wounds and be able to choose politically effective "strategies for empowerment . . . in situations that are potentially disempowering" (Hoffman 1998:332).

Heath and McLaughlin (1993) observed therapeutic-like identity processes in neighborhood-based organizations serving urban youths. The youths were living in worlds filled with diversity, danger, and unpredictable changes. Their senses of self were framed by multiple identities, which they assumed in the multiple arenas of family, neighborhood, and school, as well as community organizations, churches, and youth groups. With the help of dedicated youth workers, kids who "did not have a chance" constructed identities situated in a secure sense of self that enabled them to "get somewhere" and "be someone" within their immediate surroundings. The youths were able to pursue alternatives, and overcome oppositions, in ways that enriched rather than endangered their lives. They were able to engage in the most ideal form of identity work. They, that is, managed to build connections between their selves and their worlds.

Framework for Study

The framework I developed for this study builds on my earlier research (Hemmings 1996, 1998) and places the Spindlers' concepts of the enduring and situated self at the center of adolescent identity work. I conceive identity work as a process whereby youths strive to construct enduring selves that they feel are true reflections of who they are or hope to become. The self is multifaceted, with racial, gender, ethnic, spiritual, sexual, and other dimensions. The commitments making up these facets are not fixed but, rather, change over time. The enduring self is thus manifold and evolving but nevertheless constitutes the inner psychocultural compass youths use to navigate their outer worlds.
Youths in their identity work attempt to situate their selves in multiple worlds. They construct and express identities in response to sociocultural categories encountered in families, churches, schools, peers, and other worlds. Identity adaptations take various forms and are inherently political in nature. Youths may engage in oppositional identity work characterized by a politics of resistance whereby they challenge cultural prescriptions perceived as oppressive. They may accommodate or comply with prescriptions in an effort to fit into their worlds. Or they may work to connect or change themselves and their worlds.

In the United States, it is not unusual for high school students to assert their independence by engaging in some form of oppositional identity work. But oppositions intensify and are much riskier for students who are in conflict with community traditions or with dominant societal prescriptions encountered in schools and other institutions. These youths are more likely to experience self-destabilization and social marginalization as they break away from their worlds.

Youths who become marginalized often take refuge in the world of their peers. They congregate in peer cliques characterized by oppositional subcultures. While these subcultures may temporarily stave off the imposition of oppressive cultural prescriptions, they can have negative consequences for youths. Peer pressure to conform to subcultural codes can cause youths to express collective identities that suppress or are in conflict with their enduring selves. They may discourage youths from taking advantage of educational opportunities and lure them into what Epstein (1998) describes as "destructive" acts of resistance such as premarital sex, drug dealing, and fighting. Subcultural oppositional identity politics also do little to transform traditional or dominant cultural prescriptions. They are more destructive to particular groups of students than to society at large.

Peer cliques can also be social spaces where youths engage in more positive and productive identity work. Goto (1997) observed Chinese American students whose peer cliques became sites where they and their friends resolved problems by pooling their knowledge and offering mutual support. Lona and her friends formed such a clique. Clique members experienced severe breakages with their families, schools, churches, and other peers. And yet they managed, in the end, to reconcile their enduring selves with their worlds.

Methodology

I was introduced to Lona and her friends during the course of a two-year, multisite qualitative study on high school seniors' identity work and life transitions. Jefferson High was my first research site. This school enrolled approximately 1,720 students, of whom 54.63 percent were African American and 44.20 percent were Caucasian. Forty-nine percent of students were receiving free or reduced-price lunches, indicating that their family income levels were at or below the poverty line. With these
percentages in hand, I worked with a teacher to compile a demographi-
cally representative list of seniors from which I recruited three to serve
as key participants. Lona Young was one of the students on the list who
volunteered to participate.

I went to school with each key participant for at least two weeks—or,
as was the case with Lona, for nearly one month. I accompanied them to
class, traveled with them through corridors, ate lunch with them, and
hung out with them before and after school. We engaged in lengthy in-
formal conversations, and I conducted semistructured tape-recorded in-
terviews with all of them. I also arranged focus group interviews with
key participants' friends and with other seniors.

Seniors who were interviewed were asked to talk about their past his-
tories, present circumstances, and future plans. I adopted this autobio-
 graphical method to elicit what Munoz calls "stories of identity where
we tell ourselves and others who we are, where we came from, where we
are going" (1995:46). When my fieldwork was over, I had recorded the
stories of over 25 seniors, including those of Lona and her friends.

Lona and Friends

Lona met me for the first time in front of the computer room where she
always began the school day. She was tall and overweight. That morn-
ing she had on a flannel shirt, blue jeans, and athletic shoes. While Lona's
outward appearance was nondescript, she exuded what one of her
friends would later describe as a "magnetism" that attracted "very, very
strange people" to her.

And I was, of course, strange. There I stood, a 40-year-old white
woman probing into the lives of teenagers. During my other studies I
had to devise ways to build rapport between me, the strange adult out-
sider, and adolescent students, stranger-leery insiders. But this time it
was Lona who paved the way. She greeted me with a warm smile and
quickly took me under her wing. She had few qualms about opening her
self up to me so long as I was willing to open my self up to her. It was
through these interpersonal openings that I got to know Lona and many
of her friends.

Lona made no secret of the fact that academics held little appeal for
her. She was, in her words, "totally into people and their problems." I
soon learned that she was a central figure in an unusually diverse peer
clique. Among the members of her clique was Paul, a gay white boy, and
Ashley, a white lesbian. The group also included mothers and expectant
mothers to be. DeeDee was a white girl with a 15-month-old daughter.
Carole, an African American, was pregnant with her first child. Stevie
was a white high achiever who was dating DeeDee (he was not the fa-
ther of her child). He was fascinated with computers and was described
as "too geeky even for the geeks." Randy was a white boy with a traum-
atic brain injury incurred in a bus accident. He talked incessantly
about what Lona termed "crazy things." Naomi, a white girl, was a poet
who wanted to join the Marines. Jennifer, another white girl, was regarded as the most normal member of the group. Not wanting to be different, Jennifer insisted she was just as abnormal as everyone else. There were other members of Lona’s clique whom I did not get to know. But I heard enough about them to conclude that they had something in common with their friends. They were fierce defenders of what they regarded as their “true” or enduring selves.

The True Self

As explained above, the Spindlers’ (1977; Spindler 1978) concept of the enduring self was a central focus in my inquiry. I got Lona and her friends to talk about their interpretations of the enduring self during a group interview. The discussion began when I told the group about a book that claims that teenagers develop a false self in order to get people to like them. Ashley said, “I know exactly what that book is saying. A lot of kids do that, but we’re not like that in this group. We’re our true selves. We are who we are and don’t care if other people like us.”

When I probed further into what “true self” meant, Jennifer said it was the “feeling of knowing who you are and what you want”: “In this group we know what we want, and we express how we feel when we want. We’re ourselves and we like what we want, and a lot people can’t deal with that.” Group members thus intimated that forming a true or enduring self meant making and sustaining core commitments that were acceptable to them even though they might be unacceptable to others. As the interview continued, members talked about how people were “coming out” more, how they were publicly asserting their true selves in unprecedented ways. Paul said, “In the old days if you were gay or whatever, you hid yourself or you’d be thrown in jail or killed or something. That’s changing now; like on TV people are coming out more.”

Lona and her friends were living at a time when individuals were literally broadcasting commitments that would have been stigmatized or punished in the past. The media were replete with images of women and men assuming nontraditional gender roles, of gays and lesbians celebrating their lifestyles, of interracial relationships, of religious alternatives to mainline churches, and of other new cultural possibilities. Lona and her friends were attracted to the wider range of cultural options these images presented. Their own emergent selves absorbed these new possibilities as truer reflections of who they were or hoped to become.

But while members of Lona’s clique were open to new possibilities, they felt that most people were still entrenched in old traditions. Ashley explained how older people in particular were locked in an intergenerational cycle of “traditional ways”: “The World War II generation thinks in the traditional way. Their kids are the baby boomers who protested in the sixties, but now they have come right back around to where their parents think. They are trying to make us be like them, but the cycle is
over. There’s no turning back.” It was the disjuncture between clique members’ emergent “new” selves and “old” traditions that was the cause of many of their breakages.

Breakages

Clique members in their stories of identity recalled painful, sometimes violent breakages with their worlds. They told of how they resisted cultural prescriptions that were in opposition to their emergent selves. Many of them severed family ties because of conflicts over sexual orientations, gender norms, and parenthood. Paul told of how, when he came out as gay, his mother delivered the ultimatum “you can stay if you’re not gay.” Paul left rather than deny his homosexual self. Ashley and her mother fought constantly over Ashley’s refusal to abide by traditional norms for women. When Ashley announced that she might be a lesbian, her mother packed up and moved out. Naomi was a bundle of self-contradictions. She wanted to join the Marines and yet wrote love poetry about being carried off by suitors into “rainbow flower gardens with sparkling blue lakes.” Naomi had been evicted from her parents’ home for reasons she never made clear. A male cousin sheltered her in the basement of his apartment building. Much of her love poetry was addressed to him.

Carole was pregnant. DeeDee was already a mother. The fathers of their children had broken off relations when they learned about the pregnancies. Carole wanted to assert herself by striking out on her own. Her desire for independence caused enormous conflict between her and her mother. DeeDee absorbed her self in motherhood and welcomed the support of her parents. But she felt cut off from opportunities to develop other aspects of her self.

The group also broke away from churches. They talked a great deal about religion, leaving no doubt that religious prescriptions for spiritual and moral development had a profound impact on their senses of self. Most of them had gone to church as children. Some, like Lona and Jennifer, had been sent to parochial elementary schools. Almost all of them stopped attending church as teenagers because they could not go along with doctrines that they felt were too self-restricting. Jennifer said the Catholic Church was like a “big Xerox machine”: “Priests and nuns feed everyone into the machine and Xerox the perfect holy person. I would sit there in school and see copies of the exact same kids. I felt like someone looking in a mirror who wasn’t showing the image.” She constantly got into trouble because she “talked back” and otherwise resisted Church teachings. Jennifer quit going to Catholic schools and eventually left the Church altogether.

Clique members also distanced themselves from public schooling. Most had gotten off to a bad start in their freshman year and continued to have problems in their sophomore and junior years. Some had come close to dropping out of school. Group members told of being put off by
teachers who "don't give a damn about them" and of having been turned off by a "boring" curriculum that was "out of touch with reality." They also complained about classroom expectations that "turned unsuspecting kids into mindless nerds." While all decided to remain in school, most had withdrawn into passive resistance marked by minimal involvement in classroom activities. Stevie was an exception. He was a computer whiz who found a self-satisfying niche in advanced courses. Other members were notably less satisfied.

Lona and her friends also steered clear of other peers. Many of the students who went to Jefferson High were alienated youths from working-class families. They formed cliques with oppositional subcultures that were quite hostile toward middle-class prescriptions. Skinheads were white boys who, I was told, "hated blacks, Jews, and everybody else except badass white boys like them." They tattooed Nazi swastikas on their arms. Headbangers wore black leather jackets laced with chains in emulation of rogue motorcycle gangs. Grunge wore baggy clothing resembling the garb of prison inmates. Their oversized blue jeans drooped low in the behind. Other white kids dyed their hair purple or wore outrageous makeup and clothing. Many pierced earrings through their noses, lips, and, I was told, genitals.

Black kids set themselves off from whites with their own distinctive styles. Many wore sports team or name-brand overcoats throughout the day. Expensive designer clothes carrying Tommy Hilfiger, Nautica, Versace, or other chic manufacturing labels were all the rage. Some black students imitated local drug dealers and pimps by adorning themselves with gold. They wore gold herringbone necklaces, gold rings, and gold watches. Many capped their teeth in gold.

Fashion statements were not the only manner in which hostilities were expressed. Students routinely attacked other students who were opposed to or different from them. Everyone in Lona's clique had a story about being verbally or physically assaulted by peers. Randy, the boy with the traumatic brain injury, was teased so cruelly by his classmates that Lona had to keep a constant eye on him. Stevie and other boys told of how they had been "jumped" or drawn into fist fights. Girls told of being sexually harassed. Jennifer said she kicked a boy in the face because he kept pressing his "ugly body" against hers in class. "In this school," she explained, "you have to be tough or you'll get beat to hell up."

Lona and her friends broke away from hostile peers just as they had separated themselves from other worlds. Like many other extremely marginalized students, they retreated into an insular peer clique. But, unlike other youths, they produced a clique subculture that encouraged them to forge linkages that bridged oppositions.

**Linkages**

Symbolic and social linkages emerged in the subcultural world of Lona's clique which laid the foundation for postoppositional identity
work. Lona played an instrumental role in forging these links. She was a therapist who used dialogue to help her friends link disparate psychocultural commitments together in the formation of true enduring selves. Her dialogue also created social linkages rooted in an ethic of relative difference which promoted the construction of identities in ethical relation to others.

Lona the Therapist

Lona described herself as a natural-born counselor who knew how to analyze what was wrong with people and how to assist kids with “big problems”: “A lot of kids I didn’t even know would come up to me with big problems. One thing I could do was talk to them, and I realized I had this God-given gift. I got this insight thing that everyone wants.” Lona talked a great deal with her friends about their problems. She spent hours conversing with them on the phone, in the hallways, at night spots, and in other places. Lona said she felt like a psychiatrist during these conversations, but in many respects she was a cultural therapist who used dialogue to raise her friends’ awareness of the components of their enduring selves. Her dialogue was revelatory in how it uncovered hidden psychocultural commitments. It also raised awareness about the realities of making certain commitments.

Lona’s interactions with Ashley provide a good example of how therapeutic her dialogue could be. Ashley was a working-class white girl raised by a single mother. Lona said “Ashley was like a bum” when she first noticed her in a class: “She’d always sit in the back of the room and be real reserved and quiet.” Lona befriended her and proceeded to bring her out.

Ashley admitted she was in a “dark period” in her life when she met Lona. She was on the verge of severing relations with her mother and was experiencing conflicts at work, in school, and in her social life. One of the reasons for the conflicts was her open opposition to feminine cultural norms. She and her mother fought constantly over the proper way for women to look and behave. “If you really listened to my mom,” Ashley said, “... it was like she was saying women should starve themselves, sleep with bums, and spend the rest of their lives popping Prozac. No way, no way, not for me.” She felt pressure to be an “all-American girl,” an image epitomized by jocks’ girlfriends: “Look at the jocks’ girlfriends. They all look alike. They’re tall, thin, and sexy. They have the exact same hairstyles and wear the exact same clothes. They’re cheerleaders and homecoming queens. They get the best jobs in the mall. See, they’re the perfect picture of the all-American girl.”

Even more contentious than Ashley’s refusal to comply with feminine norms was her emergent sexual orientation. Deep down inside Ashley suspected she was a lesbian. Oppositions between her and her mother escalated into verbally violent confrontations when Ashley revealed her
sexual feelings. The battles came to an abrupt end when Ashley's mother packed up and moved out of their apartment.

Ashley became depressed after her mother left. She quit her job. She lost interest in school. She became socially isolated. Ashley sank into her dark period, where she remained until Lona came along and brought her out. Lona engaged her in a dialogue that revealed much about her true self. Lona described their conversations as follows:

We'd go back and forth. She'd say, "I don't want to wear makeup." I'd say, "Fine, don't wear it." She'd say, "I don't want to go out with creeps." I'd say, "OK, go out with your dog." But the biggest issue was her being a lesbian. I kept asking, "Are you sure you're a lesbian, or are you just going through a phase?" We talked and talked until she was absolutely sure.

Ashley said Lona made her think about the "reality" of her commitments: "She brought up stuff like how my lifestyle would be different, about having kids and everything. She got me thinking about the reality of being a lesbian woman. She was like, 'Be real but get real.' " Through dialogue with Lona, Ashley revealed, analyzed, and eventually linked her core psychocultural commitments together into a self that she could accept. But this was not the only aspect of identity work that was facilitated by Lona's dialogue. There was still the matter of constructing a self-affirming identity in relation to other people's cultural commitments.

Ethic of Relative Difference

The cornerstone of the subculture that emerged in Lona's clique was an ethic of relative difference which was premised on two essential principles. The first principle was that every individual is different and should not be expected to conform to the same cultural prescriptions. People have the right to construct and express identity adaptations that reflect their true or enduring selves. The second principle was that individual differences should be made relative to the differences of others. As individuals decide how to express their identities, they should think about the social consequences of their choices. They should, in other words, express identities in ethical relation to others. Jennifer described how the first principle operated in her group: "We are who we are. The headbangers, jocks, or whatever are all trying to be like each other. We're not like that, you know, like sheep who follow what everyone else is doing." Beth said that clique members did not pressure each other to be the same. She insisted that everyone had his or her "own voice": "You don't have your own voice in other groups. It's like everyone else speaks for you. But if you're like us, you're being yourself. You have your own thoughts, your own opinions, and you do what you want to do."

The first principle gave clique members the freedom to construct and openly express identities that reflected their true selves. Some members
(with the help of Lona) had developed fairly crystallized senses of self. Ashley and Paul were able to come out as lesbian and gay. Stevie could openly display his identity as a high achiever passionate about computers. DeeDee felt comfortable about expressing her identity as a mother.

Other members were not as certain about themselves or how to express their identities. Carole was struggling with the impending realities, and negative images, of being a poor black single mother. She did not want to be a "stereotype of the black welfare queen" but was not sure how to get around it. Naomi swung wildly between her obsession with becoming a Marine and her romantic fantasies of being swept away by men like her cousin. Randy was clearly impaired by his brain injuries but nevertheless did his best to come off as a normally functioning teenager. The identity constructions of these youths were fraught with difficulties and contradictions. But their efforts were supported by other members, who upheld their right to find their own paths to self-affirming identities.

The second principle was most evident in group dialogues. Lona said she and her friends "talked about anything and everything." They discussed sex and sexuality, religion, politics, television shows, and other issues of importance to them. Lona was often the chief facilitator. She initiated discussions and kept them going. When arguments became heated, she would calm down combatants with humor and conciliatory remarks. She comforted friends who became upset and put the kibosh on those who got out of hand. Clique members also discussed their own and other people's identity expressions. It was during these instances that the second principle came through. Group members insisted not only that people express identities that reflect their true selves but that they consider the social consequences of their choices. They were vehement that individuals express identities that link people together in ethical social relations rather than fuel oppositions.

I reconstructed such a dialogue from field notes. Group members were discussing an article in the student newspaper about black boys who harassed white girls in the tunnel leading to the lunchroom. They talked about how the "street image" of inner-city black students rubbed up against the "prejudices" of whites:

Jennifer: Black boys got this street image thing they have to put out. Like they have to dress sharp and be tough to survive on the street and all that. But why do they have to pick on white girls? What's the point?

Ashley: They erroneously believe they have to do things like that because a lot of white kids in this school are prejudiced.

Carole: Yeah, it's a two-way thing. Whites call blacks niggers, and blacks call whites honkies. Both sides rub against each other, and both come off looking real bad.

Lona: Blacks and whites need to show more respect. They have to do what they have to do, but they should show more respect.

A [looking at L]: They need to be more like you.

J: Lona is an alien in a black body.
L: No. I'm a beautiful black girl in a fat body. [Laughter.] I don't call whites honky, and they shouldn't call me fatty.

While members understood the "survival" reasons for racial identity expressions, they saw no justification for symbolic or physical displays of interracial hatred. Identity expressions that were openly racist were viewed as mutually destructive. Lona made funny remarks, but she was dead serious in her conviction that, while people have the right to be different, they have no right to be disrespectful or, for that matter, to do violence to one another.

The group also took issue with identity expressions that were disingenuous or reinforced destructive elements of other youths' subcultures. Jennifer complained about affluent teenagers in the suburbs who imitated low-income inner-city youths. She said, "Poor kids used to look up to rich kids; now it's the other way around. I see all these upper-middle-class teenagers running around dying their hair purple and wearing baggy clothes. They used to be preppies. They wore Calvin Klein jeans, Guess jeans. Now they're becoming more like us."

These teenagers were "fakes" as far as she was concerned. But they also were setting a bad example. Ashley said that suburban kids who copy skinheads and other hostile inner-city youths make "poor kids who are good look bad." Paul questioned the ethics of their choices, insisting they had no right to "make people think we're worse than we are."

Clique members were critical of youths who chose to express identities that did not reflect their true selves or caused harm to others. They also were critical of one another. They questioned each other's expressed adaptations in a manner that raised social consciousness about the personal and social implications of their choices.

Naomi, for example, went through a phase during which she adopted the image of the macho-male sexual predator. Dressed in military fatigues, she would approach boys in the hallways and aggressively attempt to seduce them. One morning as we hung out in the hallway, I watched as her friends confronted Naomi about what she was doing. They surrounded her and grilled her with statements like, "You don't like being harassed. What makes you think they do?"; "Your tail end is gonna get knocked up. Those guys are gonna stick it to you"; and, "It's bad enough that guys are like that, why do you want to be like that?" Naomi listened, responded to what her friends had to say, and abandoned her predatory ways.

The ethic of relative difference made it possible for members of Lona's clique to create symbolic linkages between their true selves and expressed identity adaptations and to forge social linkages between themselves and other people. These linkages fostered postpositional identity work that was self-accepting and accepting of others. They also paved the way for Lona and her friends to reconcile with their worlds.
Reconciliations

Lona’s clique was an oasis where marginalized teenagers found the help and support they needed to work out thorny identity issues. But it was a temporary stopover. Members were quite conscious of the fact that the safe peer haven they had carved out for themselves would be dismantled after graduation. Their senior year marked the end of a long, arduous period of adolescence during which many had managed to work out a more secure sense of self and a heightened sense of social consciousness.

Clique members began to realize that in order to build on the gains they had made they would have to rebuild bridges with their worlds. They had gone through painful breakages with their worlds in an effort to protect their emergent selves. As they became more self-confident, they became more willing to reconcile with their worlds. Rather than continue to oppose their worlds’ cultural prescriptions through a politics of resistance, they turned instead to a postoppositional identity politics of reconciliation.

To reconcile is to settle disputes. Reconciliation is not political accommodation, whereby one side surrenders to another. Nor is it compromise, whereby all sides incur some losses. Reconciliations are settlements that ideally benefit or improve the lives of everyone involved. Lona and her friends reached a point at which they recognized the benefits of education and other opportunities offered in their worlds. Along with this recognition came consideration of how they could reconcile with their worlds without surrendering or compromising their true selves.

One form of reconciliation comes about when people desire what they once viewed as undesirable. They recognize the benefits of embracing perspectives or of following courses of action that they had previously rejected. Clique members began to see the benefits of schooling. Most were floundering in their classes until, according to Jennifer, “it suddenly dawned on us that, wow, we gotta get through school if we’re gonna live the way we want.” She, Paul, and Stevie began to think seriously about going to college. Other members worried about not being able to sustain their lifestyles without high school diplomas. This growing awareness of the benefits of education spurred them to reconcile with school by taking a more active role in their classes. Lona said that Ashley had once been “a bum” who sat withdrawn in the back of the class. When I observed Ashley she was in the front of the classroom answering questions and voicing her opinions. She stood out and stood up for herself. Teachers regarded her as one of their top students. Other members were less vocal but more determined to complete their schoolwork. Their grades improved, and so did their chances of finishing high school. All of them, even those who had to repeat classes and retake state exams, managed to graduate.
A second form of reconciliation occurs when incompatible positions are made compatible. Paul hoped to mend breakages with his family and envisioned ways to make gay lifestyles compatible with traditional family arrangements. One idea was to allow gay men to get married and have children with surrogate mothers. The gay couple would be the parents, he explained, but a mother figure would also be present. Other members of the group challenged him to think about the consequences of this scenario, but Paul was convinced that there were ways for "straight people and gay people to share a family life where everybody is happy."

Reconciliation also happens when all sides in a dispute take responsibility for conflicts and then strive to transform themselves or circumstances in a manner that is mutually beneficial. Transformative reconciliations, as well as other forms, surfaced in Lona’s story of identity. As the story unfolds, so do Lona’s efforts to reconcile oppositions by changing her own or other people’s psychocultural commitments.

_Lona’s Story_

Lona lived with her parents in what she described as a “run-down old house” in a working-class black neighborhood. As small children, she and her siblings had been cared for by a grandmother while her parents worked. Lona said her grandmother was “deeply religious” and that she had been very much under her influence. Lona attended a Catholic elementary school where she was a good student who got along well with teachers and peers. She said she was a “spiritual child” and that “things were good, very good.”

Then things turned bad. Her grandmother died, and Lona said that, when she died, “God and religion was kinda taken away from me.” She stopped going to church and “went to hell.” Lona began to stay out all night with her friends and otherwise did what she pleased. Tensions mounted between her and her parents. They fought and eventually got to the point in their relationship where they were barely on speaking terms.

Lona also got into trouble at school. She went to a public middle school where, she admitted, “I lost my virginity along with my good grades.” She had to repeat eighth grade and was suspended for fighting and other infractions. Lona explained, “Other kids were doing rotten things, and I wasn’t about to be different.”

Things turned around when Lona entered ninth grade. She began to reckon with her self. She was estranged from her parents, separated from her church, failing in school, and fighting with peers. Lona said, “I looked at myself and hated what I saw.” She also analyzed what people were doing to each other. She looked at her worlds and concluded that people were “driving themselves and everybody else crazy.” Lona worked to turn her life around and also to help people turn their lives around. It was at this juncture that she decided she was “a natural-born
counselor.” Because of her own experiences, she had acquired much insight into the sources of conflict. Lona reconfigured her core commitments into a true self that was devoted to helping people. She also sought to fix breakages through transformative reconciliations.

Lona worked to reconcile with her parents. She said there was “a total communication gap” between them and that it was time to change the situation. She took the lead by striking up conversations with her parents and by being more of a help around the house. Communication channels began to open up. Lona and her parents were talking once again. Although they continued to disagree about many things, both sides were more willing to make adjustments that vastly improved their relationship.

Lona also hoped to revive her spiritual self. She was not sure if she would ever reconcile with the Catholic Church, but she felt that if she did it would have to be a two-way change process. For her part, Lona would have to undergo a “cleansing”: “I haven’t been to confession since sixth grade, and maybe I should go. I don’t feel I can go to church or be religious until I get rid of this dirty feeling I have about my past. I need a cleansing, like an exorcism or something.” But the Church also had to “clean up its act.” Lona said Catholic authorities had to become more open-minded. The Church, in her opinion, was too narrow in its prescriptions for how people should express their spirituality. She also objected to the Church’s sanctions against homosexuality and other kinds of intimate relationships. As far as she was concerned, “If two people love each other and want to build a life together and aren’t hurting anyone, then it shouldn’t matter if they are the same sex, different religions, or whatever. It’s the love that counts.” Lona did not go to confession, nor did she return to the Catholic Church. But religion was growing in importance for her, and she was sure she would become a spiritual person again.

Lona also became reconciled to schooling. She was on the verge of flunking out of high school because she had failed required math courses as well as the math section of the state exam. Like her friends, Lona realized she had to have a high school diploma in order to live the way she wanted. Her attitude changed, and so did her determination to get through school. Lona took remedial math courses and passed them all. She also retook the state exam nine times until she finally achieved a passing score. Lona made it through and was able to graduate with her friends.

There was also the issue of reconciling with peers. Lona used to fight with kids. Now she reached out to them. She was proud of the fact that her friends were so diverse, but other black students felt she had crossed too far over into white territory. Lona had several white girlfriends and a white boyfriend named Tony in the Navy. Because of her associations, Lona was ostracized and taunted by black peers who felt she was acting white. “Some black kids,” she said, “think we should be separated by
race. They say I’m acting white because my friends are white. They say I
talk white, whatever that means. They can say and do whatever they
want. I don’t care ’cause I’m going to keep doing what I want.” Lona in-
sisted that just because she hung out with whites did not mean that she
was opposed to being black. She had a strong sense of her self as a black
person. She also had a strong desire to transform race relations: “I want
to show people that they can be black, white, and purple and still get
along with each other.” She respected other people’s differences and
otherwise did her part to foster reconciliations. And it was her hope that
one day other people would do their part.

Lona’s story is not over. It continues to evolve. She sends me occa-
sional letters that describe her progress and that of her friends. Stevie,
Jennifer, and Paul went to college, while other members of the clique
found jobs in the city, are raising their children, or are otherwise busy
pursuing their chosen lifestyles. Lona married Tony after he was dis-
charged from the Navy. She has a job as a retail clerk and is thinking
about enrolling in a local technical college. She wrote in her last letter
about how she has been “studying paranormal psychology and angels.”
She appears to be ascending into another realm of possibility. Wherever
she goes, and whatever she becomes, Lona is sure to remain true to her
self. My hope is that her links will be lasting ones.

Discussion

What made the identity work of Lona and her friends postopposi-
tional was the way in which it enabled urban youths to resolve or move
beyond sociocultural conflicts. This work fostered symbolic and social
linkages that made it possible for troubled teenagers to come to terms
with their true selves and that encouraged them to express their identi-
ties in ethical relation to others. Linkages also engendered forms of re-
conciliation that empowered marginalized youths to become resituated
within their worlds in ways that allowed them to live productive, more
self-satisfying lives.

What made postoppositional identity work possible was the subcul-
tural dynamics of Lona’s peer clique. The clique provided marginalized
students with a safe social space where they could sort through, try on,
invent, and abandon traditional and new cultural possibilities in the for-
mation of true selves. Lona was a central figure who, like the cultural
therapist in the Spindlers’ (1993, 1994) writings, used dialogue to raise
her friends’ awareness of their core psychocultural commitments and of
their choices among cultural responses to their worlds’ sociocultural
prescriptions. Her dialogues also raised clique members’ social con-
sciousness about the effects on social relations of their own and other
people’s identity expressions. The most remarkable feature of the
clique’s subculture was the ethic of relative difference, with its prin-
cipled stance against identity expressions that suppress the “voice” of the
true self or fuel hostile oppositions between people.
The identity work of Lona and her friends has significance for theories in educational anthropology. It lends strong support to Hoffman’s (1998) recommendation that more attention be paid to psychocultural models of the self. Such models should acknowledge not only the multifaceted nature of the enduring self but also differences in individual adaptations. This is especially critical in studies of historically marginalized youths who are often fighting ongoing struggles to assert a viable sense of self on multiple fronts in multiple worlds. Lona and her friends fought hard to realize gender, racial, ethnic, and social class facets of their selves, as well as to assert their selves as spiritual and sexual persons. Their struggles and adaptations varied in accordance with individual proclivities and circumstances. Documenting individual variations provides more accurate representations of students’ identity work and also reveals more alternative strategies that could inform theory.

Postoppositional identity work also has political significance. Lona and her friends, in an effort to protect their emergent selves, initially engaged in oppositional politics of resistance that led to severe breakages with their worlds. These politics proved to be more destructive to them than to their worlds. Resistance did little to change their worlds’ sociocultural prescriptions and ultimately forced the youths into the margins where they lived in self-absorbed isolation.

Forms of reconciliation fostered a politics that empowered the youths to resituate their selves within, and possibly to transform, their worlds. Rather than oppose world prescriptions, Lona and her friends began to weigh them and to consider the consequences of their own and other people’s cultural choices. Prescriptions like those governing formal schooling, which were once viewed as undesirable, became desirable when the relationship between education and preferred lifestyles became clearer. The idea that incompatible cultural norms and values could be made compatible created possibilities for reconciliations that blended lifestyles. The politics of reconciliation also held out promise for transforming worlds. Transformative reconciliations occur when people are willing to alter sociocultural prescriptions in ways that allow for diversity and strengthen social bonds. They offer the most potential for positive change.

The postoppositional identity work of Lona and her friends may have been a unique set of adaptations or an indication of a growing trend in urban schools. In any case, this work and the work of other urban students who are overcoming oppositions can contribute much to social movements aimed at empowering youths to assert their selves in a manner that improves their lives and their worlds.

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Note

1. The names of the school, students, and other participants have been changed to protect confidentiality and to ensure anonymity.

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