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“My Regular Spot”
Race and Territory in Urban Public Space
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Employing ethnographic data from a diverse Chicago neighborhood, this article examines how and why a group of Black men asserted exclusive claims to a street corner in explicitly racial terms. The analysis focuses on why racial-ethnic categories became the basis for social and spatial segregation in public spaces but not in a less conspicuous indoor setting. Consistent with prior research by urban ethnographers, the evidence indicates that the dynamics of interaction in public space encourage individuals to rely on categoric knowledge, which triggers stereotypes and provokes intergroup suspicions and hostilities. However, beliefs about how third parties evaluate whether or not specific interactions in visible public spaces are suspicious can also promote racially charged territorial behavior and thereby limit intergroup contact.

Keywords: race; ethnicity; diversity; territoriality; public space

Under what conditions does racial-ethnic diversity promote intergroup contact in urban neighborhoods? In particular, how and to what extent do the occurrence and tone of such contact depend on the salience of racial-ethnic identities and stereotypes in specific social settings within diverse urban neighborhoods? The contact hypothesis suggests—and some studies appear to confirm—that spatial proximity between members of different racial-ethnic groups encourages frequent interaction and decreases the salience of racial-ethnic identities (Allport 1954; Sigelman et al. 1996). For example, Lee (2002, 79-81) describes how race became less salient in interactions between Black customers and Jewish and Korean merchants in Harlem and West Philadelphia as the merchants gained experience with the neighborhood’s residents, thereby facilitating amiable intergroup contact.

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In contrast, other ethnographers—such as Suttles (1968), Rieder (1985), and Anderson (1990)—have provided vivid examples of the more general finding that close proximity to a large outgroup population heightens the salience of racial-ethnic cleavages and thereby promotes territorial behavior (Bergesen and Herman 1998; Green, Strolovich, and Wong 1998). Research in this tradition emphasizes that, to the extent that neighborhood diversity promotes intergroup contact at all, the resulting interaction tends to take on an aggressive, hostile tone and focuses on maintaining social and territorial boundaries between groups.

This study examines how the visual, physical, and legal accessibility of public spaces in a diverse urban neighborhood contributed to the salience of racial-ethnic categories and stereotypes and provoked intergroup antagonism and racially charged territorial behavior. Urban ethnographers have long been interested in how territorial behavior on the part of those who live and work in urban settings shapes the social order of local communities (Suttles 1968 and 1972; Anderson 1976 and 1990; Hunter 1985; Lofland 1973). Yet the literature on the “privatization of public space” (Lofland 1973, 118-57) has largely overlooked how this form of territorial behavior contributes to social and spatial segregation in racially and ethnically diverse urban neighborhoods. Moreover, like most theoretical and empirical work on the contact hypothesis, this literature tends to focus on patterns of interpersonal acquaintance and on individual attitudes at the expense of fully appreciating the role of categoric knowledge (e.g., shared understandings of the social significance of racial-ethnic categories) in producing territorial behavior that limits intergroup contact.

This article addresses these issues by analyzing data drawn from participant observation conducted among a group of Black men who congregated near one particular street corner in a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood on the far north side of Chicago. The analysis centers on why these men asserted exclusive territorial claims to the streets, alleys, and vacant lots in the neighborhood in explicitly racial terms and on the resulting patterns of intergroup contact in these public spaces. In particular, the analysis compares their conduct in these public spaces with their behavior in a nearby soup kitchen where they routinely engaged in friendly conversations with members of other racial-ethnic groups. The aim of the analysis is to extend and refine prior theory and research on intergroup relations by showing how one specific form of the privatization of public space can be encouraged by beliefs about the significance of racial-ethnic categories in specific social settings. The article demonstrates that the territorial racialization of public space sometimes results as much from tenuous relations
with third parties (e.g., gang members or the police) as from the attitudes toward intergroup contact held by the individuals directly involved, yet nevertheless limits the frequency and duration of friendly social interactions that cross racial-ethnic boundaries.

**Racial-Ethnic Diversity, Intergroup Contact, and Territorial Behavior**

Both theory and empirical research offer conflicting accounts of how spatially concentrated racial-ethnic diversity affects the salience of group identities and the incidence and tone of intergroup interactions. The contact hypothesis suggests that close proximity between members of different racial-ethnic groups encourages them to interact and, consequently, to replace prejudiced views of one another with more nuanced, favorable attitudes (Allport 1954; Sigelman and Welch 1993; Ellison and Powers 1994). Both laboratory studies and ethnographic accounts emphasize that contact erodes prejudice and fosters amiable intergroup relations in large part by reducing the salience of group identities, which enables members of different groups to approach and interact with one another as individuals rather than as representatives of racial-ethnic categories (Brewer and Miller 1988; Lee 2002). As a result, they learn that negative outgroup stereotypes are inconsistent with the qualities and behaviors exhibited by specific individuals and thus begin to rely less on such racial-ethnic categorizations to assess others’ intentions and behaviors.

In contrast, group threat theory posits that close proximity to a relatively large and thus highly visible outgroup population heightens the salience of racial-ethnic categories and thereby triggers associated prejudices (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1996). Moreover, many ethnographic accounts suggest that even those who do not harbor strong prejudices may find themselves compelled to behave in a discriminatory fashion by organized neighborhood groups, such as youth gangs and homeowners’ associations. These groups exert pressure both on their own members and on others in the neighborhood to enforce territorial boundaries and thereby limit intergroup contact (Suttles 1968; Rieder 1985, 66, 85-7).

Scholars have sought to reconcile these conflicting accounts, both theoretically and empirically. Macrostructural theory, for example, suggests that spatial proximity between members of different racial-ethnic groups promotes all types of intergroup contact, both casual and intimate, hostile and friendly (Blau 1977). However, most of the empirical studies that support
macrostructural theory have relied on aggregate measures of racial-ethnic diversity and segregation (e.g., see Goldsmith 2004). In fact, macrostructural factors may promote both friendly interaction and intergroup territorial conflict in the settings examined (e.g., schools) because these settings are internally differentiated, with friendly interaction primarily endemic to some contexts (e.g., classrooms) and intergroup conflicts typically emerging in others (e.g., hallways or lunchrooms). Research that examines intergroup relations in the context of entire neighborhoods must be particularly sensitive to such internal differentiation, since these environments provide opportunities for intergroup contact in a variety of different venues. In particular, some neighborhood settings (e.g., upscale restaurants) are more likely to ensure class homogeneity than others (e.g., city streets). Research suggests that intergroup contact is more likely to decrease the salience of racial-ethnic categories in social contexts where members of different groups are of similar socioeconomic status (Jackman and Crane 1986). Accordingly, ethnographic perspectives that highlight differences in the dynamics of intergroup relations across different settings within specific urban neighborhoods can provide a valuable complement to quantitative studies informed by macrostructural theory.

**Intergroup Contact in Public Settings**

One such perspective contrasts patterns of intergroup contact in private settings with those in public settings. Feagin (1991) argues that existing social ties constrain prejudiced individuals from overtly expressing racist attitudes in private settings, while the relative anonymity of public places emboldens them to engage in behavior inconsistent with prevailing social norms. Moreover, individuals encounter a wide variety of strangers in urban public spaces whom they must assess quickly and efficiently in order to manage large volumes of fleeting interactions. Consequently, interaction in public space relies heavily on categoric knowing, in which the likely behavior of individuals is inferred from readily observable visual cues (Lofland 1973). This reliance on categoric knowing increases the salience of racial-ethnic distinctions and thereby inhibits the sort of friendly interaction emphasized by the contact hypothesis (Suttles 1968; Anderson 1990). Anderson (1990), for example, notes that Whites in the racially diverse neighborhood he studied sometimes failed to recognize Black acquaintances on the street, largely because they interpreted black skin as an important indicator of risk, thereby distracting attention from the individual identities of Black passersby.
Privatizing Public Spaces and Public Accommodations

While the distinction between public and private places is important, Feagin (1991) suggests an additional useful distinction between public accommodations, like hotels, restaurants and taverns, and public spaces, like city streets and parks. To be sure, encounters with strangers are more likely to occur in both public accommodations and public spaces than in more private settings because both offer relatively unrestricted access. However, public accommodations are “public” primarily only in the sense that their private owners and their representatives (e.g., managers or other employees) by law can only refuse entry to would-be patrons on the basis of a relatively limited range of criteria. Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 specifically prohibits the private owners of such facilities from barring entry or providing segregated service on the basis of “race, color, religion, or national origin.” Nevertheless, the private owners of public accommodations are legally entitled to deny entry because the facility has closed for the day or because a would-be patron is inappropriately dressed or unable to pay for the services provided. Moreover, even public authorities (e.g., the police) are not legally entitled to enter or inspect the premises at times of their choosing without a search warrant or the owner’s permission. The physical construction of many public accommodations reinforces these legal constraints on access by rendering activities conducted inside them visually inaccessible to passersby.

In contrast, public spaces entitle both public authorities and private citizens to more-or-less continuous, relatively unrestricted physical and visual access. Of course, public authorities may place various limits on access, by restricting when public spaces are available (e.g., a public park that closes after 10 p.m.) or to whom at specific times (e.g., a curfew that prohibits minors from being on the street after dark). Yet unlike privately owned public accommodations, public spaces enable private citizens to invoke constitutionally protected rights that limit the extent to which either public authorities or other citizens can restrict access. Accordingly, public spaces, particularly when located in dense urban areas, provide venues in which unacquainted individuals not only encounter one another, but do so in a context that renders their interactions visible to third parties who are personally unknown to any of them.

In practice, of course, specific sites vary not only in their physical arrangement and legal status, but also in the patterns of social interaction that shape their use. By “privatizing public space,” the inhabitants of dense urban centers can establish “home territories,” i.e., familiar physical settings
in which they know personally most of the people they encounter (Lofland 1973, 118-57). So-called “residents” spend nearly as much (or even more) time in their home territory as those “in charge” (e.g., owners or employees of a particular establishment or the police who regularly patrol a specific street). While they do not own the places where they gather in any formal sense, residents are nonetheless able to assert proprietary claims to these settings because they are personally, rather than just categorically, known to other residents and to those in charge (Lofland 1973, 122-31). Indeed, residents often feel entitled to use their home territory for their own private purposes and even to engage in backstage behavior (e.g., see Suttles 1968, 84-7). Strangers may be physically locked out (May 2001) or made to feel unwelcome so that they quickly conduct their business and leave (Anderson 1976, 7; see also Lofland 1973, 130). Significantly, such reactions to strangers have little in common with the categoric knowing that Lofland (1973) attributes to urbanites who have become skilled in navigating public spaces. Residents need not attend closely to visual cues provided by strangers’ appearance to determine how they should react, since they automatically deny to all strangers the proprietary claims and privileges accorded to residents. Thus, Lofland (1973) conceptualizes the privatization of public space as an alternative to becoming “streetwise,” i.e., skilled in using categoric knowing to manage relations with strangers in public settings.

The literature on the privatization of public space suffers from two notable limitations. First, the literature generally fails to distinguish analytically between public spaces and public accommodations. Unlike the private owners of public accommodations, public officials not only have limited authority to exclude private citizens from public spaces; they are also obligated to protect individuals’ rights to use these spaces when other private actors try to assert exclusive territorial claims. As such, the residents of public spaces must attend closely not only to how other residents and those in charge, but also to how relative strangers are likely to react to their attempts to assert proprietary claims. Consequently, one can expect categoric knowing to play a more prominent role in attempts to privatize public spaces than this literature has acknowledged.

Moreover, most of the relevant empirical studies either focus on settings that are racially and ethnically homogenous (Anderson 1976; Venkatesh 2000) or devote little analytical attention to the racial-ethnic diversity of the research setting in explaining how and why individuals assert territorial claims (Henderson 1975; Duneier 1999; but see Suttles 1968; Anderson 1990). As a result, previous research has largely ignored how efforts to privatize public places can contribute to social and spatial segregation in
racially and ethnically diverse urban neighborhoods. Accordingly, this study examines patterns of intergroup contact in one such community and compares the frequency and tone of contact on a street corner where a group of Black men regularly congregated with those characterizing a nearby soup kitchen, paying particular attention to how territorial claims influenced these contrasting patterns.

The Setting: Howard Street and the “Juneway Jungle”

I collected the data for this article on a section of Howard Street in the East Rogers Park neighborhood on Chicago’s far north side and in the Good News Community Kitchen, a soup kitchen operated by a local church on a nearby street (see figures 1 and 2). This section of Howard Street, along with the city blocks immediately to the north, is colloquially known as the “Juneway Jungle,” an unflattering reference to the active markets for narcotics and prostitution that have plagued the area for a number of years and also a racist reference to the large Black population that began moving into the area during the 1970s. This area and the section of Rogers Park immediately south of Howard have remained racially and ethnically diverse. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the area north of Howard had a population of 5,391, which was approximately 56 percent non-Hispanic Black or African American, 23 percent non-Hispanic White, 14 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 3 percent non-Hispanic Asian. Moreover, 17 percent of the local residents were born outside the United States, hailing predominantly from Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The residential population in the portion of the neighborhood immediately south of the Juneway Jungle had a similar composition, but with the proportions of non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks essentially reversed, such that Whites made up the largest share. Consequently, Howard Street served as a symbolic boundary between the “White” and “Black” sections of the neighborhood, even though the populations of both areas were quite diverse (cf. Suttles 1968).

Method

I lived just east of the Juneway Jungle for one year, from the fall of 1997 until the summer of 1998. From April through early June of 1998, I devoted part of two to three days out of each of ten weeks to some combination of
hanging out on the street corner, eating at the soup kitchen, and walking around the neighborhood. I typically observed for an hour or two before returning to my apartment to write up my field notes and then went back to the street corner to conduct further observation. In addition, I walked through the neighborhood virtually every day during the entire period that I lived there, noting who was on the street and occasionally stopping to talk with people I knew. I also conducted formal interviews, lasting approximately one hour each, with my main informant (described below) and with the manager of the soup kitchen, and I returned to the site (after moving to a different neighborhood) to gather additional data during one week in December 1998. My detailed field notes document approximately fifty hours of observations.

As a White male in my late twenties, I surmised that the reactions I observed to my attempts to approach and converse with the Black men who
hung out on Howard Street might well provide revealing insights into their
experiences with and attitudes toward intergroup relations in a racially and
ethnically diverse neighborhood. In this respect, I followed Venkatesh’s (2002, 92) suggestion that the data obtained from ethnographic observation
should not be limited to descriptions of subjects’ behavior and their inter-
actions among themselves, but should also attend carefully to how “the
interaction of fieldworker and informant is itself potentially revealing of the
local properties of social structure and may . . . illuminate chosen research
questions.” Prior to beginning the research, I had noticed some of the men
from the corner going into the soup kitchen as I walked by on the way to
my apartment. As such, I surmised that eating at the soup kitchen might
also give me an opportunity to become better acquainted with some of these
men. The importance of comparing the patterns of intergroup contact in the
neighborhood’s public spaces with those in a public accommodation (i.e., the soup kitchen) emerged inductively in the course of the research.

My main informant on Howard Street was a man known as Pops, whom I met the evening I began my research while having dinner at the Good News Community Kitchen. (To protect confidentiality, I refer to all the men included in this study by pseudonyms.) About three weeks after I began my field research, Pops disappeared for almost a month (from April 26 until May 22, 1998). I later learned that he had pneumonia and was hospitalized in the nearby suburb of Evanston during this time. In his absence, I became better acquainted with several of the other men who hung out on the corner. Overall, I got to know eleven men, ranging in age from approximately thirty to sixty-five, as well as several younger Black men with whom they associated.

**Intergroup Contact on Howard Street and in the Community Kitchen**

On Howard Street, a varied mixture of people regularly made their way up and down the sidewalk, heading into the “El” station, waiting at the bus stop, or ducking into one of the fast food restaurants, cosmetics shops, or record stores that lined the street. A group of middle-aged Black men stood out, since they generally lingered in the area longer than anyone else. They gathered either in one large cluster or several smaller ones, most often on the sidewalk or on some railroad ties at the edge of one of the empty lots. They spent much of their time on the street corner talking and joking with each other, while consuming alcohol (usually either malt liquor or cheap gin) purchased from one of the two liquor stores on the corner. They sometimes asked passerby for change, but I rarely observed this behavior, and some of them explicitly told me that they refused to beg. Occasionally, one of the men would fall asleep on the sidewalk, but this behavior was also infrequent.

One of the most striking features of intergroup relations on Howard Street was how rarely members of other racial-ethnic groups interacted with these Black men. While I did observe a number of Hispanic men hanging out for extended periods in the area, they were usually in small clusters segregated from the Black men and were seldom on Howard Street itself, but instead along a side street or sitting in lawn chairs in the parking lot near an abandoned building (see figure 2).[^2] I saw Asians on the street less frequently. Those who did walk through the area never stopped to talk to the
Black men on the corner. Indeed, the only Asians with a sustained visible presence in the neighborhood were the Korean owners of a hardware store and a fast food restaurant, and these individuals were rarely on the street. Similarly, while many non-Hispanic Whites could be seen walking up and down Howard Street in the course of any given day, none of them lingered long enough to strike up a conversation with any of the Black men.

Significantly, sustained intergroup contact (i.e., interaction that went beyond merely passing a member of another racial-ethnic group on the street) was noticeably more common in the nearby Good News Community Kitchen than on the street. While most of the people who ate at the soup kitchen were Black, a few Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites also ate there. In addition, White volunteers from nearby suburban churches frequently helped with preparing and serving the meals. Some of the Black men who hung out on the corner occasionally sat and talked in a friendly manner with some of the Hispanic men who were eating at the soup kitchen, something I never observed them doing on the street. The same was true for their interactions with non-Hispanic Whites. I frequently observed some of the men from the corner sitting with one or more of the relatively few White men and women who ate at the soup kitchen and engaging in friendly conversations. And as I examine further below, these men had very limited interactions even with poor Whites who had similar lifestyles when they were on Howard Street, yet they did not hesitate to interact in a friendly manner with these same individuals in the confines of the soup kitchen.

**Racial-Ethnic Stereotypes and Attitudes and Intergroup Relations in Public Settings**

What accounts for the markedly greater degree of racial-ethnic segregation in social interactions on the street as compared to the nearby soup kitchen? I argue that this pattern reflects the increased salience of racial-ethnic categories in interactions that occur in public spaces as compared to those taking place in public accommodations like the soup kitchen. Consistent with the arguments advanced by urban ethnographers, the high volume and wide variety of fleeting contacts that occurred on Howard Street focused attention on visual cues like skin color and manner of dress that individuals used to categorize strangers and acquaintances. Such fleeting interactions triggered racial-ethnic stereotypes and provoked intergroup suspicions and hostilities. At least as importantly, my data suggest that the
heightened salience of racial-ethnic categories in public spaces sometimes reflects concerns with maintaining racially exclusive territorial boundaries in settings where interactions between members of different racial-ethnic groups are visible to third parties, even when the individuals involved are personally acquainted with one another. On Howard, Black street-corner men were keenly aware of how social interactions with members of other racial-ethnic groups would be perceived by their peers, by gang members and especially by the police, which encouraged them to assert exclusive territorial claims to the neighborhood’s public spaces that limited sustained intergroup contact.

While the older Black men who hung out on the street corner had extremely limited contact with members of other racial-ethnic groups in the neighborhood’s public spaces, some of the younger Black males they associated with were more likely to initiate interactions that crossed racial-ethnic boundaries. These interactions were typically characterized by stereotyping and even open hostility. For example, I had been standing on the sidewalk next to one of the liquor stores talking with Pops one afternoon when two younger Black men and a Black woman drove up. After getting out of the car and talking to us for a while, they were ready to leave:

All three of them went back to the car and got in. As they were climbing in, a Hispanic man walked by wearing a cowboy hat. The man who had been driving called out, “Yo quiero Taco Bell.” The other Black man responded by quoting from other Taco Bell commercials, “Here, leezard, leezard. I’m goin’ to need a beeger box.” They got in the car and took off.

Relying on obvious visual cues like skin color and attire, these younger Black men were quick to categorize this Hispanic individual as the embodiment of a stereotype promulgated by the mass media. Their mocking reference to a popular television commercial identifies him as a Mexican immigrant with limited English proficiency and discourages any further interaction that might undermine this stereotypical view. Indeed, the Hispanic man gave no indication that he knew these men and did not respond to their taunts, instead quickening his pace down the street to avoid any further interaction. While this particular individual may have spoken relatively little English, the stereotypes triggered by reliance on categoric knowing in this fleeting contact effectively undermined any opportunity the situation might have provided for more sustained interaction that could have contradicted the image of Hispanics popularized by the mass media.
Similarly, I never observed any direct interaction between the older Black men on the corner and any of the handful of Asian residents of the neighborhood. However, some younger Black males did occasionally engage in hostile interactions with Asians who were making their way through the neighborhood’s public spaces. For example, I observed the following interaction:

I walked by the Howard Area Community Center Alternative High School [on Howard Street]. A bunch of Black teenagers were standing outside, some of them smoking. As I walked past them, one boy called out to an elderly Asian man across the street, “You come over here if you want to mess with a Black person.” The old man glared at the boy angrily.

Even more emphatically than in the previous example, this fleeting interaction focused attention on racial-ethnic distinctions, provoking intergroup hostilities. The boy’s challenge not only discouraged further interaction, but also served as a symbolic display of aggression (Fischer 1975), as it clearly marked a territorial boundary that members of other racial-ethnic groups must not cross if they wished to avoid violent conflict. This observation is consistent with the accounts of intergroup relations and territoriality in previous ethnographic studies that depict how young males play a leading role in maintaining spatial segregation between different groups by aggressively guarding their “turf” (Suttles 1968; Anderson 1990). Moreover, this observation is also consistent with Anderson’s (1990, 164) more specific claim that the toughness and street smarts attributed to young Black males by people from other age, gender, and racial-ethnic groups enable them to assert “a peculiar hegemony over public spaces.”

My observations suggested that racial-ethnic categories and stereotypes were much less salient in the interactions that took place in the nearby soup kitchen than in those that occurred on Howard Street. In part, the reduced salience of racial-ethnic categories in the social interactions that took place in the soup kitchen reflected its physical arrangement and organizational routines. Depending on when they arrived, patrons often had a limited range of choices about where to sit. In addition, they were often called up to get their food by age group, meaning that they spent a significant amount of time sitting at the tables waiting to be served. Thus, in contrast to the fleeting interactions on the street, previously unacquainted individuals had ample time and opportunity to engage in conversations. Furthermore, the soup kitchen’s manager enforced strict behavioral rules, denying service to anyone who became violent or was caught using drugs or alcohol on the
premises: “I don’t let peoples come in here and fight and just be rowdy and things like that.” As a result, the backstage behaviors displayed by the Black men on the corner, which may have discouraged others from interacting with them, were less likely to occur in the soup kitchen.

Yet contrary to the contact hypothesis, my observations suggested that the relatively low salience of racial-ethnic categories in interactions in the soup kitchen did not always reflect favorable racial attitudes or positive assessments of intergroup relations developed through prior intergroup contacts (c.f. Lee 2002; Sigelman and Welch 1993). Instead, my observations highlighted the importance of distinguishing between the generalized salience of racial-ethnic categories and their salience in particular, context-specific interactions. For example, on one occasion, I sat with a group of four Black men who were engaged in an animated discussion. One argued that “the White man” brought drugs into the community to “keep Black folks down,” and another asserted that “White folks” had reinterpreted the Bible to suit their own purposes. Referring to the authors of the Bible, he asked rhetorically, “How could they be livin’ on the Nile and be White folks?”

As this exchange suggests, many of the Black men in the soup kitchen were keenly aware of racial-ethnic identities and conflict. Their comments portray “White folks” as determined to maintain their privileged status vis-à-vis Black Americans, whether by bringing drugs into Black neighborhoods or by reinterpreting the Bible to minimize Blacks’ role in this sacred text. Yet there was no indication in their comments, explicitly or otherwise, that they intended these remarks to blame me personally or to make me feel uncomfortable. Moreover, when a White woman sat down at our table, one of the men proceeded to strike up a friendly conversation with her about the Chicago Bulls. Such observations suggested that, while many of the Black men in the soup kitchen viewed race as a powerful source of social division and, indeed, of divergent interests in American society at large, they were nonetheless able, in the context of the soup kitchen, to separate their awareness of the generalized importance of race from their face-to-face interactions with individual members of other racial-ethnic groups.

**Socioeconomic Status, Lifestyle, and Personal Knowledge in Public Interaction**

As the preceding analysis suggests, one explanation for the differences between the soup kitchen and the street in the relevance of negative racial attitudes to actual and potential face-to-face interactions can be found in
differences in the physical arrangement and functional organization of each setting. Yet clearly these characteristics cannot entirely account for the pronounced difference in the extent to which each setting fostered sustained intergroup contact. While many of the interactions I observed on Howard Street involved only fleeting contact, the older Black men spent much of the day on the sidewalk and in nearby alleys and empty lots, providing ample opportunity to engage in sustained interactions with one another. Members of other racial-ethnic groups could have easily joined them in socializing and drinking in these public spaces, but they did not. To be sure, many of the neighborhood’s residents and visitors avoided sustained interaction with these men simply because they lacked the time or the interest in hanging around for extended periods. Moreover, many passersby (Black and otherwise) expressed disgust at their backstage behaviors, such as consuming alcohol or, less frequently, smoking marijuana or sleeping on the sidewalk.

Nevertheless, I observed frequent cordial interactions between Black passersby and the men on the corner. On several occasions, I saw Pops approach well-dressed older Black women, who clearly recognized him and would stop to talk. Similar to Hannerz’ (1969) findings with regard to so-called “mainstreamers” and their attitudes toward “street” behaviors in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Washington, D.C., I found that many of the Black residents who lived near Howard Street expressed disapproval of the street corner men’s lifestyle, yet were willing to interact with them on the street in a friendly manner:

Two of the men from the corner saw two Black women walking in the opposite direction on the other side of the street and walked over to them. One of the women explained that she was going to the grocery store to get something to eat. One of the men asked if he could get some money to buy something to drink. “You don’t need anything to drink! Look at ya! I take care of myself.” She gave him a hug and continued on.

While she obviously did not condone—or wish to encourage—this man’s behavior, her disapproval of his lifestyle did not prevent her from expressing affection toward him as an individual. In contrast, I did not observe even a single comparable instance in which the men on the street initiated this sort of friendly interaction with anyone who was not Black.

Moreover, even poor White men who shared the street corner men’s lifestyle—and had become personally acquainted with them in the soup kitchen—avoided interacting with them in the neighborhood’s public spaces. I met two White men who appeared to be in their thirties, Tom and
Pete, at the soup kitchen. I saw them there several times, and on each occasion they were sitting and talking with one or more of the Black men from the corner. Their comments indicated that, like Pops and his peers, they were heavy drinkers. Yet while I occasionally saw them walking down Howard, greeting the Black men as they passed, I never saw them hanging out or drinking with any of the Black men on the street. The first time I met them, Pete made a revealing comment:

Pete began talking and joking about how he was going to “drink a forty-ouncer.” Tom suggested that they go to someone’s house to drink, but Pete said, “Naw, I want to go out in the alley and drink it like a real nigger. I shouldn’t say that, though, I’ll offend somebody. I’ll offend myself.”

Tom, who was a little older, quickly overruled this suggestion. Indeed, Pete’s comment struck me as a fanciful musing that depicted him in a situation that even he viewed as unrealistic. His use of the term “nigger” did not seem to reflect any sort of conscious aversion to being around Black people—as suggested by his comment that he might “offend himself”—but did suggest that he regarded the nearby alley as a place where only Black people could legitimately hang out and drink.

These examples suggest that the social and physical segregation of the Black street corner men from other racial-ethnic groups in the neighborhood’s public spaces cannot be explained entirely in terms of differences in socioeconomic status or lifestyle. These men had frequent and friendly interactions with well-dressed Black passersby who did not share their lifestyles and, in some cases, explicitly disapproved of their behavior. In contrast, such interactions with comparable White passersby simply did not occur. Nor should one suppose that either the dearth of poor Whites with similar lifestyles or the street corner men’s lack of interpersonal familiarity with such individuals accounted for the segregated patterns of interaction on the street. Poor White men like Tom and Pete remained absent from their gatherings on the street despite having similar lifestyles and being personally acquainted with them from their interactions in the soup kitchen.

The Territorial Racialization of Public Space

By joining in the street corner men’s interactions in the neighborhood’s public spaces, I provoked a revealing combination of confusion, suspicion and hostility. Their reactions suggested that they regarded the sidewalks,
alleys, and empty lots on and around Howard Street not only as their home territory, but also as places where members of other racial-ethnic groups—especially “Caucasians”—did not belong. Most of the Black men I met on Howard Street initially assumed that I was hanging out there for one of two reasons. Several younger Black men offered to sell me drugs. They reacted with surprise and even confusion when I indicated that I was not interested but nevertheless continued to hang out on the sidewalk. Similarly, many of the older Black men assumed that I must be an undercover narcotics officer. While I was pursuing this research, I had long hair and wore a somewhat tattered plaid shirt and faded jeans. Accordingly, and consistent with Lofland’s (1973) claims about the importance of visual cues in the dynamics of social interaction in urban public spaces, many of the men on the corner assumed that I was a “hippie” or “burnout” (i.e., the sort of person who would be interested in buying drugs on the street) or that I was an undercover narcotics officer trying to pass myself off as this type of person to catch them selling drugs.

While these visual cues undoubtedly influenced their reactions, my white skin also played a particularly significant role in triggering the assumptions they made about me. For example, when I sat on the sidewalk by myself one evening, the following ensued:

While I sat, the young Black guy whom Pops and I had run into on his bike south of Rogers [Avenue] came by and said, “What up, White boy.” A few minutes later I saw him talking with Pops at the edge of the vacant lot. Shortly thereafter, Pops came over and said, “They think you’re an undercover cop. You better get out of here, or they’re going to fuck you up.”

The younger man drew explicit attention to my racial identity, and Pops interpreted what this attention meant in practical terms. My visible presence on the street corner provoked the younger man’s hostility because he assumed that the only reason a “White boy” would be hanging out there was that he was an undercover police officer.

Contrary to both the contact hypothesis and to Lofland’s account of the privatization of public space, the personal relationships that I developed with several of these men (especially Pops) proved insufficient to reduce the salience of my racial-ethnic identity on the street. As I became better acquainted with some of the men, I was able to convince some of them that I was neither interested in buying drugs nor in arresting local drug dealers. Nevertheless, they continued to insist that I did not belong in the neighborhood’s public spaces and that I should not be hanging around with them in
this setting. Several of them warned me that I would be “in danger” if I per-
sisted in hanging out on the street. In particular, Pops repeatedly warned me
that, while “[w]e can go off by ourselves and talk,” I could not “just hang
around out here” on the corner.

In warning me that “you better get out of here,” Pops’ behavior resem-
bled that of the so-called “old heads” described by Anderson (1990), who
assume a caretaking role in poor, predominantly Black neighborhoods that
includes warning strangers about where not to go. Consistent with this
description, Pops repeatedly emphasized that his warnings to stay away
from the street corner were for my own good. Yet when I insisted that I
needed to hang out on the street corner to do my research, he responded by
warning me that, “I can’t be seen with you too much, because if one of
these guys gets arrested, then they can say that I was hangin’ around with a
Caucasian.” My observations revealed that precisely this sort of concern
about how third parties would perceive the interactions taking place in the
neighborhood’s public spaces was one of the most important factors under-
lying the exclusive, racialized nature of their territorial claims to the street.

To be sure, some aspects of the behavior I observed on Howard Street
were at least superficially consistent with Lofland’s (1973) account of the
privatization of public space. Many of the Black men on the street were
marginally housed in the nearby suburb of Evanston (i.e., they resided on
and off with relatives who lived there) or were homeless. The liquor stores
in the neighborhood opened earlier than those located in Evanston (the his-
torical home of the Women’s Temperance Society), providing an incentive
for many of these self-described “alcoholics” to arrive in the area early in
the morning. Moreover, they could generally count on a free evening meal
from the Good News Community Kitchen, a further incentive to hang
around throughout most of the day. Because they spent a great deal of time
on the street, they had ample opportunity to get to know some of the police
officers who patrolled the neighborhood, as well as local gang members
and other younger Black men who could offer some assurance of protec-
tion. For example, Freddy maintained that he had developed personal rela-
tionships with local police officers that allowed him to escape stringent
enforcement of the prohibition against drinking on the sidewalk. One might
discount this assertion as mere bravado, yet my observations seemed to
support his claim:

The police car pulled into the empty lot and drove toward us. Freddy dropped
his cup on the ground. The beer bottle sat empty next to me. “They saw me drop
it,” Freddy said. The car pulled up in front of us. Two White police officers sat
inside. The driver said something, and Freddy moved up to the window. He leaned down to the window and talked with the officer for a minute, and then the car turned around and left. He explained that he had told the officer the truth—he knew that the officer had seen him drop his cup. He said that if he had lied, he would have arrested him himself had he been in the officer’s position.

Such observations provide some evidence that carefully managing personal ties to local police enabled these men, like the “residents” in Lofland’s account, to engage in backstage behaviors in the neighborhood’s public spaces.

Moreover, younger Black males routinely pledged to protect the older men from anyone who threatened to interfere with their use of the neighborhood’s public spaces as their home territory. The following example is typical:

The man from the car told me he would “fuck me up” if I messed with “my pops. I don’t mean no disrespect, I’m just bein’ honest wit’ you.” I told him that I wouldn’t mess with the old man and that I understood.

As a result, the “hegemony over public spaces” that Anderson (1990) attributes to young Black males extended to these older Black men to some extent by association. Accordingly, Pops and his peers felt entitled to use the neighborhood’s public spaces to hang out, socialize, and drink alcohol, even though few of them rented or owned a home in the neighborhood. For example, when I asked Jim where he lived, he replied, “I live in Evanston, but this is my regular spot.” While he identified himself as a resident of Evanston, he also made clear that Howard Street was his “regular spot.”

At the same time, their insistence that I did not belong with them on the street was not entirely consistent with Lofland’s account of the privatization of public space, since they based this assertion largely on their understanding of the social significance of racial-ethnic categories in the neighborhood’s public spaces, despite our interpersonal familiarity with one another. As I became better acquainted with Pops, he repeatedly assured several of the other Black men on the corner that “he ain’t no undercover.” Nevertheless, their reactions to me on the street frequently suggested that I was not entitled to participate in their gatherings primarily because of my skin color. On one occasion, Pops explained how he would have to spend hours answering questions because he was talking to me, a “Caucasian.” He implied that it was as if I had walked into their home uninvited:

If you was to bring me back to your crib, your people would probably be worried about me. They would think I was gonna take their VCR or something, that I’m some kinda crack addict. I’m an alcoholic, but I’m not no crack addict.
He clearly intended these comments to explain why his “people” were so suspicious. He was asking me to put myself in his place and to imagine that someone whose skin color clearly marked him as a threatening outsider with questionable motives walked into my home (my “crib”) without my friends or family having prior warning. His analogy suggests that they viewed the public spaces in the neighborhood in a manner analogous to how someone might regard their privately owned or rented home. His emphasis on how he would have to “spend hours answering questions,” however, suggests that his ability to provide access to this setting in the same manner that someone might invite a friend into their home was sharply limited. Because his peers regarded me first and foremost as a “Caucasian,” his frequent insistence that “he’s all right” was insufficient to render my presence unproblematic. As noted above, even Pops himself remained wary about being seen with me, despite our interpersonal familiarity and even mutual affection. He often framed his warnings that I should not linger among his peers on the street by emphasizing that “I’m just telling you because I like you,” but he nevertheless insisted that he could not afford to be seen too often with “a Caucasian” in this context.

Racial-ethnic categories thus remained salient on the street even in interactions with members of other racial-ethnic groups with whom these men were well acquainted. Such categories remained salient because they believed that sustained intergroup contact was likely to undermine their already tenuous claims to the neighborhood’s public spaces. Indeed, they recognized that personal ties to individual police officers and younger Black males were hardly sufficient to guarantee that they would be able to continue to exercise their proprietary claims on the corner. Becoming personally acquainted with the beat cops who routinely patrolled the neighborhood provided some measure of assurance that these officers would respond to their presence and their activities with a degree of leniency, but the men on the corner were well aware that other police patrolling the area could not always be counted on to react similarly. A few of them indicated that they had been arrested for public intoxication on Howard Street in the past. Furthermore, I observed several instances in which police officers angrily warned them that “loitering” was not allowed, clearly implying that they would be arrested if they did not leave immediately.

Consequently, they were very much attuned to how various uses of the sidewalk were likely to be interpreted by third parties. In particular, they believed that many police officers were more likely to interpret their mere presence on the sidewalk as “loitering” and as an indication of their involvement in more serious criminal offences (e.g., drug dealing) than
would have been the case had they not been Black. While they were quick to obey in every instance I observed in which the police ordered them to disperse, they nonetheless tried to assert their claim to the corner as their home territory in a manner that subtly defied attempts to define their presence and activities there as illegitimate. They sometimes joked that they were not “loitering,” but simply “waiting for the bus.” Even more significantly, I often saw several of the men sitting or standing on the raised sidewalk in front of one of the local liquor stores directly underneath a sign that read, “No Loitering—Violators Will Be Arrested.” When I sat down beneath the “No Loitering” sign one afternoon, one of the men walked by and said, “I sit there, I get arrested. You sit there, they don’t do nothing.” He was clearly very angry that I presumed to sit there, even though many of the Black men who hung out on the corner did so routinely. More generally, Pops asserted that

Howard Street has a zero tolerance zone. Zero tolerance means that two Black Afro-Americans cannot stand on the corner and communicate because somebody’s gonna get stopped.

While he did not specifically say so, his comment implies that members of other racial-ethnic groups are able to “stand on the corner and communicate” without the same concern these Black men had about whether the police would interpret their behavior as loitering.

Accordingly, they were determined to assert that they should not be prevented from standing and conversing on the sidewalk because of the color of their skin. While this determination need not have meant that only Black people should be permitted to hang out in the neighborhood’s public spaces, their territorial claims to the neighborhood’s public spaces did, in fact, take on a racially exclusive character. This occurred not because they personally had hostile attitudes toward members of other racial-ethnic groups, but because their shared perception of racially motivated police hostility increased the salience of racial-ethnic categories and thereby encouraged them to attend to the racial-ethnic identities of everyone present on the street. In particular, they carefully monitored how third parties were likely to perceive their interactions with members of other racial-ethnic groups. Pops stated this concern quite explicitly: “If a Black and a White are congregatin,’ straight off the board [the police] think, on the Howard Street area, the Black is sellin’ drugs.”

Moreover, this same concern informed how other older Black men responded to me on the street. For example, I was standing on the corner one morning with Tee when the following exchange occurred:
“We’re about 70 cents short for a beer, can you help us out?” he asked me.

“Yeah, I can help you out,” I responded, reaching into my pocket.

“Hold up . . . ” he warned, as a police van drove by. “They’re really bad now. They’ll think I’m sellin’ you drugs or something. All they’re gonna do is drive around again. Remember what [Pops] told you. You don’t belong out here. You’re like a swan with a bunch of crows, even though I’m not a crow, and you’re not a swan. You can give me that change now if you want.” I handed him a dollar.

Tee’s thinly veiled explanation clearly indicated that I did not belong with the men on the corner because I was White. My racial identity mattered, not because of any general antipathy toward Whites on his part, but because our visible interaction might signal suspicious behavior to the police and attract unwanted attention. Moreover, he eloquently suggests that, while my presence among a group of Black men was likely to appear unnatural (like “a swan with a bunch of crows”) and thus suspicious to the police, he rejected the implication that the racial-ethnic categories to which third parties would likely assign us corresponded to any inherently meaningful distinction. Indeed, he asserted that “I’m not a crow, and you’re not a swan.” Nevertheless, the distinction remained a very real one in the sense that he believed it was likely to guide the behavior of other people with the power to limit his ability to continue using the sidewalk as a place to hang out. Consequently, he insisted that I did not “belong out here,” thereby asserting the Black men’s exclusive territorial claim to this public space.

**Conclusion**

The diverse racial-ethnic composition of the neighborhood examined in this study provided a wealth of opportunities for intergroup contact. Yet the social significance attributed to racial-ethnic categories in the neighborhood’s public spaces prevented many of these opportunities from being realized, and consequently much of the intergroup contact that did occur in these settings took on an antagonistic tone. The number and variety of fleeting contacts among individuals belonging to different groups increased the salience of racial-ethnic categories, triggering stereotypes and intergroup hostility. At least as importantly, the Black men on the corner responded to what they perceived as racially-charged police hostility by asserting exclusive claims to the neighborhood’s public spaces in explicitly racial terms. Yet they did so neither because they lacked experience with
amiable intergroup interactions nor because of any perceived threat associated with sizable outgroup populations in the surrounding neighborhood. Instead, their visibility to the police and the insecurity of their claims to their home territory increased the salience of racial-ethnic categories and the perceived risks associated with intergroup contact on the street.

Accordingly, the research presented in this article suggests that the focus of many prior studies on the way impersonal relations in public spaces encourage reliance on categoric knowing needs to be complemented by more careful attention to how both personal and impersonal relations with third-party observers influence how individuals frame intergroup contact. For example, Duneier’s (1999) ethnographic study of Black street vendors in Greenwich Village emphasizes that White street vendors had an easier time gaining access to private spaces, such as restroom facilities and places to shower and change, which enhanced their ability to appear respectable in public spaces (see Duneier 1999, 304-11). Regardless of their own racial-ethnic identity, strangers hesitated to offer help to Black men in public spaces because they interpreted black skin as a sign of danger and untrustworthiness. Consequently, strangers observed Blacks engaging in indecent behavior (e.g., peeing in a cup or wearing dirty clothes), which reinforced racist stereotypes about the latter’s lack of decency. Because Black men were repeatedly confronted with this sort of suspicion regardless of their actual behavior, many gave up trying to sustain friendly relations in public and took “the opportunity to subvert the social conventions that make normal interaction possible” (Duneier 1999, 306).

However, Duneier does not explicitly address why racial-ethnic categories were salient in public spaces in the first place. Like much of the literature on the privatization of public space, he implies that racial-ethnic categories influence individuals’ responses to others only so long as they lack intimate personal knowledge of one another. Contrary to this account, my observations on Howard Street suggest that the street corner men’s violation of social conventions neither rendered “normal interaction” impossible nor fully accounted for the observed pattern of spatial and social segregation between Blacks and members of other racial-ethnic groups. Like the “wineheads” and “hoodlums” in Anderson’s (1976) study of Black men who gathered to drink in public places, the men I studied on Howard Street more or less explicitly rejected many of the “social conventions” associated with decency. Nevertheless, several of them were able to engage in friendly, even affectionate interactions with many of the Black residents of the neighborhood, whether or not these individuals approved of their lifestyle. At the same time, the men sharply restricted their interactions with
Whites in the public spaces on and around Howard Street, *regardless* of whether or not specific White individuals appeared to conform to the social conventions defining standards of decency and respectability. Indeed, they were no more likely to engage in sustained interactions in public spaces with the poor, alcoholic White men who ate at the soup kitchen than they were to approach middle-class Whites walking through the neighborhood. Accordingly, while Duneier’s careful attention to the significance of visibility and concealment in public and private spaces is well-placed, patterns of social and physical segregation in diverse urban settings should not be too quickly attributed to individuals’ success or failure in visibly enacting standards of respectable appearance and behavior.

One limitation of the research presented in this article is the paucity of attention to intergender contact (cf. Duneier 1999). As noted above, the men on Howard Street had frequent social contact with women both in the neighborhood’s public spaces and in the nearby soup kitchen. However, the patterns of intergender contact in each setting conformed closely to the patterns of social interaction among males in the sense that these men had very limited contact with women who were not Black on Howard Street, but frequently engaged in friendly conversations with both Black and White women in the soup kitchen. Nevertheless, the public spaces on Howard Street were largely male-dominated, at least where hanging out for extended periods of time was concerned. Black women occasionally joined in the men’s conversation on the sidewalk, but they were always in the minority and seldom lingered in the area as long as the men did. Accordingly, the relationships among the visibility of social interactions, the salience of racial-ethnic categories and the prevalence of territorial behavior might have been otherwise had I selected a female-dominated or gender-integrated setting (e.g., a public park frequented by roughly equal numbers of men and women).

Bearing this limitation in mind, the evidence presented here highlights some of the limitations of the contact hypothesis as a basis for understanding intergroup relations. While intergroup contact may indeed promote more favorable attitudes toward outgroup members, this outcome is neither necessary nor sufficient to promote sustained, cordial interaction across racial-ethnic boundaries. In settings like the soup kitchen, where structural conditions (e.g., a minimum of visual privacy, conducive physical arrangements and support from authority figures like the soup kitchen’s manager) both discourage territorial behavior and facilitate sustained intergroup contact, friendly interaction that crosses racial-ethnic boundaries will ensue even among individuals who evaluate race relations very unfavorably in the
broader social context. Conversely, individuals who reject racial-ethnic stereotypes will nonetheless base their behavior on such stereotypes and the social categories with which they are associated when they find themselves in settings where they expect authority figures and others in positions of influence to assess the significance of their behaviors and interactions in terms of visible indicators of racial-ethnic identity. Accordingly, the research reported here suggests that efforts to develop ever more precise measures of individuals’ general attitudes toward other racial-ethnic groups may prove less useful in explaining patterns of intergroup relations than examining the meso- and microstructural contexts in which opportunities for intergroup contact arise.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use the term racial-ethnic to refer generally to ascriptive distinctions, such as “Black,” “White,” “Caucasian,” “African American,” “Hispanic,” and “Asian.” In doing so, I follow the lead of prominent scholars of race and ethnicity who argue that race constitutes a special case of ethnicity and that all forms of ethnicity, including race, are socially constructed (e.g., Nagel 1994). Thus, the modifier racial-ethnic is intended to refer to identities and categories that mark ethnic distinctions that may or may not also constitute racial distinctions. In taking this approach, I do not intend to deny the particular significance of the Black-White color line in American society. Rather, I merely seek to avoid any confusion that might arise from using either term alone to refer not only to the distinction between “Black” and “White,” but also to similarly broad categories such as “Hispanic” and “Latino” that are often believed (e.g., by the U.S. Census Bureau) to refer to ethnicity but not to race. Similarly, I also occasionally refer to race and racialization, especially when discussing “Black” or “Caucasian” as an attribute ascribed to individuals, groups or territories, but I do not mean to suggest thereby that these categories are not also ethnic categories in Nagel’s (1994) sense.

2. According to the 2000 Census, a small minority (slightly less than 6 percent) of the neighborhood’s “Hispanic” residents also identified as “Black” or “African American.” However, none of the Black men who hung out on the corner ever spoke Spanish while I was present, nor did any of them explicitly identify themselves or each other as Puerto Rican, Afro-Cuban, etc. One of the street corner men, Jim, did speak with what I coded as a “West Indian accent” in my field notes, as did a few of the Black men and women I occasionally observed interacting with these men. However, none of the men appeared to attribute any particular significance to these accents. Furthermore, all of the individuals I identified as “Hispanic” in my field notes had lighter skin than those I refer to as “Black,” and most were probably of Mexican extraction, since nearly three-fourths of the Hispanic population of Census Tract 101 indicated that they were “Mexican.”

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