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The Semiotic Mediation of Identity

THOMAS A. SHAW

Things could not be truly compared because they were so rarely laid out horizontally, next to one another, but were always positioned above or below each other on an infinite vertical scale.

—Lawrence W. Levine (1988:3)

THE DUAL FUNCTIONS OF IDENTITY

The analysis of personal meanings and private intentions is central to most research and thinking about identity. More often than not, the individual is privileged as the creator or “agent” of meaning and the source of motivation. Understanding how identities are used by individuals to form satisfying relationships, meet socioemotional needs, and articulate plans and goals becomes the primary objective within this paradigm. However, in this article, by viewing identity from a semiotic perspective, I try to show that the categories and symbols that make up a person’s identity serve dual functions: they mediate reflection on self and on the intentions, desires, and goals that orient the self in a particular behavioral environment; at the same time, identity expressions invoke tacit knowledge of life-chance differences linked to status domains. This knowledge, which is presupposed by the signs that make up identities rather than directly referenced by them, is integral to a culture’s ethnopsychology and enables others to “make inferences about the interrelation of actor’s goals, intentions and abilities” (White 1980:767).

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I argue that culture works in two ways in the construction of identity: it mediates reflection on the attributes or relationships that are felt to characterize a self^d; simultaneously, culture works to permit individuals to index their social position by marking solidarity with a moral community and expressing loyalty to that community. Solidarity and loyalty are expressed not so much through the referential meanings of explicit statements as through the tacit understandings invoked by gestures and styles that index membership in a status category. This article focuses on how the gestures and styles that are linked to identity not only create and enliven the solidarity that they point to (D'Andrade 1984), but also reproduce hierarchies of status in society.

Individuals convey information about themselves both through what they say, or what they mean, and through the styles and gestures in which their conscious meanings and intentions are "packaged." The "packaging," I argue, instantiates ethnopsychological models as much as the conscious meanings do, and both help others interpret individuals' motives, goals, and presumed abilities. For example, someone encountering a man begging on the sidewalk may be more prone to help him if he is unkempt or disabled than if he is groomed and clean. What the beggar's appearance invokes is tacit knowledge of the "prototypical" conditions under which unkempt or disabled persons are likely to live, knowledge that "explains" their diminished life chances compared with others who appear clean and combed. Other gestures and styles may communicate, in similar fashion, indispensable information that helps others interpret the beggar's "motives" and capacities.

Identity in this article is a "signifying practice" and refers to people's use of a range of sign vehicles in an ongoing process of communication that is both intrapersonal and interpersonal and that simultaneously serves both psychological and social functions. A primary purpose of this article is to show that, although identity systems "work" (see Obeyesekere 1990) to permit individuals to adapt public cultural meanings to their personal needs and desires, they also function to characterize selves in a way that makes them intelligible to others. Identity symbols and signs thus signal loyalty and solidarity to a particular community in a particular status domain (Milroy 1980) and communicate this "situatedness" to others as relevant context for the interpretation of a person's

motives and goals. Thus, it is possible that at the same time individuals may intentionally signal that they have transcended certain status ascriptions, the understandings communicated through their gestures and styles may contradict this message by indexing the particular moral community that has most consistently nurtured and supported their sense of self and is nested within a circumscribed status domain.

My argument is that while individuals in modern societies are “free” to contest their status, their “attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols” associated with a particular moral community/status group (Cohen 1985:16) limits *the range* of symbolic resources that they feel they can comfortably incorporate into their identities. Because people prefer to invoke this familiar set of symbols and, thus, to index the support and solidarity of co-participants in their “local moral worlds” (Kleinman 1988), the distinctions that mark subject position are reproduced rather than transcended. A premise of this article, then, is that identification with a moral community is fundamental to one’s sense of identity. As Taylor (1989:35) maintains, a self “can never be described without reference to those who surround it” and who share an orientation to the good.

It thus makes sense to reserve for the term, “self,” the symbolically mediated, semantic-referential, personally valued attributes and emotions that are invoked to distinguish self from other in moral/essential terms (in terms that define a self that is oriented to some conception of good) and use “subject position” to refer to those signals that index, metaphorically and metonymically in style and gesture, membership in a particular status category. Status situates selves in circumscribed moral communities and, at the same time, reproduces the intergroup relations from which distinctly different moral worlds derive (see DeVos and Suarez-Orozco 1990).

This article represents a reaction against cultural-studies romanticism that bestows on individuals a seemingly unbounded freedom to constitute themselves almost entirely as they please through assertions, productions, and interpretations of (mostly semantic-referential) meaning. Such a position, by dichotomizing concepts of “the individual” and “society,” reify both and pit one against the other in a struggle that falsely assumes the independence, and denies the close interdependence, of each. This article, instead,

takes to heart Shweder's (1990:26–27) exhortation to take into account the way in which “culturally constituted realities (intentional worlds) and reality constituting psyches (intentional persons) continually and continuously make each other up, perturbing and disturbing each other, interpenetrating each other's identity, reciprocally conditioning each other's existence.” In this article, status domains are viewed as “intentional things” that “would not exist independent of our involvements with them and reactions to them; . . . they . . . are causally active, but only by virtue of our mental representations of them” (1990:2). Understanding selves thus depends not only on what persons intentionally communicate, but also on how a culture's symbolic resources are (intentionally) differentiated and distributed and then used by individuals to make overtures of social solidarity, and difference, in everyday life.

Bourdieu (1984, 1991) has been a key proponent of the idea that identities represent and reproduce “subject position” through tastes and lifestyles that serve as “symbolic capital.” Of interest here are the ways lifestyles and identities serve communicative functions by presupposing the abilities, motives, intelligences, maturity, trustworthiness, and credibility (or whatever is relevant to self-characterization in the local ethnopsychology) of persons and, thus, permit others to make inferences about their motives. Identities instantiate ethnopsychological models in the interest of intersubjective understanding through conscious, goal-directed meanings but, also, through “the social knowledge embedded in the indexical structures of its speech and other semiotic acts” (Much 1992:57). The sum total of signs and symbols that constitute identities place actors' goals and intentions in contexts of particular status domains.

As Strauss (1992:9) points out, Bourdieu focuses almost exclusively on learning that is “inexplicit” and on behavior that is “unreflective.” In this article, I *affirm* the importance of this unreflective, inexplicit learning for the analysis of the communication and functioning of identity. One of the things I explore in this article is how consciously goal-directed, self- and status-enhancing action can sometimes mask identity signals that express contradictory information, signals that “point to” inexplicit knowledge about the situatedness of selves in status domains that ground the person

psychologically in a particular moral community and orientation to the good.

One gets the impression from Bourdieu that individuals play no active role in either reproducing *or* resisting their ascribed status. This article aims to correct this view by pointing to how individuals take an active role in substituting meanings that they hope will enhance their status and self-image and, also, by showing how they select categories and styles that reaffirm their loyalty to local moral worlds and status domains. For example, people, and especially youth, negate, ignore, and reinterpret received meanings and ascriptions, as researchers who study social deviance and/or youth cultures are quick to recognize. However, as I illustrate below, to the extent that these “grounded aesthetics” (Willis 1990) draw upon the metaphors and meanings that fall within the symbolic boundaries that circumscribe a person’s local moral world, their subject position in relation to other persons and groups tends to be reproduced, if only in the perceptions of persons outside their own moral community. Because symbolic forms that index a different (“higher”) subject position seem to “belong” to others and not to oneself or one’s group, these symbolic markers are then rejected in favor of those that are felt to “belong” to the subculture in which one’s identity is supported and sustained. Status boundaries are thus preserved rather than redrawn, all in the interest of actively seeking and sustaining a sense of ontological security.

An aspect of Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of “symbolic capital,” unlike Goffman’s more generic concept of style, is that it invokes a much broader context for understanding the semiotics of self-representation than simply the local interactional setting.² Inexplicit and unreflective components of identity constitute what Bourdieu refers to as “habitus,” which reflects (and maintains) “large-scale pragmatics” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990:10) through an ethnopsychology that depends, at least partly, on linking ascriptions of self and other to circumscribed status domains within prestige hierarchies. At the same time, these unreflective components of identity ground the self in a particular moral community. Thus, the positioning function of identity is at once personal and pragmatic, if also unreflective, and serves the individual while serving broader social functions.

While what works to signal status surely varies from one culture to another—honor signals privilege for the Kabyle; Latin for the

Parisian college student—the very possibility of semiotic *signs* functioning as symbolic *capital* implies that people recognize the existence of “standards” whether they agree with them or not. Because, in most settings, this cultural logic of distinctions is inexplicitly learned, it tends to be unreflectively enacted in styles and tastes in the absence, it seems, of any visible coercion. This is demonstrated nicely by Foley, whose study of teenage culture in Texas illustrates how “youths practice, learn, and anticipate their different class identities and roles through the way they play football, display peer status, and horse around in classrooms” (1990:192).

Thus, the work of “symbolic violence” that Bourdieu deemed necessary to sustain conformity to a standard system of status distinctions may be minimized to the extent that individuals, to feel secure in their identities, reproduce their subject position anyway in order to sustain the support and solidarity extant in their moral communities.³ This interdependence of psychological and social reality tends to be overlooked by the romanticism of cultural studies that highlights individuals’ substitutions of one meaning for another, both of which are still drawn from the same subcultural meaning system, and then holds up these substitutions as evidence of the fundamental freedom of the individual.

Though people may understand the stigma associated with certain of the cultural forms that link them to their local moral worlds, they continue to use them anyway in their everyday lives. The use of nonstandard speech styles to mark in-group solidarity and affirm alternative standards of self-evaluation has long been noted by sociolinguists. Labov noted in his study of the speech styles of New Yorkers that individuals in some situations denied their use of stigmatized speech forms. This appears to suggest that people can self-consciously hide behaviors that have undesirable status implications and can manipulate their status in varying situations. But as Labov comments:

It is not clear why a group of speakers should adopt more and more extreme forms of a speech sound which they themselves stigmatize as bad speech. (Many subjects reacted to . . . a person who used high vowels for *coffee* and *chocolate* as not even speaking well enough to hold a factory job.) . . . It has become clear that very few speakers realize that they use the stigmatized form themselves. They hear themselves as using the prestige forms. [Labov 1972:533]

As Labov’s New Yorkers illustrate, standard prestige models continue to be recognized within “low status” speech communities

even as members of those communities use alternative speech forms to assert solidarity and loyalty within their own local moral worlds. These alternative status systems, which may be suppressed when confronting individuals from more standard status domains, can apparently coexist with the latter without necessarily challenging the standard prestige system.

Recognition of the dependence of a person's sense of well-being on close identification with others who share a moral community has also led Ogbu (1990) to argue that African-Americans' identity needs have worked against them by limiting their use of symbolic expressions to only those that circumscribe a status domain marked off as different from (and thus subordinate to) the standard ("white") status domain.⁴ While African-Americans "challenge" their status vis-à-vis white society primarily by redefining what it *means* to be black, "voluntary" immigrants, Ogbu points out, are more likely to undertake to transform their status by adopting, if only for purely instrumental purposes, the symbolic forms and strategies of the dominant society. Metaphors that, for example, equate black with beauty tend to decontextualize the cultural identity of African-Americans from its history of institutional racism and abstract it to the level of pure ideology. The suggestion that African-Americans and their cultural identity might be better enhanced by adopting conventional mobility strategies cannot "stick" as long as African-Americans continue to view conventional mobility strategies as "belonging" to the community of whites. In this sense, identity systems based on what Ogbu refers to as secondary cultural characteristics (including markers of status) are said to operate "subtractively" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). That is, the more different one perceives oneself to be from specifiable others, the stronger one's sense of self and of belonging to one's group.

Ogbu points out that "voluntary" minorities from Southeast Asia and other nations and cultures are able to deploy conventional mobility strategies precisely because they do not feel that these strategies belong to any one group. Their identities are *not* subtractive, so they do not feel that they have to give up their identity in order to adopt such strategies. The reason, of course, is that their identities are linked to "local moral worlds" and status domains in a distant land and not, as in the case of African-Americans, to a moral community that has established its identity in opposition to other local groups that are seen to have more or less power and

prestige relative to their own. Fear of identity loss, Ogbu argues, is a factor that helps explain why black “resistance” to white society remains oppositional, utilizing meanings and symbols that are explicitly and referentially nonwhite, and nonstandard.

Cultural-studies scholarship maintains that the ideological revitalization of one’s collective identity is apt illustration of the power of subordinate groups to contest the hegemony of dominant groups. However, the distribution of symbolic capital in society is determined less by the power of individuals to reshape the meanings of received symbols at will and more by the way positions of power and opportunity are attained. “It is the structure of society which decides what social positions there will be, and the terminology has to identify and differentiate those positions,” as Banton (1983:24) notes.

This is not to say that reinterpretations of identity and status can never have more than an ideological effect. Under the right political circumstances, efforts to redefine the moral attributes of collective identities can and *do* work to motivate others to change the structural conditions that maintain the cultural logic of lifestyle distinctions. Indeed, some Communist revolutions might not have succeeded had “peasants” not been painstakingly convinced of their new collective status as society’s most honorable class of persons. However, under less extraordinary conditions, the “sense” of identity symbols—their rootedness in local moral worlds and presupposed status domains—is much harder to change and would require that many fundamental features of the social context are also concomitantly restructured.⁵

THE SEMIOTICS OF SELF

The semiotics of self and identity has been the concern of a small but influential group of anthropologists (for example, Crapanzano 1990; Holland and Valsiner 1988; Mertz 1985; Much 1992; Silverstein 1991; Singer 1984; Straus 1989; Urban and Lee 1989). In this article I do not develop further the nascent “semiotic psychology” of people like Crapanzano (1990), who maintains that a primary function of semiosis is to develop “anaphoric potential” through symbolic representations that create an illusion of increasingly complex processes of reflection.

However, I argue that an additional function of self-referential signs and symbols is to generate a “defensive” social identity that permits individuals to distinguish the evaluative standards of their group from those of other status groups and, simultaneously, to express and reinforce solidarity and loyalty within local moral communities.⁶ Like Labov’s residents of Martha’s Vineyard, who “resist” outside intrusion into their local moral worlds, or Ogbu’s (1978, 1987) involuntary minorities, defensive identities wall off insiders’ perspectives from perceived hostile ascriptions from outside. These are reactions to change that are of a defensive nature and not the causes of change.⁷

Such ideological reactions may serve to revitalize shared images of identity relative to the perceived self-attributes of members of an exploitative group. It is in this sense that youth subcultures are frequently viewed as “imaginary solutions” to contradictions in society (Brake 1985; Clarke et al. 1975; Cohen 1965). As Brake points out, youth subcultures stand ideologically, and imaginatively, outside the ascribed status positions associated with their “parent” class or community. Nevertheless, while the semantic meanings young people adopt may free them of ascribed statuses, the “sense” of the signals they send through style, gesture, and taste express loyalty to local moral worlds in a circumscribed status domain and invoke tacit understandings of the life-chance differences associated with those domains.

Knowledge of life-chance differences that distinguish local moral worlds leads to the classification of the latter into status domains. This tacit knowledge makes up what Giddens (1991) refers to as “practical consciousness,” or what Bourdieu (1984) calls “habitus.” Presupposed or tacit knowledge of life-chance differences also “explains” status differences by pointing toward their presumed origins in particular life circumstances and living conditions. Identity symbols that function indexically invoke such presupposed knowledge of different life chances and life circumstances.

Indexicals, representing “the most elementary sign function in language” (Silverstein 1985:225), do “not characterize” what they denote (Lyons 1977; Morris 1971:102). Peirce used the concept of indexicality to describe “a man’s rolling gait as a probable indication that he is a sailor”; the way “a sundial or clock indicates the time of day”; “the rap on a door” (Lyons 1977:106). However, in many instances, including most instantiations of adolescent style

and identity, indexical signals can be viewed as “segmentable sign vehicles” that *combine* semantic meaning with pragmatic meaning (Silverstein 1976:24). Status is indeed such a duplex category in the way it points to life circumstances in local worlds (and thus characterizes types of persons) as a condition of understanding an individual’s motives, goals, and capacities.

Indexical signs can be thought of as symptomatic: they point to origins, as smoke points to fire or slurred speech indicates drunkenness. Subcultural styles act as indexical signs that frame the intentions and desires of selves by pointing in the direction of their presumed origins—the life circumstances that are believed to shape the desires of persons who share similar “positions.” Indexical signals thus contribute to how others understand actors’ intentions and desires by invoking images of “prototypical” circumstances presumed to characterize the lives of persons in particular status positions.⁸ Thus, indexical signs, sometimes called “metasigns” (Hodge and Kress 1988): (1) refer not to discrete objects but rather to “types” or classes of objects (Lemke 1990), and (2) are constituted by meanings that are presupposed in actions rather than being directly coupled with discrete referential meanings (Lemke 1990).

For example, a teenager from a “good” family background who gets drunk at a college fraternity party may be viewed by most members of society as a basically healthy young person who is perhaps too given to indulging in “the pleasures of the moment.” Another teenager from a poor, “bad” neighborhood who gets drunk on a local street corner may be seen as unbalanced, irresponsible, and potentially dangerous. This is not just a problem of labeling, but reflects the more complex issue of how, in addition to the referential meanings of actions (i.e., drinking = loss of capacity and sensibility), the “packaging” of actions (i.e., the street corner versus the fraternity house, the neighborhood and clothes worn by the youth) shapes how others interpret actors’ intentions and goals by indexing tacit understandings of the “types” of individuals who come from such settings and status domains.

THE ADOLESCENT SELF: CATEGORIES AND OPPOSITIONS

Even while they reinterpret, negotiate, and resist the meanings and status implications of their social identities based on categories

salient in the peer culture—jocks, greasers, socies, hoods, lads, to name but a few—youth often unreflectively reproduce the distinctions that govern how esteem is distributed in the larger social context. These seemingly contradictory outcomes are achieved semiotically through signs that operate, following Silverstein (1976:35), on a “sliding scale” of creativity-presupposition.

At the creative end of the spectrum, young people reinterpret the official meanings of things to produce “*new* meanings intrinsically attached to feeling, to energy, to excitement and psychic movement” (Willis 1990:11). At the other end of the spectrum, many of the stylistic features of their self-expressions *presuppose* identification with, and loyalty to, local moral worlds and circumscribed status domains.

In the rest of this article, I explore the comparability of adolescent self-expressions in widely separated locales that is due not to biological universals but, rather, to common features of the sociopolitical contexts in which young people construct themselves as persons. What these locales have in common are, first of all, strikingly evident differences in life chances for individuals and groups variously positioned in the social structure. The societies covered all have stratification systems that give rise to relatively nonmobile populations at “high” and “low” ends of the status scale and local moral worlds, or moral communities (based on shared criteria for evaluating persons), that arise from the supportive networks that exist for individuals who share these status domains. Shared evaluative standards sustain distinct forms of social solidarity and moral community that can be thought of as “subcultures” through which individuals construct interpretations of self and other. “High” and “low” status domains, and the subcultures on which they are based, “anchor” person categories in adolescent peer cultures (Eckert 1989; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1985). In the settings described below, cultural identity systems thus serve an organizing function, not simply by providing “templates” or models through which adolescents construct themselves as persons in a shared moral context, but also by positioning selves in distinct status domains.

Both functions of identity systems are evident when identity is viewed from a semiotic perspective, and both contribute to the full communication and subsequent interpretation of a person’s intentions, attributes, abilities, and goals. Such an orientation to self and

identity is necessary if we are to understand self systems as functioning not only for individuals, but also for society, especially in their capacity to maintain “a transactional relationship between a speaker and an other,” and if we maintain, as Bruner (1990:101) goes on to suggest, a “dialogue dependent view of the Self, designed as much for the recipient of our discourse as for intrapsychic purposes.”

In each of the following cases, the last being from my own research among youth in Taipei, Taiwan, I describe the simultaneous psychological and social functions of adolescent identity expressions, viewed semiotically. The three nations represented below are the United States, Great Britain, and Taiwan.

JOCKS AND BURNOUTS

Adolescents tend, initially at least, to see their peers as polarized into two opposing cliques, an “in” crowd and an “out” crowd. Both their lack of experience and newly emergent cognitive capacities at this age result in the oppositional pairing of categories—jocks and burnouts, socies and greasers, and so forth (Eckert 1989; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1985; Varenne 1982). With one member of the pair indexing a socially approved, high-status position through fashions and behavioral goals that adults generally endorse, the other indexes a low-status position through opposing styles and commitments. The social processes leading to this polarization have been described by Eckert (1989), whose ethnographic study of social categories in a high school in a Detroit suburb is the main source of data in this section.

Youth who adopted the low status or “burnout” style used smoking and drug use to signal their self-ascribed maturity and to express their sense of themselves as grown-up. As Eckert points out, these semiotic signals fail to demonstrate a commitment to the age cohort, a commitment that is expected of young people in the culture of the school. To associate with students older than oneself was to expose oneself to progressively more adult influences at a time when one was expected to cultivate one’s individuality through competition with peers and when, in conjunction, it was appropriate to possess and display a “youthful innocence.” Burnouts rejected school, Eckert claims, because it postponed their attainment of adult status and interfered with their early claims to

“personal freedom and adult prerogatives, representing a departure from the relative docility of childhood.”

As Eckert points out, standard prestige models *for youth* in American culture encourage participation in a narrow range of activities confined mainly to the school. The more circumscribed, and the less evidently problematic and consequential their activities, the more “model” the youth, at least as far as the standard status system is concerned. Thus, while among burnouts both status and network loyalty were achieved and demonstrated through an early transition to adult styles, entailing a visible increase in both the scope of activities (i.e., frequent visits to downtown Detroit) and their “seriousness” (greater consequences with respect to health, future, etc.), this pattern of activity at the same time signaled a low position in the standard adult prestige system.

Jocks, on the other hand, conformed to standard adult prestige models by forming friendships that were segregated by age. Moreover, they took pains to maintain a “youthful innocence” even when it had to be pretended. For example, Eckert notes that jocks who had personal problems at home acted as if they did not in order to appear to have simple (inconsequential and unproblematic) lives. Their commitments to the institutional life of the school were thus made to appear uncompromised by the problems of grown-up life.

This is not to say that jocks feigned such commitments merely in order to enhance their status. Youth who styled themselves jocks no doubt were given to reflect on whether or not they had successfully made themselves into clean, competitive young people whose attitudes demonstrated “acceptance of the school and its institutions as an all-embracing social context, and an unflagging enthusiasm and energy for working within those institutions” (Eckert 1989:3). Still, as Eckert notes, jocks were not blind to the instrumental rewards that resulted from staff perceptions of their trustworthiness: “I can basically do whatever I want because they just figure I’m doing something for the school. And they know me, that I’m not going to get into trouble” (1989:115).

Jocks were expected to express their autonomy and individuality through participation in leadership roles in the school, academic achievement, and decisiveness on the athletic field. What distinguishes the burnout style of expressing autonomy from the jock style is that the latter is localized within the domain of the school: “Jocks are as covetous of their particular kind of autonomy as

burnouts are of theirs, and the value of ‘doing real things’ is important to both sets of people. The difference lies in the domain in which these things are to be done” (Eckert 1989:117). It is precisely this fact, that burnouts and jocks “say the same thing” about themselves—that they are autonomous beings who want to be taken seriously—but say it in different ways using signs that index different domains of meaning, action, and subject position, which insures that others will ascribe distinctly different motives, goals, and capabilities to their respective selves.

No less prone than jocks to express their autonomy and individuality, burnouts nevertheless expressed themselves through a quite different set of idioms—idioms more commonly used within working-class culture and local low-income communities that indexed solidarity with those communities. Thus, smoking and drug use, rather than athletics, signaled individuality and maturity for burnout youth. Nevertheless, no matter how much these actions enhanced their status within their own group, and expressed loyalty to group norms, smoking and drug use signaled a demeaned status within the culture of the school, and outside of burnout circles generally. Eventually, many youth who identified with the jock category in the high school *also* used drugs, a fact that was widely known in the student body. However, most importantly, jocks never used drugs as a statement of their worthiness or maturity as persons, as burnouts did. Burnouts incorporated drug use into their repertoire of self-representations while jocks carefully avoided any association of drugs with their identity or self-image.

Interestingly, to account for the widely known fact that jocks had more than an occasional smoke on a marijuana joint, as Eckert notes, burnouts, rather than trying to dilute the negativity associated with drug use (and by implication with them) by pointing to this fact, instead made their *early* use of drugs, relative to other youth, into a source of pride, pointing to their subsequent “wisdom” regarding the risks and dangers involved. At the same time, their acknowledgment of the risks of drug use reveals how aware burnouts were of the public meanings associated with drug use—yet they continued to maintain that drugs had made them better persons, rather than worse ones. Even when some burnouts moderated or abandoned their use of drugs, drug use was still invoked as a metaphor to signal maturity in spades: “There’s kids that just started in ninth grade that are, you know, they’re just ruining their

high school because—That’s why I wish everybody would start early, you know, because then by the time high school rolls around, you pretty much know what you’re doing” (Eckert 1989:154).

With every statement the burnouts make like this, they seem to be reclaiming a subordinate status domain, even while they simultaneously bolster their pride.

Thus, while burnouts *do* try to enhance their status by reversing the “standard” interpretations and stigma associated with drug use, and by claiming that experience with drugs can make a person wiser, their determined commitment to express their maturity through idioms of drug use guarantees that their subject position will remain fixed at the less-esteemed end of the status scale. Had they declined to associate drug use with their self-image, dropping it altogether as a marker of their identity, they may have stood a much better chance of shedding their negative image.

Thus, smoking and drug use and other activities, which are meant to reflect on the maturity and wisdom of burnout youth within their own inner circle, continue to insure that those who use these as markers of identity are spatially and socially marginalized in the school:

I tried out for [the team]. I didn’t make it. I made it right down to the last line, but . . . see, back then you were considered a burnout, and you didn’t make it because of that. . . . The jocks made it even if they weren’t good. Teachers even admit it over there. Mr. Jackson . . . was like . . . “I think you should have made it,” he goes, “but just because you’re labelled a burnout you didn’t make it.” And I go, “Right.” He’s one of the honest teachers you know. He just tells it like it is. [Eckert 1989:92]

At the same time, since drug use and jock personhood are so unthinkable in combination, when jocks *did* use drugs, no one noticed:

I don’t know why I’ve never had a fear of being caught stoned. I don’t know why—probably the main reason is because it’s the last thing anybody—the teachers and everything—expect of me. I mean because I’ve got the image of—you know the image that I have and I don’t think they suspect—you know—“allergies”—you know—she wouldn’t think I’m high, you know. [Eckert 1989:115]

Burnouts tended not to participate in extracurricular school clubs and activities, including sports, even though they were in many ways just as athletic as jocks. It was not that they were not interested in sports. It was just that the borders of their moral

community crystallized in opposition to peers whose activities were organized almost exclusively around the school, an institution whose constant supervision and monitoring burnouts felt to be patronizing and infantilizing. In fact, they had their own informal pickup games outside the school. Eckert describes how, in several baseball games she was involved in, “play was interrupted while a ‘runner’ ran onto the field to pass a cigarette around to players stranded on base.” I think Eckert is right in pointing out how this gesture marked burnout solidarity. At the same time, it also indexed burnouts’ relative (because smoking carries a negative stigma in the standard prestige system) status position and moral community in an activity otherwise identified with the jock subculture/status domain.

Burnouts also eschewed the use of school lockers, saying they were subject to being robbed and that the locks never worked. Lockers could be inspected by school officials at any time, which to the burnouts epitomized the parental role of the school while accenting the locker user’s immaturity and juvenile status. At the same time, lockers symbolized commitment to school, as did school athletics—a commitment at the very core of the esteem-worthy status of “model” youth. Jocks, in fact, visited their lockers frequently and decorated them, sometimes elaborately, for important events like birthdays and sports events. They spent long periods of time sitting against the wall opposite their opened lockers and chose their locker partners carefully. It is doubtful that these actions were consciously calculated to gain status but, rather, that jocks felt attached to their lockers and committed to the gamut of activities and goals that lockers symbolized.

Burnouts’ aversion to using their lockers, an aversion which they deployed to communicate their maturity and autonomy, as well as their loyalty to burnout subcultural networks, at the same time signaled their marginal status in the school community. Burnouts were no doubt aware at some level that their way of expressing maturity simultaneously necessitated the rejection of meanings supported by the school and was bound to lead to their inevitable marginalization. For example, one burnout who wanted to work on the school yearbook explained why she finally did not:

Like, you hung around with the burnouts. You didn’t talk to the jocks. . . . And I talk to so many girls now that I think in ninth grade we didn’t talk and stuff because she was a jock and I was a burnout, or whatever. And, um, they were all on all the

activities, you know. . . . Yeah, like, well it's not cool to go to school activities, you know. [Eckert 1989:89]

Burnouts thus rejected activities that might have actually changed their rank within "standard" hierarchies of prestige. By basing their identity and moral character on smoking, drug use, partying, and urban sophistication, they were actually complicit in the reproduction of their marginal status.

Subordinate groups may not, after all, always be interested in changing their status within the system, even while they contest that status on semantic and ideological grounds. They might in fact seek to maintain a supportive moral community with its own alternative statuses and self-characterizations in a circumscribed, if also "subordinate" domain, within the standard prestige hierarchy.

SOCIES AND GREASERS

When Schwartz and Merten (1968) studied the expressive symbols and social identities of girls in a high school sorority in a large mid-western city, they found that the qualities initiates were presumed to possess were opposed to those attributes and qualities they were implored to reject. For example, in the rituals of "hell night" and "mock," in activities similar to what Garfinkel (1965) described as "degradation ceremonies," red lipstick, piled hair, hairspray, and makeup were all used to signal the attributes of self and subject position that differentiated initiates from the opposed "hoody" (delinquent) styles.

"Socie" girls were supposed to demonstrate an effusive friendliness that predisposed them to behave "as if the outcome of all social interactions mattered deeply." Like Eckert's jocks, sorority girls did not necessarily feign commitment to such expectations. Many, no doubt, deeply felt their sociability was a reflection of qualities inherent in their own personality, causing them to be naturally likable and attractive to others.

At the high end of the status scale, it may be even more important to disguise a desire for status group loyalty in notions of "natural" personality differences. Thus, the newly recruited socie girls, who in fact came from a variety of class backgrounds, were likely to think about whether or not they possessed the requisite character traits to be a member of the category and not about the styles they would subsequently use to index their superior status. This was probably

most true in the course of sorority initiation, which was designed to effect an identity transformation that was “authentic.” As Schwartz and Merten (1968:1128) note, “This vision of a girl’s moral character does not refer to her social origins. Rather, it is based on value commitments that are manifest in a mode or presentation of self.”

Even so, that socie girls will at various times and under varying conditions reflect on their newly acquired status is undeniable. Still, the question of their “intentions” is partly resolved by supposing that for many, if not for most girls, the approved outward expression *was* synonymous with the requisite “inner” capacity. The outward expressions of supposedly “inner” qualities took forms such as standard, albeit affected English, social smiling, and the kinesics necessary to sustain a flow of communication uninterrupted by doubt or misunderstanding. Together, these *defined* sociability for socie girls and, presumably, for all girls. Like jock or burnout expressions of maturity and autonomy, socie girls’ styles of sociability were referentially exclusive—no other actions correctly referenced “sociability” as the latter was understood by the socie girls.

And yet, hoody girls had friends, too, and valued friendships and relationships. The fact that hoody girls might have had as many friends as socie girls could never, however, convince the latter to think of the former as sociable or “popular.” That friendliness and sociability could, for example, take the form of sharing cigarettes with base runners on the playing field or dancing together at a disco was simply beyond the socie imagination. The only acceptable way to be sociable was the socie way.⁹ Hoody girls, it should be pointed out, knew and understood socie styles, but to adopt those styles would mean disclaiming loyalty to their status group and abandoning their moral community. This, in turn, posed a significant threat to their identities, which were “subtractively” defined as being “not socie.”

Clearly, adolescents are aware of the status differences associated with different subcultural identities in the peer society. Nevertheless, their reluctance to treat status symbols in a completely instrumental way, adopting whatever stylistic expressions they may need to advance their own interests, suggests how important status domains are for “indexing” the local moral worlds on which the security and support for their identities depend.

LADS AND EAR' OLES

At a high school in a British working-class town, students classified their peers into "ear'oles" and "lads," terms that constitute the two poles of another adolescent peer group category system as described by Willis (1977). In Willis's book, although the lads challenge and resist the received wisdom of the school, their attitudes and orientations are shown to be ultimately "preadapted" to working-class lifestyles.

At the same time, as Willis points out, the lads' truancy, their freedom of movement within the school, and their rejection of schoolwork enable the lads to experience a modicum of privacy and autonomy by creating a space that cannot be intruded upon by school authority. Such actions, therefore, are more defensive than offensive. Like the linguistic changes that marked solidarity for residents of Martha's Vineyard in Labov's study, the lads' "resistance" is not so much a challenge to the system as it is an attempt to wall themselves off from it. Willis once made a similar argument about the inexplicit function of hippies' claims to want to spread "love and peace" around the world:

Instead of the sense of community being the romantic one of full-blooded love and peace bringing a new age, it was more one of a decisive rejection of "straights" and the erection of a barrier against their polluting definitions. . . . The hippies' sense of community came from a collective conspiracy to hold their world as "real," rather than from the pure altruism of "love" and "peace." [1978:113]

The relevant distinction here is between trying to change one's relative status by influencing others to validate one's own definitions and interpretations of self and group, and resigning to a familiar and receptive local moral world whose borders *are* the symbolic markers that fix one's own and one's group status "low" in the standard prestige hierarchy. Lads extolled the virtues not of love and peace, but of toughness, cleverness, and independence. Rather than confronting society with their toughness and demanding recognition, as some "resistance" theorists might argue, they instead used their toughness to define a local moral world, set apart from the impure and threatening institutional culture of school, in which support and loyalty could be assured.

Like jocks and burnouts, ear'oles and lads often "said the same thing," but in ways that indexed their different subject positions and life contexts. For example, that lads, like the more conformist

ear'oles, valued "cleverness," is indicated by their characterizing people and groups they did not like as "thick." But the lads used informal and, indeed, pointedly obscene rituals such as the "pisstake" to deride individuals they considered stupid:

Spansky: Did you have a piss dinnertime?

Bill: Or a shit?

Spansky: You disgusting little boy. . . . I couldn't do that.

Bill: Hold on a minute, I want you to hold my cock while I have a piss. [Laughter]

X: Why am I?

Will: He don't even know.

Bill: Does your missus hold your cock for you when you go for a piss?

X: Who does?

—: You do.

X: Who?

—: You.

X: When?

Spike: You did, you told Joey, Joey told me. [Willis 1977:33, emphasis added].

Like the burnouts, lads chose the domain of the "informal" to express themselves, a domain set off from, and in many respects subordinate to, the formal culture of the school. Like the burnouts, the fact that the lads' cleverness was expressed in informal, non-standard ways insured that their intelligence would not be taken seriously or even recognized by the school. No matter how witty their "pisstake," it could never be counted as cleverness within the school culture or the culture at large, even though such expressions earned the lads' loyalty and recognition within their own peer group. Ear'oles, no doubt, would claim that their ways of expressing cleverness through grades, academic performance, skill in manipulating standard English, and so forth, monopolized the range of expressions that could possibly be associated with "intelligence" and that no other expressions could possibly indicate smartness.

While effectively conveying their "quickness" to other lads, the lads are nevertheless likely to be typified by nonlads as base, perverse, and dim-witted, just as their truancy, control of the school corridors, and rejection of schoolwork were thought of as representing a lack of self-control and discipline, rather than demonstrating autonomy and freedom according to the lads' understanding. Ear'oles, we may presume, were also as much interested in expressing their independence but, like the jocks, chose to do so through idioms sanctioned by school authorities. For their part, of course, the lads typified the ear'oles as immensely

stupid on the basis of the latter's presumed mindless conformity to institutional norms.

Willis understood that the lads' choice of styles for expressing their cleverness and independence simultaneously rewarded and penalized them, in much the same way as I am arguing here: "Though the culture says to the individual, 'This is right for me', it can also seem to add 'even though it may be wrong in general'. The informal guides and validates real behavior but it is held ultimately in the larger frame of the formal" (Willis 1977:167).

What lads do when they challenge and resist schooling does little to alter the fact that the styles of their resistance, while indexing the support and solidarity of their local moral worlds, insure that they are not taken seriously as full persons, with full capacities. Others' reactions to them, based on inferences about the goals, intentions, and abilities of persons in "*their* position" are brought about less by *what* the lads do and say, than by *how* they do and say it. While lads, pointing to their ability to roam freely through the school corridors, hoodwink teachers, and do a pisstake with peers, insist that their minds are every bit as agile and their social and emotional skills every bit as mature as those of the ear'oles, they nevertheless refuse to adopt any of the ear'oles more "standard" styles of expressing the same qualities, and so forgo any possibility of being recruited to positions from which they might actually be able to effect a real change of status.

Willis writes of the lads' "penetration" of the myth of their empowerment and their semiawareness of their complicity in instrumenting their own disempowerment. My point is that the lads accept a certain degree of disempowerment and are willing to sacrifice power and prestige, to sustain loyalty to a moral community and local moral world that exists only as long as it opposes the larger society and is distinguishable from it. The sacrifice of high status for reciprocity, loyalty, commitment, and purpose—that is, a sense of being grounded in a certain conception of what is good, of having "moral character"—even while one's social identity is positioned at the bottom of the standard prestige scale, works to preserve self as it reinvents cultural hierarchy.

KAHA AND LIUMANG

In Taiwan, where the author conducted research, students in junior high school identified two contrasting person types in their

age group (Shaw 1988). Young people used the term, *kah-a* (pronounced like “car,” without the “r” sound), to refer to peers who followed the latest fashions, frequented discotheques, and “worshipped foreign things.” The term was first brought to my attention, spray-painted in English as “car,” on the rear wall of a junior middle-school classroom in Taipei.¹⁰ Kah-a, like jocks, socies, and ear’oles, expressed themselves in styles that indexed both status at the high end of the prestige scale and loyalty to networks of like-minded peers.

Consonant with the fact that status mobility in this setting often entails the attainment of university degrees from foreign universities, and/or eventual residence in America, Europe, or Japan, individuals tended to express “high” status through idioms of cosmopolitanism and a taste for “foreign,” as opposed to local Taiwanese, goods.¹¹

For example, youths who identified with the kah-a subculture adopted styles that followed the latest fashions from New York and Tokyo and that demonstrated their commitment to “modern” values. They listened avidly to the newest popular music from America (in 1985, Michael Jackson and Madonna were big stars) and were connoisseurs of foreign cigarettes, movies, and dance styles, such as breakdancing. Their regular presence at McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken in Taipei, where they lingered for hours, made a fashion statement that others in the peer society were apt to read as “sophistication” at the same time that it expressed solidarity to an elite network of youth. These styles are consistent with the emergence of a “new” middle class in Taiwan that is increasingly international in the scope of its activities and interests (Gates 1981; Yu 1983).

Like the jocks’ sports insignia and the socies’ social smiling, kah-a’s foreign tastes illustrate dual semiotic functions: on the one hand, they reference a self presumed to possess outstanding qualities of sophistication and creativity; on the other hand, they signal loyalty to a segment of the youth population defined largely by its collective status and distinction in relation to other youth groups.

Kah-a’s sense of being on the crest of change in their society seemed to give them a sense that they were in possession of the most evolved moral standards and values. As Metzger (1981) has argued, claims to understand and embody a set of moral standards best suited to one’s group illustrate deep epistemological patterns

of Chinese culture and thought. Such claims, though highly implicit and rarely articulated directly, can be identified, I think, even in teenagers' assertions that their lifestyles are "right" for the society in which they live, at the same time echoing Erikson's claim that all adolescents seek a lifestyle that is true to the "historical moment" (Erikson 1961). In any case, most interesting from the point of view of the dual functions of identity is that, while each group of young people wants others to believe that its interpretations of the moral order are correct, the styles in which these interpretations are cast also position groups (and individuals) within local moral worlds that are symbolically circumscribed as distinct status domains.

Among those who styled themselves kah-a, for example, the virtues of being free and independent, rather than mired in the social obligations that are characteristic (in their minds at least) of traditional society, were constantly reiterated. Thus, for example, the importance of more independence and equality in relationships with parents was a common refrain. As one 14-year-old boy commented: "I like Americans because they are more open. The kids in the family can communicate with their parents and treat their parents as friends. So many of us here spend a lot of time fighting with our parents, including me. We can't communicate with them."

Not only family members should be more independent and equal in their relationships with each other, but so should friends, according to kah-a ideals and practices. In contrast to many of their peers, who kah-a youth believed were forced to demonstrate their obligations to others monotonously and on a daily basis, kah-a referred to themselves as "individuals" (*ke jen*) and rejected many of the obligatory rituals that accompany friendships traditionally. Thus, the popular swearing of brother/sisterhood, involving ritualistic expressions of commitment to mutual help and loyalty in friendship, was unpopular in kah-a circles.¹² Why would anyone want to act like friends any longer than the *feeling* of friendship is present, I was often asked. As one young person commented characteristically, "I would not swear brotherhood with anyone. Oh no. What for? It's of no use. Anyway, my friends today may not be my friends tomorrow."

References to the importance of "freedom" (*zi you*) and "independence" (*tu li*) permeated any discussion I had with kah-a youth. More than simply invoking an abstract, distinctly "Western" ideol-

ogy, such talk was often accompanied by actions that conveyed a sense of oneself as “modern,” with the appropriate attributes—a relaxed, carefree attitude, a self-centeredness as opposed to a group-centeredness, an emotionality that served as a basis for making decisions, and a playfulness that eschewed seriousness.

Alternative metaphors were deployed by youth at the lower end of the prestige scale to characterize the qualities they felt persons needed to develop. Young people who adopted activities and styles associated with the *liumang* category (pronounced lee-oh-mang), which in Taiwan carries the stigma of “delinquency,” spoke with a nostalgic tone of how the “golden age,” now passed, had fostered bonds of trust, loyalty, and mutual aid in their communities. They sometimes even blamed the passing of such a desirable state of affairs on the “effeminate” and “indecisive” kah-a. Much was made of an individual’s ability to *jiang i qi*, or “talk righteousness and loyalty” (which actually referred both to talking and to demonstrating through action) with other youth who styled themselves liumang. To “talk righteousness and loyalty” was, most significantly, to communicate a sense of oneself as principled and committed to fairness in human relationships. The measure of the man amongst liumang was the number of people he could call to his aid in an emergency and not, as was the case among kah-a youth, one’s ability to forego relationships for personal freedom. Like Ilongot males who, according to Rosaldo (1984), took heads *not* in order to prove their inner worth, but in order to demonstrate their “sameness” with other adult men, young liumang gained status by demonstrating the strength of the bonds between them.

While for males a desire to appear “tough” was reflected in their seemingly constant readiness to fight at the slightest provocation, such posturing also reflected their sense of fairness, which was manifested as a proclivity to judge all manner of situations as examples of inequities of some kind and, therefore, as requiring correction through intervention. An informal survey of the situations that gave rise to liumang feeling they had to intervene to “rectify” things turned up the following most common contexts: when a friend was perceived to be cheated or insulted, when a person asked for a gang member’s help in settling a dispute (whereupon the merits of the case are evaluated), when money was owed but not returned, when persons (including relatives) were perceived as failing to care for their parents or other close relatives,

when a foreigner (usually a male) was believed to treat a Chinese person (usually a female) unfairly. Liumang convey a sense of themselves as guardians of local moral standards. They carefully weigh each situation before getting involved to determine if, from the point of view of their heightened moral sensitivity,¹³ an injustice has been committed.

Liumang styles adopted symbols from the register of local (Taiwanese) culture and commodities. For example, their loyalty to a particular status domain, illustrated in their "localism," was expressed in their preference for rice wine or local Taiwanese beer rather than an imported beer or liquor, for Taiwanese cigarettes rather than imported brands, and local Taiwanese or regional Chinese food rather than the otherwise increasingly popular Western-style "cafeterias." The barrier was not cost, since at the elaborate fetes organized for liumang by gangs at local restaurants, money was never in short supply; rather, the barriers were cultural, expressed as circumscribed domains of expression necessary to preserve a certain identity and moral community. Clothing styles were local rather than foreign. In fact, locating liumang was never a problem because they rarely sojourned far from their local neighborhoods and could usually be found in or around neighborhood temples or tea houses. They rarely "hung out" on the main streets of the city where the more modern shops and department stores signaled an otherness that was to them strange and unfamiliar. They spent most of their time in back-alley hangouts (temples and tea houses) off the main streets.

While participants in the liumang and kah-a subcultures differed about whose metaphors most adequately conveyed the attributes of self needed by the current moral order, their interpretations expressed loyalty to distinctly different moral communities and reflected distinctly different subject positions. Moreover, the moral communities indexed by kah-a and liumang through their subcultural styles occupied contrasting status domains, and it was this contrast in status that most shaped how others interpreted the claims to selfhood and morality made by members of each community. For example, the "new" individualism and emerging de-emphasis on social obligation among kah-a youth were beginning to be accepted by school officials and actually contributed to the redefinition of "guidance" functions in the school from a collective, discipline-based military model to a model based on individual

counseling. At the same time, the more traditional moral values of liumang, founded on the old familism and issues of group morality, were increasingly construed as, at best, anachronistic and, at worst, threatening to the authority of the school and society in general.

Just as the Detroit school insisted on seeing burnouts' stigmatized friendships across age groups as engendering "bad influences," the junior high school in Taiwan could not separate the loyalty and mutual assistance that liumang extolled from the context of their practice in what was understood and labeled as "the black society" (*hei she hui*) or underworld. The "justice" (*i qi*) liumang constantly invoked also could not be separated from the fact that such notions of fairness and equity were put into practice in situations where disputes were settled, not by "official" law enforcement agencies, but by unauthorized, "uneducated," and often unemployed persons.¹⁴ When taken out of context, the values of loyalty and justice that liumang routinely express are compelling and meaningful, but "packaged" in the back-alley styles of underemployed and undereducated males, their impact is discounted greatly and does little to advance the status of these youth in the larger society.

While subordinate social groups may adopt styles that express their marginality, it is this marginality that allows for the existence of a distinct subculture with alternative self-images and bases for self-esteem. Even as consciously more glowing ascriptions are applied to one's self and one's group in an attempt to transcend status boundaries, the tacit meanings of unreflective styles and gestures continue to index local moral worlds and circumscribed status domains in which identities are supported and shared.

The symbolic unity of elite moral communities is just as crucial for the security of their members' identities as communal unity is in subordinate social strata. Kah-a, for example, when they were not espousing the virtues of freedom and individuality, spent a lot of their time talking about and seeking activities that were "fun." In fact, the most common explanation kah-a gave for doing just about anything was that it was "fun" (*wan*). While persons who like to have "fun" signal a sense of themselves as playful, creative, and carefree, fun tacitly indicates that one belongs to a community whose members are able to sidestep, at least temporarily, the responsibilities and timetables of an existence governed by family

or school-related responsibilities, and who have the time to enjoy leisure pursuits.

It is important to recognize that kah-a discourse about “fun” indexes a specific social and economic context outside of which “fun” would not otherwise be meaningful or, at least, would not have the same meaning. This context, presupposed by the indexical as opposed to the semantic referential meaning of “fun,” is essentially the reality of a life course in which family resources are considerable, higher education is essentially inevitable, and future (salaried) employment is more or less guaranteed. In the absence of this tacit understanding, an essential precondition for “fun” to be either possible or meaningful would not exist, namely, the postponement of adult roles and responsibilities in adolescence. As one 15-year-old boy perceptively pointed out, “Fun is what you do in your free time when you are neither working nor studying. It is different from *hun* [a term used by liumang to characterize how time should normally be spent], which is what you do when you are not in school and don’t have a job.”

Kah-a, by going to discos, breakdancing, seeing movies, riding motorbikes, and doing nothing (consuming “time” conspicuously), dallying for hours at Western fast-food establishments, strolling around shopping malls, listening to music, and smoking glue, represented themselves as persons who liked to have “fun.” All of these activities defined “fun” according to the kah-a system of meaning and referenced a self that was free, playful, autonomous, and assured. At the same time, the meanings of these activities presupposed a life course that was unproblematic and in which adult roles and responsibilities could be temporarily postponed.

Kah-a youth could have conceivably expressed the same qualities—a sense of themselves as playful, creative, and free—through activities like camping in the nearby mountains (a popular pleasure for “good students”) or through after-school recreational activities like basketball and baseball (baseball has been popular since the Japanese introduced it in the 19th century). While these activities might have “said the same thing” about kah-a youth that other activities do, activities like camping index a different moral community because they fall more within domains that are officially endorsed by the school. The point is that although individuals *can* denote a playful, fun-loving self, without having to express these

qualities in the idioms of ideological individualism or the styles of Western fashion and taste, *kah-a* “focused” (Milroy 1980) on styles that were both urban and urbane in order to express their loyalty to a segment of the youth population defined by its elite status and social exclusiveness.

Likewise, *liumang* might have expressed their toughness, bravado, and autonomy in more socially legitimate activities. They might have adopted more legitimate styles to advance their status except for the fact that the styles they *did* use were inseparable from the tacit meanings that link them to local networks and community contexts in which the meanings, or “sense,” of their lives are supported and maintained. Outside these local moral worlds, the “tough” teenager who styles himself as *liumang* feels threatened and insecure.

Since their marked styles—from betel-nut chewing (often associated with the unemployed in small towns) to a posture that communicates “fighting readiness”—signal a subject position linked to lower-class communities and “underworld” contexts, non-*liumang* treat them as “types” not to be trusted and not worthy of much esteem. Still, *liumang*, like Labov’s New Yorkers or Ogbu’s African-Americans, exploit their own marginality, thereby reproducing it through the semiotics of identity expression, to allow for an alternative prestige system to operate within their own distinct moral community. Inside worlds that are circumscribed precisely to the degree that they are stigmatized, they enjoy a measure of freedom and collective buoyancy that outsiders neither acknowledge nor appreciate.

CONCLUSIONS

Identity in this article has been described as having dual semiotic functions: the communication of self-referential qualities that are intended to characterize a person more or less independently of context and the invoking of presupposed knowledge of the “subject position” of the speaker. I have argued that the tacit knowledge of an actor’s position in a particular status domain is necessary for interpreting the sense of his or her self-ascribed attributes, qualities, and motives.

Interpretations of a person’s subject position are really inferences based on semiotically indexed knowledge of the probable

conditions that affect their lives: where they live, their likely social networks, educational background—whatever a culture considers relevant “symbolic capital” for the classification of different types of persons. This knowledge of life-chance differences and their effects on people is crucial for a culture’s ethnopsychology to the extent that such knowledge enables others to frame actors’ self-ascribed attributes and goals in light of the context of their likely (presupposed) motives and abilities.

I have argued that people signal their subject position through their identification with a particular local moral world—a community whose symbolic boundaries are largely determined by the shared subject position of its members in relation to other status groups. To construct their identities, people draw upon the semiotic resources of distinct moral communities, the first moral community in a person’s life being the one created out of the intimacy between mother (or primary caregiver) and child (Bruner 1983) and, subsequently, by the range of interactions within larger spheres of kinship and, with adolescence, by relationships situated within wider social circles and status domains. Viewed semiotically, it is not surprising, then, that the social forces that differentiate local moral worlds in complex societies are reflected also in the “semiotic subjects” (Much 1992) or identities individuals construct in response to their environments.

Loyalty to local moral worlds both anchors identities and reproduces status hierarchies. As DeVos (1990:148) points out, “Questions of instrumental dominance or conflict in humans cannot be considered apart from questions of the expressive needs satisfied in group membership and the symbolic representation of social hierarchy in human thought.” I have argued that what usually goes by the name “resistance” or a “contest of meanings,” and is presumed challenging to the hegemony of dominant cultural forms, is really a paradigmatic replacement of one subcultural meaning for another in the same status domain and hardly disturbs the syntagmatic relations between players and groups in different status domains. I have suggested that individuals make such paradigmatic replacements of subcultural meaning, rather than adopt interpretations that index “standard” status domains, because the subculture’s system of meaning reflects a local moral world in which an individual’s identity is supported and affirmed. Losing the support and solidarity of persons who share local moral worlds,

as has been shown for successful African-American students, can be deeply discomfiting and may amount to nothing less than a feeling of “racelessness” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986).

Although cultural-studies scholars may view the substitution of one subcultural meaning for another from the same subculture as status enhancement, I have interpreted instances where adolescents assert (and insert) their own meanings—when burnouts claim smoking as a symbol of maturity or liumang insist that their role in settling disputes reflects their heightened sense of justice, for example—as defensive reactions to a perceived threat from outside their moral community, much as Patterson (1983) has described the functions of ethnic identity symbols as resolving perceived crises. In any case, it cannot be overlooked that an important effect of such reinterpretations is to establish an alternative status mobility system quite apart from the mainstream “standard.”

Viewed semiotically, the shape and form of identities derive as much from the interpretations ascribed by others to selves as by the meanings persons, as selves, themselves send. As Eco notes, the interpreter acts as “the methodological guarantee of the existence of signification” (quoted in Colapietro 1989:32). In fact, while actors may attend primarily to the referential aspects of their experienced identities and only secondarily to the contextual cues that signal status and that “frame” their more conscious, goal-directed meanings, for the interpreter this order of priorities is probably reversed. Referential meaning—what symbols of identity refer to—for the interpreter cannot be understood without first positioning the speaker in a local community, which permits the goals and motives of the speaker to be inferred from his or her “type,” as indicated by one’s subject position in a particular status domain.

Furthermore, to ignore the extent to which signification depends on the interpreter is to possibly underestimate the power of the *other* to control the terms in which meaning, and identity, may be expressed—a point to which Foucault has dedicated a great deal of scholarship. If anthropology as a discipline is to try to explain and understand the origins and functions of human identity, it most certainly will need to take into consideration historical and political conditions that give rise to the societal production of

intergroup distinctions and the contingent nature of identities associated with these distinctions (Williams 1989).

Individuals clearly select meanings from experience that serve to allay fears, enhance self-esteem, and identify objects of their desires, yet the categories that structure experience also insure that identity expressions help preserve social arrangements that are consistent with historical and institutional patterns and inherited social structures. Previous analyses of social identities have been either psychosocial or macropolitical in focus. This article attempts to provide a link between these by introducing, or perhaps reintroducing, the importance of local moral worlds as sites for the experience of solidarity and community, which are crucial for the construction of identity. While the consistency of self-experience is preserved by shared standards of self-worth within local moral worlds, the consistency of these standards and their preservation in subcultural meaning systems can be traced to the intergroup relations that constitute and sustain status distinctions derived ultimately from the forms of political economy.

Structural-functionalism's conceptualization of the social order has proven to be fatally flawed and, in American sociology, has all but uttered its final gasp. However, to discard the idea that the survival of a society entails systemic imperatives and functions is to ignore the powerfully configuring demands, both psychological and material, of living in a sociopolitical world where collective action and collective meaning making contribute significantly to social and personal existence.

People fear and remember, rebel and refuse, fantasize, imagine, and hope and thus insert themselves in, and even change, albeit in limited ways, the social order. That society does not always get what society needs is an important reminder (Geertz 1986) for a discipline that has tended to view individuals wholly as inert extensions of social forces. Still, people construct their own realities within limits defined by the imperatives of the social system. These limits are not merely abstract or structural, but they are implicated in the ways selves are constructed and communicated and in the ways people interpret each other's motives and abilities.

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NOTES

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1. The notion that *all* cultures mediate individuals' intentions and desires and, thus, guide the construction of self as a locus of experience is a premise of this article and can be traced to the seminal work of Hallowell (1955) on the "behavioral environment" of the individual.

2. Bakhtin's extension of Vygotsky's more narrow focus on immediate interactional settings to account for the intersection of identity with broader "social languages" parallels the difference emphasized here (see Wertsch 1985, 1991).

3. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the extraction of consensus by a dominant power is achievable only through some sort of "symbolic violence" that involves, at the very least, the delegitimization of competing frames of reference and "cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination" (1977:192). This delegitimization is implicit, of course, in any prestige hierarchy, but it is not the diminished value of the identities of subordinate groups that keeps them in subordinate positions so much as the cohesiveness of the moral community that subordination necessitates.

4. The origins of this need can be traced to the intergroup distinctions that have separated and distinguished a moral world for blacks from a moral world for whites. Although my argument in this article suggests that status distinctions are maintained by psychological mechanisms, this should not obscure the fact that moral communities are themselves differentiated, and their distinctiveness preserved, primarily by sociopolitical forces.

5. Sense has been defined as "the aggregate of all the psychological facts emerging in consciousness" produced by a sign function (from Vygotsky, quoted in Lee et al. 1983:334).

6. The argument here can be traced to earlier discussions by sociologists and criminologists. For example, a similar viewpoint was expressed by A. Cohen (1955) when he pointed out that a delinquent's conduct is right by the standards of his subculture, precisely because it is wrong by the norms of the larger culture. Miller (1958) provided a slightly different viewpoint: delinquents were not so much reacting to loss of status, as they were simply extending working-class "focal concerns" into their own subculture. Thus, they did not, as the argument went, define themselves in contrast to the standards of the larger culture. I believe neither argument can be rejected but that Cohen's, like my own, better accounts for the dynamic between dominant and subordinate cultures and status groups in society.

7. For a contrasting view, see Scott (1990). Scott argues that "ideological dissent is virtually always expressed in practices that aim at an unobtrusive renegotiation of power relations" (1990:190).

8. Although I do not attempt any thorough demonstration of this point here, I believe that tacit knowledge of life-chance differences, "indexed" by varying lifestyles and tastes, is probably organized as images or schema that represent "prototypical" life circumstances for persons of a given status (D'Andrade 1984; Holland and Quinn 1987). The linking of cultural knowledge with semiotics in this way opens up many possibilities for ethnographies of experience that take semiotic mediation as their starting point.

9. As Le Page (from Milroy 1980) has argued, this kind of cultural and linguistic "focusing" on circumscribed domains of referential meaning takes place at *both* low and high ends of the prestige scale.

10. Kah-a, which is a term from the Taiwanese (*Min-nan*) dialect, has no Mandarin equivalent. Like a number of words expressed in the Taiwanese dialect, it is a form that exists only in speech. Yet, according to many of my young informants, the term approximated the meaning of the Mandarin word "*kai-zi*," which can be written and which conveys a similar

set of meanings as the English word "playboy," with many of the latter's connotations of womanizing and a spendthrift lifestyle, with the addition of an especially effeminate quality, when applied to men.

11. Nowadays, the status of Taiwanese "local" culture is on the rise. The reason is not because local Taiwanese have simply asserted more forcefully their view of the symbolic value of their cultural identity but, rather, because Taiwan has significantly increased its power and prestige in the world economically, and the reordering of status symbols reflects this.

12. Sworn brother/sisterhood, through which fictive kin relations between two or more persons are ritually established and observed, is proscribed by school authorities regardless of the fact that they would have little effect on life in school. Students swear oaths of brotherhood and sisterhood anyway, but they must do so surreptitiously. Sometimes these relations turn out to be exploitative, as, for example, when a girl was discovered to have requested her "younger sister" in the school to bring money from home. Usually, however, sworn brother/sisterhood between young people is an expression of a particularly intimate friendship. For more on "sworn brotherhood," see Jordan (1985) and Gallin and Gallin (1977).

13. This characterization of self as supermoral and superjust, while strange to a westerner, has a long tradition in Chinese culture replete with metaphors and idiomatic phrases that persons may call upon to establish their *i qi*, or righteousness. Contemporary youth, as well as other members of society, are exposed to these traditions on a daily basis through the constant airing on TV of tales of chivalrous bandits or from reading "martial arts" novels that model this subculture of self-righteousness (Liu 1967; Yang 1957).

14. *I qi*, the Chinese idiom for "loyalty and justice," is not used only in the context of gang activities but appears, also, in scholarly Confucian texts where it refers to a sense of loyalty and justice in the ordinary affairs of life.

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