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# The Underlife of Kids' School Lunchtime

## Negotiating Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Food Exchange

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While the literature on ethnic identity takes traditional “adult-centered” socialization theory for granted, this study breaks away from such a perspective, and instead uses ethnographic data on children’s food exchange during lunchtime in two predominantly Korean (-American) elementary schools to explore how children use food as a symbolic resource to negotiate group boundaries in peer interaction. Following a discussion of lunchtime seating patterns, this article presents children practicing exchange of “dry food (mass-consumed)” and “wet food (homemade)” that takes three different forms—gift-giving, sharing, and trading—each of which have different relevance for marking, maintaining, and muting ethnic boundaries and other social differences. Taking a child-centered perspective, the study finds that children’s ethnic identity development is by no means a universal linear process. Instead, preadolescent children, although constrained by external forces, learn to do layered and situated ethnic identity through using cultural resources in peer interaction.

**Keywords:** *ethnic identity; preadolescent children; boundaries; food exchange*

In her insightful fieldwork at a racially and ethnically mixed high school in urban California, Olsen (1997) reveals a striking racial divide and conflict among American adolescents and a pressure against immigrant adolescents to conform to this racialization process at school. A white girl in

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her study talked about the changing relationship with her best friend in elementary school, who was African American. As the racial divide became increasingly intensified through middle school to high school, she lost contact with her African American friend who continued to go to the same school with her. While cross-racial ethnic friendship may be much more salient during preadolescence, previous studies at elementary schools show that preadolescent children also tend to segregate according to their race and ethnicity under some circumstances (Ausdale and Feagin 2001; Lewis 2005; Thorne forthcoming). Fine and Sandstrom (1988) argue that "preadolescents, perhaps more than any other age group, are concerned about the nature of proper relationship with others" (p.55). Since learning to affiliate with a "proper" racial and ethnic group is one of the crucial tasks for preadolescents, racial and ethnic divides at school start to crystallize at a very young age. To promote cooperative relationships among children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, we first need to understand how preadolescent children construct racial and ethnic boundaries and come to develop ethnic identity at an elementary school setting.

The constructionist view of race and ethnicity, which has gained popularity in the last several decades, suggests that racial and ethnic identities are created, elaborated, and reconstructed in the interaction between internal identification and external categorization (Barth 1969; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Nagel 1994). This view rejects a conceptualization of ethnic and racial identity as static entities, and instead assumes that they vary across space and change across time (Cornell and Hartman 1998, 101). While an increasing number of case studies focus on ethnic identity formation of adults and adolescents, there are few studies that have paid full attention to how small children construct ethnic boundaries and identity. The traditional socialization framework is still prevalent in this genre of study, which consequentially neglects children as learners of the norms and values of the established adult society. Children's experience is not understood on its own terms, but interpreted as molding children into members of a presumed ethnic group in society. Such an "adult-centered framework" (Thorne 1987) relegates children to passive recipients of adult culture, and dismisses processes of how children, with limited autonomy, actively negotiate their ethnic differences and identities.

Conducting participant observations of children's peer interaction during lunchtime in two predominantly Korean (-American) elementary schools in Los Angeles, this study reveals how the fourth-grade children negotiated ethnic boundaries through using food as a symbolic resource in an intricate system of distribution, which they cooperatively constructed

without teachers noticing. Adopting the sociology of childhood perspective (see Corsaro 1997), this study demonstrates children as “active economic agents” (Zelizer 2002), who skillfully selected the use of two types of food, “dry food (mass-consumed)” and “wet food (homemade)” in three forms of exchange—gift-giving, sharing, and trading—to control their relationships with peers as well as to mark, maintain, and mute ethnic boundaries. As I will show, such ethnic boundary negotiation usually accompanied children’s marking of differences based on gender, age, classroom, and to some extent, social class. Simultaneously, I find that construction of these various boundaries are confined by a larger social context, such as school demography and social class inequality. These findings suggest the pitfalls of previous racial and ethnic studies that have neglected children’s active construction of ethnic boundaries and identity. A child-centered perspective allows us to understand that children’s ethnic identity development is not a universal linear process that is automatically triggered as children go through a series of distinct stages of intellectual ability (see Piaget 1965). Rather, preadolescent children, although constrained by external forces, learn to do emergent, layered, and situated ethnicity through creating and using cultural resources in peer interaction.

## Children’s Racial and Ethnic Identity

Although a growing number of studies examine construction of race and ethnicity among adolescents and adults, little attention has been devoted to how small children “do” race and ethnicity (West and Fenstermaker 1995) in everyday settings. As Ausdale and Feagin (2000) claim, existing studies that explore children’s understandings of race and ethnicity rely heavily on cognitive-developmental theories derived from Piaget (1965), and use psychological tests and laboratory experiments to assess “the linear development of measurable attitudes that are assumed to develop a logical, adultcentric endpoint” (Ausdale and Feagin 2001, 13). The adult-centric socialization model depicts three- to seven-year-olds as egocentric, incapable of understanding abstract concepts such as race and ethnicity. Challenging this dominant idea, Ausdale and Feagin (2001) observed preschool children in natural settings and conclude that children as young as three can understand and use racial and ethnic concepts to build relationship with others and to take control of their lives. They particularly emphasize the importance of peer groups as sites where children cooperatively learn and develop their ethnic and racial identity. As Corsaro (1997)

argues, such peer groups become increasingly differentiated along the lines of age, gender, and ethnicity during the preadolescent period. Furthermore, Fine (2006) maintains that it is during preadolescence that through spending more time with peers, children become increasingly skilled in impression management and "acquire skills necessary for the successful positioning of the self in multiple worlds" (p. 217). From these arguments, it is expected that identities related to race and ethnicity become more salient as children enter preadolescence. However, researchers have rarely explored how preadolescent children do and learn race and ethnicity in everyday social interaction.

Instead, preadolescent children's race and ethnicity have often been studied by the use of sociometric tests, which have become a popular quantitative method to examine children's friendship bonds (Hallinan and Teixeira 1987). One of the important contributions that these studies have made is the revelation that race and gender are both crucial determinants of children's friendship choices, with gender producing a much stronger effect than race (Sagar, Schofield, and Sneyder 1983; Schofield and Whitley 1983; Singleton and Asher 1977). Still, these studies perceive children's ethnic differentiation as fixed and stable patterns that are replicated across different social contexts. Conducting both sociometric tests and observation in elementary school classrooms, Denscombe et al. (1993) point to a dissonance between the results obtained from the two methods and maintain that sociometric research fails to capture the complexity of children's friendship choice and ethnic differentiation. In studies that rely on sociometric tests, race and ethnicity are considered independent variables that affect children's social relationships, and not dependent variables to be explored. These studies conceptualize children's social identities as "fixed and often essentialized categories rather than as multifaceted, situated, and socially constructed processes" (Orellana and Bowman 2003, 26). Consequently, they do not tell us how children construct ethnic identities in interactional contexts, let alone how such processes are related to the construction of gender identity which is presumably more salient than race and ethnicity. These gaps can only be addressed by conducting direct observation of children's interaction.

To illuminate children's construction of ethnic identity, I rely on an emerging perspective provided by a "new sociology of childhood," which attempts to break away from a Piagetian socialization model and individualistic biases concerning children (see Corsaro 1997; Fine 1987; Goodwin 1991; Thorne 1993). Corsaro (1997) argues that a new sociology of childhood conceptualizes children as innovative agents who constantly engage

in a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction of their social world. This approach to children's socialization highlights children's collective creation and the reproduction of peer culture in interactional contexts, and looks at how children participate in such culture with others. It questions the universal linear model of children's development assumed in the Piagetian model, and calls attention to more flexible ways in which children present and form a sense of self and identities.

The definition of the term "identity" needs to be made clear at this point. My understanding of it relies heavily on the works that fall under the symbolic interactionist tradition. From this perspective, identities are strategic constructions that are produced in the process of self-indication and self-presentation (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959; Mead 1934). Mead (1934) argued that the ability of a person to take the role of the other allows him or her to possess the "self"—what Cahill (1998) defined as "a being's reflexive awareness of personal agency and identity" (p.135). Like other objects, the meaning of the self is negotiated and interpreted in interaction. Goffman's analysis (1959) stressed the situated nature of the self, which is enacted, presented, and realized in the process of actors' collaborative definitions of situations. Social identities play a crucial role in this self-producing process. In face-to-face interaction, people come to define each other's differences and expressively claim who the self is by identifying with certain social groups or categories. This process is made possible, according to Goffman (1963), because "society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories" (p. 2). Along with gender and class, race and ethnicity are among the most common categories that contemporary people use to form their identity (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, 12). From a symbolic interactionist view, racial and ethnic identities are continuously negotiated in interaction and thus vary according to contexts. This view also resonates with a constructionist approach to ethnicity (see Barth 1969).

While there are increasing numbers of ethnographic studies that have focused on preadolescent children's construction of gender identity using sociology of childhood as well as symbolic interactionist perspectives (see Adler and Adler 1998; Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992; Best 1983; Eder and Parker 1987; Eder 1985; Thorne 1993), few have studied racial and ethnic identity using these frameworks since most studies have been conducted at predominantly white schools. As Ausdale and Feagin (2001) suggest, Corsaro's overview of recent sociology of childhood literature says little about children's understandings and practice of race and ethnicity. Yet,

Thorne's pioneering study of children's gender identity formation (1993) is suggestive in studying children's race and ethnicity. Observing fourth- and fifth-grade children's behavior on a school playground, Thorne argues that girls and boys engaged in a range of "borderwork," which evoked a sense of boys and girls as opposite groups and exaggerated gender separation and stereotypes. Simultaneously, she cautions not to take gender dualism for granted, suggesting that

Gender boundaries are episodic and ambiguous, and the notion of "borderwork" should be coupled with a parallel term—such as "neutralization"—for processes through which girls and boys (and adults who enter into their social relations) neutralize or undermine a sense of gender as division and opposition." (Thorne 1993, 84)

To capture children's dynamic construction of gender, Thorne stresses the need to examine how gender is played out *in context*.

As Thorne (1993) argues, race and ethnicity are usually less visible and more ambiguous than gender, which is "clearly marked by dress and by language." The few existing ethnographic studies in this field mostly focus on race rather than ethnicity, which requires actors' continuous affirmation and recreation of ethnic boundaries (Ferguson 2000; Lewis 2005; Moore 2001; Schofield 1982). Between race and ethnicity, the latter conveys more changing and constructed quality since it has emphasis on "self-consciousness, the participation of groups themselves in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of their own identities" (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, 37), whereas racial identity is usually based on perceived physical differences. In this study, I strategically chose a racially and ethnically diverse site where Koreans are the largest ethnic group, to expand and deepen the understanding of "the fluid, situational, volitional, and dynamic character of ethnic identification" (Nagel 1994, 152). Furthermore, while African American children are given the most attention in previous studies, little attention has been devoted to Asian American children (Howes and Wu 1990). The selection of the site and the subject will also give voice to these minority children who have often been neglected in previous studies on children's social development.

Culture plays a crucial role in constructing ethnic boundaries and identity (Nagel 1994; Cornell and Hartmann 1998). To understand how children do ethnicity in everyday settings, Swidler's conceptualization of culture is particularly useful. According to Swidler, culture is "a 'tool kit' from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of actions" (Swidler

1986, 277). From a sociology of childhood perspective, children, like adults, *appropriate, produce, and use* culture in their peer interactions to negotiate group boundaries, and in that process, come to see themselves as members of a certain ethnic group. Previous studies have shown that children use various cultural objects (e.g. dress and possession) as well as language to mark gender, racial, and ethnic boundaries (Ausdale and Feagin 2000; Ferguson 2000). Play and games are also important rituals that children produce and use to negotiate their relationships and identities (Evaldsson 1993, 2003; Goodwin 1991 and 2001; Levinson 2005; Thorne 1993). Adding to the literature, this study finds that *children's use of food and collaborative production of food exchange during lunchtime plays a crucial role in children's formation of ethnic boundaries and identity*. In this sense, this study also adds to previous research that has studied gift economy, but in which children's activities are mostly invisible. Brief reviews of these areas of literature are provided in the following section.

## Children's Participation in Gift Economy

Mauss's study of gift economy in primitive societies (1967 [1925]) showed that the gifts that were exchanged conveyed not only a fixed general cultural meaning, but also the "spiritual power" of the giver. This view opposes a semiotic and structural approach that comprehends cultural objects as a text with inherent meanings, rules, and structures to be decoded by people (Barthes 1970 [1957]; Douglas 1966; Levi-Strauss, 1970). The Maussian view sees that gifts "bear the particular personal meaning of the relationship in which they are transacted" (Carrier 1991, 133). Subjective meanings attached to gifts instead of the general cultural meanings are emphasized here. Gifts are the symbolic means by which a giver's identity is expressed and at the same time, the giver's idea of a receiver's identity is revealed (Komter 1996; Schwartz 1967). As Schwartz (1967) notes, the gift exchange is "a way of dramatizing group boundaries" (pp.10-11). In gift economy, participants reinforce a sense of obligation and develop moral bonds toward one another while at the same time forming group boundaries. Particularly from a symbolic interactionist approach, which emphasizes meaning-making processes, gift economy is an arena where group boundaries and identities are continuously constructed and negotiated.

As Mauss forcefully argued that gift exchange vanishes in capitalist societies in which commodity relationships becomes the dominant form, it is only recently that sociologists started to focus on the prevalence of gift



exchange in contemporary societies (Cheal 1988; also see Caplow 1982, 1984; Komter 1996). However, it should be emphasized that children are mostly invisible in these studies. Caplow (1982) studied Christmas gift giving in Middletown, and discovered that the ritual helped maintain a close and affectionate relationship between children and their parents. He saw, however, that children played only a minor role in the gift-giving ceremony, and had "few responsibilities in connection with it except to provide a token gift for each primary relative, a task with which they usually have adult assistance" (p. 388).

By contrast, Zelizer (2002) contends that "contrary to cherished images of children as economic innocents, we discover children actively engaged in production, consumption, and distribution" (p. 379). Maintaining that despite adult efforts to intervene, children construct a partly autonomous economy, Zelizer calls for more studies that examine children's economic activity from children's own vantage points. With regard to children's distribution, she suggests further investigation about how, when, and why children establish distribution networks and how such processes relates to variations by social differences such as age, gender, and race.

A small number of ethnographic studies have shown that preadolescent children actively construct a gift economy with peers in classrooms, lunchrooms, playgrounds, and on the streets (Chin 2001; Ferguson 2000; Katriel 1987; Thorne 1993 and 2005). Katriel (1987) conducted an ethnographic study of the Israeli sharing routine "xibùdim," and found that children carefully assessed and negotiated a "normal bite" size of the food for each person so that "everybody can get a share, leaving about half of it for the giver" (p. 315). She maintains that this ritualized sharing serves an important socializing function by providing a context where "a symbolic sacrifice in which one's self interest and primordial greed are controlled and subordinated to an idea of sociality shaped by particular cultural values, such as equality and generalized reciprocity" (p. 318). Her study shows that children actively create and maintain social solidarity by participating in such gift economy.

Other studies show that gift exchange marked a degree of friendship and also emphasized social differences. Chin (2001) found that children carefully selected to whom they would give gifts of money, food, and objects. In her observation, children gave gifts to their best friends first and then to less intimate classmates. In observing "underground economy of food and objects" which children practiced behind teachers' scrutinizing eyes in classrooms, Thorne (1993) observed that the pattern of exchange strongly marked the separation between boys' and girls' friendship groups

(pp.20-23). Objects that were exchanged also marked gender differences. She found that boys brought in “toy cars and trucks, magnets, and compasses” while girls possessed “tubes of lip gloss, nail polish, barrettes, necklaces, little stuffed animals, and doll furniture” (p .21). In her recent study of lunchtime at a mixed-income ethnically diverse elementary school in California, Thorne (2005) briefly discusses how children used valued food to mark lines of friendship, gender, social class, and race differences.

Building on this literature, this study shows how children construct, participate, and use food economy during lunchtime to organize peer relationships and group boundaries, and in that process come to develop ethnic identity. Extending Thorne’s observation of lunchtime, I focus not only on “valued food” that encouraged the flow of the economy, but also “ethnic food” that mostly Korean children brought from home and exchanged with their peers. It will be shown that Korean children understood their “ethnic” food as a symbol of their Korean self and negotiated its meanings and value in interacting with their peers. Furthermore, looking closely at different forms of food exchange, I reveal that each form had different relevance for marking, maintaining, and muting ethnic boundaries.

## Setting and Method

School lunchtime is an ideal site to dig into children’s friendship, group boundary construction, and identity formation. It is the time when children associate freely with their peers under minimal adult surveillance and form a strong sense of solidarity through sitting and eating together. Such experience is what Durkheim (1968 [1915]) called “collective effervescence,” which creates emotional foundations of moral bonds. Simultaneously, it is the time when children negotiate their differences through interacting with others and develop identification with a certain social group. In introducing theoretical frameworks for exploring contexts, differences, and trajectories of children’s development, Thorne (2005) argues for the advantages of studying school lunchtime as follows:

Like the Balinese cockfight analyzed by Clifford Geertz (1973), school lunchtime is a public and collective “text” with many, sometimes contradictory, layers of meaning. The lunchtime scene, especially in a school where students come from strikingly divergent backgrounds, is a fruitful site for uncovering practices to mark, mute, and negotiate social differences. When these practices involve labeling or group formation, they may become especially consequential for trajectories of personal change. (p.14)

Several studies on children's friendship and social differentiation have studied seating arrangements during lunchtime both qualitatively (Eder 1985; Zisman and Wilson 1992) and quantitatively (Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux 2005; McCauley, Plummer, and Moskalenko 2001). By contrast, this study provides new insights into school lunchtime by mainly focusing on children's ritualized food exchange.

My ethnographic research of school lunchtime was conducted at two elementary schools in Los Angeles, which I call "Hamilton" School and "Claremont" School.<sup>1</sup> These two schools were mixed-income ethnically diverse public elementary schools located just two miles apart in an affluent community. I chose these two schools as my fieldsites because of the similarity in racial and ethnic diversity of the children, with Korean as the most prevalent ethnic group. According to the Los Angeles Unified School District 2005 statistics, at Hamilton, about 50 percent of the students were classified as "Asian," 25 percent were "White," 12 percent were "Hispanic," and 13 percent were "African American." At Claremont, 61 percent of the students were "Asian," 19 percent were "White," 12 percent were Hispanic, and 8 percent were "African American." Most of the children who fell into "Asian" category were Korean. For both schools, about one-third of the students were English learners, most of whom were Koreans. The fourth grade children (ages nine and ten) whom I observed were aware of racial and ethnic differences to some extent, and used the following categories to describe themselves and others: "Korean," "Chinese," "Jewish," "Black," "White," and "Latino or Latina." White and Latino children who were not born in the United States also associated themselves with the country where they were born (e.g., Australia, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, etc.). These racial and ethnic labels will be used to describe children's racial and ethnic identity throughout this article.

With regard to children's social class backgrounds, most of the children came from upper-/middle-class families, although there were also quite a number of children who qualified for free/reduced lunch program (14 percent at Hamilton and 25 percent at Claremont). When looking at the children who frequently ate cafeteria food, they tended to be Latino/a and Black, rather than White and Korean. However, since most of the children possessed a meal card, which did not indicate a child's reduced or free lunch status in any way, I was not able to tell clearly who qualified for these programs. The social class differences among these children were not very visible because of the schools' rather successful efforts to obscure class differences. When I asked a principal at Hamilton if she thought that children knew about their social class differences, she answered as follows:

No. We try not to let children become aware of such differences. . . . I can tell you the percentage of the students who are in reduced or free lunch program, but I can't give you the names of the children who are in these programs. Same for the children and parents. We try to be very careful. We don't want children to humiliate one another.

Hence, at two schools, I found that talk about class differences was much less common among kids compared to other social differences. Nevertheless, class differences entered into kids' interaction during lunchtime in a very subtle way. As will be shown later, White and Korean kids brought more food from home to school than Latino/a and Black kids, and thus they were at the center of the food economy as the main distributors.

From February through June 2004, I visited Hamilton School on different days of the week, ranging from one to three times a week. I visited Ms. Gill's fourth-grade class and observed kids' interaction in the class,<sup>2</sup> during lunchtime, and at recess, and sat and participated in their activities through eating and playing with them. Hamilton had two cafeterias: outside picnic tables for kids who brought a lunch from home and a much smaller indoor space for those who ate cafeteria food. In the outside cafeteria, kids could freely choose their eating companions and sit at any of the twenty-two tables in the area, while the indoor cafeteria was much more controlled by a lunch aide. Food exchange occurred mostly in the outdoor cafeteria where kids brought various kinds of food from home. Kids who ate cafeteria food often participated in this food exchange after they finished eating lunch and left the indoor cafeteria. I ended up collecting sixteen sets of fieldnotes that described kids' interaction in the outdoor cafeteria and three sets of fieldnotes from the indoor cafeteria. I also have ten sets of fieldnotes for kids' activities inside Ms. Gill's classroom and during recess. I also conducted focus group interviews (twenty minutes each) with twenty-three kids in Ms. Gill's fourth-grade class, and informal interviews with Ms. Gill, the school principal, a lunch duty aide, and three Korean mothers.

From the end of October 2004 to February 2005, and again in September 2005, I visited nearby Claremont School. Like Hamilton, access to the school was made possible by a principal responding to my e-mail. Introduced by a vice principal, I entered Ms. Wood's fourth-grade classroom as "a volunteer," and sometimes helped kids do their activities in the classroom. During lunchtime, I sat at one of the three lunch tables that were assigned to Ms. Wood's class and ate lunch I had brought from home with kids in the class. Unlike Hamilton, which had two separate cafeterias, there was only one cafeteria at Claremont. Each classroom was assigned three

tables, and kids in the same class had to sit at one of these tables. From these participant observations, I collected twenty-three sets of fieldnotes of lunchtime. I also have twenty sets of fieldnotes describing children's interaction in Ms. Wood's class and during recess.

At both schools during lunchtime, I tried to immerse myself into the site. I brought my own lunch that I packed at home, and ate with different kids at different tables on different days. Ethnographers who studied kids and their activities devised various ways of dealing with the age and power barriers that lie between adult-ethnographer and kids (Corsaro 2003; Fine and Sandstrom 1988; Mandell 1988; Thorne 1993). Like Thorne (1993), I refrained from adult roles of authority, and instead related to the kids as their friend willing to learn from them and understand their experiences. My Japanese background seemed to have appealed to kids' interests in schools where the majority of the kids spoke more than one language. Kids asked me how to say certain words in Japanese and we ended up telling and chanting words in different languages in a friendly manner. While my ethnic background contributed to building friendly relationships with the kids, my gender often interfered with my access to boys' friendship groups. As I will discuss in the next section, girls and boys usually sat at different cafeteria tables, creating what they called "girls' tables" and "boys' tables." Even though I am a female, boys did not mind me sitting with them because in their eyes my adult status overrode my gender. However, whenever girls found me at the boys' table, they would ask, "What are you doing at boys' table? You'll get cooties!" and forcefully invited me to come over to their table. Sometimes, girls would come to sit next to me at the boys' table, consequently outnumbering the boys and driving them away to another table. I tried to stop the boys from leaving, but was not always successful. Such dilemmas in the field made me highly aware of the gender separation among preadolescent kids (see Adler and Adler 1998).

It was not long after I started to sit and eat with the kids as their "friend" that they started to give me various kinds of food even without my asking and invited me to participate in their communal food exchange. They also asked if they could have some of my food, especially when I brought a bag of chips or crackers. Through my attempt to immerse myself into the kids' world, I discovered that food exchange was an important ritual that children made use of to create and strengthen friendships with others.

It needs to be emphasized that although food exchange was a prime ritual during lunchtime that involved almost all the kids in school, it was not apparent or accessible to the teachers. Classroom teachers hardly knew anything about children's interaction in the school cafeteria, because they

usually went straight to the teachers' lounge to have their lunch. Besides, food exchange was a hidden activity especially at Hamilton, where the principal prohibited children from sharing food because of health concerns. At this school, teachers sent a notification home to parents stating that children were not to share food at school because some children are allergic to certain types of food. During lunchtime, lunch aides warned children to stop sharing whenever they found such activities. However, behind the eyes of the adult surveillance, children's food exchange ritual continued to flourish. They skillfully gave and received food under the table or behind their lunch bags and carefully watched out for the lunch aides, prepared to hide the activity whenever they came close. The giving and receiving of food, which involved minor resistance and challenge to school rules, constituted the *underlife* of school lunchtime. According to Goffman (1961), underlives develop in any kind of social establishment; they become an arena where individuals practice secondary adjustments which "represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted for him by the institution" (p. 189). Corsaro (2003) and Thorne (1993) observe similar activities among children who defy school rules by bringing in and exchanging snacks and small objects in the classroom.

Like Thorne (1993) who participated in children's secret exchange and felt pulled between her loyalty to children and her identification with and dependence on the teacher (p. 22), I also could not stop feeling a slight sense of guilt at Hamilton where food exchange was prohibited. It was only after a month of fieldwork that I discovered this school rule, but even after that, I continued to take a *laissez-faire* position. I believed that the fourth graders were well aware of the types of food that they were allergic to, and hence there was little concern for children getting sick through sharing food. However, my affiliation with kids and participation in their rule-breaking, which was one of the strategies to gain access to their world (Fine 1987), continued to collide with my loyalty to the principal who kindly invited me to her school.

While sitting, eating, and sharing food with the kids, I focused on the moments when the kids' various lines of differences became visible in their interaction (Thorne 2005, forthcoming). Although I entered the field with an initial interest in kids' negotiation of ethnic differences, I took an open-minded approach and attempted to gain a holistic understanding of kids' various activities during lunchtime. Seeking immersion in kids' lunchtime, I refrained from taking any notes while I was sitting at the cafeteria table with the kids. Only after I left the school, did I jot down the things I saw and heard during lunchtime. I later used these memos to write up detailed

fieldnotes. Analysis of the fieldnotes involved retroduction, moving “constantly from observation and analysis to conceptual refining and reframing and then back to seek new forms of data relevant to their emerging theoretical concerns and categories” (Emerson 2001, 284; see Bulmer 1979; Katz 1983). Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I started from open-coding of the fieldnotes and developed them into more integrative memos as I continuously honed theoretical ideas.

### **Age, Classroom, Gender, and Ethnicity in Seating Patterns**

Choosing a place to sit and with whom to sit marks the beginning of school lunchtime. Within certain institutional limits, kids can freely choose their eating companions, and thus the seating arrangements tell much about kids' friendship patterns (Eder 1985; Thorne 1993; Zisman and Wilson 1992). In this section, I provide a general portrait of the friendship pattern in two schools from their seating arrangements during lunchtime. This gives an important backdrop of the hidden food exchange that took place after kids were seated at the cafeteria tables. From the seating pattern, I show that age/grade, classroom, gender, and ethnicity helped shape kids' friendship patterns.

#### **Kids' Strategies to Sit with Friends**

Seating arrangements are shaped through kids' continuous negotiations. Although kids had a choice to choose their seats within certain institutional limits, they were never sure that they could sit with their friends in the same spot everyday. From her ethnographic study of lunchtime seating, Eder (1985) found that seating patterns started to stabilize after the seventh grade. Sixth graders in her study had a flexible seating pattern, and they sat with different groups on a daily basis. My observation of the fourth graders also suggests this flexible seating pattern and a lack of stable hierarchical cliques, although I found kids making a considerable effort to sit with a small number of “best” friends (usually one to three) as they entered the cafeteria each day. They used three types of strategies to sit with their friends: choosing seats and/or getting in the cafeteria line with their friends, saving seats, and making space on the bench.

At the two schools, kids usually entered the cafeteria in two lines led by the classroom teacher. When they approached the cafeteria and the lines

were dismissed, kids started to rush toward either the cafeteria line or the tables if they brought lunch from home. In this process, kids would break up into small friendship groups, and two or three friends would start walking hastily side by side. For those who bought the cafeteria lunch, kids would get in line with their friends. At Hamilton, those who brought their lunch from home strolled together in the cafeteria area in a small group searching for a clean empty table. Once they found a table, kids usually sat next to each other, and not face to face. Even when the group was big, they often chose to sit on the same side of the table in a long line, instead of separating themselves into different sides. This was also a common practice among friends at Claremont. As many studies have shown, physical proximity is an important marker of kids' friendship and an expression of intimacy (see Epstein and Karweit 1983; Rizzo 1989).

Kids who wanted to sit together did not always arrive at the cafeteria at the same time for various reasons. In these cases, saving seats for friends was an effective strategy that kids used to make sure that they could sit with their friends. Brandon (White) at Hamilton said, "Usually my friends take seats for me. When I go first, I take seats for them." At two schools, I observed various ways kids tried to save seats for their friends: spreading out their property on the table, stretching their legs on the bench, spreading their arms widely on the table, etc. When someone approached these seats and attempted to sit there, they would say, "This seat is taken," or "I'm saving these seats," and try to make others leave. As they saw their friends coming to the cafeteria, they stood up, waved and called out their friends' names to make sure that their friends found them in the crowded and noisy cafeteria.

Kids often faced the problem that there was not enough space to sit next to their friends. Even when kids attempted to save seats for their friends, as other kids started to fill the table, they were not always able to save enough room for all their friends to sit. In these cases, kids managed to sit together by scooting over and making space, so that their friends could squeeze in next to them. Consequently, physical proximity among friends became intensified. Sitting next to each other in a small space, they touch each other's shoulders, arms, buttocks, and legs, which seems to generate an intimate basis for eating together as well as the food exchange that is about to begin.

## Social Differences and Friendship Patterns

Through the processes that I have just described, all the kids are finally seated at the table and they start eating lunch. At Claremont, where kids were assigned tables according to their classroom, I took note of the seating



patterns among thirty-one kids in Ms. Wood's class each time I visited the school. There was a great deal of variation of seating on different days, although some general patterns were found. These patterns were shaped by kids' differences in age, classroom, gender, and ethnicity. Figure 1 in the appendix shows seating arrangements on one typical day at Claremont. Kids who are circled showed strong sense of friendship to one another by walking together toward the table, saving seats, making space, and sitting closely next to each other.

*Differentiation by age and classroom.* Kids' friendships are strongly shaped by age/grade and classroom differences. At Claremont, the institutional setting left no room for kids to sit with friends in other grades or classrooms. The thirty-one kids in Ms. Wood's class were free to choose their eating companions only from among their classmates. At Hamilton, kids who brought their lunch from home were able to sit with anyone at any table, but I found they usually sat next to their friends from the same classroom. Among the kids in Ms. Gill's class, those who brought their lunch from home separated themselves into small groups, and often sat at different tables. Consequently, they often sat at the same table with kids from other classrooms and grades, but they continued to avoid body contact and eye contact with these kids.

*Differentiation by gender.* Gender separation in kids' friendships was also very visible. At both schools, I observed that girls and boys chose to sit at completely different tables. Mixed-gender tables were rarely found. Kids at two schools openly talked about the presence of a "girls' table" and a "boys' table" and engaged in borderwork (Thorne 1993) that separated themselves from the other table and strongly marked gender boundary.<sup>3</sup> As the figure shows, girls and boys in Ms. Wood's class at Claremont sat at different tables. Girls usually occupied the middle table, while the boys chose to sit at either one of the two tables on the sides. Boys had two tables, because according to Kelly (Korean), "there are more boys than girls." Johnny (Latino) said, "I think we had boys' table and girls' table since the first grade. It's like a tradition." In fact, I observed that even the first graders had completely separate tables for girls and boys, although they were not asked by a teacher to separate.

*Differentiation by ethnicity.* Friendship grouping along ethnic lines, which is the focus of this study, was less salient among the fourth graders at the two schools compared to separation by age/grade, classroom, and

gender. As the figure above shows, each table was usually ethnically mixed at Claremont. Even at Hamilton where kids could freely associate with peers from other classrooms, kids rarely created a “Korean-only” table, despite the fact that there were enough Korean kids at the school to create one. While kids talked openly about “girls’ tables” and “boys’ tables,” as well as tables differentiated by grade and classroom, racial or ethnic group labels were less verbalized during lunchtime.

However, this does not mean that ethnic difference was not an important identity element in peer interactions among the fourth graders. A close look at the formation of seating reveals that Korean kids and other “minority” kids at both schools tended to generate separate groups. Figure 1 demonstrates that among kids who attempted to sit together in Ms. Wood’s class, two girls’ groups and three boys’ groups consisted only of Koreans, one boys’ group was a mixture of Latino and White kids, and one had two White girls and a Black girl. As for the last group, when the Black girl left the school after winter break, a Korean girl, who used to be a loner, joined the White girls. This group was the only salient one at either school in which a Korean kid and non-Korean kids continuously attempted to sit together during lunchtime.

At Hamilton, the separation between Koreans and non-Koreans in Ms. Gill’s class sometimes became more visible than at Claremont, because kids did not have to sit with their classmates. Among boys, I sometimes saw five to seven Koreans eating at the same table, while three Latino boys were sitting next to each other, and also a White and a Black boy sitting together, each group at a different table. Among girls in Ms. Gill’s class, Korean and Chinese girls were frequently seen eating together, while a pair of a Latina and a Black girl and another pair of two White girls (one Jewish and the other Australian) usually sat together, separating themselves from these Asian girls.

In general, perhaps because Koreans were the majority group at both schools, there were more inter-racial and inter-ethnic mixing among non-Korean kids, which consequentially highlighted the separation between Korean and non-Korean kids. However, it should be emphasized that such patterns of ethnic separation were neither static nor strong. Kids from different ethnic backgrounds chose to sit together at the same table on different days. Although ethnographic studies of middle schools and high schools report that adolescents have a strong tendency to segregate themselves according to race and ethnicity (Institute for the Study of Social Change 1992; Olsen 1997), it appears that preadolescent kids are only starting to strengthen their ethnic identity in peer interaction.

In the following sections, I argue that food exchange during lunchtime provided the kids with opportunities to negotiate ethnic and gender boundaries and their meanings. Through the use of food that they bring from home, kids maintained and strengthened ethnic and gender boundaries that were to some extent already visible in seating patterns. Simultaneously, it will be shown that kids also used food to renegotiate, cross, and mute these boundaries.

## **Food in Kids' Food Exchange: "Dry Food" and "Wet Food"**

In kids' hidden social exchanges, there were two types of food that were frequently given and received: one was store-bought, mass-consumed food products and the other was food that kids brought from home, including Korean "ethnic" food.

### **Dry Food**

The dry food included snacks like cookies (e.g. Chips-Ahoy), chocolates (e.g. M&Ms, Twix, Milky Way), gummies, chips (e.g. Doritos, Cheetos, Fritos), as well as "Lunchables," a pre-packaged meal, usually containing meat, cheese, and crackers. Some kids described these fun sharable food items as "dry food." These are non-sticky food items that are easy to share as well as to play with. These fun dry foods were the central items that moved the flow of kid's hidden social exchange. Kids who brought these items caught much attention from other kids in the cafeteria, and often became the target of begging and coercing. As many have argued, commercial brand-named food has turned into "the lingua franca of the twenty-first century" (Thorne 2005) for kids who have become active consumers in global capitalism (Langer 2005; Zelizer 2002). Regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, kids that I observed all had access to these dry foods and brought them to school from time to time for sharing and exchange.

### **Wet Food**

On the contrary, many kids showed unease toward exchanging "wet food" that was made and packed at home. When I asked kids what kinds of food they liked to share at school, Chris (White) at Claremont said, "I only share dry food. I don't like to share sandwich and stuff 'cause that's gross." Erica (Australian) said, "I share chips. Only dry foods. I don't ask my

friends to give me other kinds of stuff, because I don't really know what they are and I haven't eaten them before."

There were practical and symbolic differences between exchanging dry food and wet food. In contrast to dry food, which a receiver can pick up without a giver touching it, wet food is hard to share without the other person "contaminating" it with his or her mouth, hand, or with eating utensils (fork or chopsticks) with his or her saliva attached. In my observation, kids often showed disgust for food that another person had touched with his or her hands. Because a physical substance of a giver is attached, the exchange of these foods seemed to engender the notion of pollution in kids' minds, and threaten bodily and self-integrity.<sup>4</sup> By preadolescent age, kids have developed the notion of *homo clausus* (Elias 1978), the sense of self that is encapsulated in one's body and is clearly cut off from others. Violation to this bodily boundary would arouse in them fear and disgust.<sup>4</sup>

However, it should be emphasized that kids who regarded themselves as best friends did not seem to care much about sharing wet food and eating food that other person's eating utensils had touched. For instance, I often watched kids giving their food to their closest friends with chopsticks and forks that they had been using. Sometimes, even having wet food that another person's mouth had touched was acceptable among close friends. I frequently saw kids sipping a drink from the same can. It appears then that close friends shared strong bonds that allowed them to breach the bodily boundary that generally separates individuals. Indeed, the sharing of wet food marked and reinforced their affection for one another.

In general, Korean and White children were more likely to possess and share wet food with others than Latino and Black children, many of whom appeared to qualify for a reduced/free lunch. Several Latino and Black kids told me that their parents leave early in the morning for work and they do not have time to fix their lunch. On the contrary, White and Korean parents in general seemed to come from economically advantaged backgrounds and had time to prepare lunch for their kids. Several White and Korean kids told me that they did not like cafeteria food and they always asked their parents to fix lunch for them. Judy (Jewish) told me she could not eat in the cafeteria "because I'm Jewish, and we are supposed to eat only what's called Kosher. And the cafeteria food is not Kosher."

What was interesting was the fact that Korean kids frequently brought Korean food from home. In interviewing Anna's mother (Korean), she told me that Anna resisted eating cafeteria food and insisted on bringing Korean food and rice to school because they were her favorites. During lunchtime, some Korean kids often commented on their homemade food as "Korean"

and showed their pride in it. For instance, at Claremont, Cindy (Korean girl) usually expressed joy and excitement when she opened her lunchbox:

Cindy opened the lid of her thermal lunchbox. Inside, she found pieces of meat that looked like *Bulgogi* (Korean BBQ meat) and cooked bean sprouts on top of steamed rice. She exclaimed with joy, "Oh, I love this!" When I asked what they were, Cindy replied, "I don't know what it's called, but it's Korean."

In sum, wet food strongly reflected and represented the self of kids who owned it. However, Korean kids, who frequently brought "Korean" food from home, had more of an advantage than other kids to attach ethnic meanings to their wet food and use it as a token of their ethnic identity. Non-Korean kids brought in sandwiches, spaghetti, pizza, and hotdogs from home, but these foods were never attached to ethnic meanings. Even what is usually considered "Mexican" food such as burritos, tacos, and taquitos became everyday food and had little ethnic meanings for the kids since these foods appeared frequently on the school lunch menu and everyone had access to them. Korean food, on the other hand, only belonged to Korean kids and they were usually exchanged and shared among Koreans, who would appreciate the value of the food. By consciously selecting the receiver of their wet food, Korean kids identified who is "Korean" and who is not. Equipped with a symbolic resource, Korean kids had more opportunities than other kids to build ethnic boundaries and identity in food exchange.

### **Three Forms of Hidden Social Exchange and Ethnic Boundary Negotiation**

Using dry food and wet food, kids collaboratively produced and practiced three forms of social exchange: gift-giving, sharing, and trading. Each form had different openings, sequence, and involved a different number of participants. In terms of frequency, I observed that gift-giving and sharing took place ubiquitously during lunchtime, while trading was rarely practiced. Also, each form of exchange had a different relevance for marking, strengthening, and at times muting ethnic boundaries, since each had different implications for friendship. The fourth graders I observed at the two schools appeared to have a clear notion of a friendship continuum, ranging from the strongest form ("best friends") to the weakest one ("someone from another class"), and marked these differences through different forms of social exchange. In general, gift-giving marked the strongest friendship,

while sharing involved larger but weaker friendship ties, and trading marked differential power relationships. Also, gift-giving could be used to make new friends, and sharing often functioned to expand friendship networks. These three forms of social exchange can be understood as what Goffman (1971) termed “tie-signs,” which, like “hand-holding,” are a ritual idiom that “provide evidence of the current character of the relationship, pertaining as they do to a present state” (p. 195).

When the distinction between dry food and wet food is considered, we see how different forms of social exchange affirm kids’ gender and ethnic relationships. Table 1 presents a summary of the findings.

In gift-giving, both wet food and dry food were used, and they marked strong same-gender, same-ethnic friendship. Strong cross-ethnic friendships within the same gender group existed to some degree, and these also were marked by gift-giving. In sharing, kids also used wet food, but in this case, it only involved same-gender, same-ethnic relationships. In my observations, Korean kid frequently shared wet food with other Koreans, which consequentially affirmed their ethnic boundary and strengthened their Korean identity. On the other hand, when dry food was used in sharing, basically everyone at the school was allowed to participate. As I will present later, the sharing of dry food enabled kids to mute ethnic and gender boundaries and in turn, strengthened their sense of membership in the same classroom or school. Trading involved only dry food, and typically marked different power relationships between boys and girls and/or Koreans and non-Koreans, consequently emphasizing the power of Korean boys in predominantly Korean (-American) schools.

Partly because of the aforementioned seating pattern that separated girls and boys, cross-gender interaction in this food exchange was very scarce, and thereby ethnic boundary formation usually occurred within the same gender group. This suggests that children’s ethnic identity formation is likely to occur along with gender identity construction.

In the rest of this article, I present the kinds of moral ties that are produced and marked by these different forms of food exchange. I also demonstrate how kids used each form and food to mark, maintain, strengthen, or mute ethnic boundaries.

## Gift-giving

Gift-giving is characterized by a closed structure in which only the giver and a small number of selected receiver can participate. It was generally initiated by a giver’s voluntary offer of his or her food to the receiver(s),

**Table 1**  
**Three Forms of Hidden Social Exchange**

	Gift-giving	Sharing	Trading
Frequency	Frequently	Frequently	Rarely
Initiator	The giver	The receiver	Either or both
Number of participants	Small, usually 2-3.	Large, up to 7-8.	Small, usually 2.
Function	Mark strong friendship. Make new friendship.	Mark weaker friendship. Expand friendship.	Mark power relationship.
Use of wet food	Can be either same-gender, same-ethnic relationship, or cross-ethnic.	Mostly in same-gender, same-ethnic relationship.	Never.
Use of dry food	Can be either same-gender, same-ethnic relationship, or cross-ethnic.	Can involve anyone at the school site regardless of gender and ethnicity.	Mostly cross-gender and/or cross ethnic.

which often accompanied a phrase, "You want some?" Kids used both dry food and wet food in gift-giving, but in terms of the latter, the giver usually had knowledge that the receiver also appreciated its value. Otherwise, it would not be considered a gift. Furthermore, the giver carefully controlled the amount of the food that they gave, thereby marking it as a gift that was limited in supply and therefore had special quality. For instance, Jennifer (Korean) put a small portion of *udon* (noodle) on the lid of her lunchbox and offered it to Cindy (Korean); Kerry (Chinese) rolled some spaghetti around her fork and held it out to Judy (Jewish), asking her "You want it? It's good."

Gift-giving usually occurred among those who considered themselves best friends, and the ritual functioned to strengthen these strong friendship ties. In addition, the gift-giving not only marked the existing strong friendship, but it could also create a new one. At both schools, I observed newcomer kids frequently giving food to their classmates with whom they wanted to get close. In my own experience in the field, those who became my key informants frequently gave me various kinds of dry and wet food as we sat and ate together.

The giver usually did not expect the receiver to repay him or her with food. When I asked Maria (Latino) if she got something back from Sarah

(Black), to whom she often gave food, she replied, "I don't have to. If I give something to my friends, I really don't care if they give me something back." Instead, the receiver reciprocated the giver through his or her commitment to their friendship. When I asked David (Korean) who his best friend was, he immediately named Brian (Korean) and explained, "He's nice. And he gives me lots of stuff. Like hot Cheetos."

To successfully practice gift-giving, the giver had to protect the ritual from the intrusion of others to whom he or she did not intend to make offers. When other kids witnessed the gift-giving, the giver easily became the target of begging and coercing and the ritual quickly turned into sharing, which I will present next. One of the givers' strategies to avoid this from happening is to hide the gift-giving from other kids' eyes. Philip (White) told me, "I give food to my friend without letting anyone else know about it. If others know about it, they'll come to me and beg." Thus, gift-giving often became a private, secret ritual among a small number of best friends, which further emphasized their intimate relationships.

I observed that gift-giving can crosscut ethnic boundary and affirm strong friendship that exists between kids from different ethnic backgrounds. Non-Korean kids tended to mix and engage in gift-giving regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, probably because there was a small number of kids from the same ethnic group. However, I sometimes came across a moment when Latino, White, and Jewish boundaries were drawn by kids who regarded themselves as best friends. Judy, who was the only Jewish girl in the class, often gave her food to another Jewish girl in another class. She told me that she could give her Kosher food to her friend because she is also Jewish.

Compared to the non-Korean kids who relatively lacked symbolic resource, Korean kids were in a more privileged position to construct and assert ethnic boundaries because of their possession of ethnic wet food. They were able to attach ethnic meanings to their group identity and express them to others when engaging in gift-giving. The episode below shows an example. Figure 2 in the appendix shows how the gift-giving described in this episode reaffirmed an ethnic boundary between Korean and Latino kids.

Howard sat between James and George (all Korean). Greg and Bill (Latino) from Ms. Gill's class later came to the table together and sat facing the Korean boys. Howard took out three pieces of cut apple from his cloth-made lunchbox. Each piece of apple was wrapped with plastic wrap, and its skin was peeled. The center part of the apple was cut off so that the whole piece can be eaten without bothering about seeds. Howard gave one piece each to



James and George. The three boys unwrapped and started to eat the apple. Greg stared at the boys and asked Howard, "Why are you eating apples like that?" Howard did not say anything. Instead, James answered, "I eat apple like this." Then he turned to me and said, "American people don't cut apples, but I like it cut." Howard added, "Yeah, Korean people usually cut apples." Greg fell in silence, and just stared at the Korean boys.

The apples that Howard gave to his two Korean friends served as nice gifts especially because of the way each of them were neatly peeled and wrapped by his mother, who packed a lunch for him almost every day. Howard used food that was limited in amount as a gift: another way to prevent other kids at the table from joining the ritual and instead to mark and strengthen the friendship among the giver and the receivers. The boundary between Korean and "American" kids became more apparent when Greg, a Latino boy, suspiciously posed a question about the wet food that Korean kids were sharing. Korean boys collaboratively attached strong ethnic meanings to this boundary by proudly announcing the food as "Korean," which differed from "American." This episode suggests that Korean kids, who frequently brought Korean ethnic food, were able to take advantage of gift-giving to affirm their strong friendship as well as an ethnic boundary.

## Sharing

While gift-giving had a closed structure that only incorporated a few number of selected kids, sharing had an open structure that enabled any kids nearby to participate or at least to try participating. Thus, it had the power to expand the group boundary and form a larger group, although it generally marked weaker friendship bonds. Unlike gift-giving, which started with the giver's voluntary offer, sharing was initiated by the receiver sending cues that indicated his or her interest in the giver's food, such as "staring at food" or giving comments like "Oh, I love that" or "That looks so good." It was also triggered by the receiver's more straightforward asking, "Can I have some?"

What made sharing a ritual that incorporated a large number of kids was that whenever others asked the giver for his or her food, the giver was obliged to give. It was often the case that when one kid received food from the giver, others who witnessed this event approached the giver and started to beg one after another, "Can I have some too?" The giver, sometimes unwillingly, offered food to everyone and the sharing developed like a chain reaction until everyone got some share. What was striking was that the giver would give food to someone whom she or he did not even know.

Kids said they did this because people came and begged for their food. They said they did not care about the immediate return.

However, kids became upset when the receiver refused to give some of his or her food in the future, breaking the norms that underlie sharing. Andrew (Black) said to me as follows: "One thing I don't like is that when someone asks me for food, people I never seen, people I don't know at school, I give it to them, but then, when I ask the same person to give me food, they act like they don't remember me, and don't give them to me." His friend, Tim (White) echoes: "Yeah, and if they don't give it to him, he just stops giving it to them forever. He remembers them."

Similar to what Katriel (1987) found in Israeli children's sharing ritual, the underlying norm of sharing at the schools that I observed was that both the giver and the receiver needed to control their self-interest and show respect toward one another. When asked, the giver usually kept control over the amount of food they gave, and the receiver politely accepted whatever amount they were offered. Sometimes, the giver would hand a bag of snacks to the receiver, but even then, the receiver would take only "a piece" from the bag in the first round of sharing. If she wanted more, she would ask the giver "Can I have some more?"

Because of the large number at school and their possession of various foods, Korean kids frequently engaged in sharing wet food while non-Korean kids did not attempt to participate in such sharing. When Korean kids shared *miso* soup and noodle soup (*udon* and *ryannmen*) from the same cup or bowl, the ethnic boundary became especially visible because of the physical proximity among these kids (see Figure 3 in the appendix):

Toward the end of lunchtime, Jonathan (Korean) started to drink an instant noodle soup directly from the plastic bowl. On the side of the bowl, several Korean letters were printed. Donald, a Korean boy sitting facing Jonathan, pointed at the bowl and asked, "Can I have some?" Jonathan lifted his face from the bowl and nodded. Donald stood up and walked over besides Jonathan. Jonathan also stood up, and now two boys stood face to face. Jonathan handed out the cup to Donald, who received it and started drinking directly from the cup. After a few seconds, Donald removed his lip from the edge of the cup, and returned it to Jonathan. Jonathan started to drink some soup. Then, Michael, another Korean boy who sat next to Donald, stood up and approached the two boys. He stood next to Jonathan and asked him, "Can I have some too?" Lifting his face from the cup, Jonathan passed the cup to Michael keeping its position the way he got it back from Donald. Michael received the cup and stepped forward. Now three boys were standing in a triangle. After Michael removed his lip from the cup, he pointed at the place

where his lip touched with his forefinger. Then, he passed it to Jonathan, also keeping the cup in the same position so that each of them would not drink from where others' mouth had touched. The cup was passed on to Jonathan, Donald, and Michael for several times. While three kids stood up beside the table in a triangle, two Latino boys and an African American boy were left at the table sitting next to each other. Joseph (Black) glimpsed these boys several times, but did not join the sharing.

Donald and Michael were not necessarily Jonathan's best friends, as the two usually did not sit next to him at the table. Still, Jonathan offered his soup when the two politely asked him for some share. This sharing ritual made visible an ethnic boundary that was not apparent from the seating pattern. The non-Korean boys were excluded from the sharing, when the two Korean boys approached Jonathan and turned their back on them standing in a triangle facing each other. The Korean boys built a kind of fort with their bodies that outsiders could not easily enter. Drinking soup from the same bowl further highlighted and strengthened their group solidarity. Simultaneously, the way they circulated the bowl in the same position and refrained from drinking from the same spot indicates their less intimate relationship. Still, in the eyes of other kids, this wet food sharing expressed a strong bond among Korean kids.

## Trading

Trading, although it rarely occurred in the two settings, had different ways of linking kids and creating ethnic boundaries. Unlike gift-giving and sharing in which kids did not talk explicitly about the return gift, trading was marked by a mutual agreement on the exchange ratio prior to any transaction (see Mishler 1979). For instance, I observed an incident in which kids agreed to trade three nacho chips for two pieces of chocolate. In other cases, kids even traded food with labor or money. Two Korean girls explained to me that they gave two pieces of *Starburst* candy to a Korean boy, who would become their "slave" and save a spot for them in line. Purchasing others' food with money (usually less than a dollar) could also be considered as a form of trading, since kids engaged in a process of bargaining and determining the exchange ratio.

I found that trading was much more risky business in that participants could not really rely on the goodwill of the other for a reciprocal relationship. The relative power of the kids became more salient in trading, and the less powerful were often betrayed and exploited. For instance, the boy who promised the girls to be their "slave" did not keep his word and told the

girls instead he never had such a deal. Thus, while gift-giving and sharing often reinforced equal friendships among those involved, trading created, marked and strengthened the differential power among the participants.

I observed Korean kids engage in trading with non-Korean kids, which often marked a power relationship between the two. Because Korean kids often had valuable foods that were popular among kids, trading of these foods led Korean kids to possess power over non-Korean kids. One of these foods was Korean seaweed. To my surprise, at Claremont and Hamilton, Korean seaweed became a commonly circulated item in kids' food economy to the extent that it had become a popular dry food which only the Korean kids possessed.

The following episode shows trading between a Korean and an African American kid who initially asked the Korean boy for his seaweed:

Five Korean boys in Ms. Gill's class were sitting together at one of the boys' tables. Rick (Black) came over to the table from somewhere, and pointed at a plastic container on the table in front of Nicholas. It had layers of Korean seaweed inside. Rick asked Nicholas, "Can I have some?" Nicholas looked at Rick, and said, "It's a quarter." Stephen, who was sitting next to Nicholas laughed and said, "That's a rip-off!" Rick silently took out a quarter coin from his pocket and rolled it on the table. Nicholas took the quarter, and handed a sheet of seaweed to Rick. As he received it, Rick left the place without words. I asked Nicholas, "A quarter for one seaweed?" Nicholas nodded and said, "Yeah, 'cause he always comes for food." Stephen laughed and said, "Rip-off!" Three other Korean boys also laughed and chanted, "Rip-off! Rip-off!" Nicholas smiled and left the table with a quarter in his hand. When he came back, he had a string cheese in his hand. Bryan asked Nicholas, "You bought that with that quarter?" Nicholas nodded and started peeling the film that covered the cheese. He peeled a small string of cheese, and as he put it in his mouth, he handed out the rest of the stick toward Stephen. Stephen received it and peeled a small string from the stick like Nicholas did. Seeing this, Phillip asked Nicholas, "Can I have some too?" Nicholas nodded, and Stephen passed the stick to Phillip. As Phillip peel a string of cheese, Rick came back to the table, and as he stood beside Nicholas, he silently pointed at the seaweed. Nicholas took a sheet from the container and gave it to Rick. Stephen giggled and said, "That's like one cent." Phillip joined Stephen and said, "Give him more! You need to give him twenty-three more!" However, Stephen closed the lid of the container. Other Korean boys at the table made "Ohhh" sound and chuckled. Rick walked away.

This episode clearly shows the power relationship between Korean boys and an African American boy. Although Korean boys at the table marked

the trading as a "rip-off," they were not seriously accusing Stephen of abusing power. Rather, these kids were enjoying the power that Stephen practiced against Rick. In particular, by sharing a string cheese that Stephen bought with the quarter that he "ripped off" from Rick, other Korean kids also became a part of the exploitation. Thus, when cross-ethnic trading occurred, Korean kids often constructed ethnic boundaries and identities with a growing notion of power that they could practice against non-Korean kids.

This power imbalance seems to reflect school demography as well as social class differences in the community. Korean kids were the majority at the two schools and they as a group had more power against non-Koreans to negotiate trading in their favor. Furthermore, Korean kids, who were in general more economically advantaged than Latino and African American kids, had more valuable dry food (including seaweed) to bring and thus were able to exercise power in trading. As Thorne (2005) claims, wider social inequalities "enter into children's social worlds—and thus potentially shape their awareness of class positioning—in varied ways" (p. 82). In this study, I noticed that Korean boys often teased the African American boy in the above episode as "always begging for food" and thus "he's poor." At the other school, I also saw an African American boy who always ate cafeteria food and had a reputation for begging for food. His classmates (usually White and Korean) refused to share their food and instead traded them with his "labor." From these incidents, it can be said that food exchange is also an arena where kids subtly mark class differences and develop a sense of their position in the class hierarchy. This awareness seems to happen along with a growing sense of racial and ethnic identity and a learning of a racial hierarchy in the United States. However, at predominantly Korean schools, the power difference between White and Asians, which exist in larger society, was not to be seen.

### **Dry Food Sharing and Crossing Gender and Ethnic Boundaries**

So far, I have argued that gift-giving, sharing, and trading of food marked and reinforced ethnic boundaries and contributed to kids' ethnic identity formation in different ways. I now discuss the many moments during food exchange when kids' ethnic boundaries became muted and cross-ethnic friendships were reinforced. In these cases, boundaries based on other social categories—classroom and age—were often marked, which sequentially led to the obscuring of ethnic boundaries.

Among three forms of social exchange, I found that sharing dry food enabled kids to cross ethnic boundaries, because unlike gift-giving and trading, it allowed them to freely ask for food from anyone and thus participation was open to everyone at school. Gift-giving often marked existing strong cross-ethnic friendships, but since they were conducted secretly among a few kids, they did not have the power to stretch and create larger friendship groups as in sharing. Dry food played a significant role in underscoring the function of sharing, because it was favored by almost every kid regardless of their ethnic, gender, or class differences.

The episode below shows how the ethnic boundary between Korean and non-Korean kids, as indicated by their seating arrangement, was blurred in sharing dry foods. Class differences were also obscured. In this case, sharing also cross-cut gender boundaries largely because on this day, boys and girls in the same classroom were assigned to the same table by the teacher. Figure 4 in the appendix shows the seating pattern and how the food flowed from a Korean girl to her classmates:

When Jane (Korean) took out a big bag of colorful rock-shaped chocolates, and handed several pieces to me, David (Latino) instantly asked Jane, "Ohh . . . Can I have one too?" Jane silently took out a piece and gave it to David. Seeing this, Joseph (Latino) made a shape of bowl with his hands and also asked Jane, "Ohh, can I have one too, Jane?" Jane pulled out another piece from the bag, and dropped it on Joseph's palms. Then, Julian (White) cried out, "I wanna have some too!" Ben (Korean) echoed, "Me too!" Jane hesitated for a moment, but when Julian and Ben leaned forward over the table, casting her with an upward glance and pleaded, "Please, please, Jane?" she made a big sigh and handed a piece to each boy. Then, Emma (White), Melanie (Korean), and Cindy (Korean) began asking Jane for chocolate. Jane rolled her eyes, but gave a piece to each girl. As she handed out a piece to Cindy, David cried out, "Oh . . . that's big! Can I have one more?" Jane looked up and rolled her eyes again. She said, "Now that everyone knows I have chocolate, they are all asking me!" David fell into silence, and there was no more begging. Kids who got chocolate from Judy started to compare the shape, color and the size of the piece they had. Ben said to Cindy, "Let me see yours. Yours is big!" Emma said to the boys, "Mine's yellow. What color is yours?" Julian stuck out his tongue and showed a tiny piece of chocolate on its tip. Melanie laughed and shouted, "It turned into white!" Seeing this, others also stuck their tongues out, chuckling as they looked at each others' chocolate.

In the above episode, the kids crossed ethnic, gender, and class boundaries as they collaboratively created and maintained the norms that underpinned sharing. Jane expressed her unwillingness to share by "rolling her eyes";

nevertheless she gave a piece of chocolate to each of her classmates who asked. The boys started to beg, but they were never coercive. Rather, the ways in which they pleaded with a soft voice and dramatized gestures (e.g. making a bowl shape with his hands, leaning forward and casting an upward glance) expressed their subordination to Jane in playful manners. Boys stopped begging when Jane began to complain, showing her some respect. Such interaction suggests that sharing gave boys and girls opportunities to challenge and subvert the common ideas about boys' domination over girls (Thorne 1993). Social bonds that cross ethnic, gender, and class differences were further strengthened when kids started to engage in collaborate "food talk." The playing with food that followed also contributed to their friendship and emphasized their identities based on classroom and age, rather than gender, ethnicity, or social class.

## Conclusion

Corsaro (1997) argues that preadolescence "is a time when children struggle to gain stable identities, and their peer cultures provide both a sense of autonomy from adults and an arena for dealing with uncertainties of an increasingly complex world" (p. 188). Looking closely at children's interaction during lunchtime, fourth graders in this study collaboratively created peer cultures that emanate from establishing and participating in food economy, which was hidden from adults' eyes and thus operated largely on its own. While previous studies have focused on game, play, and disputes as an arena for children's friendship and identity construction (see Corsaro 2003, Evaldsson 1993, 2003; Goodwin 1991 and 2001; Levinson 2005; Thorne 1993), this study has shown that food economy is another sphere where children organize peer relationships and negotiate various social identities. As Zelizer (2002) forcefully argues, children are "active economic agents" (p. 377) who possess an ability to create and participate in economic activity, including distribution. As shown by their use of dry/wet food as well as three forms of food exchange, children created an intricate system and culture of food economy, through which they negotiated various ties with others while marking, maintaining, strengthening, and muting social differences. In this process, ethnic boundaries and identities were marked and developed. The study shows that children do not become ethnic by passively "internalizing" ethnic culture in the adult world, as the traditional socialization model would assume; rather, children learn to do ethnicity by making use of cultural objects (food) in the exchange system that they collaboratively create.

Looking closely at *how* children negotiate ethnic boundaries in food exchange, I have shown “the fluid, situational, volitional, and dynamic character of ethnic identification” (Nagel 1994, 152), which preadolescent children become increasingly adept in negotiating. Children frequently marked and strengthened ethnic boundaries using dry and wet food in gift-giving, sharing, and trading, but as demonstrated in children’s sharing of dry food, these boundaries were often muted to incorporate children from different ethnic backgrounds. Like Thorne’s (1993) conceptualization of borderwork, which not only worked to emphasize gender separation but also created a space where girls and boys could come together and “cross” the gender divide, children’s participation in food economy also created the dynamics of both marking and muting ethnic boundaries. When muting occurred, other identities based on classroom, age, and/or gender came to the fore instead.

This finding also suggests that children’s construction of ethnic boundaries usually accompany a creation and negotiation of other boundaries related to gender, age, classroom, and social class. Gift-giving and sharing among children from the same ethnic background normally occurred within the same gender group. This observation confirms the results gained from previous sociometric studies, which indicate that children’s friendship is affected first by their gender and then by race/ethnicity (see Sagar et al., 1983). It appears that children learn to do ethnicity at the same time they position themselves in either of the gender category. Identities based on age and classroom were also implicated in children’s construction of ethnic boundaries, since children usually engaged in food exchange with peers from the same grade and classroom. These identities were highlighted when children muted ethnic boundaries through sharing of dry food. Even social class differences, which were mostly obscured by school efforts, sometimes surfaced in the process of food exchange. White and Korean children in this study saw African American children who always “begged” for food as “poor.” Here, children’s understandings of the ethnic differences appear to accompany their emergent sense of social class positioning. These findings suggest that children’s ethnic identity formation is a flexible ongoing process that should be understood in conjunction with the formation of other local categories such as gender, classroom, age, and social class. Different identities are activated at different moments and thus, this process is by no means linear or universal.

While children skillfully negotiated ethnic boundaries and identity in food exchange, this process also depended on larger social contexts which infused the dynamics of children’s interaction. As the constructionist view



suggests, ethnic identity is not simply a personal choice but, in fact, a product of a dialect between internal identification and external categorization; in other words, between agency and structure (Barth 1969, Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatv 2004; Nagel 1994). This study has shown that school demography and social class inequality constrain which differences are marked and which ethnic group has the most cultural resources and opportunities to negotiate and construct ethnic boundaries and identity. Studying Black immigrant adolescents in New York City, Waters (1999) finds that the Black immigrant ratio of the students has a strong influence on whether Black immigrant adolescents would identify themselves as "Americans," "Ethnic," or "Immigrants." Similarly, Thorne (forthcoming) argues that "the availability of differences that may be successfully deployed in the naming of identities and the organization of groups" partly depends on "local demography and knowledge." At predominantly Korean schools in this study, Korean children were in a much better position to mark their difference and assert their ethnic identity in a positive way. Because of the large number of Korean children, various Korean foods moved the flow of food economy, making more opportunities for Korean children than for non-Koreans to engage in exchange and thereby to negotiate ethnic boundaries and create ethnic solidarity. Some Korean foods such as seaweed became a popular dry food among children at school, and therefore Korean children, who had access to these foods, were more active as givers. They could use these foods to enhance egalitarian friendship that cross ethnic boundaries, but in several occasions, they also used them in trading to practice power against African American children. Furthermore, Korean children's middle-class background enabled them to bring various kinds of homemade wet food that contributed to their active engagement in food exchange. Latino and African American children, many of whom qualified for free/reduced cafeteria lunches, had fewer cultural resources to construct boundaries in ethnic terms.

Breaking away from the traditional socialization model and demonstrating the situated, multi-layered nature of children's ethnic identity which children cooperatively construct in their everyday life, this study suggests the need for more ethnographic case studies that take serious consideration of children's meaning-making process in interaction. As this study has shown, preadolescent children learn to negotiate ethnic boundaries and develop ethnic identity by participating in peer culture. Thus, the question of *how* and *when* children construct ethnic boundaries as well as *who* has the resources to do so should be answered by adopting a child-centered perspective and carefully observing children's peer interaction. Since children's ethnic identification differs according to contexts that they are in, as more

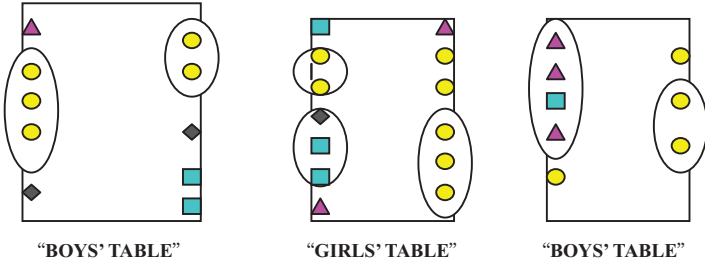
case studies at schools of varied racial/ethnic composition accumulate, we will be in a better position to understand the dynamics of the ethnic boundary construction and its relevance to the construction of other social differences.

Finally, the findings gained from this study have some specific practical implications for schools and teachers to create culturally inclusive environments. Although studies of playgrounds have reported that boys are in a much stronger position to invade girls' activities and control more space on the playground (Grant 1984; Oswald et al. 1987; Thorne 1993), I observed that lunchtime provides much space for cross-gender and cross-ethnic friendship. Among the three forms of social exchange, sharing of dry food provided a tool for children to interact with one another harmoniously without any shameful teasing or power enforcement. Regardless of their social backgrounds, they engaged in sharing as "kids" in the same classroom, while maintaining and fostering the mutual respect and trust that underlies any sharing ritual.

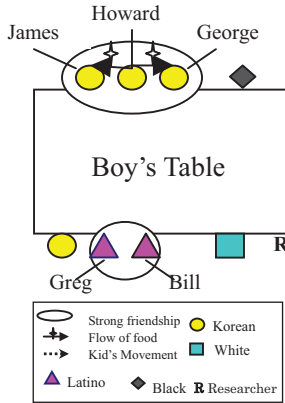
The major barrier that prevented cross-gender and cross-ethnic sharing was kids' physical distance during lunchtime: namely, they usually chose to sit at different tables. On the other hand, whenever they had a chance to sit together, they started to practice sharing which often led to "food talk" and "food play," which further fostered emotional ties across gender and ethnic lines. How is it possible to encourage relaxed cross-ethnic and cross-gender interactions during lunchtime? Perhaps teachers can assign the table to children and intentionally make mixed-gender and mixed-ethnic tables in cafeteria. Also, studies suggest that an adult presence can ameliorate gender divides (Adler and Adler 1998; Moore 2001; Thorne 1993). I also found that my presence at the table encouraged boys and girls to sit together and engage in sharing. If classroom teachers sit and eat with children even once in a while, they can play an important role in fostering cross-gender and cross-ethnic friendship by naturally creating mixed-gender and mixed-ethnic tables. They can also caution against some practices that may cause negative results in peer relationships: teasing food, excessive begging, unfair trading, and so forth. In the United States, eating with teachers is given to children as a "privilege" or a reward for their good behavior. In my fieldwork, children very much appreciated this privilege and looked forward to eating lunch with their teachers. Teachers can perhaps find a way to organize their busy schedules, and sit and eat with the whole class once in a while. Lunchtime is a rich opportunity not only for children to maintain and cultivate friendships with their classmates, but also for the teachers to deepen their understanding about children and their worlds which are full of surprising creativity.

## Appendix

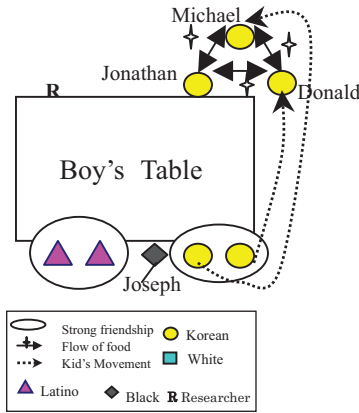
**Figure 1**  
**Example of seating arrangements among kids in Ms. Wood's class**



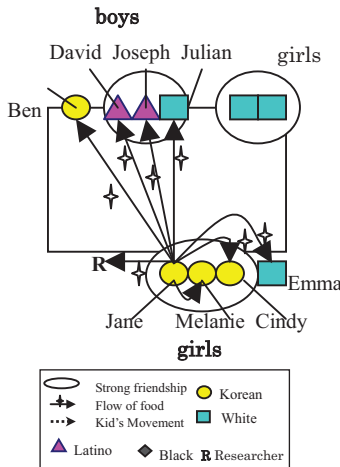
**Figure 2**  
**Gift-giving among Korean boys**



**Figure 3**  
Sharing among Korean boys



**Figure 4**  
Cross-gender, cross-ethnic sharing



## Notes

1. The names of all teachers and children have been changed to allow anonymity.
2. In my ethnographic accounts, I will use the term "kids" instead of "children," because that was the label that children frequently used to refer to themselves in our conversation. Also, the term "children" is a top-down category created from the "adult-ideological viewpoint" (Thorne 1993, 9) and entails the traditional socialization perspective.
3. For instance, I found what Thorne (1993) called "pollution rituals" involved in this gender separation of seating arrangements. While Thorne acknowledged "girls as a group were treated as an ultimate source of contamination, while boys as boys . . . are exempt" (p. 74), at the two schools that I observed, boys as a group were rather seen as the source of ultimate pollution by girls among the fourth graders. Girls frequently stigmatized boys by saying that they were "messy" and "dirty" and they did not want to sit at the boys' tables. In both schools when I sat at boys' tables, girls occasionally came up to me and warned, "You'll get cooties from the boys."
4. As Turner (2003) explains, "the fluids that flow from inside of bodies to the outside are dangerous and contaminating because fluids on the outside of our bodies challenge our sense of order and orderliness (p. 2)."

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