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## Intersections of Language and Race for English Language Learners

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## Intersections of Language and Race for English Language Learners

### Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the intersection of linguistic and racial hierarchies for English language learners in their school community. I argue that the mapping of one social hierarchy onto another is used to create Self-Other distinctions based on linguistic background. I examine how these hierarchies framed the social context in ways that marginalized this diverse group of learners. I draw on research data from six, white, middle-class English language teachers to analyze how their students experienced this intersection. I conclude with suggestions for teacher educators to include material and curricula that examines not only structural hierarchies of language and race but also the influence of white racial identity on teaching and pedagogy.

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# Intersections of Language and Race for English Language Learners

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper, I discuss the intersection of linguistic and racial hierarchies for English language learners in their school community. I argue that the mapping of one social hierarchy onto another is used to create Self-Other distinctions based on linguistic background. I examine how these hierarchies framed the social context in ways that marginalized this diverse group of learners. I draw on research data from six, white, middle-class English language teachers to analyze how their students experienced this intersection. I conclude with suggestions for teacher educators to include material and curricula that examines not only structural hierarchies of language and race but also the influence of white racial identity on teaching and pedagogy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Language and race are closely linked as a means of distinguishing Self and Other (Kubota, 2004; Mahboob, 2006; Motha, 2006; Pennycook, 1998). Underlying the intersection of language and race is a language ideology that Shuck (2001) calls “the ideology of nativeness,” an Us-versus-Them division of native and nonnative speakers of a language that are perceived as mutually exclusive, uncontested, and identifiable. The basis of such a model holds that speech communities are naturally monolingual and monocultural, so that one language is associated with one nation (Gal & Irvine, 1995; Wiley & Lukes, 1996). The binary native-nonnative categories that emerge from this monolingual model not only frame social hierarchies of race, class, and ethnicity, they also inform existing cultural models of

educational and political systems (Shuck, 2001; Urciuoli, 1996). Pennycook’s research (1998) reflects such hierarchical constructions as the college students in his study—all from multiple language backgrounds—perpetuated a social order that placed native English speakers at the top and non-native English speakers, especially those languages spoken by students who were not white, at the bottom. The mapping of one social hierarchy onto another is used in the service of creating Self-Other distinctions based on linguistic background (Kubota, 2004; Shuck, 2006). Thus, language becomes racialized as the native and nonnative English speaker hierarchy intersects with existing structures that order and rank the collective conscience. Such ordering works to frame language use in relation to racial membership.

Phillipson (1992) argues that “[L]inguicism

has taken over from racism as a more subtle way of hierarchizing social groups in the contemporary world” (p. 241). This subtlety is realized not through separate forms of symbolic domination, but rather through ideological structures that provide discursive resources for laypersons, public figures, and academics alike to systematically connect linguistic discrimination and racism (Shuck, 2006). Discourse surrounding language use is bound by political and social constructs that frame its expressibility today, as seen in English Only initiatives throughout the United States and in the passing of English Only legislation in more than half of the states (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). Such institutional actions reflect the macrosocial conditions that have enabled linguisticism to emerge and pervade social and personal identity through common assumptions of truth that authorize linguistic exclusions. In direct conflict with the emergence of linguisticism is the increased number of linguistically diverse students. Of these school age children, a total of 9,779,766—one in six—speak a home language other than English and almost half do not have sufficient proficiency in English to succeed academically in traditional all-English classrooms (NCELA, 2004). Indeed, the question of this themed issue rings true: how do we, as teachers, negotiate the contradictory change contexts and processes that are taking place within the United States?

While language ideologies cannot always be mapped directly onto beliefs about race, public discourse surrounding the use of non-standard varieties of English in the United States, for example, is racialized—in effect, expressed with direct or indirect reference to racial categories or by using rhetorical patterns associated with discussions of race and ethnicity (Shuck, 2006). Linguisticism discourse—like racial discourse—is similarly reflective and constitutive of power and underlying power relationships that are normalized in the broader social context and implied as the “natural” order of things. The underlying set of factors that directly generate discursive fields take place at what Foucault (1972) calls the preconceptual level. Goldberg

(1993) describes the preconceptual level as manifestations of power relations vested in and between historically located subjects that determine social history and generate concepts and categories of expressibility and comprehension. One consequence of such ordering is the establishment of a hierarchy of humankind where racial classification—the ordering of human groups on the basis of inherited or environmental differences—implies that certain races are superior to others. In attempting to better understand racial connections to linguisticism at the preconceptual level, it is necessary to look at surrounding contextual factors such as how linguistic differentiation is described, explained, and excluded within schools in terms of implicit or explicit deliberation about English language learners (ELLs) and English as a second language (ESL) programs.

Linguistic hierarchies are also intertwined with accents that are associated with white speakers and assigned a higher degree of prestige than those generally connected to racial minorities (Lindemann, 2003). As an English language teacher (ELT) of color, Motha (2006) describes a reciprocal relationship between race and language (including accent) hierarchies. The consequences of this interrelationship have surfaced throughout her teaching career and have served silencing or marginalizing purposes in the classroom and school community. Mahboob (2006) describes the understanding of racial identity in relation to language identity and other identity factors, as a process of being “enraced”—the way through which people acquire awareness of race by and through their own and others actions, behaviors, and/or discourses. The process of enracement extends to stereotypes, beliefs, and/or orientations of language (including accent), gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. As English language teachers of color, Motha and Mahboob’s experiences reflect the ways in which race and language connect and intersect in American institutions of schooling.

How do teachers perceive conditions that

enable language use and language proficiency to map onto existing hierarchies of race? And, how do they perceive the social conditions within schools to reinforce such ordering? In the following sections, I describe how linguistic and racial hierarchies within the schools where this research study took place, framed the types of marginalization that ELLs experienced. I argue that this framing is reflective of Shuck's (2001) ideology of nativeness—that the English language learners were not only nonnative speakers but also nonwhites, thus rendering the Self-Other distinction two-fold. I examine the types of marginalization that took place for ELLs in order to highlight the everyday occurrences that maintained these hierarchies within the school community.

### THE STUDY

This research project included six, white, English language teachers from both urban and rural settings (See Appendix 1). I conducted structured interviews and classroom observations of each participant, keeping notes on the class subject, number of students and country of origin, classroom arrangement, students' response to the material, and teachers' responses to the class. Structured interviews assisted me in understanding the experiences of the participants and the meaning that they made of their experiences. Over the course of one academic year, I conducted three interviews with each of the six participants who were K-12 public school English language teachers. I followed a three-interview format as a way to provide in-depth contextualization of the aspects that influenced the participants' conceptualizations and articulations of their role as English language teachers in relation to linguistic and racial identity. In addition, I conducted five classroom observations with each participant of approximately 30 to 90 minutes. The observations with the rural participants' included one-on-one and small group (3-4 students) tutoring sessions in reading, writing, history, grammar, and vocabulary. The urban participants had between eight to 24 students per class and I observed classes in language

arts, reading, writing, social studies, and math. The cross analysis of interview, observation, and field note data enabled a detailed description to emerge that took into consideration the social context of each school.

### DATA ANALYSIS

I used a grounded theory method of data coding to apply analytical techniques for handling data, considering alternative meanings for phenomena, and systematically relating concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The procedures for this analysis consisted of developing broad categories of information for open coding then interconnecting these categories based on similarities that began to emerge from the data of each participant. These codes represented the themes or patterns that were recurring throughout the data.

In conjunction with multiple rereadings of participant data, I analyzed my classroom field notes to integrate observational data with interview data to develop a more cohesive and fuller picture of the context wherein each participant responded. For example, when Miguel asked Hannah, "Why does this teacher [treat us this way], it's because we're ESL students?" It was important to refer to my notes of this observation to read the unspoken cues that accompanied Miguel's question. That he entered the classroom with his shoulders slumped and flopped into his chair was important contextual information to frame his question. In my subsequent visits to different classrooms, I was more mindful of this issue and the treatment that other ELLs might have encountered outside of their ESL classes.

### PARTICIPANTS

Three teachers, Maureen, Hannah, and Bridget, taught within one mile of each other in an urban<sup>1</sup> New England city that I call Milltown. During this study, Maureen was in her third year of teaching English language learners at Mountain View High School, a magnet school serving students in grades 9-12, in the heart of

Milltown's large working class neighborhood. Maureen, a native English speaking woman in her early 50's, grew up on Long Island in an all white neighborhood with various ethnic and religious groups, most notably Italian, Irish, and Jewish. She identified most strongly with her father's Italian side and was saddened by the fact that she hadn't continued to speak and study Italian. Maureen taught ESL1, the lowest of four levels in her strict and orderly classroom, which she felt was most appropriate for the refugee students from Bosnia, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, and Afghanistan. For many of these students, English was learned in refugee camps or through sporadic school attendance in their war torn countries.

Hannah, an English language teacher at Pine Ridge Middle School, was in her third year of teaching during my data collection. This school was approximately one mile from Mountain View High School and was similarly designated as a magnet school for ELLs. A native English speaking woman in her mid 20's, Hannah grew up in a small town that was mostly white. She remembers there were "two black kids in my school, possibly." She tried hard to get her students to focus on their studies and not waste time because, as she reminded them, they had a lot of catching up to do to reach the academic levels of their mainstream peers. She taught the first and second levels of social studies, math, and language arts to students from Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Columbia. She also had immigrant students from Korea and China, and refugee students from Bosnia, Sudan, and Somalia, some of whom came to her class with no educational experience or English language background.

Bridget, the third urban teacher in this study, was in her second year at Milltown Elementary School, teaching small groups of kindergarteners. Bridget, an energetic, native English speaking woman in her early 20's, grew up in white, middle-class towns that had very little diversity in comparison to the setting in which she taught. She focused on creating a relaxed, polite, and fun setting in her small classroom. She wanted

her young students to feel comfortable so that they would begin to participate in the on-going dialogue that was at the center of her instruction. Many of the students were Hispanic, from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic; others were from Albania, Russia, and Liberia.

The other three participants in this study, Carly, Allie, and Beth, taught in rural school districts within the state<sup>2</sup>. In the rural school settings, these teachers most often supported the curriculum of the mainstream teacher and traveled from school to school depending on where their students were located. Carly taught in the university town of Rockfield, her third year as an ELT at Rockfield High School. When I asked Carly, a native English speaking woman in her early 50's, where she grew up, she laughed and replied "honkyville" then further described it as "a heavily Caucasion environment" in a large suburb of New England. She was a strong advocate for her students and tried hard to get them involved in the social fabric of their school to develop a sense of belonging.

Allie was in her second year as an ELT in her district. A native Spanish speaker in her late 40's, she was born in Cuba and immigrated to the United States when she was 11. While living in Cuba, she attended American schools so that she could learn English. She went to private schools most of her life that were "mostly white" with "some Black students and some white students and the Hispanic students were mostly Cubans, so there was some diversity, but not a whole lot." Her students were mostly Spanish speakers from Latin America and Puerto Rico. Allie spent about one hour "on the road" each day traveling to three elementary schools and one high school to provide English language services to 12 students.

Beth, the other rural teacher, was in her third year of teaching during this study. A native English speaking woman in her mid 40's, Beth grew up in a small town on Long Island where many people commuted to New York City to work. When asked the racial make-up of her town, she laughed, "Oh, white, white, and

white.” She knew of two African Americans in her school throughout her K-12 years. Beth was a very conscientious teacher who strived to maximize her time with her students through detailed planning and frequent short meetings with their mainstream teachers. As with Allie, Beth taught K-12 in a rural district with few ELLs. At the time of my data collection, she worked with two students regularly and monitored five others in the district (See Appendix 1: Summary of Participant Information). The teachers in this study had an array of background experiences that informed the ways they approached their teaching and curriculum planning. In the next section, I analyze how socially constructed notions of race and language factored into the research findings.

### FINDINGS:

#### 1) Linguistic and racial hierarchies in the school community

“Why does this teacher [treat us this way], it’s because we’re ESL students?”

--Miguel, 6<sup>th</sup> grade student  
in Hannah’s class

The teachers in this study related accounts of racial and linguistic discrimination that their students had encountered from peers when attending mainstream classes. Hannah describes the general climate for ELLs in her response to an interview question about the obstacles they encounter at school,

*I would say that [discrimination] is one of the biggest things...and I think they see it in the schools...I don’t hear them complaining very often about being anywhere else...but they know it here and it would be from when they’re out, like maybe in [mainstream] classes they might feel it, or like the whole getting turned away from classes...And them knowing that there’s sometimes conflicts about mainstreaming...So, I would say that the discrimination within the school system.*

The process of integrating English language

learners into mainstream classes was a source of contention for Hannah and the other ELTs in her school because of the inconsistency in policy implementation from the administration and mainstream teachers.

Low English proficiency and overcrowded classrooms made the transition from ESL to mainstream classes contentious and despite the efforts of the ELTs to keep this conflict between the teachers, ELLs often felt the resentment and exclusion that accompanied the mainstreaming process.

While the discrimination that the ELLs experienced above revolved around language proficiency, another factor in their marginalization became apparent when I observed four of Hannah’s ELLs in their Home Economics class, one of the first classes in which they are mainstreamed. After all of the students had divided into cooking groups of 4 or 5 and separated into kitchen stations, a white, native English speaking boy leaned over the counter toward the adjacent cooking group and said to two African refugees,

*Hey black boy...you black boy...I’m gonna whup your black ass...You gonna go to jail and drop the soap and when you pick it up then... [unintelligible].*

While the two newly arrived ELLs may not have had the language proficiency to literally understand the boy, they could most likely interpret the silence that suddenly descended upon the two groups as unfavorable. The students in both groups, hovering closely together around large mixing bowls, heard what was said, but did not respond. The teacher and teacher’s assistant, attending to other cooking groups across the room, did not hear the remarks. In this situation, the ELLs social context is framed by a Self-Other distinction based on racial membership in combination with language proficiency. Similar to Pennycook’s (1998) research, a social order was perpetuated in the school context that placed native English speakers at the top and non-native English speakers, especially nonwhites, at the



bottom.

Carly, a rural ELT, acknowledged the existence of racial prejudice and the difficulty that her students have had in school because of it. In particular, she recounts an incident involving one of her ELLs in his mainstream class,

*I've seen [blatantly awful things] happen in classrooms most recently...where a kid, who's critically misbehaved, said 'How can you be black, you can't even shoot a basketball. I'm blacker than you, I'm better at basketball.'... and I mean this stuff happens to him all the time because he's been in the school district for a long time.*

Acts of racism come up “all the time” for some of her African students. She continues, “I’m guessing, maybe I’m projecting—that they deal with it on a daily basis.” The explicit deliberation about this ELL frames the social context for learning as well as the setting wherein differentiation is described, explained, and excluded within the school community. In this sense, racial discourse maps onto language proficiency to maintain a power relationship that is normalized in the broader social context, becoming what Foucault describes as the “natural” order of things—a preconceptual notion of who is superior and who is not.

## 2) Linguistic and racial hierarchies among English language learners

The propagation of stereotypes about groups of people different than oneself was not only prevalent among native English speaking students in this research, but also among ELLs. The teacher participants provided many examples of their students’ notions of difference. Maureen, one of the urban teachers, describes a racial incident that occurred in her classroom,

*A Mexican young man, who was about five foot three, looked up at one of my six foot five Dinka boys and said something about monkeys in jungles. And, I'm just so thankful he said it to THAT boy and not to one of the others (laughs)*

*because that boy came right to me and let me deal with it.*

Bridget, another urban teacher, explains an incident between her ESL students.

*I had a boy last year—it just broke my heart—he was from Taiwan and he was the only one from that area. Most of the students were from South America. He just stood out, was horribly teased.... They used to make fun of him because he looked [sic], they're like 'Chinese, Chinese!' And I don't know what it is with that, but not even just American, all my kids, all different races—it's just picked on.*

As ELLs formulate understandings of their racial identity in relation to language identity, they become “enraced” (Mahboob, 2006), acquiring an awareness of race by and through their own and others actions, behaviors, and/or discourses. In this sense, the collective conscience orders and ranks Self-Other distinctions to frame language use (Kubota, 2004; Shuck, 2006).

## IMPLICATIONS

As I reflect on the findings of this study, I return to my original questions: How do teachers perceive conditions that enable language use and language proficiency to map onto existing hierarchies of race? And, how do they perceive the social conditions within schools to reinforce such ordering? My thoughts on how to address these questions turn to my role as a teacher educator and the curricula, course material, and experiences that I can provide to better prepare preservice teachers to address and disrupt linguistic and racial hierarchies that frame the two-fold marginalization that English language learners may face in schools. Part of this understanding, I believe, begins with examining the influence of teacher linguistic and racial identity on teaching and curriculum design.

In studies of American mainstream teachers and the factors that influence their pedagogy, white racial membership and cultural positionality have been shown to have implications for teacher/



student interactions in ways that limit minority student academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2001; McIntyre, 1997). Exposure to material in teacher education programs that problematizes the impact of white racial membership on teaching and pedagogy can facilitate a deconstruction of cultural assumptions and expectations. This entails including curricular materials that reflect a critical multicultural and antiracist perspective as well as an activist component that connects curriculum to lived experience. The challenge for educators in this deconstruction is to better understand the role that race has in identity construction in order to expand upon it in class discussions (Liggett, in press). In addition, addressing avoidance behaviors in discourse about white privilege enables teacher candidates to be more aware of their own avoidance tendencies in the classroom when discussing perspectives that run counter to their dominant culture beliefs. When students talk about their belief systems, teachers may be more apt to explore these beliefs so that students can more easily navigate the terrain between home culture and dominant culture (Liggett, 2008).

While there are several factors besides race that contribute to individual identity construction (religion, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and others), white racial identity is often the unnoticed and unscrutinized factor in pre-service teacher education (Bolgatz, 2005; Kailin, 2002). As such, specifically addressing the social and historical influences that determine how racial discourse is conceptualized and bound to specific social constructs can illuminate the entrenchment of racial inequality in the American psyche.

The impact of this entrenchment becomes increasingly relevant in the broader social context of schooling as the emphasis on conversation and dialogue in literacy instruction has evolved as a fundamental strategy in teacher education to promote reading and writing. Notably, dialogic reading has emerged as a way for teachers to strategically question and respond to students while conducting multiple readings and conversations about books (Doyle

& Bramwell, 2006). These conversations require teachers to understand the social context that readers reference in their communicative plans. An important part of this understanding lies in the ability of the teacher to recognize aspects of personal identity and social stratification that inform the substance of such communication. For example, how one comprehends what they read links not only to their background knowledge and experience, but also to the perspectives they've developed in part because of their racial and ethnic identity as well as their social positionality. In addition to the emphasis on a dialogic component in literacy instruction, English language teachers focus on communication in literacy instruction to gauge language proficiency. This emphasis similarly calls on teachers to interpret the communicative competence of their students, making it vital for deeper understandings of socially constructed inequities.

Uncovering the complex nature of how our perceptions of race and culture are formed begins with trying to deconstruct the multiple ways we are influenced by overt and covert messages in society. The gradual and subtle practices, the repeated performance of specific acts that become so ingrained in peoples' lives that, without notice, are taken for granted to become a part of the normal and natural (Foucault, 1977). Foucault describes these unnoticed acts as being of eternal importance, for these small details can emerge as a set of techniques, methods, plans and eventually knowledge (1977). Inquiry into the construction of racialized discourse then is a key component to highlighting the confinement of it within certain parameters determined by societal notions of acceptability. For white teacher candidates, expanding these boundaries to explore what it means to be white and to belong to the dominant culture, translates into an exploration of power, its connection to knowledge, and how this knowledge influences one's perspectives, beliefs, and values (Liggett, 2007). In my experience, this exploration is an emotional one, often met with resistance, defensiveness, and at times, moments of deep self-reflection.

In order for preservice teachers to begin the process of changing the broader culture of the school, I suggest initiating collaboration with the school or district ELT in specific ways:

- 1) Seek out the ELT and set up a time to talk
- 2) Ask about the ELT's responsibilities and schedule within the school
- 3) Discuss the ELLs in your class (e.g., background education, previous assessments, family information, siblings in school)
- 4) Discuss ELL academic achievement in class (e.g., strengths, difficulties, gaps)
- 5) Ask how the ELT makes connections with families
- 6) Talk about classroom teaching approaches
- 7) Talk about how the ELT could work with ELLs in class
- 8) Invite the ELT to grade level planning meetings and social events
- 9) Ask about ideas for infusing culture and language diversity into the curriculum

Through such collaboratory efforts, general education teachers become more knowledgeable about language learning processes, and learn ways to more accurately scaffold content information and address socio-cultural issues that may arise. In so doing, they assist ELLs and ELTs in becoming part of the school community—key components to academic success and job happiness. Teacher educators can include course material that disrupts the status quo of hierarchical structures that maintain the peripheral and inferior status of English language learners and marginalize the expertise of their teachers. While the mere inclusion of such material does not ensure the reconceptualization of multilingualism, it can transform the ways that preservice teachers think about their teaching and compel them to act in ways that bring about

change within their local context.

## CONCLUSION

As teacher educators teach for change in a vastly changing world, we must think of the heightened importance that language use and language proficiency play in the social context of schools. This demographic shift requires us to prepare all teachers to address the issues that confront and sometimes marginalize linguistically diverse students. Part of this preparation involves us to include material in our course readings and design that foster better understandings of the marginalizing effects that social hierarchies have on ELL students and the ways that we, as teachers, can disrupt and reconfigure the ways we can include all students in the learning process.

U.S. Department of Education statistics indicate that 86% of all elementary and secondary teachers are European Americans, while the number of African American teachers has declined from a high of 12% in 1970 to 7% in 1998. In addition, the number of Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander teachers has increased slightly, however, the percentages are still very small (approximately 5% and 1% respectively), with Native Americans comprising less than 1% of the national teaching force. In stark contrast to the overwhelming lack of racial diversity in the teaching force, the increase in the number of students of color continues to rise, particularly in high-poverty urban areas where enrollment is approximately 69% (National Council for Education Statistics [NCES], 1996). With such a racial and cultural divide between teachers and students, a specific focus on the intersections of language and race in teacher education could foster better understandings of the ways that structural hierarchies play out for English language learners (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Highlighting this marginalizing impact would be a step toward developing strategies to facilitate academic success for this diverse population of learners.

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**APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT INFORMATION**

Summary of Participant Information						
	Maureen	Hannah	Bridget	Carly	Allie	Beth
School classification	Urban	Urban	Urban	Rural	Rural	Rural
Total population (school or district)	School: 2381	School: 1070	School: 422	School: 738	District: 2088	District: 2846
Percentage of limited English proficient students in school/district	9.6% (school)	6.6% (school)	17.1% (school)	1.8% (district)	.4% (district)	.3% (district)
Percentage of free or reduced lunch in school/district	12.0% (school)	29.3% (school)	70.4% (school)	2.0% (district)	10.4% (district)	24.3% (district)
Percentage of White, non-Hispanic	85.43%	84.02%	67.56%	97.02%	96.7%	98.56%
Median household income	\$40,774 (city)	\$40,774 (city)	\$40,774 (city)	\$44,198 (county)	\$48,875 (county)	\$40,792 (county)
Classroom description	Modular unit outside of main school building	Half of a regular classroom; furthest back corner from main school entrance	10'x10' windowless room off teachers lunchroom; stores two refrigerators	Large, sunny space on 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor overlooking library	One school: 6'x8' corridor between nurses office and storage room. Other 3 schools: no classroom	One school: old equipment storage room off main library. Other 2 schools: no classroom

## Notes:

1. Urban is defined as “All territory, population and housing units in urbanized areas and in places of more than 2,500 persons outside of urbanized area. ‘Urban’ classification cuts across other hierarchies and can be in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas.” U.S. Census Bureau, 2000. (9/28/04) [http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/glossary/glossary\\_u.html](http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/glossary/glossary_u.html)

2. Rural is defined as “Territory, population and housing units not classified as urban. ‘Rural’ classification cuts across other hierarchies and can be in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas.” Census 2000