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“Acting White” by ROLAND G. FRYER

“Go into any inner-city neighborhood and you will find that government alone can’t teach kids; parents have to parent, that children can’t learn from television expectations and turn off the television. Stop the slander that says a black youth with a high IQ is acting white.”
 —Barack Obama, Keynote Address, Democratic National Convention, 2004

Acting white was once a label used in academic journals, to characterize academically gifted minority students who were shunned.

Now that it has entered the national conscience—the term has become a household name and is used to refer to a variety of unsavory behaviors whose meaning is open to many interpretations, both by perpetrator, who the victim.

The social price paid by the best and brightest minority students

I cannot, in the research presented here, resolve the dispute, but I can sort out some of the confusion about what I mean by acting white: academically gifted minority adolescents who get good grades and high test scores.

They are more popular than white students who do well academically.

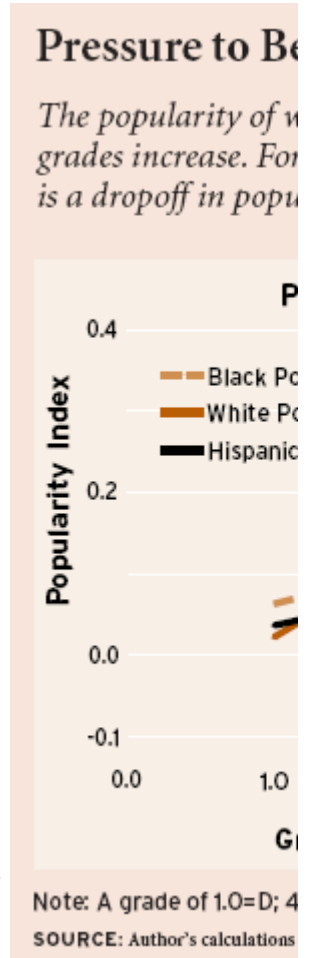
My analysis confirms that acting white is a vexing reality within a subset of American schools. It is not the fault of the studious youngster or others in his peer group. But I do find that the incidence of the acting-white phenomenon. The evidence indicates that it is most prevalent in racially integrated public schools. It’s less of a problem in the predominantly white public schools.

With findings as potentially controversial as these, one wants to be sure that they are fortunate that the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Adhealth) provides patterns of a nationally representative sample of more than 90,000 students, from 1991 to 2002, who entered grades 7 through 12 in the 1994 school year. With this database, it is possible to conduct narrowly focused ethnographic studies and the potentially misleading national studies that have so far guided the discussion of acting white.

The Meaning of the Phrase

Though not all scholars define acting white in precisely the same way, most definitions include a reference to situations where some minority adolescents ridicule their minority peers for engaging in behaviors perceived to be characteristic of whites. For example, when psychologist Angela Neal-Barnett in 1999 asked some focus-group students to identify acting-white behavior, they listed actions that ranged from speaking standard English and enrolling in an Advanced Placement or honors class to wearing clothes from the Gap or Abercrombie & Fitch (instead of Tommy Hilfiger or FUBU) and wearing shorts in winter!

Only some of these behaviors have a direct connection to academic engagement. However, as the remarks of Barack Obama, who would later win a seat in the United States Senate, suggest, it is the fact that reading a book or getting good grades might be perceived as acting white that makes the topic a matter of national concern. Indeed, negative peer-group pressure has emerged as a common explanation for the black-white achievement gap, a gap that cannot be explained away by differences in demographic characteristics alone. If minority students today deliberately underachieve in order to avoid social sanctions, that by itself could explain why the academic performance of 17-year-old African Americans, as measured by the National Assessment of Education since the late 1980s, even while that of nine-year-olds has been improving. It may also explain why many minority students in most elite colleges and universities.



Ethnography vs. Statistics

But is this well-publicized aspect of African American peer-culture reality or urban examine school life in specific locations present acting white as a pervasive fact of But the only two quantitative studies that analyze data from nationally representative dismiss it altogether as cultural lore. My findings confirm the existence of acting w Hispanics, but offer important qualifications about its pervasiveness.

Although they did not coin the term (its origins are obscure), it was an ethnographic Fordham and John Ogbu, published in the *Urban Journal* in 1986, that did the most fellow academics. Their "Capitol High," a pseudonym for a predominantly black hi Washington, D.C., had what the researchers said was an "oppositional culture" in v academically oriented behavior as "white."

In the late 1990s, Harvard University economist, Ron Ferguson, found much the sa upper-class suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, called Shaker Heights. Although that city h

large racial disparities in achievement persisted. When Ferguson detected an anti-intellectualism at a local high school, Shaker Heights became virtually synonymous with the problem (

Fordham and Ogbu traced the roots of the “oppositional culture” to institutionalized racism, which they contend led blacks to define academic achievement as the prerogative of whites and to turn instead in alternative pursuits. Other observers, however, place the blame for acting white on the students themselves. The Manhattan Institute’s John McWhorter, for example, contrasts African American immigrants (including blacks from the Caribbean and Africa) who “haven’t sabotaged their education. These two theories, the former blaming acting white on a racist society, the latter on the students themselves, emerged as the predominant explanations for acting white among American blacks.

In fact, however, shunning the academic is hardly the exclusive prerogative of blacks. In James Coleman’s classic work *The Adolescent Society*, published in 1955, he identified cheerleaders, not those on the honor roll, as the most popular students in public schools (see his original *Harvard Education Review* article, [p. 40](#).) The former bring honor to the entire school; the latter, only to themselves. Since Coleman, ethnographers have identified similar patterns of self-advancement and community integration. Indeed, variants on acting white have been identified among the Buraku outcasts of Japan, Italian immigrants in Boston’s West End, the Maori in New Zealand, and the working class, among others.

Even so, the question remains whether the tension that Coleman identified is more acute among blacks than among whites. On this topic, two sets of scholars weighed in with quantitative studies based on surveys. Writing in 1998 in the *American Sociological Review*, James Ainsworth-Darnell of Pennsylvania State University and Downey of Ohio State University reported that anti-intellectualism is no more severe among blacks than it is among whites. Meanwhile, in a 1997 study, economists Phillip B. Ladd and Georgetown found that high-achieving black students are, if anything, even more popular than are high-achieving whites.

Of course, it is possible that the social rewards for achievement do not vary among blacks and whites. In both studies, each of which is based on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, a major shortcoming in that they depend solely on a self-reported measure of personal popularity. The survey asks if the student “thinks others see him/her as popular.” The answer choices are “yes,” “no,” and “not sure.” Unfortunately, when students are asked to judge their own popularity, they can be biased. The bias is more than is warranted.

New Data and Methods

Fortunately, the Adhealth data I used in this study allow me to measure popularity in a more subtle way. All the students surveyed were asked to list their closest male and female friends, up to five of each sex. I first counted how often each student’s name appeared on peers’ lists. I then adjusted these raw counts to reflect the fact that some friends count more than others. The more frequently a peer is listed by others, the more weight I assign to showing up on his or her list.

The advantage of this research strategy is that one never has to ask a student about his or her own popularity. Students’ natural tendency to brag, in this



case by listing popular students as their friends, only gives us a more accurate picture of the social structure of the school. Students listed as a friend by many peers who are themselves popular, rise to the top of the social hierarchy, while those who are listed by only a few peers, who in turn have few admitted friends, stand out from the rest of the community.

Armed with an objective measure of social status, I could examine more systematically whether the findings were correct in identifying a distinctive acting-white phenomenon within African American schools. Do high-achieving minority students have fewer, less-popular friends than lower-achieving students? What is the social experience of white students?

In my first report I report my findings using a measure of each student's popularity within his or her school. The most direct test of the acting-white hypothesis. But as I explain below, I obtain the data without regard to the friends' ethnicity.

I measure student achievement with a composite of grade-point average (GPA) based on recent grades in English, math, history/social studies, and science. When comparing high-achieving students, I compare students only with students who attend the same school to avoid being skewed by unmeasured characteristics of specific schools. Even then, I take into account factors such as parental education and occupation and participation in various school activities, such as sports, government, and cheerleading.

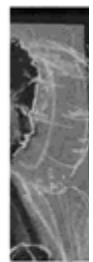
Finally, to subject my findings to the strongest possible test, I adjust students' popularity by their reported effort in school. Recall that some types of acting-white theory say that students do not study hard for achievement per se. The bright kid who can't help but get good grades is no different from the student who rate busters with books constantly in their faces who are annoying. By adjusting for effort in their studies, I do my best to separate the social consequences of achievement from the consequences of effort.

New Evidence of Acting White

Even after taking into account many factors that affect student popularity, the evidence remains strong that acting white is a genuine issue and worthy of Senator Obama's attention. Figure 1, which plots the underlying relationship between popularity and achievement, shows large differences among whites, blacks, and Hispanics. At low GPAs, there is little difference among ethnic groups in the relationship between grades and popularity, and high-achieving blacks are actually more popular within their ethnic group than high-achieving whites are within theirs. But when a student achieves a 2.5 GPA (an even mix of Bs and Cs), clear differences start to emerge.

As grades improve beyond this level, Hispanic students lose popularity at an alarming rate. Although African Americans with GPAs as high as 3.5 continue to have more friends than those with lower grades, the rate of increase is no longer as great as among white students.

The experience of black and white students diverges as GPAs climb above 3.5. As



beyond this level, they tend to have fewer and fewer friends. A black student with a 3.5 GPA has fewer friends of the same ethnicity than a white student with the same GPA. Put differently, a black student with a 3.5 GPA is less popular than a black student with a 2.9 GPA, but high-achieving whites are at the top of the popularity scale.

My findings with respect to Hispanics are even more discouraging. A Hispanic student with a 3.5 GPA has fewer friends of all Hispanic students, and Hispanic-white differences among high achievers are particularly pronounced.

The social costs of a high GPA are most pronounced for adolescent males. Popular among young black men than young black women (3.25 GPA compared with a 3.5), and the social costs of a high GPA after this point is far greater. As a result, black male high achievers have notably fewer friends. I observe a similar pattern among Hispanics, with males beginning to lose friends at a lower GPA than females. The male-female differences are not statistically significant.

Potential Objections

Could high-achieving minority students be more socially isolated simply because there are fewer high-achieving minority students in the average school? To test whether this disparity could explain my findings, I adjusted the data to eliminate the ethnic differences in the number of students at each school with similar GPAs. This adjustment, however, did little to change my results.

It might also be hypothesized that high-achieving minority students are able to cultivate friendships with students of other ethnic groups. If so, I should obtain quite different results when I examine popularity within ethnic groups. While one finds some evidence that high-achieving students are more popular among students of other ethnicities, the increase in popularity is not enough to offset the decline in popularity within their own ethnic groups. Black and white students have only, on average, one friend of another ethnicity, and the number of friends of other ethnicities is smaller than the number of friends of the same ethnicity.

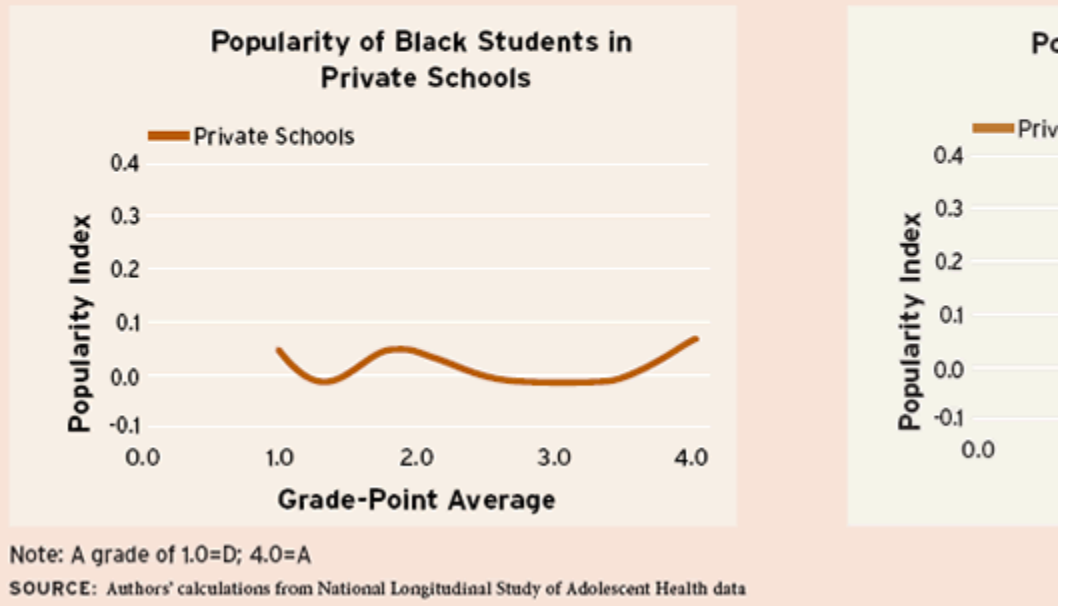
Indeed, when minority students reach the very highest levels of academic performance, their popularity and the number of friendships declines. Black and Hispanic students with a GPA above 3.5 actually have fewer friends than those with lower grades, a finding that seems particularly troubling.

Finally, I examined whether high-achieving blacks and Hispanics can shield themselves from social isolation by taking up extracurricular activities. There are many opportunities in schools for students to form friendships, including organized sports, cheerleading, student government, band, and the National Honor Society. I found that high-achieving students are in contact with students with similar interests.

Unfortunately, when I look separately at minority students who participate in each of these activities, I find that within which ethnic differences are eliminated: the National Honor Society. Among students in the National Honor Society, new friends made outside the classroom do not make up for the social penalties of high achievement.

The Private-School Advantage (Figure 2)

For black and Hispanic students, the adverse effect of good grades on popularity d



A Private-School Edge

The patterns described thus far essentially characterize social dynamics of public-school students in the Adhealth sample. For the small percentage of black and Hispanic students in private schools, however, I find no evidence of a trade-off between popularity and achievement (see Figure 2). In private schools, students with the highest grades are not as popular as their lower-achieving counterparts. In public schools, students with the highest grades are more popular than those with lower grades. In private schools, students with a GPA of roughly 2.0, a C average,

These data may help to explain one of the more puzzling findings in the research on private schools. Most studies of academic achievement find little or no benefit of attending private schools, but quite large benefits for African Americans. It may be that blacks attending private schools are in a different peer group.

The Segregated School: Is It an Advantage?

I also find that acting white is unique to those schools where black students comprise a small percentage of the total population. In predominantly black schools, I find no evidence at all that getting good grades leads to higher popularity.

But perhaps this changes when school desegregation leads to cross-ethnic friendships. If the degree of internal integration within a school affects acting-white patterns, I calculate the expected number of cross-ethnic friends in a school based on the ethnic mix.

a greater percentage of cross-ethnic friendships than expected are considered to be into two groups of equal size: those with higher and lower degrees of internal integ

Unfortunately, internal integration only aggravates the problem. Blacks in less-integrated schools (with fewer expected cross-ethnic friendships) encounter less of a trade-off between popularity and academic achievement. Acting white on popularity appears to be twice as large in the more-integrated (racially integrated) schools. Among the highest achievers (3.5 GPA or higher), the differences in popularity between acting white almost five times as great in settings with more cross-ethnic friendships. Schools with fewer cross-ethnic friendships fare the worst, penalized seven times as harshly as my estimate of the average schools!

This finding, along with the fact that I find no evidence of acting white in predominantly white schools, is strong evidence of a “Shaker Heights” syndrome, in which racially integrated settings only

In Search of an Answer

That acting white is more prevalent in schools with more interethnic contact hardly surprising. It nonetheless provides a clue to what is going on. Anthropologists have long observed that, in groups where individuals identify themselves as members of a group, an activity that accelerates when threats to internal cohesion intensify. Individuals can be expected to enhance the power and cohesion of the group as long as the group risks losing its most successful members to outsiders, then the group will become more cohesive. Cohesive yet threatened groups—the Amish, for example—are known for limiting contact with the outside world risks the community’s survival.

In an achievement-based society where two groups, for historical reasons, achieve different levels of success, the group with lower achievement levels is at risk of losing its most successful members, especially if those individuals have opportunities to establish contacts with outsiders. Over the long run, the group’s most successful members will no longer identify with its interests, and group identity will erode. To prevent identity erosion, groups may try to reinforce their identity by penalizing members for differences in achievement. The penalties are likely to increase whenever the threats to group cohesion intensify.

Applying this model of behavior to minority and white students yields two important implications. First, the trade-off between academic achievement and peer-group acceptance (popularity) will erode as a whole has lower levels of achievement. And that erosion will be exacerbated in schools with fewer cross-ethnic contact. This, of course, is exactly what I found with regard to acting white.

Understanding acting white in this way places the concept within a broader conceptual framework of group identity and cultural contexts and lifts the topic beyond pointless ideological exchanges. There is nothing inherently wrong with well and rejection by your peers when you come from a traditionally low-achieving group. The problem comes into contact with more outsiders.

Alternative Explanations

Such a conceptualization is preferable to both of the two theories that have so far dominated the

the notion of oppositional culture and the allegation of cultural self-sabotage.

The oppositional culture theory, developed by Fordham and Ogbu in the wake of their accounts for the observed differences between blacks and whites as follows: (1) white schools treat them differently in school; (2) by imposing a job ceiling, white schools punish their academic achievement in adult life; and (3) black Americans develop coping mechanisms for their striving for academic success. Fordham and Ogbu suggest the problem arose first because white Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans were capable of intellectual achievement. Black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to feel that academic success was not their people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from striving for academic success.

However plausible it sounds, the oppositional culture theory cannot explain why the theory fails in integrated settings. If Fordham and Ogbu were correct, the social sanctions for acting white would be most severe in places like the segregated school, where opportunities are most limited. The results are in precisely the opposite direction.

The notion that acting white is simply attributable to self-sabotage is even less persuasive when applied to black and Hispanic cultures. These cultures are dysfunctional, punishing successful members of the culture for their success. That theory is more a judgment than an explanation. A universal, it cannot be applied to one school setting to another that are so apparent in the data I have explored.

The Need for New Identities

How important are these social pressures? Although that story has yet to be fully told, the evidence that acting white in schools with racially mixed student bodies suggests that social pressures contribute to the large racial and ethnic gaps in SAT scores, the underperformance of minorities in elite colleges, and the inadequate representation of blacks and Hispanics in elite colleges and universities.

Minority communities in the United States have yet to generate a large cadre of high achievers as the high incarceration rates among minorities who never finish high school. In fact, as long as distressed communities provide minorities with their identities, the social costs of acting white are high. To increase the likelihood that more can do so, society must find ways for these high achievers to succeed. In the integrated school, by itself, apparently, these social pressures are less intense.

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