



The Search for Oppositional Culture among Black Students

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Reply to Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga

THE SEARCH FOR OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE AMONG BLACK STUDENTS

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RESULTS PUBLISHED in our 1998 *RASR* article (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998, henceforward A-D&D) presented a serious challenge to the oppositional culture explanation for racial/ethnic differences in school performance. It was a surprise to many to learn that black students typically report more optimistic occupational expectations, view education as more important to their future, and maintain more pro-school attitudes than do white students. In our conclusion, we stated our hope that this new evidence would lead to further debate regarding the source of racial/ethnic differences in school performance:

The oppositional culture model has become so respected in the academic community that it threatens to divert attention from other explanations for the racial gap in school performance. We hope our results, which contradict key claims, will stimulate a new dialogue. (A-D&D, p. 550)

We are pleased that Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga (2002, henceforward FL&M) have answered our call for a new dialogue, but at the outset we note that they misread our conclusion. They describe us as definitively claiming that oppositional culture theory "must be rejected." We never said that. We

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will make no effort, therefore, to defend against their primary thesis—that it is premature to reject oppositional culture theory—because we also endorse this view. But while agreeing that oppositional culture theory merits greater attention, we disagree with FL&M on where the weight of the evidence currently lies. Below we demonstrate the narrowness and fragility of their empirical support for peer-group opposition among blacks, and we question their position that there is a "disjuncture between African American student attitudes and their school behavior" (FL&M, p. 153).

ARE HIGH-ACHIEVING BLACK STUDENTS SANCTIONED BY THEIR PEERS?

Contrary to oppositional culture expectations, we found that high-achieving black students are especially popular among their peers. Indeed, being a good student increases popularity among blacks more so than among whites. In addition, we found that black students are more likely than white students to offer pro-school responses to the statement: "Among the friends you hang out with, how important is it to: study, get good grades, finish high school, and continue their education beyond high school."

FL&M'S ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION LONGITUDINAL STUDY (NELS)

FL&M predict a different dependent variable from the NELS: students' responses to the statement "I often feel put down by other students." They estimate a three-way interaction and conclude, "within high-minority schools, that African American males and females who are very good students experienced a greater tendency to be put down by peers compared with similar white students" (p. 150).

But the careful reader will note how very limited the evidence is for this claim. The black male coefficient, for instance, can be dismissed summarily. The omitted category in this analysis is white females! Even the most ardent proponent of oppositional culture would not purport that a black male/white female comparison provides evidence

either for or against the theory. We replicated FL&M's analysis and changed the omitted category to white males so that the explicit statistical test between black males and white males could be made. *We found no statistically significant difference between black males and white males.*

This leaves the coefficient for black females who report being "very good students" in high-minority schools ($b = 1.772$) as the sole source of support for peer-group opposition in FL&M's Table 1. But note that black females who are "very good students" and in high-poverty ($b = -1.631$) or urban ($b = -1.040$) schools are *less* likely than white females to report feeling put down by their peers. This odd confluence of findings means that the only scenario where FL&M's results are consistent with their claims is when comparing black and white girls in high-minority *but* low-poverty and nonurban schools—less than 4 percent of all blacks in the analysis. The focus on this very small group can make us lose sight of the overall question: Are high-achieving blacks more likely than high-achieving whites to be sanctioned by their peers? From FL&M's own Table 1 the answer is a clear "No." *The overwhelming majority of black girls (by a factor of 10) are in schools where the evidence suggests greater sanctioning for school success among whites than among blacks.*¹ And to make matters worse, the modest evidence of peer-group opposition among blacks is also suspect because it does not survive even minor alterations to the model. For example, if we define "high-achieving" blacks simply by their earned grades or test scores rather than self-reports, even the evidence for peer-group opposition among this small group of black females disappears altogether (results available upon request).²

¹ A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ table of schools (high-minority \times urban \times poverty status) based on FL&M's Table 1 reveals that 476 black girls are in school conditions where there is greater white than black peer-group opposition compared with only 48 black girls in schools where there is greater black than white peer-group opposition.

² FL&M discuss three strategies that they say improve the likelihood of locating peer-group opposition among blacks: (1) focusing on high-minority schools, (2) analyzing race/gender subgroups, and (3) including control variables for

FL&M'S ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS (NAEP)

The new evidence FL&M present in their Table 2 (p. 152) requires more serious consideration. At first glance the results appear to provide the first hint from generalizable data that black students may be more likely than white students to sanction peers who want to succeed in school. Using the Fourth-Grade Reading sample of the 1998 NAEP, FL&M find that black students are more likely than white students to report that "My friends make fun of people who try to do well in school." How important is this pattern? If it is consistent with other information in the NAEP data, if it is robust across alternative modeling specifications, and if it mediates a large percentage of the black/white gap in test scores, then it would represent important new information in the assessment of oppositional culture theory. Unfortunately it disappoints on all accounts.

There are nine 1998 NAEP samples for which the question "My friends make fun of people who try to do well in school" was asked, yet FL&M show readers the results from just one of these (Fourth-Grade Reading). We obtained data for the other eight samples (Fourth-Grade Civics and Writing; Eighth-Grade Reading, Civics, and Writing; Twelfth-Grade Reading, Civics, and Writing), and we reestimated their model for each of these samples (see our Table 1). Not only is the pattern FL&M report not consistently replicated, but in many of the NAEP samples it is reversed. The evidence for peer-group opposition does not exist in most of the other samples and is precisely the opposite among three of the eighth- and twelfth-grade samples. *Taken as a whole, the NAEP data offer as much reason to argue for peer-group opposition among whites as for blacks.*

copied strategies (e.g., participation in student government). We performed a wide range of analyses testing these claims on FL&M's NELS and NAEP dependent variables and on our own NELS dependent variables. None of their strategies consistently increase the likelihood of locating peer-group opposition among blacks, and in many cases their strategies reveal greater peer-group opposition among whites. See Appendix A.

Table 1. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Black/White Differences in Peer-Group Opposition^a and Mediation of the Black/White Test Score Gap: Nine Samples from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998

Variable	Fourth Grade			Eighth Grade			Twelfth Grade		
	Reading	Civics	Writing	Reading	Civics	Writing	Reading	Civics	Writing
Coefficient predicting oppositional culture ^a for blacks	.47*** (.07)	.45*** (.09)	.57*** (.05)	-.14* (.06)	-.03 (.07)	.00 (.05)	-.27*** (.06)	-.07 (.08)	-.16** (.05)
Black/white test score gap	-32.32 (1.13)	-25.51 (1.27)	-26.54 (.67)	-27.71 (.90)	-25.77 (1.08)	-26.36 (.65)	-27.22 (.90)	-28.15 (1.14)	-23.14 (.70)
Net of controls ^b	-19.78 (1.19)	-14.39 (1.32)	-16.72 (.69)	-20.32 (.93)	-16.16 (1.13)	-17.77 (.65)	-22.91 (.93)	-22.65 (1.21)	-19.12 (.70)
Net of controls and oppositional culture ^a	-17.62 (1.14)	-12.30 (1.27)	-14.84 (.68)	-20.41 (.92)	-16.14 (1.12)	-17.67 (.65)	-23.14 (.93)	-22.58 (1.20)	-19.21 (.70)
Percentage of black/white test score gap mediated by the oppositional culture measure ^a	11	15	11	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: These coefficients follow FL&M's practice of presenting unweighted results that are unadjusted for the clustered sampling technique employed by the NAEP. We also estimated weighted models that adjusted the standard errors using a jackknife procedure. Although the standard errors are typically larger, the overall pattern of results is similar (results available upon request). Top row coefficients are from an ordered logistic regression. All others are from OLS regressions.

^a Model uses FL&M's measure of oppositional culture: "My friends make fun of people who try to do well in school."

^b Consistent with FL&M's models, control variables include: sex of student, Title 1 participation, high-poverty school, parent's level of education, urban/suburban/rural location, public/Catholic/private school, region of the country.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

Ignoring the fact that much of the NAEP data contradict their position, what do we make of the fourth-grade data, where support for peer-group opposition among blacks appears more consistent? FL&M encourage us to give these results special attention because "Fourth-graders are . . . more likely to answer without concern for impression management or for issues of adolescent identity than are A-D&D's tenth-graders" (FL&M, p. 150). They offer no evidence for this claim, however, and as we shall show later, attitude-behavior correlations demonstrate why tenth-graders' (blacks included) reported attitudes should not be dismissed as mere impression management.

More importantly, if the oppositional culture argument is correct, there are clear theoretical reasons for expecting peer-group op-

position among blacks to *increase* with age, as the salience of peer groups grows and youths approach the realities of the labor market. Recall that oppositional culture proponents posit that the source of black students' opposition to schooling is "because of employment discrimination" (FL&M, p. 148). The expectation of increasing peer-group opposition with age is not borne out by the data, however, given that the only evidence potentially favoring oppositional culture theory is found among the youngest blacks in the NAEP data (fourth-graders) and disappears as students approach the age of labor market participation.

In addition, there are credible reasons for doubting FL&M's evidence for peer-group opposition among black fourth-graders. Also available in the fourth-grade NAEP data are

students' responses to the statement, "Doing well in school is a goal of most students in my class," and "I have friends that I could talk to if I needed help with a school assignment." Again, FL&M did not present results for these variables, but we analyzed them. In contrast to the portrayal of black fourth-graders FL&M provide based on a single indicator, a more balanced view emerges when we also include these other relevant measures. Black students are *more* likely than whites to report that doing well in school is the goal of most students in their class, and they are equally (in some samples more) likely to report that they have friends whom they feel comfortable going to for help with homework.

Of course, we could debate the merits of these different indicators, or we could struggle to construct a story that accommodates all the patterns. But the more important issue is whether these measures of peer-group opposition help explain racial/ethnic differences in school performance, as oppositional culture theory predicts. In this vein, suppose that FL&M's results regarding peer-group opposition were not so limited. Let us pretend that the support they found in the Fourth-Grade Reading sample was not reversed when we looked at other NAEP samples and that the three indicators from NAEP did not produce contradictory patterns. Further, let us imagine that instead of finding narrow and fragile evidence for peer-group opposition among only 4 percent of blacks in NELS, they found consistent peer-group opposition among all blacks. Even if all of this were true, it would still not represent support for oppositional culture theory unless these measures of peer-group opposition mediated racial differences in school performance. It is one thing to find differences between black and white students that we think might indicate peer-group opposition. It is quite another to show, as the theory posits, that these differences are responsible for racial gaps in school performance.

FL&M did not perform these tests, but we did. Using the NELS we predicted grades and entered their dependent variable ("I feel 'put down' by other students") in our model. It mediated *none* of the black/white difference in grades. With the NAEP data we predicted standardized test scores with FL&M's

indicator of peer-group opposition. Again, their indicator of peer-group resistance is a disappointing mediator of the black/white gap in test scores, explaining none of the gap for the majority of samples (see Table 1). *Whatever modest peer-group opposition FL&M managed to find is clearly not the reason black students do less well in school than white students.*³

DO BLACKS' DEEDS MATCH THEIR WORDS?

Although they do not provide additional analyses, FL&M also challenge our conclusions regarding our three other hypotheses. The crux of their position is that blacks' reported attitudes should be viewed with skepticism because of the "disjuncture between African American student attitudes and their school behavior" (FL&M, p. 153). Proponents of oppositional culture are eager to promote the view that black students say one thing and do another because if blacks' attitudes did not matter, their more optimistic occupational expectations, stronger endorsement of education as important for the future, and generally more pro-school attitudes than whites would not be so troublesome to the theory.

FL&M assume that because blacks' group-level attitudes are more positive than whites, and their group-level behaviors more negative, blacks' attitudes are "inconsistent" with their behaviors. Mickelson (1990) termed

³ There is also reason to believe that the black coefficient in FL&M's Table 2 (p. 152) is confounded with school performance. It may represent the fact that low-performing students are more likely than high-performing students to associate with friends who sanction peers for trying hard in school (a strong pattern in NAEP). We predicted their dependent variable in Table 2 and removed this potential confound by statistically controlling for students' test scores; the black coefficient was reduced to nonsignificance. In other words, if we compare black and white students at the same level of test score performance, there is no difference in their responses to the question, "My friends make fun of people who try to do well in school." In addition, we estimated interactions between race and test scores and found no evidence that high-achieving blacks (vs. high-achieving whites) are especially likely to have friends who sanction school effort.

Table 2. Attitude-Behavior Correlations by Race/Ethnicity: High School Sophomores from the National Education Longitudinal Study, 1990

Attitude Measure and Race/Ethnicity	Behavior Measure			
	Teacher Report		Student Report	
	Effort	Disruptiveness	Time Spent on Homework	Grades
<i>"I get a feeling of satisfaction from doing what I am supposed to do in class."</i>				
Non-Hispanic whites	.205***	-.128***	.220***	.290***
Blacks	.149***	-.077**	.154***	.164***
Asian Americans	.203***	-.103	.165**	.265***
Hispanics	.205***	-.142***	.138***	.273***
<i>"I try as hard as I can in class."</i>				
Non-Hispanic whites	.236***	-.159***	.212***	.219***
Blacks	.194***	-.093***	.161***	.172***
Asian Americans	.113	-.011	.167**	.013
Hispanics	.136***	-.087**	.173***	.190***
<i>"Education is important to getting a job later on."</i>				
Non-Hispanic whites	.218***	-.147***	.176***	.260***
Blacks	.150***	-.072**	.123***	.126***
Asian Americans	.140*	-.199**	.123*	.158**
Hispanics	.133***	-.095***	.150***	.185***
<i>Occupation student expects to have at age 30</i>				
Non-Hispanic whites	.175***	-.102***	.159***	.277***
Blacks	.156***	-.127***	.261***	.231***
Asian Americans	.193***	-.024	.142*	.257***
Hispanics	.115***	-.047	.085***	.239***

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

this the "attitude-achievement paradox among black adolescents" and puzzled over "why blacks continue to say that education is important and then behave in ways that have little relationship to their stated attitudes" (p. 46).

But what is the relationship between what blacks say and what they do? If FL&M and Mickelson (1990) are right, rather than showing consistency, the attitude-behavior correlations for blacks should demonstrate the opposite. Or, a weaker form of this position would predict zero correlations. Blacks' reported attitudes may not be "inconsistent" with their behaviors, but at the very least they would be unrelated to them.

It turns out, however, that neither of these conditions is true. In Table 2 we present attitude-behavior correlations for non-Hispanic white, black, Asian American, and Hispanic

students from the tenth-grade NELS data. Consistent with attitude-behavior research, the correlations highlight the modest relationship between attitudes and behaviors for *all* subgroups (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980).⁴ But the more important question is whether blacks are an anomalous group. They are not. All 16 of the attitude-behavior correlations for blacks are in the expected direction, demonstrating remarkable attitude-behavior consistency. As a typical example, among blacks the correlation between "I get a feel-

⁴ The strength of this relationship depends, of course, on the conceptual fit between the attitude/behavior pair. Among pairs where the fit is tight (e.g., "I like to turn my math homework in on time," and actual records of turning in math homework), the correlation should be typically stronger than those we report here.

ing of satisfaction from doing what I am supposed to do in class" and their teachers' evaluations of their effort is .149. For whites the correlation is .205. And in some cases, the association between attitude and behavior is *stronger* for blacks than for whites. For example, there is a greater association between the kind of occupation a student expects at age 30 and the amount of time they spend on homework among black ($r = .261$) than white students ($r = .159$). Overall, attitude-behavior correlations for blacks are typically smaller than those for whites, but are comparable in magnitude to those for Asian Americans and Hispanics.⁵

The myth that black students' reported attitudes have no relationship to their behaviors has persisted in the social sciences for too long. It is incumbent upon scholars who maintain this position to answer the following questions: (1) Why are attitude-behavior correlations among blacks consistently in the expected direction? (2) If the argument is that blacks' attitudes are meaningless because their attitude-behavior correlations are slightly smaller than those of whites, shouldn't we also dismiss the attitudes of Asian Americans and Hispanics? Their attitude-behavior correlations are also typically smaller than those of whites. (3) What more must black students do before we believe that they mean what they say?⁶

⁵ Given these findings, we see no justification for dismissing blacks' attitudes as irrelevant to models predicting educational performance. Blacks' attitudes do matter for school success; if blacks did not maintain such pro-school attitudes the black/white performance gap would be greater than it currently is.

⁶ If there is no disjuncture between blacks' attitudes and behaviors, how do we explain that, relative to whites, blacks have a higher group mean on attitudes but a lower group mean on behaviors? Our answer is that attitudes are not the sole or even the primary predictor of behaviors (true for all groups) and that blacks are more often disadvantaged than whites in terms of other factors in the environment that influence behavioral outcomes.

And why are black students typically rated as poorer classroom citizens than their white classmates? Although we believe that both students and teachers have agency in the classroom and that the answer probably requires understanding the actions of both, it is worth noting that teach-

CONCLUSION

We agree with FL&M that survey data can play an important role in assessing oppositional culture theory. But we would have greater confidence in their claim of peer-group opposition among blacks if: (1) the results were not so narrow and fragile in their NELS analysis, (2) the evidence from NAEP was consistently replicated in samples other than the one they presented, and (3) the NAEP evidence was not contradicted by other information available in the data. And while we encourage scholars to look for peer-group opposition wherever it might be, it is important to remember that the goal of oppositional culture theory is to explain racial/ethnic differences in school performance. Merely locating racial differences in behavior that we think represents peer-group opposition does not constitute support for the theory unless these behaviors

ers may evaluate black and white students differently. Building off Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson (1987), Downey and Pribesh (1999) find that black students are rated especially poorly by white teachers. When matched with same-race teachers, however, the behavior of black and white students is comparable. That this pattern is equally strong across samples of kindergartners (Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort) and adolescents (NELS) strains belief in oppositional culture theory. To believe the oppositional culture explanation, one would have to argue that five-year-old black children perceive occupational barriers and, as a result, resist white teachers more than black teachers. We think a more likely explanation is that white teachers, probably unwittingly, misinterpret some of black students' behaviors as resistant.

As FL&M point out, however, even blacks' self-reported behaviors are more negative than those of white students. This is true in the NELS, as blacks report doing less homework than whites and being in trouble more often at school (e.g., "got in trouble for not following school rules," "suspended," etc.). But even these patterns could be a result of teacher bias. If teachers assign black students less homework, they will do less, and if teachers more often misinterpret black students' behavior as resistant, they will discipline them more often. Consistent with this view, blacks are less likely than white students to report that "discipline is fair"—the single attitudinal measure from our study for which blacks reported a more anti-school view than did whites.

also mediate racial differences in school performance.

Moreover, the weight of evidence continues to suggest that high-achieving black students are no more likely than their white counterparts to be sanctioned by their peers. Relative to white students, blacks who are good students are especially popular among peers, and blacks are more likely to report that pro-school values are held by their peers—patterns that are robust across a wide range of model specifications. Also analyzing the NELS, Cook and Ludwig (1997, 1998) have come to a similar conclusion:

Our results indicate that both black and white students are able to join peer groups that are supportive of high achievement. This finding holds even for black students in predominantly black schools. (Cook and Ludwig 1997:274)

Although the most persuasive evidence, in our opinion, is not currently on its side, we still think that oppositional culture is a theoretically attractive explanation and that it deserves further attention. Far from arguing that the theory "must be rejected," our position remains that we hope scholars will continue to assess the theory's propositions. But when we wrote our article we were alarmed that nearly all of the empirical tests before ours had important design flaws. Often there was not even a comparison between black and white students! It was as if researchers had presumed that an oppositional culture

among blacks existed and so did not see the need for fair tests. The sooner we drop this presumption, make fair comparisons, and look at all relevant data, the sooner we will successfully identify the causes of racial/ethnic differences in school performance.

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James W. Ainsworth-Darnell is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Georgia State University. His research interests include social stratification, race and ethnic relations, and sociology of education. His current research addresses how educational processes reproduce social inequality including: how neighborhood context influences school performance, and the effect of involvement in high school vocational education on the school-to-work transition (with Vincent Roscigno).

APPENDIX A

Strategies for Finding Peer-Group Opposition: Do They Work?

Dependent Variable	Searching for Peer Opposition among Blacks by:	
	Focusing on High-Minority* Schools. Does It Work?	Making Gender/Race Subgroup Comparisons. Does It Work?
<i>FL&M's NELS variable:</i> "I often feel 'put down' by other students."	No: FL&M find modest evidence of peer-group opposition in schools with fewer than 25 percent white students. But if we re-estimate their models with alternative definitions based on even fewer whites (20, 10, or 5 percent) the evidence for peer-group opposition becomes increasingly <i>weaker</i> and is statistically nonsignificant in schools with less than or equal to 10 percent	Yes and no: Conditional evidence for peer-opposition is revealed in the black female/white female comparison. However, there is no statistically significant difference between black males and white males.

(Continued on next page)

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Dependent Variable	Searching for Peer Opposition among Blacks by:	
	Focusing on High-Minority ^a Schools. Does It Work?	Making Gender/Race Subgroup Comparisons. Does It Work?
	or 5 percent fewer white students. And in models where high-minority schools are defined by a 30 or 35 percent cutoff point, again, the evidence for peer-group opposition becomes <i>weaker</i> .	
<i>FL&M's NAEP variable:</i> "My friends make fun of people who try to do well in school."	No: For unstated reasons, FL&M did not include minority composition of the school in their analysis of NAEP. We re-estimated their models including high-minority schools and interactions with racial/ethnic groups. There is no significant difference between blacks' responses to this question in high-minority versus low-minority schools.	No: The race/gender interactions are not statistically significant.
<i>Our dependent variable:</i> "Do you think that other students see you as: (1) popular, (2) socially active, (3) part of the leading crowd?"	No: Our evidence that high-achieving blacks are especially popular relative to high-achieving whites is <i>stronger</i> in high-minority schools than in other schools.	No: The race patterns do not differ across gender.
<i>Our dependent variable:</i> "Among the friends you hang out with, how important is it to: (1) study, (2) get good grades, (3) finish high school, (4) continue their education beyond high school?"	No: Black students hang out with friends with more pro-school values than white students' friends, and this pattern is similar in high-minority and low-minority schools.	No: Gender/race subgroup analysis continues to suggest that blacks more often agree that educational goals are important to their friends, and this pattern is <i>even stronger</i> for the black/white female comparison.

Note: In addition, we also estimated FL&M's and our own models with and without indicators of extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, student government, cheerleading). The substantive patterns regarding peer opposition were largely unaffected by including these variables.

^a The racial composition of FL&M's "high-minority" school is not mostly black (27 percent black, 16 percent White, 40 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Asian, 4 percent Native American), suggesting that there is considerable uncertainty as to whether the black students in FL&M's "high-minority" schools are referring to same-race peers. Of course, if the goal is to improve the probability that students refer to same-race peers, FL&M should have used "percent black" rather than "high-minority." Ideally we would know the precise racial composition of students' peer groups, a limitation of both our tests and FL&M's.

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