

# BEYOND ACTING WHITE



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# Introduction: Framing the Field: Past and Future Research on the Historic Underachievement of Black Students

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Why are black students underperforming in school? Researchers continue to pursue this question with vigor not only because Blacks currently lag behind Whites on a wide variety of educational indices (e.g., test scores, grade point averages, high school graduation rates, college attrition, and completion), but because the closing of the black-white achievement gap has slowed and by some measures reversed during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Gutssmer, Flannagan, & Williamson 1998; Hedges & Nowell 1998; Nettles & Perna 1997a, 1997b). The persistent "gap" in educational outcomes between Blacks and Whites has substantial social implications. Black people's experience with poor school achievement and equally poor access to postsecondary education reduces their access to important social and economic rewards (e.g., all the familial and economic benefits of high wage jobs). However, the underperformance of a large number of black students stands in stark contrast to abundant evidence that black youth articulate high aspirations for their own educational and social mobility—aspirations that actually exceed those articulated by their white counterparts (Cheng & Starks 2002; Kao & Tienda 1998; Macleod 1995; Qian & Blair 1999). Why, then, do Blacks lag behind Whites in school?

Satisfactory explanations remain elusive, despite extensive research. Ironically, the lack of a definitive answer is in part because the conversation about black students' performance is commonly cast in terms of a "black-white" achievement gap. This framing implicitly situates Whites as the normative referent for interpreting how black students perform in school. Academic and public attention is thus directed toward what it may be about Blacks or blackness that produces underachievement. The contributions of other factors, such as the culture and structure of schools and society, and

the attitudes and perspectives of Whites (including schooling agents) go unexamined. Moreover, the social construction of a "black-white" achievement gap inadvertently homogenizes the experiences of both groups. As a result, white poor and working-class students' academic (under)performance is understudied, and both researchers and the public lose sight of the variation in school achievement among Blacks (e.g., the fact that some black students succeed in school and perform comparably to Whites goes unnoted).

Even with these embedded limitations, however, the notion of a black-white achievement gap can be productive. Focusing on "the gap" provides a reference for marking and subsequently exploring racial inequities. We can use these demarcations to advance policies and reforms aimed at producing equity, so long as we also challenge, complicate, and extend the oversimplified conceptualizations of those phenomena that are said to lie at the heart of the gap. Toward this end, this volume uses as a point of departure an especially popular explanation of the gap—the notion that black students disengage from academic learning and reject schooling because they believe it is a "white" thing. Although this theory, heretofore referred to as the "acting white hypothesis" originated in empirical research (Fordham & Ogbu 1986), over time it has taken on a life of its own. The findings and discussion presented in this volume aim to extend our thinking about and beyond the acting white hypothesis. Moreover, the chapters that follow provide starting points that academic and policy communities can use to foster conversations and stimulate investigations that will enrich our understanding of black people's ability to succeed within and progress through the educational pipeline.

We begin, in this chapter, with an overview and critique of research in the field to date and suggest new directions in which the research community might move. We document the general parameters of the black-white achievement gap and analyze existing explanations for this difference. We discuss why the acting-white hypothesis that grew out of Ogbu's cultural ecological theory (CET) has assumed center stage, and why CET and its attendant focus on the cultural opposition to acting white provide only limited insight into the underachievement of Blacks. We then outline productive avenues for new research that complicates and moves beyond the notion of acting white. Lastly, we give an overview of the organization of this volume, highlighting the significant themes addressed by each of the chapters.

## DOCUMENTING AND EXPLAINING "THE GAP"

### Empirical Evidence

The persistent gap in education between Blacks and Whites has been documented in several areas, most notably in standardized testing, high

school completion rates, secondary school achievement and track placement, and postsecondary school attendance and completion. A detailed discussion of the nature and extent of the achievement gap exists elsewhere (e.g., Hallman 2001, Jencks & Phillips 1998a); here, we outline some of the central parameters.

Historically, Blacks have underperformed on standardized tests relative to their white peers (Jencks & Phillips 1998b). However, discussion of an "achievement gap" did not enter public discourse until the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, when measurable strides were made in giving black students more adequate educational opportunities. In fact, the gap in standardized test performance between Blacks and Whites narrowed substantially during the first decades after the Brown decision (between 1965 and 1992) (Cook & Evans 2000, Hedges & Nowell 1998). Researchers attributed this narrowing to the rapid closing of group differences at the bottom of the distribution of test scores (Hedges & Nowell 1998). Blacks continued to be underrepresented in the upper tails of the distribution of achievement test performance.

In the post-*Brown* years, Blacks also made substantial progress in high school completion rates. High school graduation rates for all racial and ethnic groups have increased steadily since the 1960s. In 2000, Asians and Whites had the highest rates (around 85 percent) (NCES 2001); Blacks, with graduation rates close to 79 percent, seemed to be approaching parity (NCES 2001). This progress was not echoed in college attendance or completion rates, however. By the mid-1980s, Blacks were enrolling in college at a lower rate than they had been in the mid-1970s, and their rate of college completion had slowed (Marks 1985; Nettles & Perna 1997a; NCES 2001). Relative to Whites, Blacks were only 65 percent as likely to have attained a Bachelor's degree and only 58 percent as likely to have achieved an advanced degree (NCES 2001). Further, the overall rise in educational attainment that had been documented since the 1960s largely reflected gains being made by black women and not black men. Researchers have attributed these (now-slowed) gains to the higher rates at which black women—and not black men—were attending and completing college (Nettles & Perna 1997a). In addition to these important gender dynamics, there are social class dynamics to the achievement "gap." It is not only working-class and poor black students who are underperforming. Some local measures show Whites of lower socioeconomic status (SES) outperforming Blacks of higher SES (e.g., Ann Arbor Public Schools 1998; Rioux 1997). Consistent with this finding, the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites widens as one moves up the social-class hierarchy (The College Board 1999).

Blacks also continue to be overrepresented in lower ability and special education classrooms, while they are underrepresented in higher-ability classrooms and gifted classrooms (Hallman 2001; Kovach & Gordon 1997;

National Academy of Sciences 2002; Oakes 1985). They are three times as likely as white students to be labeled as retarded or behaviorally disturbed (Akorn 2001; National Academy of Sciences 2002; Skiba 2001), and they are disproportionately represented among the discipline, suspension, and expulsion rolls of America's schools (Ferguson 2000; Noguera 2003).

Clearly, despite a narrowing in some areas, the achievement gap has remained a persistent problem, and one that has affected many points along the educational pipeline. The resulting constrained opportunity for black students takes on special meaning in our current postindustrial economy, where academic credentials are a requirement for entry into living-wage occupations (Bowen & Bok 1998). We cannot effectively address either the gap in educational outcomes or its many ripple effects until we first understand its root causes.

#### Theoretical Explanations

Researchers have advanced numerous theories to account for the continued underperformance of black students relative to their white peers. They have linked the gap to levels of innate intelligence, cultural deficiencies or differences, cultural and social reproduction, and capital investment and distribution. The roles of within-school (e.g., tracking and ability grouping) and across-school inequities (inequitable resource distribution) also have been examined repeatedly (Cook & Evans 2000; Hallinan 2001; Oakes 1995). Despite their number and variety, these efforts have had significantly less impact than Ogbu's cultural ecological theory. Over the last twenty years, CET has assumed a prominent place in both academic and popular discourse regarding the underachievement of black students.

Despite CET's prominence, the model is rarely taken up in its entirety. This is due in part to its complexity and comprehensiveness (discussed in detail below). Methodological, funding, and time constraints have prevented researchers from designing and implementing empirical studies that account simultaneously for each facet of the model. Instead, researchers have selected particular aspects of CET for further exploration. Of special concern has been how an oppositional cultural frame of reference, an accordant oppositional identity, and the presumed "fear of acting white" are implicated (or not) in the poor school performance of black youth.<sup>1</sup> In fact, this last aspect of the theory has been popular outside as well as inside academia. Articles in major newspapers, news magazines, and journals regularly attribute Blacks' underachievement to black students defining their identities in opposition to Whites and to their fear of (being accused of) acting white if they do well in school.

In the following section, we outline CET's several interrelated tenets and discuss how and why the notion of an oppositional identity and the acting-

white hypothesis seem to have gripped the imagination of academics and the general public. We also situate the emergence of CET in its disciplinary, historical, and political contexts.

#### CULTURAL ECOLOGICAL THEORY IN CONTEXT

According to CET, Blacks in the United States interpret their oppression as systematic and enduring due to the historical and contemporary experiences with institutionalized discrimination (e.g., slavery, job discrimination, structural disadvantages, and racial discrimination in schools) they have experienced. Consequently, they generate theories of "making it" that contradict dominant notions of status attainment and produce disillusionment about the instrumental value of school. They also develop substantial distrust of school and of its agents. Both their disillusionment and distrust suppress their commitment to school norms. Additionally, according to the theory, Blacks identify schooling as a white domain that requires Blacks to "think" and "act" white in exchange for academic success. Not wanting to compromise their own racial identity or risk losing their affiliation with the black community, black youths limit their efforts in school because they find it difficult to withstand the psychological strains involved in crossing cultural borders. This last element of Ogbu's cultural ecological theory raised the specter of a potential conflict between "being" (i.e., "acting" and "thinking") black and doing well in school. The 1986 article Ogbu coauthored with Signithia Fordham subsequently imprinted the acting-white hypothesis on the imagination of the American public. That article also explicitly proposed the idea that black students continue to underperform in school as a result of their cultural opposition to acting white.

CET and the accompanying acting-white hypothesis have important historical antecedents. The history of research dedicated to understanding racial differences is long and varied. Much of this research has been conducted in an effort to understand social mobility in the United States and can be linked to the dominant narrative of status attainment which "promises" that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it—material or otherwise—through their own efforts" (Hochschild 1995, p. xvii; for additional discussions, see Hallinan 2001; McQuillan 1998). This American "dream" forwards the myth of a meritocracy and provides a powerful backdrop for educational research and discourse in this country—particularly with regard to interpreting educational opportunity.

Education is the most-often cited way in which Americans can pursue economic success and social mobility. Educational opportunity is, according to the dominant narrative of status attainment, a taken-for-granted right that can be pursued by all with equal vigor. Some groups' inability to "pull

initial examination of how historical experiences with and perceptions of a limited opportunity structure (or "job ceiling") informed the poor performance of black and Mexican American youths relative to Whites (Ogbu 1974, 1978). In these early publications, Ogbu also began to draw distinctions between immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities (initially referred to as caste-like minorities); these differences, in turn, provided the basis for his account of why some minority groups experience more success in school than do others.

Ogbu defined immigrant minorities as nonwhite people who came to the United States voluntarily; this category includes immigrants, refugees, binationals, and migrant workers (Ogbu 2003).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, involuntary minorities are nonwhite people who are in the United States because they were initially colonized, conquered, or enslaved by white Americans (Ogbu 2003). Oensibly in this country against their will, these minorities include "Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, black Americans, Puerto Ricans, original Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and Native Hawaiians (Ogbu 2003, pp. 50-51). Over the next two decades, as he made adjustments to CET, Ogbu continued to elaborate on and refine the formative distinctions between these two types of minorities. He traced the more successful academic experiences of immigrant minorities compared to involuntary minorities to two sources: differences in the incorporation, subordination, and exploitation of the two types of minorities; and differences in the nature of these minorities' responses to their history and treatment (Ogbu 1987, 2003).

According to Ogbu, immigrant minorities, having been incorporated into the United States voluntarily and in the pursuit of greater educational, social, economic, or political opportunity, use compatriots in their "homeland" as their frame of reference. This reference enables them to develop a favorable disposition toward the American opportunity structure and to acquiesce to discrimination. When they encounter differential rewards and opportunities, they focus on being better off than those who remain in their country of birth. Immigrant minorities can rationalize the discrimination they experience in light of being "guests in a foreign land," who have no choice but to tolerate such treatment. Additionally, they know they have the option of returning "home" if things become intolerable in the United States. When voluntary minorities encounter social obstacles (including the cultural barriers and differences they face in schools), they perceive them as merely temporary—they are "barriers to be overcome" in their pursuit of the American dream. Consequently, they do not interpret learning school norms "as threatening to their own culture, language, and identity" (Ogbu 1987, p. 328). In sum, voluntary minorities' frame of reference makes it possible for them to craft folk theories of "making it" that are consistent with the dominant narrative of status attainment. In turn, they develop a pragmatic trust of white people and the institutions they control and willingly adapt to the norms and expecta-

tions of American schools. All of these factors are said to contribute to their more competitive performance in school.

In contrast, involuntary minorities situate Whites as their frame of reference and "often conclude that they are far worse off than they ought to be because of white treatment" (Ogbu 1987, p. 331). Furthermore, "they know from generations of experiences that the barriers facing them in the opportunity structure are not temporary" but systemic and enduring (Ogbu 1987, p. 325). They are aware not only of how historical and contemporary expressions of subjugation and exploitation limit their access to social and economic rewards upon their completion of school, but also of how schools' structural inequities (e.g., "biased testing, misclassification, tracking, biased textbooks, biased counseling") already circumscribe their potential to be viable competitors in the contest for social rewards (Ogbu 1990a, p. 127).

It is involuntary minorities' knowledge of and experience with structural barriers to upward mobility that cause them to question the instrumental value of school and to develop a deep distrust of whites and the institutions they control (notably, schools). Consequently, they come to privilege their collective identity and favor collective struggle in the effort to cope with their oppression (Ogbu 1989). Collective identity buffers involuntary minorities psychologically and enables them to "maintain their sense of self worth and integrity" despite their subjugation (Ogbu 1990a, p. 62). Their engagement with collective struggle provides an instrumental means for reducing or eliminating barriers to mobility (Ogbu 1983, 1990a). Although involuntary minorities' collective orientation may help them maintain their mental health, it also produces maladaptive educational consequences. Unlike immigrant minorities, involuntary minorities perceive the cultural differences they encounter in school as "markers of identity to be maintained" not "barriers to be overcome" and develop an oppositional stance and identity vis-à-vis white Americans and what they see as indices of white culture. (Ogbu 1987, p. 327). They consequently "equate following the standard practices and related activities of the school that enhance academic success with 'acting white'" (Ogbu 1987, p. 330). With little evidence that they will be appropriately rewarded for their efforts in school and the accordant notion that schooling is the province of white Americans and threatens their own cultural identity, involuntary minorities have little reason to work hard in school and consequently experience poor or underachievement.

CET was a welcome advance over other theories on offer in education. In contrast to genetic models of academic underperformance (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray 1994; Jensen 1969), CET seemed to explain why the relationship between ability (however imperfectly measured by standardized test scores) and academic achievement was weak in the case of black Americans (Ogbu 1989). Unlike models of cultural deprivation (Bloom, Davis, & Hess 1965;

Deusch 1967; Gottlieb & Ramsey 1967) and cultural difference (Hale 1982; Kochman 1981; Shade 1982; Tharp 1989), it seemed to explain why some minority groups (read immigrant minority groups) did better in school than Blacks even when their culture was "more different from the dominant group in culture and language" (Ogbu 1989). Unlike social and cultural reproduction theories (e.g., Bernstein 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Willis 1977), Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Willis 1977) that emphasized how social class positioning was implicated in the achievement process, CET seemed to explain why middle-class Blacks sometimes fared less well in school than lower-income whites (Jencks & Phillips 1998b; Steele 1992, 1997).

CET's prominence advanced dramatically when Fordham and Ogbu used the theory's logic to explain why black students at a high school in Washington, DC, distanced themselves from what they perceived to be white modalities of success in school. Echoing McCordle and Young (1970), who found that black students in Madison, Wisconsin, feared the loss of their collective black identity during the period of desegregation, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) reported in an *Urban Review* article that the students in the study (which had been conducted by Fordham) felt that they would compromise their racial identity if they sought academic success.<sup>3</sup> These same findings became the subject of public discourse given the popular press coverage of the phenomena in print media.

Since the publication of the 1986 *Urban Review* article, as many as 158 popular press articles (including editorials) have made reference to the acting-white hypothesis.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, since the first popular press mention of the premise in 1987, the number of print media references to acting white has grown aggressively. In the five-year span from 1987 (when the first such article was published) to 1991, twenty-five articles made reference to the phenomenon; during the next five years (1992–1996), forty-two articles did so; and in the next five-year span (1997–2001), forty-five articles. In 2002 alone, partly in anticipation of the publication of a major new work by Ogbu (2003), twenty-two articles referred to the acting-white hypothesis. Between January 2002 and April 2004, partly in response to Ogbu's death in August 2003, but also in response to the Supreme Court decision to uphold the right of universities to consider race in admissions procedures, the number jumped to forty-two articles. Coverage has not been limited to local and national outlets (e.g., *Omaha World Herald*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*), but has included international media such as the *London Times*, *Toronto Star*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, and (Montreal) *Gazette*.

This popular press interest in the acting-white hypothesis, while useful in focusing national attention on the achievement gap, has distorted some key features of CET and has obscured some critical factors that contribute to the gap. Arguably, the overall effect of this media coverage has been to

divert attention from the enduring structural constraints that shape black people's ability to succeed in school and in society more broadly and to focus national concern instead on alleged "problems" within black students, families, and communities. Below, we offer a brief review of the efforts of the popular press to make sense of the gap, as well as a more detailed analysis of its effects.

#### TREATMENT IN THE POPULAR PRESS

During the first year of popular coverage, most references to the fear of acting white or being accused of acting white in relation to black school performance were closely aligned with how Fordham's and/or Ogbu had rooted this phenomenon (Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1987). In accordance with their conceptualizations, the articles conveyed that this fear developed in response to black people's historical and contemporary experience with racial oppression and with U.S. society's differential reward and opportunity structure. For example, citing an interview with Fordham, one publication explained, "While this response—fear of acting white—is clearly visible in the students' behavior at school, its development and persistence are attributable to the oppressive conditions confronting Black people in America" (C. Stafford 1987). Another noted, "Fordham's study traces the anti-studying peer pressure to the inferior schools and low-level jobs that many Blacks have faced over several generations" (Fisher 1987).

As early as 1988, however, the notion of "the fear of acting white" began to take on a life of its own in the popular press. In general, the hypothesis was stripped of any reference to the structural antecedents Fordham and/or Ogbu had invoked. Additionally, prior to 2002 and the anticipated release of another major work by Ogbu, few articles specifically attributed the theory to either Fordham or Ogbu. In fact, most references to the relationship between the fear of acting white and black underachievement presented the phenomenon not as an academic hypothesis but rather as a foregone conclusion, a taken-for-granted reality. Before 2002, only seven articles challenged the validity of the hypothesis, refuted its impact, or tried to convey the point that—as Diane Ravitch cautioned—"way too much has been made of the purported unwillingness of black students to study for fear of 'acting white'" (as cited by Charen 1997).

The subject of the fear of the acting-white phenomenon has been taken up by a wide cast of characters: teachers incorporate it into articles and editorials about their experiences in predominantly white and predominantly black high schools; parents mention it in letters they write to newspaper editors about their own experiences, or those of their children, or their friends' children; columnists refer to it when reporting on special programs that were

designed to combat its occurrence (e.g., Carl Rowan, advocating for his Project Excellence in Washington, DC) (Rowan 1988). Even the leadership of the NAACP and the National Urban League has commented on the belief that black students have a fear of acting white. For example, in his keynote address before about 3,000 people at the 87th National Conference of the National Urban League, then-president Hugh Price urged that efforts to improve educational opportunities for black youth should begin "by putting a stop to the anti-achievement peer culture in our own community. . . . The world among all too many of our youngsters on the street . . . is that doing well academically means acting white. Our children must understand that 'dissing' education is tantamount to signing a death warrant for their dreams" (Moorar 1997). Even members of the entertainment industry have found reason to invoke the acting-white hypothesis. After the release of *Malcolm X*, an interviewer asked film director Spike Lee, "Why is the life of Malcolm, Spike Lee's Malcolm, needed right now?" Lee responded:

It's needed for the same reason that Malcolm was needed when he was alive, and even more so today. One of the things that Malcolm stressed was education. Well, we're just not doing it. It's such a sad situation now, where male black kids will fail so they can be "down" with everyone else, and if you get A's and speak correct English, you're regarded as being "white." Peer pressure has turned around our whole value system. [*New York Times* 1992, p. 13]

Book reviews and other references to D'Nish D'Souza's (1995) *End of Racism*, John McWhorter's (2000) *Losing the Race*, and Debra J. Dickerson's (2004) *The End of Blackness* also have provided occasions for rearticulating and reinvigorating the acting white hypothesis (Brown 1995, p. 4; Brown 2000, p. 4; Stern 1995, C6; Sewell 2004). Both D'Souza and McWhorter have, in addition, contributed op-ed pieces and/or have spoken out in other venues, invoking the phenomenon in their arguments against affirmative action and other policy interventions aimed at restructuring educational and social opportunities for minorities (Gaines 1996, p. 35; McWhorter 2002, B4). Columnists and academics—sometimes, as in the case of Thomas Sowell and William Raspberry, one and the same—have referenced the theory to substantiate their charge that black people should assume personal responsibility for their failures and stop assuming the role of the victim (e.g., Raspberry 1989, A19; Sowell 1997a, 3G; Sowell 1997b, p. 25). Henry Louis Gates, in a 2002 article in the *London Guardian*, associated the fear of acting white with one of the many ways Blacks themselves have "reformed the manacles" of the slave era" (Jaggi 2002, p. 20).

Over time, the acting-white hypothesis increasingly has been invoked to suggest that black culture rather than racism or other structured inequities (e.g., low teacher expectations, poor curriculum, inadequate school funding) is responsible for (or, at the very least, more responsible for) the low

achievement of black youth. Before 1995, three of the fifty-one (approximately 6 percent) articles that referenced the acting white hypothesis conveyed this perspective. Spurred by the publication of D'Souza's (1995) *End of Racism*, three such articles (representing about 33 percent of the articles referencing the fear of acting white) were published in 1995 alone. Between 1995 and April 2004, twenty-four of 107 articles (a little over 22 percent) called for black responsibility in light of the acting-white hypothesis.

In anticipation of the release of what became Ogbu's (2003) last work, a study examining the underachievement of middle-class Blacks in Shaker Heights, Ohio, the popular press refocused some attention on Ogbu's conceptualization of the structural causes that gave birth to the fear of acting white. For example, an article in the *Plain Dealer* (Santana 2003b, A1) directed readers "to the legacy of slavery, racism and deprivation that combined to feed hostility toward the white majority." A *New York Times* article (Lee 2002, p. 9) indicated that a "long history of discrimination helped foster what is known in sociological lingo as an oppositional peer culture." These same articles also drew attention to other presumed cultural adaptations that could be attributed to Ogbu's cultural ecological theory (CET) itself is not mentioned, however). The articles indicated that the fear of acting-white phenomenon was one among other cultural orientations (e.g., black students identifying rappers rather than parents as role models; black parents failing to supervise their children's homework completion and track their progress through school) that reflected "a long history of adapting to oppression and stymied opportunities" (Lee 2002, p. 9).

Other articles echoed (albeit imprecisely) Ogbu's 2003 heightened emphasis on community forces (or the way members of a minority group perceive, interpret, and respond to education as a result of their unique history and adaptations to their minority status in the United States). In his book, Ogbu (2003) argues that these "community forces" do not offer a complete explanation for the differences in school performance among minorities. He notes in his preface that "there is no presumption that community forces are the only cause of, or play the most important role in the academic gap [between Blacks and whites]" (Ogbu 2003, p. viii). He adds, however, that "community forces can and should be studied in their own right, just as societal and school factors are studied in their own right" (Ogbu 2003, p. viii). Nevertheless, articles in the popular press, such as one written by William Raspberry, concluded that "Ogbu sees culture as the *overriding determinant* [of the black-white achievement gap in Shaker Heights] (though he would acknowledge the effect of racism)" (Raspberry 2002, A23; emphasis added).

Most other references to the acting-white hypothesis were disconnected from CET and Ogbu's last work. Still, they concluded, as Raspberry did, that black culture was a powerful—if not the most powerful—factor explaining the achievement performance of Blacks, relative to other variables.<sup>5</sup> Importantly,

many of the articles that marginalized or were inattentive to structural factors and made passing or decontextualized references to the acting-white hypothesis were written in response to the Supreme Court decision to uphold affirmative action in university admissions. In these instances, most references to the acting-white hypothesis were offered in the effort to report on the perspectives of those who criticized the Court's decision (Young 2003, A13; Healy 2003, A1; Brown 2003b, 6; Richey 2003, p. 1). One such article quoted one member of the Center for Equal Opportunity who claimed:

The question underlying the University of Michigan cases is why are so few African-American 17 and 18 year olds academically competitive with white and Asian 17 and 18 year olds. . . . The answer to that question is not discrimination. . . . The answer is extremely high illegitimacy rates, poor public school, and a culture that too often views studying hard as "acting white." [Richey 2003, p. 1]

As early as 2002, Fordham was reported as "fear[ing] that the acting-white idea had been distorted into blaming the victim" (Lee 2002, p. 9).

The cumulative result of the print media's simplification of the acting-white hypothesis and its near-total silence regarding the structural factors CET identifies is that the public has become firmly focused on the culture of black Americans as the source of the achievement gap. This, in turn, makes it easier for conservative activists to orient public sentiment toward policies and practices that would further circumscribe the already inadequate gains that have been made since the civil rights movement. CET and the acting-white hypothesis are vulnerable to more than political exploitation, however. These conceptualizations also are flawed by inherent theoretical and conceptual weaknesses, problems we outline below and that the contributors to this volume take up, as well.

#### THE NEED FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

A growing body of literature highlights problematic aspects of Fordham's and Ogbu's work. These limitations rest with how CET in general and the acting-white hypothesis in particular fail to contend substantively with (1) the theoretical unpacking of race as a social phenomenon; (2) the heterogeneity of the African American experience; and (3) the specifics of social context (particularly how these specifics are articulated by the culture and organization of individual schools and communities).

#### Unpacking Race Theoretically

Research on the educational achievement, outcomes, and experiences of black youth must necessarily attend to race,<sup>6</sup> But undertheorized, oversim-

plified, or inaccurate conceptualizations of race work against robust interpretations of how race impacts the educational realities of black students. Consequently, in conducting educational research we must pursue more accurate and precise ways of capturing race as a social phenomenon.

The imprecise specification of race in survey research aimed at documenting and explaining "the gap" derives from the desire to uncover significant statistical relationships. But treating race as a variable makes it almost impossible to unpack its phenomenological, operational, and performative dynamics. Like other qualitative research that examines the relationship between black identity and achievement, both Fordham's and Ogbu's ethnographic work (including the work they discuss in their coauthored "Coping with the Burden of Acting White" article) takes up race in these more complex ways. At the same time, however, their work often suffers from what Walker Bann Michaels (1992) has referred to as the "anticipation of culture by race" (p. 677). Michaels argues that such anticipation occurs when we presume that to be a member of a particular race, you have to do certain things, but these certain things are not considered authentic to the race in question unless the person doing them is recognized as a member of that race. He stated the case in terms of members of the Navajo nation, but the logic of the argument applies to other races and ethnicities as well. In his words, the anticipation of culture by race occurs when "To be Navajo you have to do Navajo things, but you can't really count as doing Navajo things unless you already are Navajo" (Michaels 1992, p. 677).

When we anticipate culture by race, we not only rely race as a stable, objective, and measurable category, but also link it deterministically to culture. When race is operationalized in this way, we lose sight of black heterogeneity, including the diverse ways by which individuals make sense of what it means to be black. We underconceptualize how "blackness" intersects with class, gender, and ethnic identities. Further, we limit our analyses to how "blackness" is reflected in the meanings students bring with them to school and other institutions and simultaneously silence the meanings that are imposed on black students by institutional structures (including schools) and their agents. And the near-unilateral focus on making sense of "blackness" in this literature also stops short of examining how the social construction of "whiteness" is simultaneously implicated in the achievement performance of black students.

The anticipation of culture by race also prevents us from considering whether the behaviors and attitudes that are documented among Blacks are indeed "black" attitudes and behaviors, or whether, instead, these attitudes and behaviors are hallmarks of another social category of which black (as well as white and other) youths are a part (e.g., adolescence) (Cook & Ludwig 1998). If we are to address these limitations as they are articulated in the empirical research that undergirds the acting-white hypothesis, we must



improve the theoretical precision with which we document and conceptualize race. In so doing, we need also to more closely examine the ways in which black heterogeneity, class, and gender intersect and more carefully evaluate the impact of institutionalized constructions of race (including but not limited to whiteness) that are articulated via inequities and struggles that occur in schools and other institutions.

### EXPLORING THE HETEROGENEITY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Critics of CET and the acting-white hypothesis regularly point out that Blacks are not simply raced. They are also positioned by gender and social class. Additionally, black families not only vary in structure, norms, expectations, and value orientations (Allen & James 1998), but also in terms of how they racially socialize their children (Spencer 1983, 1990; Stevenson 1994; Swanson, Spencer, & Peterson 1998). Black youths' peer groups, moreover, are differentially constituted and exhibit different norms and beliefs. Finally, the experience of being black shifts across historical time as a consequence of how opportunities and constraints are differentially reflected from one era to another.

In light of known heterogeneity in the black experience, we have already developed evidence that gender (Carter 1999; Fordham 1996a, 1996b; Kao & Tienda 1998); social class (Hochschild 1995; Foley 1991); peer group norms (Cook & Ludwig 1998; Ferguson 1998; Hennings 1996; Horvat & Lewis 2003); family history, resources and interactions (Clark 1983; MacLeod 1995; Mitchellson 1990; O'Connor 1999); and historical time (MacLeod 1995; O'Connor 2002) all moderate the meaning and expression of racial identity. And despite the preoccupation with how black students perform relative to their white peers, we also already have evidence of substantive variation in how Blacks perform in school (e.g., Altaway & Bry 2004; Bryk, Lee, & Holland 1993; Gross & Slater 2000; Dachter-Louy 1989; Gritsmer, Flanagan, & Williamson 1998; Nettles & Perna 1997a, 1997b; Wang & Gordon 1994). The evident variation in the black experience and in black achievement performance, therefore, compels us to establish more precise empirical and conceptual connections between these two indices of variability.

The acting-white hypothesis, as it was first introduced in 1986 and further elaborated in Fordham's solo publications (Fordham 1988, 1996a, 1996b), recognized high achievement on the part of some black students. Additionally, Ogbu (e.g., 1981, 1989) acknowledged variability in the achievement performance of black Americans, despite his evident focus on a comparative examination of Blacks as a whole vis-à-vis other minority groups and Whites. Both Fordham and Ogbu, however, treat these expressions of high achieve-

ment as exceptions, and marginalize the significance of substantive within-group variations in black achievement that are not simply the province of individual distinction. Social class not only differentiates the performance of Blacks, but at least one measure of social class—namely wealth—indicates the gap between Blacks and Whites; on some educational measures (Conley 1999). Additionally, black women academically outperform black men at dramatic rates. These considerable distinctions in black achievement cannot be reduced to individual variation. They require greater empirical and theoretical attention.

### EXPLORING THE CULTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

In homogenizing African American experiences, the acting-white hypothesis also overlooks the possibility that the specifics of any given context might moderate the meaning and performance of racial identity, thus disrupting its relationship to academic achievement in ways unaccounted for by the model. Unfortunately, the failure to attend to how the contexts and demands of particular environments affect the development and adjustment of minority youth is not uncommon. As Spencer, Swanson, and Cunningham (1991) point out, with few exceptions (e.g., Bell-Scott & Taylor 1989; Holliday 1985; Taylor 1976), "studies that explore contextual effects are seldom conducted on minority youth" (p. 368). Similarly, both Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) and Cook and Ludwig (1998) emphasize the importance of context. They urge attending to the specific complexities of daily school experiences in different school settings in order to gain a more complete understanding of black students' persistent lack of achievement.

In accordance with this charge, we must further explore how the culture and organization of local schools rely race and impose specific meanings of blackness. Race is more than a product of how African Americans make sense of themselves as racial subjects and then enact this sense-making in relation to school. It is also a consequence of how schools and their agents racialize black subjects. For example, Ann Ferguson (2000) found that both black and white boys are apt to perform their masculinity (or their position as males) by transgressing school rules. She stresses that black boys more often find themselves "in trouble" because of how their performances are interpreted, rather than what actions they perform. More specifically, Ferguson found that when white boys transgress, school officials presume that "boys will be boys," attribute "innocence to their wrong doing," and believe that "they must be socialized to fully understand the meaning of their acts" (p. 80). In contrast, when black boys transgress, their acts are "adultified." That is, "their transgressions are made to take on a sinister,

intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of naivete" (p. 83). Having framed the young black transgressors as "not children," the interpreters (most of whom are white and constitute authority, and therefore power, in the school setting) are necessarily directed toward treatment "that punishes through example and exclusion rather than through persuasion and edification, as is practiced with the young white males in the school" (p. 90). Too often we have treated race and even racial subjectivities as something that students bring with them to school rather than understanding them as coproduced in relation to educational practices and processes.

Schools are not, however, the only institutions that racialize black bodies and frame black actions. The culture and organization of communities (physical and affective) and neighborhoods also can operate in ways that reify race and make sense of and shape blackness in ways that inform black achievement. Thus, the study of the institutionalization of blackness both within and outside of schools is warranted.

### BOOK OVERVIEW

The chapters that follow address the limitations outlined above. Taken in total, the chapters not only explore the heterogeneity in black identity, experience, and response but how the demographics and organization of schools, public discourses, racialization processes, and material conditions impact how black people experience school. We have divided this volume into three sections that highlight the different ways in which these issues can be taken up in relation to making better sense of the black-white achievement gap. Further, these chapters signal promising avenues for future research. Below, we provide a detailed overview of the chapters and the contributions that they make to our understanding of where future research efforts aimed at understanding and ameliorating the gap ought to be directed.

#### The Organization of Schools and Student Agency

The chapters that we have selected to begin this volume amplify the importance of examining the intersection of school structures, race, and individual processes. Given the research presented here, it is clear that efforts aimed at ameliorating the gap need to be directed at what happens inside schools and classrooms. While social class differences among families, parenting practices, and a host of other factors certainly impact students' ability to engage in school, educators have little control over what happens inside students' homes. Moreover, as the chapters below argue, school structures are deeply implicated in maintaining racial inequality in access to opportunity in schools. Both Mickelson and Velasco and Tyson make strong cases for

the need in the research community to systematically examine the ways in which our school structures reinforce and reify existing racial disparities in achievement. Highlighting the relevance of tracking and ability grouping, both chapters argue that early and persistent notions among students about who is smart and who is not are implied and reinforced by the historical and present-day structures of schools, including the hierarchical organization of instruction and ability grouping. These chapters are especially important because they both connect these structural arguments with the lived experiences and responses of students in schools and their interpretations of their own and their peers' ability and life chances. These authors make apparent how structure and agency work in concert in schools to perpetuate the black-white achievement gap.

In their chapter, Mickelson and Velasco focus on black high achievers in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, school district. Unlike much other research that has examined the gap and the notion of acting white, Mickelson and Velasco acknowledge both the structural factors impacting black students' lives and illustrate how these structural factors (primarily tracking) influences their lived experiences, the choices they make about classes, the ways that they are viewed by peers, and how they respond to these peer assessments of them.

We would like to highlight two critical contributions made by Mickelson and Velasco in their examination of these students' experiences as high achievers and our often failed or incomplete efforts to understand the lived meaning of the notion of acting white. By examining the intersection of race, school structure, and individual difference, these authors endeavor to move the debate away from a dichotomous conversation about either the presence or absence of acting white in schools. They complicate our understanding of how and when the acting-white label is used and what it signifies for students. Their work highlights the complexity of not only the participants' lives within schools but also the complexity of the ways in which race and achievement are institutionalized in these sites. Their work hints at the heterogeneity of the black experience, taken up in more detail later in the book, and draws attention to the significant and enduring role of school and classroom structure in perpetuating the achievement gap.

Tyson also takes up the issue of tracking/ability grouping, and her findings are consistent with those of Mickelson and Velasco in her emphasis on the role of school structures in perpetuating the achievement gap and reifying raced notions of ability in school settings. However, Tyson layers on top of this structural analysis of school settings a much-needed focus on life stage development. Tyson's body of work presented here makes clear the need for researchers to examine the achievement gap in light of the developmental stages students move through. Her findings indicate that younger black students have a very strong desire to excel academically and that the

notion of oppositional culture or the importance of what it means to act white does not emerge until adolescence. Yet, by the time they reach adolescence, students have certainly begun to have been sorted and labeled as "smart" or not.

It is clear that a promising avenue for future research on the gap ought to be aimed at identifying the processes that explain these developmental and academic shifts. More work on student's early school careers is also warranted. Such work must examine how individual differences are interpreted in school settings. Additionally, this work must explore how race (that of the students as well as that of the educators) influences educators' interpretations of ability as well as their proclivity and capacity to maximize the learning opportunities of all students, especially students of color who are underrepresented in the upper echelons of our tracking system.

#### The Heterogeneity of Black Identity, Experience, and Response

The authors contributing to this section of the book take up more directly the ways in which students' lived experiences are far more complex and differentiated than other explanations for black underachievement would suggest. All three contributors to this section highlight the variation found in black students' experiences and how students actively create their identities and respond to the structures of school and society. These three chapters also draw attention to the value of examining the achievement gap from an ethnographic perspective, allowing researchers to gain insight into the complexity and multifaceted nature of students' lives. These authors reveal the ways in which race, class, gender, and ethnicity interact to shape how students are situated within and react to school. By extension, the research presented here draws attention to the fact that solutions aimed at narrowing the achievement gap must take into account the multidimensional nature of students' social realities.

The chapter by Annette Hennings provides an anthropological perspective on black student achievement and the ways in which individual and publicly available discourses regarding the identity and potential of black people (or blackness) are played out in school settings and interplay with black achievement. Focusing on the micro-level cultural realities of two students' lived experiences as they come of age in specific high school communities, this chapter sheds light on how students' narratives and dispositions toward achievement change over time as they progress through high school and move into adulthood. This chapter reminds us of the important role of individual agency and how social structures frame but do not wholly determine how students articulate their identities and navigate their social world. It also reveals how students differentially make sense of and respond to publicly available discourses on blackness in the process of doing their

own identity work. This work highlights the dynamic nature of identity formation and development for young people and illustrates the ways in which students will articulate different identities as they struggle to find the formula and representations that suit their lived realities.

Prudence Carter's examination of the influence of gender on academic achievement among black and Latino youth further takes up this theme of identity construction and the complexity of factors that impact the ways that students engage with school. Exploring the nexus of race/ethnicity and gender, Carter's work brings into focus the ways in which racialized gender construction affect students' orientations toward schooling norms and expectations. More specifically, she shows how black and Latino youths' constructions of femininity and masculinity are aligned or not with conceptions of what it means to act white; and how these constructions subsequently impact the inclination with which males versus females are more likely to embrace those styles, codes, and behaviors that increase the probability for academic success. This research not only highlights the extent to which gender has been woefully understudied in relation to black achievement performance. Moreover, it demonstrates that research efforts aimed at understanding the variation with which Blacks perform in school must be theoretically and empirically attentive to how the intersections of "particular" identities are framed and articulated in relation to schooling.

This theme of broadening our conceptual lenses such that the race of students is not treated in isolation of other social positions is also taken up in the next chapter by Sherri-Ann Butterfield. Butterfield's work examines how ethnic identity is implicated in black students' dispositions toward and activity in school and further complicates our understanding of how intersecting identities affect students' educational orientations. Her analysis centers on black West Indians who do not fit neatly into the logic of Ogbu's cultural ecological theory. Focused on second-generation immigrants, Butterfield finds that her research participants report that their parents imagine the American opportunity structure in ways that are consistent with how CFT captures the orientations of voluntary minorities. Yet these same young people also report being confronted with the racial challenges common to involuntary minorities. In their effort to make sense of and negotiate the narratives of opportunity that are transmitted in their households and their own experience with racial discrimination, which they read as systemic and enduring, they engage in school in ways that would not be predicted by Ogbu's model. Importantly, the nature of their engagement is not only framed by their distinct experiences as second (as opposed to first generation immigrants) but by the demographics of the schools they attended. Butterfield's work conveys that researchers need to be quite careful and deliberate in conceptualizing immigrant status and how this status is uniquely articulated and experienced in specific settings to impact achievement orientations and performance. Taken

together, these three chapters provide evidence that future research and the theoretical models and adaptations that emerge from the research need to take into account the ways in which the multiple identities of students intersect with social space to influence experiences in and outcomes from schooling.

### The Structuring of Race and Material Inequities

The final section of the volume reinvigorates our attention to the structural realities that frame the achievement gap. In the final two chapters, the authors take up the question of how the structural conditions of American society influence the complex ways that students experience school.

Ainsworth and Wiggan force us to pull back our lens again to a wide-angle vision that focuses on the structural impediments to equal opportunities for achievement in schooling between Blacks and Whites. While not discounting the individual level decisions made by families and students that affect their ability to achieve in school, the work of these authors points to the important role of "material conditions" in shaping opportunities to achieve and enact social mobility through educational institutions. While in this chapter they present a detailed analysis of research that points to the importance of neighborhood context in shaping opportunities for achievement, these authors call for research that focuses on the ways in which the structural conditions of our society—such as housing discrimination, racial inequality in schools, and uneven opportunities for employment based on social location—influence efforts to close the achievement gap. In their examination of neighborhoods, Ainsworth and Wiggan direct us to a multidimensional approach that would reveal how neighborhood context influences individual outcomes.

We conclude the substantive chapters of the volume with a piece by Amanda Lewis. In the work presented here, Lewis argues that research efforts need to be focused on the ways in which the racialized structural realities of school and society must be taken into account before we can look to individual attitudes and behaviors as a way to make sense of the achievement gap. She argues that our lack of attention to the structural impediments to school success has limited our ability to develop effective social policy aimed at ameliorating the gap. Lewis further demonstrates how culture operates as structure—how durable patterns of meaning-making and human interaction systemically accord some and not others educational privilege and rely power differentials between racial/ethnic groups in ways that impact educational opportunities and outcomes and inform achievement gaps. Lewis uses a detailed ethnographic study of the everyday lives of students in three schools to illustrate how the racialized structure of American society permeate daily interactions in schools. Her work again reminds us that de-

scribe CRT's attendant focus on both the structural and cultural forces that shape black achievement. In recent years the structural aspect of the theory has received far less attention than the cultural aspect that draws attention to the attitudes and values of black students and their families. In contrast to this problematic turn, Lewis's work focuses squarely on the structural conditions that shape black achievement, including the ways that structured inequities are articulated in the micro-dynamics of U.S. schools. If we are to better understand the origins of the achievement gap we must attend, as Lewis does, to the ways in which white cultural and economic hegemony continue to structure the daily lived reality for students in schools.

As a whole, this volume calls for research that fundamentally acknowledges and explores the ways in which the raced and classed realities of American society impact the lives of students in schools. This research needs to be aimed at all levels of the problem. We need to understand how schools perpetuate systemic inequality, how students' identities are complicated by their own social location, and how the structural aspects of our lives bound the daily decisions, actions, and choices made by students and their families in relation to school. It is through such multilevel analyses that we might better understand how and why educational opportunities are maximized for some and limited for others such that achievement gaps, including the black-white divide, persist.

### NOTES

1. In an article published after his death, Ogbu (2004) criticizes how CRT has been captured in academic discourse. Among other things, he takes issue with the ways CRT has been reduced to "oppositional culture" and has become indistinguishable from the acting/white hypothesis. In this article, he stresses that "although black collective identity and cultural frame of reference are oppositional, only one of five categories of Blacks among both adults and students is explicitly opposed to adopting White attitudes, behaviors, speech" (Ogbu 2004, p. 28). He explains, moreover, that in his own study he has "generally found that there are relatively few students who reject good grades because it is White [and] on the contrary they want to make good grades and many report that they are well received by their close friends when they get good grades" (Ogbu 2004, p. 28). Having offered this clarification, he notes, however, that "what [Black] students reject that hurt their academic performance are 'White' attitudes and behaviors conducive to making good grades" (i.e., and depending on the school context: "speaking standard English, enrollment in Honors and AP classes, being smart during lessons, having too many White friends," "studying a lot or doing homework everyday," "acting like a nerd," "taking mathematics and science classes," "spending a lot of time in the library," "reading a lot") and "experience peer pressures from other Black students to discourage them from adopting such White attitudes and behaviors" (Ogbu 2004, pp. 28-29). In directing our attention to black

students' opposition to "white" attitudes and behaviors conducive to making good grades" Ogbu (2004, p. 28), nevertheless, forwards essentialized conceptions of whiteness (and by implication blackness) and continues to convey that black underperformance in school derives, in part, from black students' opposition to whiteness (with the analytical emphasis being on how Blacks conflate whiteness not with competitive educational outcomes [i.e., "good grades"] but with "behaviors" and "attitudes" that produce these competitive outcomes).

2. Ogbu does not consider the political contexts that shape the less-than-voluntary migration of some refugees, nor how these conditions might affect their perceptions and experiences once in their new surroundings.

3. CET has since been substantiated by research on other minority groups (e.g., Manute-Bianchi 1986; Gibson & Ogbu 1991). And the notion of an identity-achievement strain among African Americans, which would be consistent with the "acting white hypothesis," has been supported by the work of Ford and her colleagues (Ford, Harris, & Schueger 1993) as well as by Steele (Steele 1992; Steele & Aronson 1995). Moreover, Fordham's (1988, 1991, 1996a) sole-authored publications have reinforced the notion of a relationship between acting white and Blacks' academic achievement.

4. These articles were identified through a LexisNexis bibliographic search. We searched for all articles published between 1984 and 2004 in "major newspapers" and "magazines and journals" that featured "acting white," "race," or "black" anywhere in the text. We incorporated the additional qualifiers of "black" and "race" because an initial search using just "acting white" retrieved references to a large stream of articles that referred to acting White House representative and the like. Our qualified search produced 210 articles. Of these, fifty-two referred to acting white in relation to areas other than Blacks' academic or educational achievement (e.g., speech, dress, social relations, representation of black families in sitcoms). Two of these fifty-two articles did, however, associate acting white with the generic notion of "excellence." The remainder, 156 articles referenced the notion of acting white in relation to educational achievement or attainment.

5. Notable exceptions to this trend were three articles that referred to the work of Ronald Ferguson (and the Minority Achievement Network), or referenced the perspectives of Pedro Noguera (Santana 2003a, A1; Pappano 2003, B9; Wineip 2003, B8).

6. This discussion of unpacking race is taken largely from a chapter written by O'Connor, Lewis, and Mueller for a forthcoming edited volume.

# I

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## THE ORGANIZATION OF SCHOOLS AND STUDENT AGENCY

# 1

## Bring it On! Diverse Responses to “Acting White” among Academically Able Black Adolescents

Roslyn Arlin Mickelson and Anne E. Velasco

Even as Americans celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the epochal *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, race-related gaps in academic achievement remain intractable and perplexing problems. On the national level, the achievement gap has been narrowing since the 1970s, although in the last decade the rate of closure has slowed (Campbell, Hombro, & Mazzeo 2000). The processes that generate the racial disparity in achievement are the subjects of ongoing investigation. Among the most provocative, controversial, and widely debated explanation is John Ogbu's (Ogbu 2003; Ogbu & Simons 1998) cultural ecological model (CEM) of minority achievement, one component of which is the concept of oppositional cultural frameworks (OCFs): "Acting white." Signithia Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) notion that African American students forego academic achievement because they fear their peers will label them as traitors to their race, is a related concept that too often becomes confused with the larger, more complex theory of oppositional cultural frameworks.

Much of the scholarship in the area of the gap focuses on low-achieving students and the role OCF ostensibly plays in their outcomes. In contrast, this chapter focuses on high achievers. Our goal is to examine high achievers who have found ways to be academically successful in the same educational environments in which so many African American students have not. Our study examines how the structure of schools and classrooms intersect with students' peer cultures—which may include an OCF—to shape their reactions to race issues, including their responses to acting white.

OCFs have several aspects. They include (1) disdain for public and/or private behaviors that lead to visible displays of academic competence or that

lead to good grades (such as volunteering answers in class, doing homework during lunch, using Standard English in conversation, and studying for tests); (2) values and behaviors that resist the official educational agenda (which calls for complying with school behavior codes and mastering the curriculum); and (3) rejection of popular culture norms (meaning those defined by dominant middle-class, white dress styles and taste in music, TV, and other media). Someone who is labeled acting white accepts and exhibits many of the mainstream, white values, norms, and behaviors described above. Acting white is considered evidence of weak social identity as a black person and lack of race solidarity.

Several researchers have investigated the effects of OCFs on achievement, sometimes mistakenly fusing the acting-white hypothesis with the OCF model as they explore the roots of the race gap. Some find support for the model (Farkas 1996; Farkas, Ilevas, & Maczuga 2002; Lovaglia et al. 1998; Mickelson 2002; Portes & Rumbaut 1996; Solomon 1992; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown 1992; Waters 1999), but many researchers who investigate oppositional culture are less convinced. Some report that it does not exist (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey 1998; Cook & Ludwig 1998; Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell 2002; R. Ferguson 2001), or that what is labeled oppositional culture is actually something else, or that oppositional culture operates differently from the way Ogbu describes it (Carter 2003; Cousins 2006; Horvat 2001; O'Connor 1997, 1999, 2001). Other researchers do not question the existence of the acting-white label as something to be avoided; rather, they question whether it is related to achievement, or whether black students' primary response to the actual or threatened labeling is always academic withdrawal. We fall into this last category in that our findings illustrate that the responses to being labeled acting white vary, and, in some cases, the label seemed to spur students to even higher achievement.

Using data from a series of interviews of academically successful black high school students in Charlotte, North Carolina, we find that an OCF exists among many, but certainly not all, black students. The acting-white label is certainly associated with the behaviors other researchers have documented, such as the use of Standard English, certain taste in clothing, demeanor, etc. But, we also find that the acting-white label is associated with academic achievement.

Additionally, we found a range of responses to the acting-white label among the academically talented and accomplished black students we interviewed: (1) Some students acknowledged being the recipient of the insult but promptly dismissed it. (2) Some students were greatly disturbed by it—some even admit to crying about it—but, with the help of parents and others, managed to work through that distress. (3) Others rejected the label as being “anti-Black” but were challenged by it. In some way, it motivated them to actively “represent their race” and assume a “Bring it on!” attitude.

We also found that structural or organizational features of schools are one set of contributing factors to the academic race gap and to OCFs. Scholars frequently note the ways that the organization and structure of schooling shape, channel, and trigger students' behavior. Supporters (including Ogbu) and critics of the OCF model readily acknowledge that racism in American culture, along with discriminatory school policies, practices, and organizational structures, contribute to the racial disparity in achievement. Tracking is a good example of this point. Tracking—which segregates students in racially correlated ability groups and thus also imposes racially correlated opportunities to learn—is a notorious structural contributor to the achievement gap. The voluminous literature on tracking indicates,<sup>1</sup> among other things, that a key component of the race gap in achievement is the relative absence of black students in higher-level tracks and their disproportionate enrollment in lower-level ones (Jenkins & Phillips 1998b; Mickelson 2001; Oakes, Muir, & Joseph 2000). Research on the black-white race gap on standardized tests shows that although both groups may take similarly named courses (e.g., English 12), Blacks are more likely to be in lower tracks where the instructional level is less rigorous than in the higher tracks dominated by white students (Mickelson 2001, 2002, 2003b). As Hallinan and Sorensen (1977) observe, no matter how motivated and capable students are, they cannot learn what they are not taught. Thus, those in lower tracks learn less, and because Blacks are in lower-level courses, they do not perform as well as Whites on standardized tests.

The race gap in achievement is also shaped by another important set of factors—individual student characteristics (e.g., prior achievement and parental involvement) and students' course enrollment decisions. Students can learn higher-level social studies, English, math, and science only if their school offers such courses *and* they enroll in them. Thus, it is the intersection of individual factors (including students' response to peer pressure) with school structures, policies, and practices that generates racially correlated track placements for comparably able students.

In our recent research, we have been interviewing students to understand why there are so few African American students in upper-track high school courses. This chapter reports our findings from a set of twenty-two in-depth interviews with high-achieving African American adolescents who were enrolled in at least two high school Advanced Placement (AP) (or International Baccalaureate [IB]) courses during the previous five years. We explore how they arrived at the top of the academic pyramid and why they were joined by so few of their comparably able black peers. Our interests include the influence of youth culture;<sup>2</sup> the organizational structure of the school (racial composition of the school and of academic tracks); and the role of parents, peers, and educators in Black adolescents' educational careers. We seek to answer the following questions: (1) Does acting white exist as part of

CEM/OCF, and is there a shared definition of acting white that operates among black high school students? (2) Does acting white affect achievement and/or the type of courses students take? (3) Do students who encounter the acting-white slur respond similarly? (4) Is acting white related to the race gap in achievement, consistent with OCF as hypothesized by Ogbu? and (5) How does the organization and structure of a school interact with youth culture to generate student responses such as the decision to enroll in a particular class to study, or to be motivated to excel academically? Specifically, how might school structure and youth culture interact in influencing whether students enroll in high-level classes *and* how might these interactions influence the labeling of high-performing students as acting white?

Our findings suggest that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS's) organization of instruction into racially correlated tracks, combined with the presence of an oppositional youth culture—specifically, students' efforts to avoid behaviors that may result in their being labeled as acting white—contributes to the decision of some, but not all, black students to not fully engage academically. At the same time, our findings also refine how an OCF operates differently among black adolescents. We show that while some students may avoid academic achievement and difficult classes due to their fear of being labeled, as Ogbu predicted, others find the cultural stereotypes of Blacks as less intelligent and the acting-white epithet motivating. They interpret these aspersions as a personal challenge, goading them to excel in school and to embrace academic success as a way of "acting black." Both responses support the argument that the acting-white label *is* about academic success and academic disengagement, as well as about the use of Standard English, a particular style of dress, and a specific demeanor as signals of racial group solidarity. In short, this chapter supports Ogbu's claims that oppositional culture exists, and it is about achievement as well as language, fashion, music, etc., and it may result in the avoidance of academic achievement for some. At the same time, our findings support critics who argue that Ogbu's model is too static and deterministic to account for the range of motivations and academic behaviors exhibited by black youth.

## STUDY BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The findings we report in this chapter are drawn from our ongoing investigation of school reform in Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte is the site of the landmark *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools* (1971) decision, in which the Supreme Court first upheld the use of within-district mandatory busing as a remedy for segregated schooling. The current phase of the research was not conducted solely to investigate the questions addressed herein. However, the wealth of data collected over the course of seventeen

years of research in CMS permits us to investigate the questions animating this chapter.

From roughly 1974 to 1992, CMS employed a mandatory busing plan to achieve racial balance among its schools. As a result of the busing, by 1997 the majority of CMS students attended a desegregated school during some portion of their academic careers in Charlotte.<sup>3</sup> Although schools were by and large desegregated at the school level, by the early 1980s, students earned in classrooms resegregated by tracking. This longstanding practice of curricular and programmatic differentiation that creates racially correlated tracking dates back to the early 1970s when busing was at its peak (Mickelson 2001). Then, as now, top academic tracks had only a sprinkling of black students (Mickelson & Smith 1999). Currently, CMS differentiates its high school academic curricula into five tracks. From least to most rigorous they are (1) special education, (2) regular (3) advanced, (4) academically gifted (also called honors), and (5) AP and/or in some schools, the IB program. Special education is almost exclusively black, while in most schools, AP and IB courses are almost exclusively white.

In the early 1990s, much of the mandatory busing plan was replaced by other desegregation strategies, most notably a program of controlled choice among magnet schools. This policy shift occurred largely because of pressure from two sources: business elites, who complained that the desegregation plan's reputation hindered economic development, and newly relocating middle-class white parents, who were dissatisfied with the race and class integration of the schools they found when they moved to CMS (Mickelson & Ray 1994; Mickelson & Smith 1999).

In 1997, white parents sued the district, seeking a declaration of unitary status<sup>4</sup> and an end to the use of race-conscious policies of any kind (*Cadachone et al.* 1997), and several black plaintiffs (*Beke et al.* 1999) reactivated the original lawsuit, claiming that CMS never fully complied with the original *Swann* ruling. A federal judge declared the district unitary in 1999. After three years of litigation and appeals, in spring 2002 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the lower courts' unitary decisions. In fall 2002, CMS returned to a neighborhood-school-based student assignment plan, and the district rapidly began to resegregate by race and social class (Mickelson 2003a, 2003b).

CMS's history of struggles over race and education form a part of every student's lived reality. Because of the desegregation plan, ongoing public discussion of desegregation, and the reopened litigation, race and racism are widely acknowledged by adults and children as part of the process of schooling in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools (Hubbard and Mickelson 2004). And even though most of the individuals we interviewed had attended desegregated schools during most of their CMS careers, at the secondary school level many learned in racially isolated white upper-track courses. Their classrooms invariably were resegregated such that many of



our interviewees were the only or one of a handful of Blacks in that classroom. As a result, throughout the CMS system, all students—Blacks as well as Whites—came to associate track levels with race and academic ability. The racial composition of a particular classroom signaled both its level of rigor and who among the students were its “legitimate” members. Courses with mainly white students conveyed to everyone that the course was difficult, while courses with mainly black students were widely considered easy. In these ways, the public struggle over desegregation of the schools and the racially correlated tracking system provide the context for CMS students’ development of trust/distrust in schools and in educators, their social and racial identities, and their attitudes toward education and their future.

#### METHODS AND DATA

The findings reported in this chapter derive from a multi-method, multiyear investigation of school reform and educational equity that can be separated into three phases. Each phase grew out of the findings and unanswered questions raised in the previous phase. Table 1.1 summarizes the phases of Mickelson’s school reform study.

In 1987, Mickelson began a qualitative study of corporate leaders and school reform (see Mickelson & Ray 1994; Ray & Mickelson 1990, 1993). She found that corporate leaders wanted public schools to improve entry-level employees’ work readiness, their attitudes, and their skills. They also wanted the schools to “do something” about desegregation. The findings from the first phase (1987–1994) led to the study’s second phase (1995–1999). The second phase included a 1997 survey of CMS eighth- and twelfth-grade students’ attitudes, experiences, and achievement outcomes. The survey was designed to ascertain, among other things, whether previous reforms resulted in students’ perceptions of greater work readiness, but this phase of the research also revealed data about school-related factors that affect achievement. One specific finding showed that segregation, both at the school level and by track within schools, had a negative effect on student outcomes. And a troubling pattern appeared: academically able black students typically *were not* found in the top tracks, while Whites with less academic promise *were* enrolled in such classes, along with academically able Whites and a few Blacks (Mickelson 2001).

Specifically, Mickelson compared the twelfth-grade track placement of black and white students who, as sixth graders, scored in the same decile range on the California Achievement Test (CAT). She found that among those who scored in the top decile (90–99 percentile), 52 percent of Whites but only 20 percent of Blacks enrolled in AP or IB English. At the same time, 35 percent of Whites with scores below the 70 percentile were taking AP or

Table 1.1. Three Phases of Mickelson’s Case Study of School Reform in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District, 1987–2003

Dates	Type of Data	Focal Point/Participants
Phase I 1987–1994	The Business Agenda and Educational Restructuring Observations  Interviews	task force; school board meetings; community forums 150 local, state, & national education, civic, business leaders, & local parents
Phase II 1995–1999	Business Leaders and School Reform: The Case Study of CMS Surveys Middle School Students High School Students Academic Pathways and Race Equity	2,400 8th graders 1,800 12th graders
Phase III 2000–2003	Interviews Students Black Females Black Males White Females White Males Other Parents Black Parents White Parents Educators	89 27 27 15 12 8 29 19 10 22

IB English. Only 9 percent of Blacks with weaker academic records enrolled in the most rigorous courses (Mickelson 2001, p. 237).

This finding prompted us to investigate CMS’s course selection and placement practices, including its approach to tracking, as well as the roles of parents and students themselves in the choice of courses. Thus, the third phase (2001–2003) of the CMS reform study produced 140 interviews, including fifty-four with academically able black students about their educational experiences. The twenty-two top performers are the subjects of this chapter. The results of the third phase interviews also inform the debate about the black-white race gap by demonstrating how structure and agency, separately and in combination, shape student achievement. Findings from this component of the research (reported in this chapter) are directly relevant to the debate over OCFs and acting white.

#### Research Design of Phase III

Consistent with our goal of understanding whether acting white exists as part of CEM/OCF and, if so, how it affects student academic behavior, we decided to talk with black students who had achieved academic success.

Given that the OCF is one explanation of black academic failure, by interviewing academic successes, we sought to gain some clarification of—at a minimum—how these young people navigated these treacherous social waters. We expected that their experiences would shed light on the OCF process among other students.

### Sample

From 2000 to 2003, we conducted a series of approximately 140 in-depth interviews in order to understand why certain students enroll in rigorous college-preparatory courses while other comparably able youth do not. In particular, we wanted to understand, given the paucity of black students in AP and IB courses, why some African American students took such classes in light of the visible association of AP and IB courses with Whites. Were these African American students subjected to OCF pressures? If so, how did they handle the situation? Could their experiences shed light on the choices made by black students who do not excel academically and who eschew AP courses? In exploring this set of questions we expected to learn about students' encounters with OCF.

Beginning in 2000, we obtained a snowball sample of academically able adolescents (both black and white students in grades ten–twelve and recent high school graduates), their parents, teachers, administrators, and counselors. We began with children of UNCC (University of North Carolina, Charlotte) colleagues and younger friends and relatives of UNCC faculty and graduate students. We asked CMS administrators, teachers, and counselors whom we interviewed to recommend additional interviewees. The students we interviewed attended eight of CMS's thirteen high schools. We interviewed eighty-nine students split roughly into black and white (and "other"), male and female subsamples. In this chapter, we focus on the high achieving—the most academically gifted and accomplished—African Americans in our sample, eleven young women and eleven young men, ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-one.

We defined high achieving as taking (or having taken) at least two AP or IB classes during high school, with the remaining classes rated no lower than the "advanced" level, which in CMS is considered college preparatory. A class with the label "advanced" is considered one academic step above a "regular" class, the lowest level—nonspecial education—of difficulty and typically not taken by those who plan to attend college.) At the time of the interviews, some of our interviewees were still attending high school, some had recently graduated, and some were attending college. Our questions focused on their experiences in the high school course selection process.

### Interviews

We conducted and recorded interviews based on protocols specifically designed for this study. The protocols were status and, in the cases of our parent and student interviewees, race specific; that is, we developed interviews for students, parents, counselors, teachers, and administrators and had unique versions for black and white students and parents. Two members of the research team conducted each interview.<sup>5</sup> We attempted to match the race and gender of the interviewee with at least one of the researchers (i.e., a black female student was interviewed by a black student researcher and one of the white female authors). Research team members transcribed and analyzed the interviews using conventional qualitative methods of analysis.

## FINDINGS

### Why More Blacks Are Not in AP Courses

The young people we focus on in this chapter took mainly AP and/or IB courses, the highest-level courses available to high school students. They also tackled multiple extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, and service organizations) and exuded great confidence in their abilities and in the academic choices they had made. We hoped they could shed some light on why other academically able black students might make different choices—course selections below their ability levels. Doing so seemed to be evidence that these black youth were avoiding high-level academics.<sup>6</sup>

As our interviewees tried to articulate why black students are so underrepresented in high-level classes, responses tended to fall into three categories: (1) Students want to avoid hard work, and their parents, teachers, and counselors are not pushing them hard enough; (2) Responses to the track structures of the school: Since, overall in CMS, there are fewer black students in upper-level classes, choosing these classes carries a risk of social isolation (see R. Ferguson 2001). Some of our students reported feeling uncomfortable if there were few students in the class who looked like them. (3) Though they would not use this as *their* reason for not taking a high-level class, *other* students might be discouraged by the fear of being labeled acting white.

A common response among our entire student sample—black and white—(regardless of ability level) was that *most* students do not want to be challenged and do not want to work hard. Several of our interviewees even

referred to themselves and others as "lazy." In response to this question: "Why do you think there are so few black students who take upper-level courses?" one young woman reported:

some of my friends do take the easy way and have art four periods of the day, and you know, they don't challenge themselves. [Karen H., seventeen years old]

Other students included the corollary that some of these students do not have parents and teachers encouraging them to challenge themselves. Another student answered the question in this way:

One, because they aren't pushing themselves, and two, well, two, because they don't have nobody to push 'em. [Kinston J., seventeen years old]

As Tyson (2002) and others have pointed out, most students, regardless of race, seek less challenging classes. High school students are pragmatic when considering the commitment required in high-level courses. Our interviewees said that AP and IB classes are seen as difficult and beyond the intellectual reach of most students, black and white. Because they are concerned about college entrance standards, many students do not want to jeopardize their grade-point average by moving into a more challenging course level where their grades may suffer. They know how labor intensive these courses are, and they want to have time for sports and extracurricular and social activities.

Our respondents indicated that they and others were reluctant to take AP and IB classes because they did not want to be the only or one of few African Americans in a classroom. They saw this possibility as a significant obstacle:

I guess one of the things that I saw that deterred me from AP classes was not seeing enough of me in AP classes. [Marilyn J., eighteen years old, who overcame her initial discomfort to take numerous AP classes]

I knew of, yeah, I knew a few people that would . . . based on, like, the number of black students in class . . . that would be the factor whether they took the class or not . . . they just say, like, . . . "There aren't any black people in there; I'm not gonna take that course." . . . I mean, like from the people that I knew . . . like, they would find it way, way easier to make friends with another black person than with a person from another race. . . . Just getting used to that [being one of few Blacks in a class] would probably take a lot of effort before even starting to concentrate on the actual work . . . of the class. [Clarence M., twenty years old]

Since all students seem very aware of the racial composition of the classes available to them, some researchers have speculated that African American students choose not to be in upper-level classes because those classes are seen as a "white domain" (Mickelson 2001; Oakes 1990; Wheelock 1992; Yonazawa 1997). Enrolling and doing well in advanced courses would be interpreted as acting white. But the desire for more Blacks in a class is not necessarily avoidance of acting white.

#### What Acting White Means

Many critics of Ogbu's OCF hypothesis do not deny that black students sometimes accuse one another of acting white. What they challenge is Ogbu's interpretation of this charge. Critics agree that acting white is used to sanction those black adolescents who are seen to have rejected their racial identity as African Americans, as signaled by their language, dress, and certain cultural tastes. It is not, critics contend, about sanctioning those who embrace achievement per se. We disagree in that our data suggest that acting white also *can* be invoked to sanction those who embrace achievement. We asked our interviewees to respond to the following question:

Some people believe that black students do not do as well in school as white students because black students are afraid that if they do well in school their friends will accuse them of acting white. Do you know of students like this, or have you ever experienced anything like that?

Students' answers show that they vary in how they interpret the meaning of acting white. The quotes below offer a nuanced picture of acting white. In fact, we found that a striking characteristic of the label is its fluidity. Students often vacillated—sometimes from one sentence to the next—about what acting white meant to them. The following exchange demonstrates how difficult it could be to elicit a firm definition of acting white. Earlier in the conversation, Kris had indicated that he had been accused of acting white during middle school.

SM [a white female graduate student]: So, did it [acting white] have to do more with academics, or with, like, social things? It sounds like you're saying academics.

KW: I think, immediately, it was academics, but when you break it down, of course, it's social. Just because, I mean, most people think that black people aren't as smart as white, so. Especially at that age, so.

SM: So, it wasn't, like the way you dressed, the way you . . .

KW: No.

SM: . . . the people you hung out with . . . ?

KW: Like I said, I've always looked like the rest of my friends. I just happened to be smarter. [Kristopher W., eighteen years old]

Despite this sometimes slippery nature of the meaning of acting white, most of our interviewees agreed, contrary to some of Ogbu's critics, that academic achievement *is* a component. Senior Edward L. observed that students who do well are targets of ridicule for a variety of reasons, including their academic achievement.

It's mostly people who are getting good grades and choosing their studying instead of going out, you know, it's like—at lunch, just sit and talk, and they're, like, studying and doing homework or reading a book or doing whatever. . . . And sometimes, it's just—the term "acting white" isn't like even based on things like that; it's based on the way they dress, they way they talk. [Edward L., seventeen years old]

In another exchange, Darryl B., an IB student, began by saying that acting white was not about academics, but he ended by describing how the students in "regular" classes talk about the black students in high-level academic classes. His answer illustrates the division between students as both black IB and regular students seem to interpret it.

AG [a black male graduate student]: Have you ever been accused of acting white?

DB: No, not really. I'm just fine now, you know. Nobody ever calls me a white boy or anything like that. I guess it's really just the company you keep. Uh, you're associated with them. And then, I mean, it's what you do, I guess. What music you listen to, where you . . . what you do on the weekends . . .

AG: So, you're saying that acting white for—at least, as far as being a black student or a black person—is more of a social thing than an academic thing or . . .

DB: Yeah.

AG: Do they go hand in hand?

DB: Nah. Nobody's gonna knock you for doing well. It's not like getting to good grades is acting white. That's just doing what you're supposed to do. I wouldn't knock anybody. I don't know, some people might. Like some of the Regular kids, they'll, um, you know, talk about the IB [International Baccalaureate] kids, you know what I'm saying? Okay, there's a wall that we stand in on the [school's] mall, and the IB black kids stand up here, and the Regular black kids stand down here. And

they call us the—I think we're the north side or something like that. So, you know, I'll walk down here to talk to some people. They're like, "What you doing down here on the south side?" And I'll just be like, "Man, I'm just here to talk, you know?" [Darryl B., eighteen years old]

Darryl attended Freedom High, which was known for having a high concentration (at least 50 percent at that time of his interview) of black students in its academically rigorous IB program. (And this working- and middle-class school was well integrated at the building level, as well.) Given Freedom High's IB program's racial composition, being black and in IB is normative; IB students accusing a black person of acting white because of his or her academic successes would have been nonsensical. But outside of that classroom, Darryl's reputation as a high-level student causes him to be seen as "different." Darryl did not belong on the south side of the mall because the regular students there knew he was an IB student. Was he in the "wrong" place because of the way he talked, walked, or dressed, or was it because he was a good student? We can know only Darryl's assessment. Darryl did not see himself as different from the regular students in terms of dress, diction, or cultural style; what he acknowledged is that the IB students stood on the north end of the wall and the regular kids stood on the south. Somehow, the students on the south side saw his crossing from the "north side" to the "south side" as a transgression—Darryl was not one of them.

High school senior Tisha A. described her experiences as an honor roll student. She expressed her disgust for those who labeled her acting white for doing well in school. She deconstructed the implication of the slur by extending its logic.

I was always on the honor roll, or you know, something like that—you know, you get called white, which I think is ridiculous 'cause that's meaning that if you're intelligent, you're white, if you're dumb, then you're black. And you know, and that's a bad, you know, a stipulation to put on yourself as a person or as a race, that this is the only way you can be. That is the stereotype that we've put on ourselves as a society, that black students aren't intelligent, they don't work hard, they don't try. So, when you do, you're trying to be a white student who does work hard and who does try and who has parents that are involved in their education. [Tisha A., seventeen years old]

In the following quote, Richard T. tried to give a definition of acting white in terms of course-level enrollment. He juxtaposed taking higher-level/college prep classes "so you can be like them" [Whites] with doing what the majority of black students do, namely avoiding advanced classes.

In general, I guess a lot of people would say acting white is because you tryin' to kiss up and suck up to people and you tryin' to take all these advanced classes or whatever so you can—so you can be like them [white students], or do whatever, and you should just do what black people do in the majority. [Richard T., twenty years old]

Clifton W.'s analysis traced responsibility for the epithet linking achievement with Whites to disgruntled low-performing students:

I would probably say that that's just a way that they [low performers] can blame or make the people who aren't performing as well feel that they don't have to do well because if they . . . if they don't do well, it's ok, because they're not acting white. I mean, just a way of putting people who are successful down. [Clifton W., seventeen years old]

Barbara T. understands that her academic accomplishments are emblematic of what some black students label as acting white. The personal discomfort engendered in Barbara T. by the label was evident as she struggled to articulate the complex intragroup dynamics that underlie the slur.

I hate to say it, but any, I mean . . . [sighs] It's such a . . . it's such a complicated . . . it's so complicated to answer that question just because . . . I . . . I'm probably the epitome of what it means to act quote, unquote "white." It's when you're, for the most part, you're competent, you know, you believe in education, and, and you, that's a practice for you. You're articulate, and, and—that bothers me that people would define such positive qualities as, have a negative connotation—like as if you haven't maintained truth to your background or something. [Barbara T., twenty-one years old]

Thus, the students indicate that although acting white is about racial solidarity, race identity, social skills, language, etc., for them, and for those wielding the insults, the concept is inextricably linked to academic achievement as well.

#### INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO BEING ACCUSED OF ACTING WHITE

Most of the students who had had the unsettling experience of being accused of acting white noted that the labeling had occurred in middle school (though students said they experienced it, at various times, from elementary through high school). This is not surprising, since middle school is a time when young adolescents are working, often in dramatic ways, to discover

who they are. O'Connor (2001) explains that students construct their identities by reflecting and refracting the world made up of their family histories, school sites, and peer group culture. The meanings black students construct about their social positioning and agency are shaped by that world. Adolescents routinely categorize people, relying first on the most visually obvious groupings of gender, race, and language. Because middle school also is the time when ability grouping for academic classes becomes more marked, it follows that students would add this distinction to their repertoire of categories, labeling those in higher classes smart and those in lower classes dumb. What they see—that more white students are in higher-level courses and more Blacks are in lower-level ones—makes it very easy for youngsters to naively confuse correlation with causality. Thus, a structural characteristic of schools provides a ready basis for associating race with academic performance.<sup>7</sup> And because young adolescents often are critical of anyone they see as different, those who deplete from what is accepted as normative behavior are likely to be ridiculed. If students attend schools in which few black students take challenging classes, those who do so could be seen as deviating from normative black behavior or as acting white.

Some students cannot withstand this criticism; they give up completely on academics when their racial identities are challenged. Edward, the high school senior quoted earlier, commented on this reaction.

I've seen this happen to a couple of people, like, to fit in, they'll just change their whole, you know, their whole attitude, you know. And they'll change the way they dress, the way they think, they'll stop doing work, you know. They won't do any type of work, homework. [Edward I., seventeen years old]

Most of the students we interviewed described themselves as able to cope with criticism and peer pressure, even when it caused them pain and confusion.

And that's just when I distance myself from people, 'cause I don't care. I mean, you can, you can say whatever you want to. I know what I'm doing, I know what I'm . . . I know I'm trying to get my grades right, and I know I'm trying to get off to a good school. So, while I'm, supposedly, acting white in school, then what are they acting like when I'm off at school, and they're sitting around the house still, in they parents' house, working at Burger King or whatever? So, I mean, I don't care, they can say whatever they want to. [Christopher W., eighteen years old]

The young women in our sample reported reacting more emotionally to being labeled as acting white than did the young men.<sup>8</sup> They eloquently de-

scribed their anguish over having their core identity challenged. As Marilyn reported, she "went home crying" when someone accused her of acting white. Anita H. responded by turning the tables.

That's happened to me before, but [laughs] I always get 'em because I say something smart like, you know, "Well, um, so you're saying that acting black is to be dumb, you know, to be ignorant?" You know? And then it . . . [the response was] "No, no, I didn't say that!" But in essence, that's what they were saying. [Anita H., sixteen years old]

Anita, Kristopher, Ilisha, and many other respondents possessed the analytical skills to deconstruct the insult and then dispose of it. Another strategy was to deliberately embrace the challenge, in order to destroy the myth of black intellectual inferiority while demonstrating black intellectual prowess. There were obstacles to overcome and challenges to meet when a student adopted this course of action.

#### The Challenges and Opportunities of "Representing the Race"

Even at this relatively early stage in life, these students had encountered racism. They were aware of lowered expectations for black students held by teachers, counselors, school administrators, and sometimes even from their own relatives. They considered the acting-white label to be part of the insidious legacy that impugned black people's intelligence. Some of our interviewees said they deliberately embraced the challenge to do well, to work hard, and to succeed to prove the doubters wrong. They knew they were intelligent, they knew they could handle high-level classes, and they consciously wanted to disprove any notion that black students were not as intellectually competent as white students. And they wanted to reclaim academic achievement as entirely consistent with acting black.

Because the slur acting white often is leveled by lower-achieving students, our high-performing students perceived the label as a reaction to their academic success. But it also implies that they are not really black. They, therefore, sought to assert their "Blackness" by reaffirming academic achievement as acting black. They sought not to change themselves but to change those who accuse and try to marginalize them.

Initially hurt and confused when labeled as acting white, they eventually found the slur motivating. They were incensed by the label's implications: if doing well is equivalent to acting white, then failing is equivalent to acting black. Some saw themselves as being on a mission to "represent the race" by challenging myths and stereotypes about black academic underperformance.

Yeah, it's like some people, not really me, [laughing] but it's like they kinda get a kick out of, you know, just being the only black person in a class. You know, it's like, "I'm, you know, here to kinda be that thorn in your side and show you that, yes, we can do this, too." [Jonathan R., eighteen years old]

I like it 'cause I want to prove that I'm just as good as you, you know. I'm in that class, and I got the highest grade in there, and all of you all are struggling. It doesn't matter that I'm black, you know. So like, um, because I was the first black male in our class, like class rank wise . . . I'm trying to represent my people. Give me the spotlight! [Darryl B., eighteen years old]

Like Darryl and Jonathan, Brian relished the idea of being in the spotlight.<sup>9</sup> He found being on center stage motivating, although he was ambivalent about the pressure this put on him:

that's mainly where I felt that I had to sort of represent the black race, and so, I saw it as something good. I didn't really see it as a pressure. But it did, it does feel kind of strange, though, when you are around people of a different race, and you're, like, the only one there. And, I don't know, it seems . . . at first, you're kind of scared that they might look down on you or something. [Brian N., eighteen years old]

Kinston had a similar perspective on being the only Black in a class and representing the race.

It's, it's pressure. I mean it's a lot. I guess it's a motivator because it keeps me in the books, but at the same time, it's hard knowing that if you fail they are going to try to say everybody that's black [is] going to fail. That's what's hard. It's a lot of pressure, but I like pressure and I like being in the spotlight. I think I do better because of that pressure and stuff like that. [Kinston J., seventeen years old]<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Jonathan's and Darryl's obvious relish in grabbing "the spotlight," Brian and Kinston, though seeming to be motivated by the pressure of representing their race, alluded to some of the negative aspects involved in this path.

The few black adolescents in high-level classes inevitably find themselves "invited" by teachers and (white) classmates to "represent their entire race." While at times amused by this idea, our students realized its absurdity and its marginalizing implications for black people. It was just another example of some of the casual racism that they endured from some of their white peers and teachers.

Unlike the young men mentioned earlier, most of the students we interviewed longed to avoid adding the burden of having to represent their

entire race to their already challenging academic agendas. Most, nevertheless, had been forced to play the role of "the token black person" in the classroom because there were no others. For instance, when the topic of slavery or of civil rights was discussed, the white students or teacher often turned to the black students for the definitive black opinion. One interviewee described her negative physical reaction to this psychological burden.

Yeah, it's—it's more like I—all eyes—yeah, all eyes are on me. I—like, I can feel my—like, I can—like I—like I'm embarrassed. Like, I feel like I'm standing up in front of the class and they're all staring at me or something, and I can feel myself getting, like, hot or something. [Madison B., sixteen years old]

### THE COSTS OF ACHIEVEMENT

Although the twenty-two students we interviewed were high achievers, intent on tackling and overcoming academic challenges, their success came at a price. African American adolescents must deal with the stresses that all adolescents face and, at the same time, they must struggle with the racialized world in which they live. The issues they deal with are different from and arguably more complex than those of white students. We have mentioned the burden of representing one's race, although some students view this as a challenge and motivator. We will now discuss other costs that our high-achieving African American students incurred.

#### Living between Worlds

Our high-track, academically successful black students were keenly aware of their separation—which sometimes was physical as well as psychological—from most other black students in their schools. As O'Connor shows, advanced classes often are located on a different side of a school from the less rigorous ones that most black students take. Some of our students made great efforts to spend time with black students who were in the regular classes, and for some isolated high-achieving black students, this was the only way they could have contact with other black students. Still, on a day-to-day basis, high-achieving Blacks spent much more time with white students than they did with black students, and often felt uncomfortable in that white-dominated world.

It's like you feel like you don't fit in because you don't really fit in with, um, white or other, or just say white people who are in that class because you're not the same as them, and those are the people who are mainly taking the upper classes. And, so you don't really feel like you

fit in with them. You feel like they might look down on you, really, even though they seem to be caring about you. And, plus, you don't really fit in with the, um, African American people who are not taking the higher classes because you're not really thinking about what they're thinking. You're not really doing the same things that they're doing. So, you feel like you don't really fit in with them. [Brian N., eighteen years old]

This passage recalls Darryl's earlier comment about the wall that literally and figuratively seemed to divide groups of black students: "So, you know, I'll walk down here to talk to some people. They're like, 'What you doing down here on the south side?'"

#### Internalizing Stereotypes

An unintentional but consequential outcome of having few Blacks in upper-level classes is that some people, black and white, consciously or unconsciously may perceive this absence as evidence of Blacks' intellectual inferiority: if black students were capable of doing the work demanded in those classes, then they would certainly be there. Our interviewees were not immune to this commonly offered logic, as the following exchange between the first author and Madison demonstrates. In describing how others associate white with smart, Madison reveals how this insidious stereotype had perpetrated her own worldview:

MB: I find myself having my own stereotypes. Like if I, I mean, 'cause I know my friends, I know they're smart, black, white, or whatever, but um, I guess if, like I'm a [teaching] assistant for this class, and it's a majority black students, and most of them have Fs in the class, and like, the few white students, not all of them, a couple of them have bad, lower grades, but none of them, of course, are as bad as the black students'. So, I guess that's . . .

RM: What do you mean "of course?"

MB: I don't know, I don't know why. . . . [laughs nervously] I heard myself do it. Oh! I don't know why I said, "of course." Um. See I have my own stereotypes. . . . I don't know why that is, 'cause that makes me as bad as a white person saying the same thing. I don't know, and I don't know why I think that.

Later in the interview, Madison was clear about the ways stereotypes about race and intelligence interact with the racially correlated organization of schooling (i.e., on-site segregation and tracking that produces racially identifiable classes) to contribute to perceptions that doing well in school is acting white.

I don't know—I [sigh]—I don't know. I prob—I know—it probably has a lot to do with who you're around. Like, I—I—I guess I would be more around white people if I was, like, coming out of a—a class where I—it would be majority, um, white students. And I'd be around them, and they'd be like, "Oh, well, she—I guess she thinks she's—she's not—she's better than us or she's not as—like, we're not as good as her because"—I don't know, um [sigh]. 'Cause I—I think—I think people associate white with smart, and black with not. So if they see a black person with white people, "Oh, they're smart. They're—they're better, or they think they are." [Madison B., sixteen years old]

Davey G., who was a college student when we interviewed him, had achieved some perspective on his high school experiences and was aware of the insidious ways that racist stereotypes had infiltrated them. As a student at a historically black college (HBC), he realized what he had absorbed by being one of few black students in the mostly white upper-level courses he had taken during high school.

[In high school] . . . there weren't enough [black] students in high [track] classes, and what effect, yeah, I mean the effect that it did have on me was when I saw a class full of black students, which was every class [at his HBCU], I always initially, before I thought about it [snaps his fingers], I came to the conclusion . . . that this class must be . . . That must be the slow class. [Davey G., twenty years old]

### STRUCTURES OF SUCCESS

Mickelson's (2001) high school survey data (see table 1.1) revealed that many bright black students do not enroll in AP or IB courses. Given the cumulative effects of racism in schools, and the presence of an African American adolescent peer culture that contains elements of OCFs, we wondered what enabled the students who did enroll in AP or IB classes to make that choice and to succeed in the classes. Why had these twenty-two students enrolled in AP or IB courses? In particular, we wondered whether our interviewees, by definition successful students, had significant support systems that helped them sustain their academic pursuits and navigate the school and adolescent peer culture.

Our interviewees revealed common experiences that launched and supported their success. Relationships with their significant others—friends, parents, and teachers—were important for sustaining the students' emotional and intellectual well-being, especially in the face of toxic epithets like acting white. We found, as well, that the organizational context of learning contributed mightily to academic success. For example, many of the twenty-

two students we interviewed had been certified as academically gifted during their elementary school years. This early certification put them on a path for academic success and supported their achievement with stimulating curricula, additional resources, and all-important labels that signaled to school agents that these children were "smart."

#### Systems of Support: Help from Friends and Parents

In order to persevere in challenging academic classes, students need support. Our research indicates that having friends who are taking the same classes is ideal, but a network of friends who are doing coursework that is at least similar is helpful, too. As Clifton and Brian explained, these friends provide touchstones—people with whom to compare notes, literally and figuratively.

And just, like, in my biology class, um, my friends in another period, although the same biology class, but we talk about the class a lot, like if I need some information about a homework assignment or anything like that . . . what they did in class that day, I'll call her up and find out what happened in class that day. [Clifton W., seventeen years old]

I think one of the things that also helped me stay in it, like I said, my three best [friends] that go to my school and they stayed in IB, so I stayed in IB. [Brian N., eighteen years old]

Antia described her strategy for maintaining support this way:

So you just have to keep the people around you who are supportive and will help you out in what you want to do, you know, and not um, you know, not listen to that kind of stuff [accusations of acting white] because, you know, where are you gonna be in ten years and where are they gonna be, ya know? So you just have to be strong within yourself to do classes like that, you know, and know that what you're doing is right and will help you. [Antia H., sixteen years old]

Supportive parents can help students manage stressful times by being available, by listening, and by encouraging their children to plan for the future. Marilyn recalled that when she came home devastated because she had been accused of acting white, her parents comforted her.

When I came home crying, they would say, "Baby, don't." I'm sure that's what every parent says to their kids, but, um, it helps to have parents you can come home to and cry, you know. They're still supportive, and they still tell you, "Well, they'll be flipping burgers at McDonald's while you're . . ." . . . you know. [Marilyn J., eighteen years old]



Davey's mother often comforted and encouraged him.

My mother and I had a lot of these conversations . . . but the pressure you're referring to [dealing with accusations from other black students about acting white], I learned to live with it. You know. And, she would always tell me, "You know, one day, Davey, you'll be doing this and that, and this and that, and you'll forget all about it." So, I don't know. I put it behind me at that moment. [Snaps his fingers.] [Davey G., twenty years old]

#### Systems of Support: Help from Teachers and Counselors

Students particularly value their teachers' assessments. The right words from a teacher or counselor can motivate a student to challenge him or herself—conversely, an educator's words can undermine a student's self-confidence.

My English teacher told me to go ahead and take AP, he felt, like, he—he could see that's what I thought [that teachers felt that black students weren't as smart as Whites] and tried to reassure me that that wasn't true. [Marilyn]

Counselors, mentors, advisors, people that I'm close to and not close to always say, "Are you sure you want to do that? It will be hard." Some say [snaps fingers], "I know you can do it. Tackle it, handle it, finish it, do it, complete it. Congrats, you're almost done." They give encouraging words while others may give . . . they may tell me that there will be many obstacles in my future: "Are you sure you wanna do that?" [Davey]

#### Systems of Support: School Opportunity Structures as a Context for Acting White

Support from significant others makes it possible to succeed in top classes, but the structure of opportunity in a school is even more important. If students do not enroll in top tracks, they cannot succeed in them. We observed a notable trend among IB students from two CMS high schools. The first, Menlo Park, is approximately one-third minority. It is located in a very affluent part of Charlotte and has a reputation as a rigorous school. Very few Blacks enroll in Menlo Park's IB program. Freedom High, located in a mixed working- and middle-class bucolic suburb on the suburban fringe of the county, is about one-half minority, in large part because a sizable number of black students opted to enroll in Freedom High's IB program to avoid their neighborhood schools. The Freedom High transfer students' poorly regarded home school, Gardner High, does not offer an IB program. An unintended

consequence of this set of circumstances is that the IB program at Freedom [approximately 50 percent black].

In a diverse school in which critical numbers of minority students take upper-level classes, acting white was not an issue. IB student Karen H. compared her prior experiences in an integrated Florida high school's IB program with IB experiences at her current CMS school, North County High, a racially isolated white suburban school.

[Acting white for Blacks] . . . really that wasn't a problem until I got here because, um, the classes in Florida, the IB program was so diverse, it had students from everywhere, so it really wasn't an issue there with the students. But, here, it's like, if you get an A on something, other black students, typically female, you know, look at you, and [say] "Oh, she acts so white," and, you know, it's really discouraging [laughs] . . . it seems like they don't want you to succeed. [Karen H., seventeen years old]

We found that black IB students at Freedom were much less likely than their counterparts at Menlo Park to fade peer criticism for their academic endeavors. We found Freedom High's black IB students were less often harassed by the epithet because participation in the IB program was more normative than at Menlo Park. The following quotation from Freedom High IB student Darryl highlights the power of school opportunity structure norms to influence students' track level enrollment decisions by normalizing IB courses as a place where Blacks belong.

Ok, um, in the IB program, there were, I think there were fifty-three IB seniors, and, uh, I think almost, like, thirty of 'em were black. Most of 'em were black. And, uh, in my classes, it'd be a good mix of everything, Blacks, Whites, Asians. That's what IB really was, so. . . . [Darryl B., eighteen years old]

Support systems provided by family members, peers, and educators, in conjunction with a school social organization that normalized Blacks' participation in the top academic tracks, made the difficult road that bright black students must travel a little easier.

#### CONCLUSION

The starting point of the research reported in this chapter is the paucity of Blacks in upper-level tracks and, by extension, how that imbalance contributes to the race gap in academic achievement. Our findings help answer

the question that follows from this starting point, namely, why aren't there more Blacks in the most academically rigorous classes? Our findings also address the debates concerning CEM/OCF. The organizational dynamics of schools, such as race differences in opportunities to learn and to prepare for these classes, discriminatory practices by educators in making placement recommendations, and structural features of schools' daily operations are part of the answer. Our data suggest, however, that we cannot fully understand the reasons for black underenrollment in rigorous college-prep courses without examining the choices made by the students themselves. Personal beliefs, peer culture, parental expectations, and the structure of opportunity at specific schools all influence the decisions that academically able students make as they select courses and allocate time and energy for studying. Our findings point to one additional aspect of this process, that is, some students' desire to avoid being labeled by peers as acting white.

John Ogbu's compelling and controversial theory that black youths' oppositional cultural frameworks lead them to discredit and avoid behaviors contributing to academic success provides one explanation for the educational choices of some black students. Following Ogbu, one could argue that one reason so few of Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools' academically able Blacks enroll in top-level classes is because taking such courses could result in their being labeled as acting white. Since this is a damaging epithet that connotes a lack of social solidarity with other Blacks, identity-conscious adolescents would likely seek to avoid the risk. Two groups of critics challenge Ogbu: those whose work casts doubt on the existence of OCFs, and those who believe that such frameworks exist but question the way Ogbu describes their function, their etiology, their distribution among minority youth, and their relative importance for explaining the race gap. We fall into the second group.

We found all twenty-two students we interviewed were aware that the most rigorous classes were considered white territory—by Whites and Blacks alike. Our respondents refused to comply with those expectations. For some, an awareness that many Whites think Blacks do not belong in top-track classes and cannot perform at a sufficiently high level was motivating. This goaded them into proving that black students are as academically competent as white students, and that valuing and pursuing academics is part of what it means to be black. But they had to prove this to other black students, as well as to white students and teachers.

Our investigation was a response to earlier survey findings that showed CMS's pervasive use of academic tracks had a powerful effect on academic outcomes (Mickelson 2001). Due to within-school segregation by tracking, and to the growth of resegregation at the school level during the 1990s, many Blacks and Whites are now learning in racially separate environments. This pattern of second-generation segregation blunted the full potential for equal-

ity of educational opportunity that came with desegregation. Another important consequence of the second-generation segregation, as our data show, is that, throughout the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, many students came to associate track levels with race and academic ability. The students in our sample confirmed that the racial composition of a particular classroom signaled its level of rigor and ostensibly who belonged in it. Courses with mainly white students were understood to be the difficult ones, reserved for smart people; classes with mainly black students were widely understood to be the easy ones. To the extent that the demography and structure of the school created or reinforced the association of "smart" with "white," we saw the intersection of school structure and peer culture shaping the individual student's behavior.

Our findings contribute to the ongoing debate on OCFs and the race gap in achievement in several ways. While our findings are consistent with Ogbu's theory that an OCF shapes the achievement behavior of black students, they also lend support to those who find his OCF model inadequately narrow in its focus, overly deterministic, and failing to account for observed variations in black students' responses to social and academic pressures. Like the youth whom Tyson describes (chapter 2 in this volume), our respondents reacted to the acting-white slur in various ways. Some got angry, a few felt that their identities were challenged, and others powerfully reaffirmed academic achievement as integral to Blackness. By definition, though, our respondents did not succumb to the pressure to underperform lest they be labeled as acting white. Another striking similarity between our findings and Tyson's is the powerful role that school social organization and structure play in generalizing and exacerbating the association between student race and academic achievement. Specifically, our respondents reported that the racial composition of their schools and their academic tracks were clearly factors in how students in their schools understood the relationship between race and achievement.

On the other hand, our findings also indicate that Ogbu is correct both about the influence of OCFs on some students' school behaviors and about the acting-white label as a part of such frameworks. In contrast to Tyson's findings, the students we interviewed maintained that acting white is, at least partially, about academic achievement and about engaging in behaviors that typically lead to achievement (e.g., enrolling in AP courses, participating in class, doing homework, studying for tests, and performing well on them). Acting white also includes using Standard English, participating in mainstream white cultural forms instead of mainstream black cultural forms, associating primarily with white friends, and displaying other signifiers of weak social identity as a black adolescent.

The twenty-two high-performing students we discuss in this chapter are a subset of the fifty-four black students we interviewed during Phase III of the

larger study (see table 1.1). Most of the fifty-four black students acknowledged that high-achieving Blacks faced accusations of acting white at some point in their academic careers. And our twenty-two high-performing interviewees, while noting the labels' social dimensions, invariably identified an academic aspect as well. Typically, our respondents recounted being accused of acting white when they were in middle school. By the time they reached high school, being labeled white for their achievement was not commonly an overt problem; there is ample evidence, however, that the slur, which contributes to pervasive stereotypes of black academic inferiority, along with school structures that segregated black and white students at the classroom level, affected them at a subconscious level. Recall Madison and Davey's disturbing comments:

the few white students, not all of them, a couple of them have had, lower grades, but none of them, of course, are as bad as the black students'. [Madison]

when I saw a class full of black students, which was every class [at his HBCU], I always initially, before I thought about it [snaps his fingers], I came to the conclusion . . . that this class must be . . . that must be the slow class. [Davey]

These comments provide evidence that black students are affected by the processes and structures within schools that contribute to the labeling of academic achievement as acting white. Schools reflect—in fact, magnify—the larger culture in which cultural stereotypes regarding race and intelligence abound, and the social organization of school by tracks reinforces a notion that white equates with smart and black equates with dumb. When particularly strong group norms in middle school and high school governing solidarity within race are added to this mixture, we begin to understand how this label attaches to high achievers.

Fortunately, all of these stellar students worked through the pain, shame, and aggravation of being accused of betraying their race, but their responses to being labeled acting white varied. Some ignored it; some consciously sought to reaffirm that acting black included academic excellence; others embraced the challenge to disprove the underlying assumptions of the acting-white epithet. We found that our students managed to cope with the accusation and even thrive because of certain factors:

- They were guided into high-level classes and supported in them by parents, peers, and educators.
- The demographic and social organization of particular schools was such that the concept of acting white was nullified. There was a critical

mass of black students participating in upper-level classes at these schools, which made the slur ridiculous (see the earlier discussion of *Mento Park vs. Freedom High*).

- Many of these students were "certified" as academically gifted students early in their school careers. This helped inoculate them against the "slings and arrows" of racism that they would encounter on their school journeys by providing them with an early imprimatur of their academic competence and self-worth.

Obviously, our high achievers are not typical of all students, black or white. Nor are their reactions necessarily typical of all academically able black students—our purposive snowball sample was self-selected. We have no idea how many academically able students accommodate the threat of being labeled as a race traitor by withdrawing from academic pursuits. Members of our sample implied that although they had not let this threat inhibit their academic performance or dissuade them from enrolling in top-level tracks, they had many peers for whom the opposite was true. Our respondents were aware of academically able Blacks who, in order to avoid being accused of acting white, deliberately chose not to enroll in higher-track classes and not to maximize their academic achievement.

The interviews we conducted with older adolescents do not permit us to investigate the developmental aspects of OCF, as does Tyson. It is noteworthy, though, that many of our interviewees recall that their own experiences with acting-white slurs initially occurred during their middle school years. Based on the data provided in our interviews, we concur with Tyson's notion of the importance of children's developmental trajectory for understanding if, when, and how OCF affect students' achievement attitudes and behaviors.

Our findings suggest that both sides of the argument over the causes of the racial disparity in achievement are partially correct. We demonstrate that an OCF exists, and that it is about academics as well as the use of Standard English, and the choice of clothing, hairstyle, demeanor, and other markers of racial identity. In some cases, we believe that the OCF contributes to the race gap in academic outcomes, as Ogbu proposed. Because of the power of acting white to shame them as traitors to the race, some portion of black adolescents do decline to behave in ways that lead to academic success. They choose not to do homework, not to study for exams, not to participate in class, and not to take rigorous college-level courses.

At the same time, our findings suggest two elaborations or corrections to the OCF model that are consistent with the arguments of Ogbu's critics. Just because the acting-white epithet is leveled at a black adolescent, it does not mean he or she will respond by withdrawing from academics. Our interviewees reacted in an entirely different manner—they were stirred to excel

academically precisely to counter the insidious claim that being black somehow means you are not smart—or at least not as smart as Whites. With their academic success, high-achieving black students prove that the blanket notion that being black means you cannot/should not do well in school is insulting, demeaning, racist, acontextual, ahistorical, and empirically false.

The second elaboration to Ogbu that our findings suggest is that school organizational features—such as racially correlated academic tracks—create, sustain, and reproduce racial differences in educational outcomes and in students' worldviews regarding race, ability, and achievement. To be fair, we must acknowledge that Ogbu (2003) does identify tracking as a source of black underachievement. Our findings suggest *how* tracking intersects with black peer culture, and with larger racial stereotypes, to inform students' decisions about whether or not they will be comfortable and successful in a higher track class. To the extent that black students associate white with smart and black with dumb, we must assume that growing up in a school system constantly waging battles over desegregation and consistently resegregating students into racially correlated tracks contributes to the core beliefs upon which OCFs are built.

Ogbu never claimed that all Blacks eschew achievement; nor did he ignore the racism that is part of what we accept as the fabric of American society and public education. His critics do not deny that the acting-white epithet exists in black youth culture. Rather, they challenge Ogbu's interpretation of OCFs as centered on achievement behaviors, his relative inattention to variation in black performance, and to issues of context, gender, and social class. Our findings suggest that one way those with differing perspectives might talk with instead of past one another is to acknowledge the validity and the incompleteness of both sets of arguments. The resulting conversation would go far toward resolving the controversy over acting white and would bring greater clarity to the larger issue of Black-White gaps in higher-level course enrollments and achievement.

## NOTES

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1. For reviews of the relationship between tracking and achievement, see Lovless (1999), Lucas (1999), Mickelson (2003a, 2003b), Oakes (1985, 1990, 1994), Welner (2001), Welner and Oakes (1996), Wheelock (1992), and Yonazawa (1997).

2. A given youth culture is tied to the economic context and historical moment in which the students live. It is also linked to adolescent development and the degree to which adolescents are socially constructed as neither adults nor children. A given youth culture will have multiple subcultures. Subcultures are raced, gendered, and incorporate elements of social class and sexual orientation specificity.

Norms, values, and artifacts (material aspects) of a youth culture are signifiers of membership in it, and that members are neither adults nor children. Signifiers include discursive music, clothing, language, behaviors such as risk taking, sullenness alternating with exuberance, subjectivity to peer pressure, moodiness, distancing from parents, argumentativeness with peers and adults, optimism, and idealism. We loosely adapted this definition of youth culture from Nancy Lesko (2001). From a youth culture perspective, an OCF reflects norms and attitudes of involuntary minority youth.

3. Although most CMS schools were desegregated during our respondents' educational careers, most of the students were resegregated by track once they reached secondary school, often a school that was officially considered desegregated. During elementary school, white students were much more likely than black students to be placed in gifted education programs, and Blacks were more likely than Whites to be identified for special education (Mickelson 2001).

4. Unitary is a legal term that describes a school system that has formally transitioned from a "racially dual" (i.e., segregated by race) system to a "unitary" (i.e., a single, desegregated) system. The status is assigned officially, by a court, typically the one that originally found the district to be a dual one.

5. The research team consisted of the authors (middle-aged, white female sociologists) and nine graduate and undergraduate research assistants (RAS). The RAS, drawn from sociology, political science, criminal justice, and social work, included three black males, two white males, two black females, and two white females. The diversity among team members permits our data collection and analysis to cross the generational, race, and gender barriers that often constrain or limit qualitative research.

6. We use our sample of high achievers as informants not only because they are articulate about this issue, but also because our subsample of the population of academically able Blacks who do *not* enroll in higher-level tracks is woefully small. Of all of the black students interviewed, even those not selected for the subsample in this chapter (the high achievers) were taking some "Advanced" classes. We interviewed very few students who would be considered "Regular" students (i.e., no college-prep classes). Also, we found it interesting, but not surprising, that the lower-level students in our black sample did not report as many accusations of acting white. We speculate that because they did not participate in such high-level classes, they apparently did not trigger this label.

7. We are keenly aware that racial stereotypes about intelligence are an integral part of American culture. Such stereotypes reinforce the associations of achievement with race that follow from the visibly disproportionate representation of Blacks in lower-track classes and Whites in more rigorous ones. Stereotypes held by counselors and teachers, for example, also are likely contributors to reinforcing the disproportionate representation of black and white students within these tracks. To illustrate, in early fall 2001, hundreds of CMS middle school students, a majority of whom were black, were found to have been enrolled in lower-level mathematics classes even though all had passed or excelled on their previous year's EOG (End of

Grade Test) math standardized tests (they had scores of 3 [proficient or 4 [above proficient]). Several weeks into the fall semester, in response to this discovery, the superintendent ordered the misplaced students to be moved into higher-level, reconstructed math classes. The superintendent said that a number of decisions led to the misplacement of so many Blacks into lower-level math courses, including racial stereotyping: "I think people need to face that there are issues of bias and prejudice that play into this" (Cenzipur 2001, A7).

8. Horvat and Lewis (2003) report similar findings. They discuss how young women are able to diffuse the anxiety caused by the accusations of acting white through supportive friendships with other peers who value education.

9. Our analysis extends Steele and Aronson's (1998) work on spotlight anxiety. Some of our evidence supports their argument that the spotlight results in academic disengagement because academically able youth, for whom achievement is very salient, fear confirming the stereotype of black intellectual inferiority. They disengage as an alternative to risking these prospective public "failures." In addition, we find student responses to the spotlight issue include those who respond differently. Some, we find, use the spotlight to thrive!

10. Whether, in fact, the spotlight pressure leads to better performance as Kingston claims, or depresses his performance as Steele and Aronson predict, is beyond the scope of this chapter.