

other and grimaced. Each of us know people of her son's generation, and of our own, who are ambivalent about success (p. B1).

Gilliam goes on to recount how the existing ecological conditions have led black parents unwittingly to teach their children a double message: "You must be twice as good to go half as far," and "Don't get the big head, don't blow your own horn." Generations of black children have learned this lesson so well that what appears to have emerged in some segments of the black community is a kind of cultural orientation which defines academic learning in school as "acting white," and academic success as the prerogative of white Americans. This orientation embodies both social pressures against striving for academic success and fear of striving for academic success. The following passage from Abdul-Jabbar's autobiography illustrates a part of this *evolved cultural orientation toward schooling*:

I got there [Holy Providence School in Cornwell Heights, right outside of Philadelphia] and immediately found I could read better than anyone in the school. My father's example and my mother's training had made that come easy; I could pick up a book, read it out loud, pronounce the words with proper inflections and actually know what they meant. When the nuns found this out they paid me a lot of attention, once even asking me, a fourth grader, to read to the seventh grade. When the kids found this out I became a target. . . .

It was my first time away from home, my first experience in an all-black situation, and I found myself being punished for doing everything I'd ever been taught was right. I got all A's and was hated for it; I spoke correctly and was called a punk. I had to learn a new language simply to be able to deal with the threats. I had good manners and was a good little boy and paid for it with my hide (Abdul-Jabbar, 1983, p. 16).

Our main point in this paper is that *one major reason* black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success. This problem arose partly because white Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as white people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in academic striving, i.e., from "acting white." Because of the ambivalence, affective dissonance, and social pressures, many black students who are academically able do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and, consequently, do poorly in school. Even black students who do not fail generally perform well below their potential for the same reasons. We will illustrate this phenomenon with data from a recent ethnographic study of both successful and unsuccessful students in a predominantly black high school in Washington, D.C.

We will begin with a conceptual background and framework. This will be followed by a presentation of the case study from Washington, D.C. In the third section we will show that the phenomenon exists in other parts of the

Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of 'Acting White'"

Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu

The authors review their previous explanation of black students' underachievement. They now suggest the importance of considering black people's expressive responses to their historical status and experience in America. "Fictive kinship" is proposed as a framework for understanding how a sense of collective identity enters into the process of schooling and affects academic achievement. The authors support their argument with ethnographic data from a high school in Washington, D.C., showing how the fear of being accused of "acting white" causes a social and psychological situation which diminishes black students' academic effort and thus leads to underachievement. Policy and programmatic implications are discussed.

The following vignettes point to the central problem addressed in this paper. The first is from Dorothy Gilliam's column in the *Washington Post* of February 15, 1982, entitled "Success":

My friend was talking to her son, who is 20, when he blurted out a secret half as old as he. It was the explanation for his ambivalence toward success. It began, he said, in his early school years, when a fifth-grade teacher questioned whether he had really written the outstanding essay he'd turned in about the life of squirrels. It ended when the teacher gave him a grade that clearly showed that she did not believe the boy's outraged denial of plagiarism.

Because the young man is black and the teacher is white, and because such incidents had happened before, he arrived at a youthful solution: "I never tried again," he recently told his mother, who had suffered misery as her son's grades had plummeted and his interest in school had waned. He had sold himself short because he was humiliated.

Today he reads the classics but has only a high school diploma; today he can finally articulate his feelings. Today he feels he was manipulated by society not to achieve, and feels he has been tricked into lowering his performance. He is furious that he blocked his own talents.

As my distraught friend recounted this disturbing episode, we looked at each

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United States and probably can be found among other, similar minority groups in the U.S. and other societies. We will discuss the implications of our paper for policy and programs designed to increase minority school performance in the last, concluding section of the paper.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural-Ecological Influences on Schooling

It is well known that some minority groups are academically successful in school, while other minority groups are not (Coleman et al., 1966). The differences in the school performance of the various minority groups exist even when the minority groups face similar language, cultural, and educational barriers in school as well as barriers in the opportunity structure (e.g., job discrimination) in adult life (see Ogbu, 1984, in press; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986). In order to account for this variability, we have suggested that minority groups should be classified into three types: *autonomous minorities*, who are minorities primarily in a numerical sense; *immigrant minorities*, who came to America more or less *voluntarily* with the expectation of improving their economic, political, and social status; and *subordinate or caste-like minorities*, who were *involuntarily and permanently* incorporated into American society through slavery or conquest. Black Americans are an example par excellence of caste-like minorities because they were brought to America as slaves and after emancipation were relegated to menial status through legal and extralegal devices (Bertrman, 1960; Myrdal, 1944). American Indians, Mexican Americans, and Native Hawaiians share, to some extent, features of caste-like minorities. American Indians, the original owners of the land, were conquered and sent to live on reservations (Spicer, 1962). Mexican Americans in the Southwest were also conquered and displaced from power; and Mexicans who later immigrated from Mexico were given the status of the conquered group and treated in the same manner (Acuna, 1972; Ogbu, 1978; Schmidt, 1970).

We initially explained the disproportionate and persistent high rates of school failure of subordinate minorities from a cultural-ecological perspective because this perspective allowed us to examine the school performance of the minorities in the context of historical, structural, and cultural forces which affect the schooling of such groups (Ogbu, 1978, 1981). In the case of black Americans we suggested that the disproportionately high rate of low school performance is a kind of adaptation to their limited social and economic opportunities in adult life. That is, the low school performance is an adaptive response to the requirements of cultural imperatives within their ecological structure.

Within their ecological structure black Americans traditionally have been provided with substandard schooling, based on white Americans' perceptions of the educational needs of black Americans; and white Americans have

controlled black Americans' education. Another feature of their ecological structure is that black Americans have faced a job ceiling, so that even when they achieved in school in the past, i.e., had good educational credentials, they were not necessarily given access to jobs, wages, and other benefits commensurate with their academic accomplishments. The third component of the ecological structure is that in response to substandard schooling and barriers in the adult opportunity structure, black Americans developed several "survival strategies" and other coping mechanisms.

We suggested how these ecological factors might enter into the schooling of black children and adversely affect their academic performance. The job ceiling, for example, tends to give rise to disillusionment about the real value of schooling, especially among older children, and thereby discourages them from working hard in school (Hunter, 1980; Ogbu, 1974). Frustrations over the job ceiling and substandard schooling create conflicts and distrust between black Americans and the public schools, making it more difficult for black Americans than for white Americans to believe what the schools say and to behave according to school norms. Survival strategies, such as collective struggle, uncle tomming, and hustling, may encourage black Americans to develop attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and competencies that are not necessarily congruent with those required to do well in school. The job ceiling and other discriminatory treatment engender among black Americans a feeling of impotence and a lack of self-confidence that they can compete successfully with whites in matters considered traditionally as white people's domain, such as good jobs and academic tasks. Finally, the experience of slavery with its attendant "compulsory ignorance" has meant that black Americans have had a limited development of academic tradition.

Under these circumstances, attitudes and behaviors of black students, though different from those of white students, are not deviant or pathological but should be considered as a mode of adaptation necessitated by the ecological structure or effective environment of the black community. That is, the attitudes and behaviors which black children learn in this community as they grow up and which they bring to school are those required by and appropriate for the niche black Americans have traditionally occupied in the American corporate economy and racial stratification system. In sum, the low school performance of black children stems from the following factors: first, white people provide them with inferior schooling and treat them differently in school; second, by imposing a job ceiling, white people fail to reward them adequately for their educational accomplishments in adult life; and third, black Americans develop coping devices which, in turn, further limit their striving for academic success.

A concept which allows one to comprehend more fully the academic attitudes and behaviors of black Americans under this circumstance is that of *status mobility system* (LeVine, 1967; Ogbu, 1978). A status mobility system is the socially or culturally approved strategy for getting ahead within a given population or a given society. It is the people's *folk theory of making it* or

getting ahead, however the particular population defines getting ahead. A central premise of the concept is that a given status mobility system generates its own ideal personality types, distinguished by those orientations, qualities, and competencies which one needs to get ahead in the particular population. Furthermore, the way members of a population, including a subordinate population, prepare their children for adulthood, through child rearing as well as formal schooling, is influenced by their ideal images and characteristics of successful members of the population, living or dead; these images are incorporated into the value systems of parents and others responsible for the upbringing of children. As the children get older and begin to understand the status mobility system of their group, they themselves tend to play an active role in learning how to get ahead in the manner prescribed by their culture.

In a given population the orientations, qualities, competencies, and behaviors fostered by the system of status mobility will reflect the social and economic realities of its members. Thus, people's way of bringing up children, through which they inculcate those orientations, qualities, competencies, and behaviors they consider essential for competence in adulthood, is not divorced from their social and economic realities. In the case of subordinate minorities like black Americans, the schooling offered to them by the dominant group usually reflects the dominant group members' perceptions of the place of the minorities in the opportunity structure; equally important, however, are the responses of the minorities, which reflect their perceptions of their social and economic realities, their strategies for getting ahead.

The cultural-ecological explanation has undergone modifications because the original formulation did not explain differences in school success among black students. Why, for example, are some black children academically successful even though as a group black Americans face a limited adult opportunity structure and are given substandard education? The original formulation has also been criticized for focusing on black school failure while ignoring possible explanations for black school success (Fordham, 1981). But in fairness to the theory, it should be pointed out that it was initially proposed as a response to earlier theories that attributed disproportionately high rates of black school failure to genetic factors (Jensen, 1969) or to cultural deprivation (Bloom, Davis, and Hess, 1965).

Collective Identity, Cultural Frame, and Schooling

Since 1980 (Ogbu, 1980, 1982) the recognition of the above weakness, as well as the need to explain better the academic success of some other minority groups, has led the authors to modify the cultural-ecological explanation. The modification has involved going beyond factors of instrumental exploitation (limitations in opportunity structure, such as "job ceilings") and instrumental responses, to examine the expressive dimension of the relationship between the dominant group and the minorities. Specifically, in studying the expressive dimension of minority-majority group relations, we have isolated

two additional factors we believe make the relationship between blacks and whites in America qualitatively different from the relationship between white Americans and other types of minorities, especially the immigrants. These additional factors also shed some light on the intragroup differences or individual differences within the black population. The two factors are an *oppositional collective or social identity* and an *oppositional cultural frame of reference* (Fordham, 1981, 1982a; Ogbu, 1980, 1981, 1984).

Our clue to the twin phenomena comes from reviewing cross-cultural studies of minorities. We have found the work of Spicer (1966, 1971), DeVos (1967, 1984), Castile and Kushner (1981), Green (1981), and others particularly helpful in this regard. These scholars have analyzed conflicts and oppositional processes between minority groups and dominant groups in both traditional societies and contemporary urban industrial societies, and they have concluded that the conflicts and opposition often cause the minorities to form oppositional social identities and oppositional cultural frames of reference (Ogbu, 1986a). A close analysis of the relationship between subordinate minorities and the dominant white Americans reveals these same kinds of conflicts and oppositional processes.

Subordinate minorities like black Americans develop a sense of collective identity or sense of peoplehood in opposition to the social identity of white Americans because of the way white Americans treat them in economic, political, social, and psychological domains, including white exclusion of these groups from true assimilation. The oppositional identity of the minority evolves also because they perceive and experience the treatment by whites as collective and enduring oppression. They realize and believe that, regardless of their individual ability and training or education, and regardless of their place of origin (e.g., in Africa) or residence in America, regardless of their individual-economic status or physical appearance, they cannot expect to be treated like white Americans, their "fellow citizens"; nor can they easily escape from their more or less birth-ascribed membership in a subordinate and disparaged group by "passing" or by returning to "a homeland" (Green, 1981).

Along with the formation of an oppositional social identity, subordinate minorities also develop an oppositional cultural frame of reference which includes devices for protecting their identity and for maintaining boundaries between them and white Americans. Thus subordinate minorities regard certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as *not appropriate* for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans. At the same time they emphasize other forms of behavior and other events, symbols, and meanings as more appropriate for them because these are *not a part of white Americans' way of life*. To behave in the manner defined as falling within a white cultural frame of reference is to "act white" and is negatively sanctioned.

The cultural frame of reference of subordinate minorities is emotionally charged because it is closely tied to their sense of collective identity and

security. Therefore individuals who try to behave like white Americans or try to cross cultural boundaries or to "act white" in forbidden domains face opposition from their peers and probably from other members of the minority community. Their peers often construe such behaviors as trying to join the enemy (DeVos, 1967). Individuals trying to cross cultural boundaries or pass culturally may also experience internal stress, what DeVos (1967) calls "affective dissonance." The reason for the affective dissonance is that such individuals share their minority-group's sense of collective oppositional identity, a belief which may cause them to feel that they are, indeed, betraying their group and its cause. The individuals may also experience psychological stress because they are uncertain that white Americans will accept them if they succeed in learning to "act white" (Fordham, 1985; Ogbu, 1986b). Indeed, DeVos (1984) argues that in a situation involving an oppositional process, subordinate-group members may automatically or unconsciously perceive learning some aspects of the culture of their "oppressors" as harmful to their identity. That is, learning itself may arouse a sense of "impending conflict over one's future identity." Of course, not every member of the minority group feels this way. Some do not identify with the oppositional identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference of their group. Some identify only marginally, and some even repudiate their group's social identity and cultural frame of reference (Fordham, 1985).

An oppositional cultural frame of reference is applied by the minorities selectively. The target areas appear to be those traditionally defined as prerogatives of white Americans, both by white people themselves and by the minorities. These are areas in which it was long believed that only whites could perform well and in which few minorities traditionally were given the opportunity to try or were rewarded if they tried and succeeded. They are areas where criteria of performance have been established by whites and competence in performance is judged by whites or their representatives, and where rewards for performance are determined by white people according to white criteria. Academic tasks represent one such area, as was noted in our comment in the vignettes presented earlier.

How do the oppositional identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference enter into the process of subordinate minorities' schooling? The oppositional identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference enter into the process of minority schooling through the minorities' perceptions and interpretations of schooling as learning the white American cultural frame of reference which they have come to assume to have adverse effects on their own cultural and identity integrity. Learning school curriculum and learning to follow the standard academic practices of the school are often equated by the minorities with learning to "act white" or as actually "acting white" while simultaneously giving up acting like a minority person. School learning is therefore consciously or unconsciously perceived as a *subtractive process*: a minority person who learns successfully in school or who follows the standard practices of the school is perceived as becoming acculturated into the white

American cultural frame of reference at the expense of the minorities' cultural frame of reference and collective welfare. It is important to point out that, even though the perceptions and behavioral responses are manifested by students, as peer groups and individuals, the perceptions and interpretations are a part of a cultural orientation toward schooling which exists within the minority community and which evolved during many generations when white Americans insisted that minorities were incapable of academic success, denied them the opportunity to succeed academically, and did not reward them adequately when they succeeded.

The perception of schooling as a subtractive process causes subordinate minorities to "oppose" or "resist" academic striving, both socially and psychologically. At the social level, peer groups discourage their members from putting forth the time and effort required to do well in school and from adopting the attitudes and standard practices that enhance academic success. They oppose adopting appropriate academic attitudes and behaviors because they are considered "white." Peer group pressures against academic striving take many forms, including labeling (e.g., "brainiac" for students who receive good grades in their courses), exclusion from peer activities or ostracism, and physical assault. Individuals "resist" striving to do well academically partly out of fear of peer responses and partly to avoid affective dissonance. Because they also share their group's sense of collective identity and cultural frame of reference, individuals may not want to behave in a manner they themselves define as "acting white."

Fictive Kinship and Schooling

In our study of the twin phenomena of oppositional social identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference among black Americans, we have found the concept of fictive kinship (see Fordham 1981, 1985) an appropriate one to convey their meanings. In anthropology, fictive kinship refers to a kinshiplike relationship between persons not related by blood or marriage in a society, but who have some reciprocal social or economic relationship. There is usually a native term for it, or a number of native terms expressing or indicating its presence (Brain, 1971; Freed, 1973; Norbeck and Befu, 1958; Pitt-Rivers, 1968). Fictive kinship in the anthropological sense also exists among black Americans. Sometimes black people refer to persons in that kind of relationship as "play-kin" (Shimkin, Shimkin, and Frate, 1978).

But there is a much wider meaning of fictive kinship among black Americans. In this latter sense the term conveys the idea of "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" of all black Americans. This sense of peoplehood or collective social identity is evident in numerous kinship and pseudokinship terms that black Americans use to refer to one another. The following are examples of the kinship and pseudokinship terms most commonly used by adolescents and adults: "brother," "sister," "soul brother," "soul sister," "blood," "bleed," "folk," "members," "the people," "my people" (see Folb, 1980; Liebow, 1967;

Sargent, 1985; Stack, 1974). In this paper we are using the term fictive kinship in the second, wider sense; that is, fictive kinship is used to denote a cultural symbol of collective identity of black Americans.

More specifically, fictive kinship is used to describe the particular mind set, i.e., the specific world view of those persons who are appropriately labeled "black." Since "blackness" is more than a skin color, fictive kinship is the concept used to denote the moral judgment the group makes on its members (see Brain, 1972). Essentially, the concept suggests that the mere possession of African features and/or being of African descent does not automatically make one a black person, nor does it suggest that one is a member in good standing of the group. One can be black in color, but choose not to seek membership in the fictive kinship system, and/or be denied membership by the group because one's behavior, activities, and lack of manifest loyalty are at variance with those thought to be appropriate and group-specific.

The black American fictive kinship system probably developed from their responses to two types of treatment they received from white Americans. One is the economic and other instrumental exploitation by whites both during and after slavery (Anderson, 1975; Bullock, 1970; Drake and Cayton, 1970; Myrdal, 1944; Spivey, 1978). The other kind of treatment is the tendency of white Americans historically to treat blacks as an undifferentiated mass of people, ascribing to them indiscriminately certain inherent strengths and weaknesses. It appears that blacks have sometimes responded by inverting the negative stereotypes and assumptions of whites into positive and functional attributes (Fordham, 1982a; Holt, 1972; Ogbu, 1983). Thus, blacks may have transformed white assumptions of black homogeneity into a collective identity system and a coping strategy.

An example of collective treatment by white Americans which may have promoted the formation of black people's sense of collective identity in opposition to white identity and expressed the oppositional identity in the idiom of fictive kinship occurred following Nat Turner's "insurrection" in Southampton, Virginia, in 1831. After that incident whites restricted the movement of blacks as well as black contact amongst themselves, regardless of their place of residence or personal involvement in the insurrection (Haley, 1976; Styron, 1966). Even black children in Washington, D.C., were forbidden by whites from attending Sunday school with white children after the incident, although local whites knew that black children in Washington, D.C., had no part in the insurrection. What was well understood by blacks in Southampton, Virginia, in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere in the country was that the *onus* for Turner's behavior was extended to all black Americans solely on the basis of their being black. Numerous arbitrary treatments of this kind, coupled with a knowledge that they were denied true assimilation into the mainstream of American life, encouraged blacks to develop what DeVos (1967) calls "ethnic consolidation," a sense of peoplehood (Green, 1981) expressed in fictive kinship feelings and language.

Because fictive kinship symbolizes a black American sense of peoplehood in

opposition to white American social identity, we suggest that it is closely tied to their various boundary-maintaining behaviors and attitudes towards whites. An example is the tendency for black Americans to emphasize group loyalty in situations involving conflict or competition with whites. Furthermore, black people have a tendency to negatively sanction behaviors and attitudes they consider to be at variance with their group identity symbols and criteria of membership. We also note that, since only black Americans are involved in the evaluation of group members' eligibility for membership in the fictive kinship system, they control the criteria used to judge one's worthiness for membership, and the criteria are totally group-specific. That is, the determination and control of the criteria for membership in the fictive kinship system are in contrast to the determination and control of the criteria for earning grades in school or promotion in the mainstream workplace by white people. Fictive kinship means a lot to black people because they regard it as the ideal by which members of the group are judged; it is also the medium through which blacks distinguish "real" from "spurious" members (M. Williams, 1981).

Black children learn the meaning of fictive kinship from their parents and peers while they are growing up. And it appears that the children learn it early and well enough so that they more or less unconsciously but strongly tend to associate their life chances and "success" potential with those of their peers and members of their community. Group membership is important in black peer relationships; as a result, when it comes to dealing with whites and white institutions, the unexpressed assumption guiding behavior seems to be that "my brother is my brother regardless of what he does or has done" (Haskins, 1976; Sargent, 1985). In the next section we will illustrate how the fictive kinship phenomenon enters into and affects the schooling of black children in one local community, Washington, D.C.

"ACTING WHITE" AT CAPITAL HIGH

The setting of the study, Capital High School¹ and its surrounding community, has been described in detail elsewhere (Fordham, 1982b, 1984, 1985). Suffice it here to say that Capital High is a predominantly black high school (some 99% black—1,868 out of 1,886 students at the start of the research effort in 1982). It is located in a historically black section of Washington, D.C., in a relatively low-income area.

The influence of fictive kinship is extensive among the students at Capital High. It shows up not only in conflicts between blacks and whites and between black students and black teachers, who are often perceived to be "functionaries" of the dominant society, but also in the students' constant need to reassure one another of black loyalty and identity. They appear to achieve this group loyalty by defining certain attitudes and behaviors as "white" and therefore unacceptable, and then employing numerous devices to discourage

one another from engaging in those behaviors and attitudes, i.e., from "acting white."

Among the attitudes and behaviors that black students at Capital High identify as "acting white" and therefore unacceptable are: (1) speaking standard English; (2) listening to white music and white radio stations; (3) going to the opera or ballet; (4) spending a lot of time in the library studying; (5) working hard to get good grades in school; (6) getting good grades in school (those who get good grades are labeled "brainiacs"); (7) going to the Smithsonian; (8) going to a Rolling Stones concert at the Capital Center; (9) doing volunteer work; (10) going camping, hiking, or mountain climbing; (11) having cocktails or a cocktail party; (12) going to a symphony orchestra concert; (13) having a party with no music; (14) listening to classical music; (15) being on time; (16) reading and writing poetry; and (17) putting on "airs," and so forth. This list is not exhaustive, but indicates kinds of attitudes and behaviors likely to be negatively sanctioned and therefore avoided by a large number of students.

As operationally defined in this paper, the idea of "coping with the burden of 'acting white'" suggests the various strategies that black students at Capital High use to resolve, successfully or unsuccessfully, the tension between students desiring to do well academically and meet the expectations of school authorities on the one hand and the demands of peers for conformity to group-sanctioned attitudes and behaviors that validate black identity and cultural frame on the other. Black students at Capital High who choose to pursue academic success are perceived by their peers as "being kind of white" (Weis, 1985, p. 101) and therefore not truly black. This gives rise to the tension between those who want to succeed (i.e., who in the eyes of their peers want to "act white") and others insisting on highlighting group-sanctioned attitudes and behaviors. Under the circumstance, students who want to do well in school must find some strategy to resolve the tension. This tension, along with the extra responsibility it places on students who choose to pursue academic success in spite of it, and its effects on the performance of those who resolve the tension successfully and those who do not, constitute "the burden of 'acting white.'" The few high-achieving students, as we will show, have learned how to cope successfully with the burden of acting white, the many underachieving students have not succeeded in a manner that enhances academic success. It is this tension and its effects on black students' academic efforts and outcomes that are explored in the case study of Capital High students.

Ethnographic data in the study were collected over a period of more than one year. During the study some 33 students in the eleventh grade were studied intensively, and our examples are drawn from this sample. Below we describe 8 cases; 4 males and 4 females. Two of the males, and 2 of the females are underachievers, while 2 of the males and 2 of the females are high achievers.

Underachieving Students

Underachieving black students in the sample appear to have the ability to do well in school, at least better than their present records show. But they have apparently decided, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid "acting white." That is, they choose to avoid adopting attitudes and putting in enough time and effort in their schoolwork because their peers (and they themselves) would interpret their behaviors as "white." Their main strategy for coping with the burden of acting white tends, therefore, to be *avoidance*.

Our first example of an underachieving male is *Sidney*. Like most students in the sample, Sidney took the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) and did fairly well, scoring at the 67th percentile on the math section of the test and at the 54th percentile on the verbal section. His scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) in the ninth grade indicate that he was performing well above grade level: His composite score in reading was 12.2; he scored at the college level on the language component (13.6); on the math component he scored just above eleventh grade (11.3), making his total battery on these three components 11.8. He scored above college level in the reference skills, science, and social studies sections. On the whole, his performance on standardized tests is far higher than that of many high-achieving males in our sample.

In spite of this relatively good performance on standardized tests, his grade point average is only C. Sidney is surprised and disgusted with his inability to earn grades comparable to those he earned in elementary and junior high school. While he takes most of the courses available to eleventh graders from the Advanced Placement sequence, he is not making the A's and B's at Capital High that he consistently made during his earlier schooling.

Sidney is an outstanding football player who appears to be encapsulated in the very forces which he maintains are largely responsible for the lack of upward mobility in the local black community. He is very much aware of the need to earn good grades in school in order to take advantage of the few opportunities he thinks are available to black Americans. However, he appears unable to control his life and act in opposition to the forces he identifies as detrimental to his academic progress.

His friends are primarily football players and other athletes. He is able to mix and mingle easily with them despite the fact that, unlike most of them, he takes advanced courses; he claims that this is because of his status as an athlete. His friends are aware of his decision to take these advanced courses, and they jokingly refer to him as "Mr. Advanced Placement."

Sidney readily admits that he could do a lot better in school, but says that he, like many of his friends, does not value what he is asked to learn in school. He also reluctantly admits that the fear of being called a "brainiac" prevents him from putting more time and effort into his schoolwork. According to him, the term "brainiac" is used in a disparaging manner at Capital High for

students who do well in their courses:

Anthropologist: Have you heard the word "brainiac" used here?

Sidney: Yes. [When referring to students who take the Advanced Placement courses, here.] That's a term for the smartest person in class. Brainiac—jerk—you know, those terms. If you're smart, you're a jerk, you're a brainiac.

Anthro: Are all those words synonyms?

Sidney: Yes.

Anthro: So it's not a positive [term]?

Sidney: No, it's a negative [term], as far as brilliant academic students are concerned.

Anthro: Why is that?

Sidney: That's just the way the school population is.

Although Sidney takes the Advanced Placement Courses, he is not making much effort to get good grades; instead, he spends his time and effort developing a persona that will nullify any claims that he is a brainiac, as can be seen in the following interview excerpt:

Anthropologist: Has anyone ever called you a [brainiac]?

Sidney: Brainiac? No.

Anthro: Why not?

Sidney: Well, I haven't given them a reason to. And, too, well, I don't excel in all my classes like I *should* be—that's another reason. . . . I couldn't blame it on the environment. I have come to blame it on myself—for partaking in the environment. But I can tell you that—going back to what we were talking about—another reason why they don't call me a "brainiac," because I'm an athlete.

Anthro: So . . . if a kid is smart, for example, one of the ways to limit the negative reaction to him or her, and his or her brilliance, is . . . Yeah, do something extracurricular in the school. . . . [like] being an athlete, cheerleader squad, in the band—like that. . . . Yeah, *something that's important* [emphasis added], that has something to do with—that represents your school.

Sidney admits that the fear of being known as a brainiac has negatively affected his academic effort a great deal. The fear of being discovered as an "imposter" among his friends, leads him to choose carefully those persons with whom he will interact within the classroom; all of the males with whom he interacts who also take Advanced Placement courses are, like him, primarily concerned with "mak[ing] it over the hump."

He also attributes his lack of greater effort in school to his lack of will power and time on task. And he thinks that his low performance is due to his greater emphasis on athletic achievement and his emerging manhood, and less emphasis on the core curriculum. He does not study. He spends very little time completing his homework assignments, usually fifteen minutes before breakfast. On the whole, Sidney is not proud of his academic record. But he does not

feel that he can change the direction of his school career because he does not want to be known as a brainiac.

The second example of an underachieving male student is Max. Max scored higher than many high-achieving males on the PSAT, scoring at the 58th percentile on the verbal and at the 52nd percentile on the math component. But his course grades, at all levels, have been mostly C's with a few B's and an occasional A. Since coming to Capital High, his grades have fallen even further from their earlier low in junior high. For example, during his first year at Capital High he earned two F's, two D's, one C, and one A.

Max, like Sidney, is a football player who "puts brakes," i.e., limitations, on his academic effort. He also takes most of his courses from the Advanced Placement courses for eleventh graders. However, unlike Sidney, who chose to come to Capital High because of the advanced courses, Max takes these courses only because his parents insist that he take them.

Listening to this student's responses to questions, or hearing him talk about his life experiences, one is struck by the tenacity of his desire to remain encapsulated in peer-group relations and norms. This is quite contrary to his mother's constant effort to "liberate" him from that encapsulation. Max is different from his friends because of his middle-class background. He knows that he is different, but values their friendship very much:

We don't think the same, me and my friends. That's why I used to think that I wasn't—I used to think that I wasn't—I used to always put myself down, I wasn't good enough. Because I could—the things they'd want to do, I didn't want to do because I knew it was wrong, and that I wouldn't get anything out of it. And, really, a cheap thrill isn't really all that much to me—really it isn't. It's just not worth it, you know. Why go through the trouble? So—that's just the way I think. I used to try and change it, but it didn't work. . . . not for me, it didn't, anyways.

Because his friends are critically important to him and his sense of identity, Max not only holds on to them at the expense of his academic progress, but he also resorts to necessary role playing to ensure that he retains the integrity of his social identity. For him, role playing means underestimating his level of intelligence and insight. In fact, he argues that the role he has played over the years has become so much a part of him that he is forced at different junctures to say to himself that he must snap out of the socially constructed persona. This role—limiting his academic effort and performance—is so much a part of who he is seen to be, that Max claims it is "something like a split personality, kind of, but it isn't."

What is the effect of these factors on Max's school career? He feels sad when he reflects on his school career thus far:

You know, I just sacrificed a whole lot out of myself, what I could do, just to make my friends happy, you know. And it never—it just didn't work. They—you know, all of them didn't take advantage of me. They really didn't bother—it bothered me, but it wasn't that they were all trying just to take advantage of me, it was just that, you know, sometimes when I got my mind—you know, I just got—I'd get myself

psyched out, worrying about what other people thought of me. But it really doesn't matter all that much, anymore. Not as much as it did then. I guess that's just growing up.

Shelvy is our first example of the underachieving female students. Her performance on standardized tests supports her teachers' evaluation of her academic ability. On her eleventh grade CTBS, her composite score in the three major areas—reading, language, and mathematics—was the highest overall grade equivalent (OGE) possible, 13.6. Because she assumes that she will not be able to go to college (her parents are very poor), she did not see any value in trying to convince her parents to give her the five dollars needed to pay for the PSAT, and so she opted not to take it.

In the elementary school her grades were "mostly VG's, A's, B's and stuff like that." Despite the resistance to academic success by students in the two elementary and two junior high schools (all in the Capital community) she attended prior to coming to Capital High, she continued to obtain good grades. In fact, in the second junior high school she was placed in the only honors section of the ninth grade class. This made it much easier for her because everybody there had been identified as a potentially good student. As she puts it:

I went to Garden [Junior High School]. That was fairly well, but in the eighth grade I had the problem of the same thing—everybody saying, "Well, she thinks she's smart," and all this. I had the same problem in the eighth grade. But in the ninth grade, they placed me in an all-academic section and, you know, everyone in there was smart, so it wasn't recognized—they recognized everybody as being a smart section, instead of an individual.

She made the Honor Roll during both her eighth and ninth grade years, and this pattern of academic success continued during her first year at Capital High when she earned two B's, two A's, and two C's.

At the time of this study, however, things had changed for Shelvy. She is no longer enthusiastic about school and is not making any concerted effort to improve the level of her performance. The reason for this development is unclear. However, from her account of students' attitudes and behaviors in the schools she attended and at Capital, we speculate that she finally submitted to peer pressures not to "act white." Therefore she has not resorted to the coping strategies that worked for her in earlier school years.

Speaking of her earlier school experiences, Shelvy says that her first contact with the notion of success as a risky task began in the elementary school, and probably came to full fruition during the sixth grade when, for the first time in her life, she heard the word "brainiac" used to refer to her. She says that ideally everybody wants to be a brainiac, but one is paralyzed with fear that if he or she performs well in school he or she will be discovered, and that would bring some added responsibilities and problems.

Perhaps more than any other underachieving female, Shelvy's academic performance reflects the pain and frustrations associated with trying to

camouflage one's abilities from peers. Having been a "good student" in elementary school, she knows firsthand how difficult it is to avoid encapulation in antiacademic peer groups:

In the sixth grade, it was me and these two girls, we used to hang together all the time. They used to say we was brainiacs, and no one really liked us. . . . It's not something—well, it's something that you want to be, but you don't want your friends to know [emphasis added]. . . . Because once they find out you're a brainiac, then the first thing they'll say is, "Well, she thinks she's cute, and she thinks she's smart, she thinks she's better than anyone else." So what most brainiacs do, they sit back and they know an answer, and they won't answer it. . . . 'Cause, see, first thing everybody say, "Well, they're trying to show off." So they really don't—they might answer once in a while, but. . . . Because if you let. . . all your friends know how smart you are, then when you take a test or something, then they're going to know you know the answer and they're going to want the answers. And if you don't give them to them, then they're going to get upset with you.

When asked how their being upset would be manifested, Shelvy replied, "Well, they might start rumors about you, might give you a bad name or something like that."

Shelvy's analysis of the dilemma of the brainiac clearly suggests that the academically successful black student's life is fraught with conflicts and ambivalence. The fear of being differentiated and labeled as a brainiac often leads to social isolation and a social self which is hurt by negative perceptions. Essentially Shelvy claims that a student who is identified as a brainiac is more vulnerable to "social death" than one who is not.

Shelvy is more aware than many of her peers concerning why she is not performing as well academically as she could and perhaps should. As she explains it, she is keenly aware of her peers' concurrent "embracement and rejection" of school norms and behaviors. In that sense she realizes that seeking school success at Capital High is immersed in boundary-maintaining devices. It is the boundary-maintaining tendencies of her peers, which negatively sanction behaviors associated with the label "brainiac," that are negatively affecting her school performance. Her fear of being labeled a "brainiac" and burdened with all the expectations attendant thereto, as well as her negative perception of the opportunity structure, has led her to resort to lowering her effort in school. Her fear of academic excellence is readily apparent when observed in the classroom context. When she is called upon by teachers, she responds quickly and correctly; however, having learned from negative experiences associated with academic success in the elementary and junior high schools, she "puts brakes" on her academic effort to minimize bringing attention to herself.

Kaela is our second example of an underachieving female student. Kaela did not take the PSAT in the eleventh grade, so it is not one of the available measures of her academic ability. Nor did she take the CTBS. She did, however, take the Life Skills Examination, a standardized test required of all eleventh graders by the D.C. Public School System. In fact, she had a perfect

score on that exam.

Kaela's teachers say that she not only has the ability to do the work required in their courses, but she is also more capable than most other students taking their courses. Yet, Kaela failed nearly all her major courses during her first semester at Capital High. The primary reason for her failure is her unwillingness to come to school regularly, i.e., her repeated absence from her assigned classes. For example, her English teacher was pleased with her performance but could not give her a passing grade because of poor attendance. Her history teacher was "forced" to give her a failing grade because of excessive absenteeism, although she scored 88% on the semester examination.

Kaela attended Catholic elementary and junior high schools in the Washington, D.C., area, and her academic records from those schools show that she was a good student and a high achiever. For example, during her ninth grade year, she earned high honors and received a full scholarship. She apparently attended school regularly before coming to Capital High. When questioned directly about her repeated absence at Capital High, Kaela says that she does not know why she and other students are absent:

I don't really know why. I don't even know why I don't come, when I know I should come. It's just that we [black students] don't have that much support. We don't get—I know we know that we should do things, but it's—you know, you know something pushing you. And when you don't have that, sometimes you feel like nobody cares, so why should you care? It gets like that sometimes. But then other times, I don't know why. Sometimes I don't want to come if I haven't done my homework. And then—I don't understand. I don't know why. I think we're scared to take responsibility and stuff. And that's because the people we keep company with, you know. And it's just—I don't know—people—when we see people, you know, and they're like role models. But they don't necessarily have to be good role models. And then we just settle for that. And we—I know that I don't want to settle for that, but it's just something in me that won't let me do more. So I settle. I know I could make the Honor Roll here. . . .

An examination of Kaela's schooling history shows that her problem probably began to develop back in Catholic schools when she started to develop a sense of collective identity. She says that she began to lose interest in her schoolwork after she found that the parochial school administrators were treating her differently from the way they treated other black students, as if she were special. Since she, too, is a black person, she began to seriously limit her school effort and could not be persuaded by her teachers or parents to believe that she was unlike the other black students. Thus, while her teachers insist on treating her as an individual, Kaela sees herself first and foremost as a black person, and it is her growing sense of identity as a black person which has negatively affected her school performance. She appears convinced that opportunities for black Americans are small and her personal future very limited because (a) she is black, (b) her family is very poor and cannot pay for her college education, and (c) the competition for highly valued positions in

school and the workplace is too keen for her. Therefore she decided to "put brakes" on her academic effort in order to reduce the frustration from being overqualified for the low-status jobs she thinks she will get eventually.

Kaela attributes the behaviors and low academic achievement of other black Americans at Capital High to the same factors as those operating in her situation. She says that students perceive an opportunity structure in which they are judged primarily on the basis of their race. This discourages students from persevering in their schoolwork and from academic success. As Kaela was being interviewed at a time when students were selecting their classes for the next year, she used the event to point out the effect of students' perceptions of dismal futures on their course selections:

[The students at Capital High would] try harder to make good grades in school if they thought they had a real chance. I know that. Because I've heard a lot of people say, "Well, I don't know why I'm taking all these hard classes. I ain't never going to see this stuff again in my life! Why am I going to sit up here and make my record look bad, trying to take all these hard classes and get bad grades? I ain't going to need this stuff. I'm just going to take what I need to get my diploma. Forget all that other stuff. And, you know, I thought like that for a while too [emphasis added]. But it's not the right way. I mean, we should try to better ourselves in any possible way. But a lot of people don't think that way.

Kaela's views of black Americans' opportunity structure as being racially biased have contributed to her diminishing interest and effort in school. Her refusal to put forth the necessary effort to do well in school also stems from her growing identification with the problems and concerns of black people. Her growing racial awareness is thus inversely related to her school effort and achievement. It seems that Kaela's absence from school is one way she tries to cope with the "burden of acting white."

High-Achieving Students

Students at Capital High who are relatively successful academically also face the problem of coping with the "burden of acting white." But they have usually adopted strategies that enable them to succeed. These students decide more or less consciously (a) to pursue academic success and (b) to use specific strategies to cope with the burden of acting white.

Marrin is our first example of a high-achieving male student. His scores on the standardized tests, PSAT and CTBS, are unfortunately not available to help us assess his ability. But he has a relatively good academic record. He graduated tenth in his junior high school class, and in the tenth grade at Capital High, he earned three B's, one A-, and a D. He is a member of the school's chapter of the National Honor Society. Although Marrin is still uncertain about his overall academic ability because of absence of reliable scores on standardized tests, he gets good grades in class, attends school regularly, has a positive attitude about school, and receives good evaluations from teachers.

Martin is fully aware of peer pressures to discourage male students at Capital High from striving toward academic success. The most discouraging factor, in his view, is the fear of being labeled a "brainiac" or, worse, a "pervert brainiac." To be known as a brainiac is bad enough, but to be known as a pervert brainiac is tantamount to receiving a kiss of death. For a male student to be known as a brainiac, according to Martin, is to question his manhood; to be known as a pervert brainiac leaves little doubt. He claims that there are persistent rumors that some male students taking all or a large number of the Advanced Placement courses are homosexuals; this is far less the case for male students who do not take the advanced courses. Also it is believed at Capital High that males who do *not* make good grades are less likely to be gay.

Martin says that the best strategy for a male student making good grades or wanting to succeed academically and yet escape the label of brainiac is for him to handle his school persona carefully and to cloak it in other activities that minimize hostility against academically successful students. One such "cloaking activity" is "lunching": that is, to avoid being called a brainiac and thereby bringing one's manhood into question, a male student who desires good grades will often resort to behaviors suggesting that he is a clown, comedian, or does not work very hard to earn the grades he receives.

Martin:

Okay, lunching is like when you be acting crazy, you know, having fun with women, you know. Okay, you still be going to class, but you—like me, okay, they call *me* crazy, 'cause I'll be having fun. . . .

Anthropologist:

Do they say you're "lunching"?

Martin:

Yeah, go ask [my girlfriend]. She be saying I'm lunching, 'cause I be—'cause I be doin' my homework, and I be playin' at the same time, and I get it done. I don't know how I do that.

Anthro:

So it's important to be a clown, too—I mean, to be a comedian?

Martin:

Yeah, yeah, a comedian, because you—yeah. A comedian is a male? There's no doubt that a comedian is a male? A male, uh-huh! 'Cause if you be all about [concerned only about] your schoolwork, right? And you know a lot of your *friends* not about it, if you don't act like a clown, your friends gonna start calling you a brainiac.

Anthro:

And it's not good to be called a brainiac?

Martin:

Yeah, it's—I don't want nobody to be calling *me* one, 'cause I know I ain't no brainiac. But if they call you one, you might seem odd to them. 'Cause they'll always be joining on you. See? When I was at Kaplan [Junior High school], that's what they called me—"brainiac," 'cause I made straight A's and B's, that's all in the First Advisory. So that's why. . . .

The interview with Martin left us with the impression that he does not put forth as much effort and time as he might have were he not shackled with the burden of worrying about his peers' perceptions of him as a brainiac. Therefore, although he comes to school every day (he missed only one day during the tenth grade) and completes most of his homework, he does not do more than the officially required academic tasks.

Norris is another high-achieving male student who has developed specific strategies for coping with the burden of acting white. His performance on the verbal and math sections of the PSAT was at the 85th and 96th percentile, respectively. His scores on the CTBS are similarly impressive. His overall grade equivalent in every section—reading, language, math, reference skills, science, and social studies, as well as in every subsection—is at the college level (13.6 OGE—overall grade equivalent).

He has maintained an outstanding academic record since elementary school, where he was recommended to skip the fifth grade. He graduated from Garden Junior High as the Valedictorian of his class. He also received several ancillary awards, including "the most improved student," "the most likely to succeed," etc. He earned all A's in his first semester at Capital High, taking Advanced Placement courses. His cumulative grade average is A.

How does Norris do so well in school and still cope with the burden of acting white? Norris says that he has faced the problem of coping with the burden of acting white since his elementary school days, when he discovered that he was academically ahead of other students, and that they did not like anyone doing well academically like himself. He says that what has been critically important in his acceptance by his peers, even though he is a good student, is his appearance of not putting forth much academic effort. At the elementary and junior high schools, where his peers thought that he got good grades without studying, they attributed his academic success to his "natural talent" or special gift. Therefore they did not view him as a pervert brainiac.

The public elementary school he attended was "filled with hoodlums, thugs, and the dregs of society," in his words. Fighting was a frequent pastime among the students. Under this circumstance Norris' strategy was to choose friends who would protect him in exchange for his helping them with homework assignments, tests, etc. He explains the strategy as follows:

I didn't want to—you know, be with anybody that was like me, 'cause I didn't want to get beat up. The school I went to, Berkeley, was really rough, see? It was really tough, you know. Lived in the projects and everything, and known tough and everything. So I used to hang with them. If anybody ever came in my face and wanted to pick on me, they'd always be there to help me. So I always made sure I had at least two or three buddies to be my friends. Even though if it does mean I had to give up answers in class. . . . I was willing to give up a little to get a lot. So I did that for elementary school. Then, by the time I got to junior high school, I said, "Forget it. If people don't tend to accept me the way I am, that's too bad. I don't need any friends, I have myself."

His alliance with "buddies" and "hoodlums" worked at the elementary school. At the junior high level, he had a second factor in his favor, namely, his growing athletic prowess. This helped to lessen the image of him as a pervert brainiac. But he also deliberately employed another strategy, this time acting as a clown or comedian. He explains it this way:

[In junior high school] I had to act crazy then . . . you know, nutty, kind of loony.

they say . . . (the students would then say), "He's crazy" — not a *class* clown, to get on the teachers' nerves, I never did that to the—around *them*. I'd be crazy. As soon as I hit that class, it was serious business . . . Only the people who knew me knew my crazy side, when they found out I was smart, they wouldn't believe it. And the people that knew that I was smart, wouldn't believe it if they were told that I was crazy. So I went through that. I'm still like that *now*, though.

Norris continues his comedian strategy at Capital High. He says that it is important for him to employ this strategy because he wants to do well in order to go to college on scholarships.

High-achieving females use certain gender-specific strategies to cope with the burden of acting white. But, like the males, they camouflage to avoid being perceived as brainiacs. More than the males, the female high achievers work to maintain low profiles in school. Katrina and Rita will serve as examples.

Katrina's performance on the math component of the PSAT was at the 95th percentile. Only one other student, Norris, scored higher and another student had a comparable score. Katrina's score on the verbal component was not as high, being at the 75th percentile. But her overall score far surpassed those of most other students. Her performance on the CTBS was equally impressive, with an overall grade equivalent of 13.6, or college level, in every section—math, reading, and language, and in every subsection, as well as in the ancillary sections, namely, reference skills, social studies, and science. She also performed well on the Life Skills examination which measures students' ability to process information in nine different areas. Katrina scored 100% in each of the nine areas.

In the classroom her performance has been equally outstanding. She had A in all subjects except handwriting in the elementary school. Her final grades in the ninth grade (i.e., junior high school) were all A's, and in the tenth grade, her first year at Capital High, her final grades were all A's.

Katrina has heard of the term "brainiac" not only at Capital High, but as far back as at the elementary and junior high school levels. And she is very much aware of the nuances associated with the term. She explains:

When they [other students] call someone a "brainiac," they mean he's always in the books. But he probably isn't always in the books. Straight A, maybe—you know, or A's and B's. A Goody-Two-Shoes with the teacher, maybe—you know, the teacher always calling on them, and they're always the leaders in the class or something.

She acknowledges that she is often referred to as a brainiac, but that she always denies it because she does not want her peers to see her that way. To treat her as a brainiac "blows her cover" and exposes her to the very forces she has sought so hard to avoid: alienation, ridicule, physical harm, and the inability to live up to the name.

How does Katrina avoid being called a brainiac and treated with hostility while at the same time managing to keep up her outstanding academic performance? Katrina admits that she has had to "put brakes" on her academic performance in order to minimize the stress she experiences. She

says that she is much better at handling subject matter than at handling her peers. To solve the peer problem, she tries not to be conspicuous. As she puts it:

Junior high, I didn't have much problem. I mean, I didn't have—there were always a lot of people in the classroom who did the work, so I wasn't like, the only one who did this assignment. So—I mean, I might do better at it, but I wasn't the only one. And so a lot of times, I'd let other kids answer—I mean, not *let* them, but . . . All right, I let them answer questions [laughter], and I'd hold back. So I never really got into any arguments, you know, about school and my grades or anything.

She is extremely fearful of peer reactions if she were identified as acting white. Since she wants to continue doing well in school, she chooses to "go underground," that is, not to bring attention to herself. Her reluctance to participate in Capital High's "It's Academic" Club, a TV competition program, illustrates her desire to maintain a low profile. "It's Academic" is perhaps the most "intellectual" extracurricular activity at the school. To participate in the three-person team, a student must take a test prepared by the faculty sponsoring it. The three top scorers are eligible to represent the school in the TV competition. Katrina reluctantly took the test at the suggestion of her physics teacher, the club sponsor. However, she had a prior agreement that she would not be selected to participate on the team *even if she had the top score*. She was one of the three top scorers, but because of the prior agreement was made only an alternate member of the team.

Rita, our second high-achieving female, had one of the best performances on the standardized tests given at Capital High. She had the highest score on the verbal component of the PSAT, at the 96th percentile. Her math score was not as high, being at the 62nd percentile. As a result of her high performance on the PSAT, Rita was one of only five students from Capital High nominated for the National Merit Scholarship for Outstanding Negro Students. Her performance on the CTBS was equally outstanding: she scored at the OGE of 13.6 on all except the spelling subsection where she scored almost at grade level, 11.8. On the Life Skills Examination, she scored higher on each of the nine areas than the minimum required.

Rita makes fairly good grades in school, although her effort and her performance are not consistent. She switches from being a good student to an average or near-average student. For example, during her first year at Capital High, she received four C's, two D's, and one B. But in the second year she got three A's, three B's, and one C.

The inconsistency in Rita's performance appears to be due to one of the strategies she claims to have adopted to cope with the burden of acting white, namely, irregular class attendance as a way of maintaining a low profile. She readily admits that she strategically cuts classes and makes deliberate plans for achieving her goal of getting the most in return for as little effort as possible in all her classes.

Rita's current main strategy is, however, comedic. She is seen as a clown

and is often described by friends, peers and classmates as "that crazy Rita." This is true even though they know that her academic performance is among the best at the school. But her main impression on people is that she is "crazy," because of the way she interacts with peers, classmates, and even with her teachers. Rita believes that this comedic behavior enables her to cope with pressures of schoolwork and pressure from peers. The comedic strategy is unusual among the female students at Capital High, but it works for Rita just as it works for Norris: it thwarts latent hostility of peers, while allowing her to do well on some measures of school success.

To summarize, all the high-achieving students wrestle with the conflict inherent in the unique relationship of black people with the dominant institution: the struggle to achieve success while retaining group support and approval. In school, the immediate issue is how to obtain good grades and meet the expectations of school authorities without being rejected by peers for acting white. Our examples show that successful students at Capital High generally adopt specific strategies to solve this problem.

THE BURDEN OF ACTING WHITE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The burden of acting white, how black adolescents cope with it, and its effects on their academic careers have not been generally recognized, let alone systematically studied. Nevertheless, there are references here and there suggesting that similar problems are faced by black students in other schools and in other parts of the United States. One example from Philadelphia, that of Abun-Jabbar, has already been cited. Another is that of E. Sargent, a journalist with the *Washington Post*, who attended public schools in Washington, D.C.

Sargent describes, in a column in the *Washington Post*, (Feb. 10, 1985) how he used his emerging sense of black identity to minimize the conflicts associated with academic success among black students. He attributes his ability to deal with the burden of acting white to his broader sense of black American history which he acquired *outside* the public schools. As he puts it:

While I had always been a good student, I became a better one as a result of my sense of black history. I began to notice that my public-school teachers very rarely mentioned black contributions to the sciences, math, and other areas of study. . . . They never talked about ways blacks could collectively use their education to solve the great economic and social problems facing the race.

My mind was undergoing a metamorphosis that made the world change its texture. Everything became relevant because I knew blacks had made an impact on all facets of life. I felt a part of things that most blacks thought only white people had a claim to [our emphasis]. Knowing that there is a serious speculation that Beethoven was black—a mulatto [sic]—made me enjoy classical music. "Man, why do you listen to that junk? That's white music," my friends would say. "Wrong. Beethoven was a brother." I was now bicultural, a distinction most Americans could

not claim. I could switch from boogie to rock, from funk to jazz and from rhythm-and-blues to Beethoven and Bach. . . . I moved from thinking of myself as disadvantaged to realizing that I was actually "super-advantaged." (pp. D1, D4)

Black students in desegregated and integrated schools also face the burden of acting white. A study by Petroni and Hirsch (1970) shows how the phenomenon operates in a midwestern city. They present several examples of academically successful students at Plains High School and the problems confronting them, as well as the strategies they adopt to cope with the burden of acting white. Take the case of Pat, an academically successful black female whose dilemma they describe. Pat appears to be different from other black students in the school, and she seems to be subjected to different kinds of pressures from black and white students. However, she indicates that the more difficult pressures come from black students:

I [feel] the greatest pressure from members of my own race. I'm an all-A student; I'm always on the Honor Roll; I'm in Madrigals, and so on. Because of these small accomplishments, there's a tendency for the [blacks] to think that I'm better than they are. They think I'm boasting. Take Nancy—Nancy ran for office, and I've heard other [black students] say, "She thinks she's so good." I don't think of it this way. These small accomplishments that I've achieved aren't just for me, but they're to help the black cause. I do things for my race, not just for myself. Most of the time, though, I don't pay too much attention to these kids. It's just a small percentage of [blacks] anyway, who're the troublemakers, and they resent the fact that I'm doing something, and they aren't. (Petroni and Hirsch, 1970, p. 20)

The burden of acting white becomes heavier when academically able black students face both pressures from blacks peers to conform, and doubts from whites about their ability, as the following cases show. The former is described in a series of articles on adolescents' school behavior in a predominantly white suburban school system near Washington, D.C., by Elsa Walsh (1984). Her account highlights the problems of high-achieving black students in integrated schools, especially the paralyzing effects of coping with the burden of acting white.

Our first case is that of "K," who Walsh identifies as a 13-year-old, academically gifted, female black student. Walsh describes K's feeling of loneliness and isolation in the predominantly white honors courses to which she was assigned. She also points out that black students at the school reject K and often accuse her of being "stuck up" and thinking she is "too good for them." At the same time, K's white classmates doubt that she actually has the ability to do the work in the honors courses. All of these factors erode K's confidence.

An example of a similar dilemma is Gray's (1985) description of the futility of her efforts to minimize her "blackness" through academic excellence in a predominantly white school and community:

No matter how refined my speech, or how well educated or assimilated [sic] I become, I fear I will always be an outsider. I'm almost like a naturalized alien—in

this place but not of it. . . . During my pompous period, I dealt with my insecurities by wearing a veil of superiority. Except around my family and neighbors, I played the role—the un-black.

To whites I tried to appear perfect—I earned good grades and spoke impeccable English, was well-mannered and well-groomed. Poor whites, however, made me nervous. They seldom concealed their contempt for blacks, especially "uppity" ones like myself. . . . To blacks, I was all of the above and extremely stuck up. I pretended not to see them on the street, spoke to them only when spoken to and cringed in the presence of blacks being loud in front of whites. The more integrated my Catholic grammar school became, the more uncomfortable I was there. I had heard white parents on TV, grumbling about blacks ruining their schools; I didn't want anyone to think that I, too, might bring down Sacred Heart Academy. So I behaved, hoping that no one would associated [sic] me with "them". (Gray, 1985, pp. E1, E5)

In summary, black students elsewhere, like those at Capital High, in predominantly black schools as well as in integrated schools, appear to face the burden of acting white. Under this circumstance students who are clever enough to use certain deliberate strategies succeed in "making it." In predominantly black schools, they succeed in protecting themselves from antagonisms of black peers who define their academic striving negatively as acting white. In integrated schools, their problem is further complicated by the negative and often implicit assumptions of whites about the intellectual ability of black people. In such schools, white Americans' doubts may erode the academic confidence of black students who are taking "white courses."

Other Minority Groups

Other subordinate minorities in the United States and elsewhere also appear to face a similar problem. There are indications, for instance, that American Indians and Mexican Americans perceive the public schools as an agent of assimilation into the white American or Anglo cultural frame of reference; and that these minorities consider such assimilation or linear acculturation to be detrimental to the integrity of their cultures, languages, and identities (Virgil, 1980; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Some Mexican-American students have been reported to say that school learning is "doing the anglo thing" and to appear to resist learning what is taught in the school context (Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986; Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

The problem of coping with the burden of acting white has also been reported for some American Indian students. Studies by Erickson and Mohatt (1982) among Odawa Indian students, and by Phillips (1983) among Warm Springs Reservation Indian students suggest that older elementary school students are already affected by it. These children come to the classroom "resisting" school rules and standard practices. That is, they enter the classroom with a sort of cultural convention which dictates that they should not adopt the rules of behavior and standard practices expected of children in the public schools taught by the white teachers. This indicates that

for them perhaps the rules and practices are considered white.

Outside the United States, there are also subordinate minorities who perceive the learning of the formal school curriculum as a *subtractive process*, i.e., as one-way acculturation into the cultural frame of reference of the dominant group members of their society. Among these subordinate minorities are Australian Aborigines (Bourke, 1983), the Buraku Outcasts in Japan (DeVos and Wagatsuma, 1967), some Indians of South America (Varese, 1985), and the Maoris of New Zealand (Smith, 1983). Good ethnographic studies of actual school and classroom attitudes and behaviors of these minorities are needed to determine the strategies of the students for coping with the burden of acting like the dominant group.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

We have suggested in this paper that black students' academic efforts are hampered by both external factors and within-group factors. We have tried to show that black students who are academically successful in the face of these factors have usually adopted specific strategies to avoid them. Although we recognize and have described elsewhere in detail the external, including school, factors which adversely affect black adolescents' school performance (Fordham, 1982a, 1985; Ogbu, 1974, 1978), our focus in this paper is on the within-group factors, especially on how black students respond to other black students who are trying to "make it" academically.

We began by noting that the instrumental factors postulated in our earlier cultural-ecological explanation of minority school performance, namely, inferior schooling, limited opportunity structure, and such peoples' own perceptions of and responses to schooling, are important, but that there are additional factors involved. We identified the additional factors as an oppositional collective or social identity and an oppositional cultural frame of reference, both symbolized, in the case of black Americans, by a fictive kinship system.

Fictive kinship is, then, not only a symbol of social identity for black Americans, it is also a medium of boundary maintenance vis-a-vis white Americans. The school experience of black children is implicated because, under the circumstance, schooling is perceived by blacks, especially by black adolescents, as learning to act white, as acting white, or as trying to cross cultural boundaries. And, importantly, school learning is viewed as a subtractive process. In our view, then, the academic learning and performance problems of black children arise not only from a limited opportunity structure and black people's responses to it, but also from the way black people attempt to cope with the "burden of acting white." The sources of their school difficulties—perceptions of and responses to the limited opportunity structure and the burden of acting white—are particularly important during the adolescent period in the children's school careers.

We chose to focus our analysis on the burden of acting white and its effects

on the academic effort and performance of black children because it seems to us to be a very important but as yet widely unrecognized dilemma of black students, particularly black adolescents. In other words, while we fully recognize the role of external forces—societal and school forces—in creating academic problems for the students, we also argue that how black students respond to other black students who are trying to make it is also important in determining the outcome of their education.

In the case study of Capital High School in Washington, D. C., we showed that coping with the burden of acting white affects the academic performance of both underachieving and high-achieving students. Black students who are encapsulated in the fictive kinship system or oppositional process experience greater difficulty in crossing cultural boundaries; i.e., in accepting standard academic attitudes and practices of the school and in investing sufficient time and effort in pursuing their educational goals. Some of the high-achieving students do not identify with the fictive kinship system; others more or less deliberately adopt sex-specific strategies to camouflage their academic pursuits and achievements.

The strategies of the academically successful students include engaging in activities which mute perceptions of their being preoccupied with academic excellence leading eventually to individual success outside the group, i.e., eventual upward mobility. Among them are athletic activities (which are regarded as "black activities"), and other "team"-oriented activities, for male students. Other high-achieving students camouflage their academic effort by "clowning." Still others do well in school by acquiring the "protection of 'pullies'" and "hoodlums" in return for assisting the latter in their schoolwork and homework. In general, academically successful black students at Capital High (and probably elsewhere) are careful not to brag about their achievements or otherwise bring too much attention to themselves. We conclude, however, from this study of high-achieving students at Capital High, that they would do much better if they did not have to divert time and effort into strategies designed to camouflage their academic pursuit.

There are several implications of our analysis, and the implications are at different levels. As this analysis clearly demonstrates, the first and critically important change must occur in the existing opportunity structure, through an elimination of the job ceiling and related barriers. Changes in the opportunity structure are a prerequisite to changes in the behaviors and expectations of black adolescents for two salient reasons: (1) to change the students' perceptions of what is available to them as adult workers in the labor force and (2) to minimize the exacerbation of the extant achievement problem of black adolescents who are expected to master the technical skills taught and condoned in the school context but who are, nonetheless, unable to find employment in areas where they demonstrate exemplary expertise. Barring changes in the opportunity structure, the perceptions, behaviors, and academic effort of black adolescents are unlikely to change to the extent necessary to have a significant effect on the existing boundary-maintaining

mechanisms in the community. Therefore, until the perceptions of the nature and configuration of the opportunity structure change (see J. Williams, 1985), the response of black students in the school context is likely to continue to be one which suggests that school achievement is a kind of risk which necessitates strategies enabling them to cope with the "burden of acting white." Second, educational barriers, both the gross and subtle mechanisms by which schools differentiate the academic careers of black and white children, should be eliminated.

Third, and particularly important in terms of our analysis, the unique academic learning and performance problems created by the burden of acting white should be recognized and made a target of educational policies and remediation effort. Both the schools and the black community have important roles to play in this regard. School personnel should try to understand the influence of the fictive kinship system in the students' perceptions of learning and the standard academic attitudes and practices or behaviors expected. The schools should then develop programs, including appropriate counseling, to help the students learn to divorce academic pursuit from the idea of acting white. The schools should also reinforce black identity in a manner compatible with academic pursuit, as in the case of Sargent (1985).

The black community has an important part to play in changing the situation. The community should develop programs to teach black children that academic pursuit is not synonymous with one-way acculturation into a white cultural frame of reference or acting white. To do this effectively, however, the black community must reexamine its own perceptions and interpretations of school learning. Apparently, black children's general perception that academic pursuit is "acting white" is learned in the black community. The ideology of the community in regard to the cultural meaning of schooling is, therefore, implicated and needs to be reexamined. Another thing the black community can do is to provide visible and concrete evidence for black youths that the community appreciates and encourages academic effort and success. Cultural or public recognition of those who are academically successful should be made a frequent event, as is generally done in the case of those who succeed in the fields of sports and entertainment.

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NOTES

1. Capital High and all other proper names are pseudonyms.

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