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Bring it On! Diverse Responses to "Acting White" among Academically Able Black Adolescents

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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, Hombo, & 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, Lleras, & 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,[1] 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 (Jencks & 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;[2] 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.[3] Although schools were by and large desegregated at the school level, by the early 1980s, students learned 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[4] and an end to the use of race-conscious policies of any kind (*Capacchione et al.* 1997), and several black plaintiffs (*Belk 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 IB English. Only 9 percent of Blacks with weaker academic records enrolled in the most rigorous courses (Mickelson 2001, p. 237).

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	task force; school board meetings; community forums
		Interviews	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	2,400 8th graders
		High School Students	1,800 12th graders
Phase III	*2000–2003*	*Academic Pathways and Race Equity*	
		Interviews	
		Students	89
		Black Females	27
		Black Males	27
		White Females	15
		White Males	12
		Other	8
		Parents	29
		Black Parents	19
		White Parents	10
		Educators	22

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.[5] 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.[6]

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 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 Itisha 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. [Itisha 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.[7] And because young adolescents often are critical of anyone they see as different, those who deviate 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 L., 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. [Kristopher 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.[8] 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, Itisha, 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.[9] 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][10]

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—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 recall's 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 penetrated 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 friend's 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]

Anita 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. [Anita 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 is 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 face 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 competitive 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 equality 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 generating 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 label's 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 bad, 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 HBC], 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 Menlo 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 Loveless (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 distinctive 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, reconstituted 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 Kinston claims, or depresses his performance as Steele and Aronson predict, is beyond the scope of this chapter.