

BEYOND ACTING WHITE



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

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

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

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

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

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

DOCUMENTING AND EXPLAINING "THE GAP"

Empirical Evidence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theoretical Explanations

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

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

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

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

CULTURAL ECOLOGICAL THEORY IN CONTEXT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TREATMENT IN THE POPULAR PRESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE NEED FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

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

Unpacking Race Theoretically

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

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

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

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

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

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

EXPLORING THE HETEROGENEITY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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

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

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

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

EXPLORING THE CULTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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

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

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

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

BOOK OVERVIEW

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

The Organization of Schools and Student Agency

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Heterogeneity of Black Identity, Experience, and Response

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Structuring of Race and Material Inequities

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

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

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

Lewis uses a detailed ethnographic study of the everyday lives of students in three schools to illustrate how the racialized structure of American society permeate daily interactions in schools. Her work again reminds us that de-

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

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

NOTES

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

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

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

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

4. These articles were identified through a LexisNexis bibliographic search. We searched for all articles published between 1984 and 2004 in "major newspapers" and "magazines and journals" that featured "acting white," "race," or "black" anywhere in the text. We incorporated the additional qualifiers of "black" and "race" because an initial search using just "acting white" retrieved references to a large stream of articles that referred to acting White House representative and the like. Our qualified search produced 210 articles. Of these, fifty-two referred to acting white in relation to areas other than Blacks' academic or educational achievement (e.g., speech, dress, social relations, representation of black families in sitcoms). Two of these fifty-two articles did, however, associate acting white with the generic notion of "excellence." The remaining 158 articles referenced the notion of acting white in relation to educational achievement or attainment.

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

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

I

THE ORGANIZATION OF SCHOOLS AND STUDENT AGENCY