



The Fear of “Acting White” and the Achievement Gap: Is There Really a Relationship?

A Research Brief & Recommendations for Educators, Policymakers & Members of the Media

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A Problem We Can Agree Upon

There is a problem. On that, nearly everyone agrees. But to what forces should one attribute the black-white achievement gap? Sometimes it seems everyone has a confident opinion. Explanations for the persistent gap in education achievement between African-American and white students range from a decline in personal responsibility among black Americans, to unenlightened education policy, to lazy teachers, to entrenched poverty.

This brief from the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School concerns itself with one of the most sensitive and most ubiquitous explanations for the black-white gap in school achievement: the so-termed “burden of acting white.” For more than two decades, a range of people— pundits, educators on the ground in urban schools, and academics in the ivory tower— have contended that for the black student, the punishment for educational success is social ostracism among one’s black peers. Thus, the theory goes, high performing black students, fearing the charge of “acting white,” will refrain from excelling. It is a powerful idea. However, after more than twenty years since its scholarly introduction, there is still no broad consensus as to whether or not such a phenomenon accounts for any portion of the black-white achievement gap.

Acting White: A Media Invention, Dangerous Mindset or Something In-Between?

Simply put, some people argue that an “acting white” mindset is rampant among black youth, especially among young men, and that such attitudes are a major cause of differences in school achievement between black and white students. Others disagree, pointing to data that seem to dispel such ideas. This research brief attempts to summarize the literature and objectively discern whether or not the fear of “acting white” is a phenomenon hampering the eradication of the black-white achievement gap. What we find, not surprisingly, is that the

data remain deeply inconsistent on this question. Careful consideration of existing evidence cannot support the conclusion that the “acting white” phenomenon does not exist. Neither, however, does existing evidence support the widely held notion that the “acting white” phenomenon as described in the research literature explains any portion of the black-white achievement gap.

The research literature on this question is instructive nonetheless. It leads to clear and useful recommendations for educators who work with African American youth; national, state and local policymakers; and members of the media who have the power to shape and moderate discourse and debate on race, youth and education in the United States.

A Quick Roadmap of the Achievement Gap

Before we synthesize the “acting white” research, let’s first map out the much-maligned achievement gap that the fear of “acting white” purportedly explains. During elementary and secondary school, blacks, overall, score lower on mathematics and reading tests than their white counterparts. Even comparing children with similar test scores one or two grades earlier, blacks score lower in mathematics and reading than white children. There is, for instance, a black-white achievement gap in reading for students in the second grade even between students who scored similarly one year before. Likewise, there is a gap for children in the fifth grade for children with similar math scores two years prior and in the ninth grade for children with similar math scores two years before that. There is a congruent pattern in achievement gaps for reading scores.

Other data hint that the achievement gap in mathematics might narrow during elementary school years and then widen during junior high school ending with little movement during high school. The black-white reading gap also differs over time, but not

consistently. In general, data intimate that the black-white achievement gap widens as students proceed from elementary to secondary school.¹

Explanations for the Black-White Gap

Generally, people on the right tend to lay blame for the achievement gap at the foot of black America's collective doorstep. A breakdown in the black household and a culture that deemphasizes educational achievement, some commentators claim, engendered this gap. The same commentators often also blame the nation's educational establishment. Conservative commentators, especially, fault what they consider the ineptitude of public school educators, including teachers' unions who, the right claims, block education reform.

The arguments from the left, however, are more complex. While often acknowledging that communities of color, collectively, have agency over their children's scholastic success, more progressive commentators reserve ire for inadequate schooling opportunities and/or the larger social conditions of increasing poverty, rising economic insecurity and other ills, such as racial and economic segregation and mass incarceration, that affect families, children and the schools they attend. In essence, the conclusion from the left is that black students don't get an equal opportunity; they aren't given the resources or provided the conditions required for them to reach their full potential.

Acting White: An Idea with Too Much Power?

Within these general explanations, the idea that black children and teens so fear being called "white" that they deliberately avoid academic excellence seems to be a largely accepted fact in the popular imagination. The idea can't be claimed only by the right or the left, but by both and by the in-between as well. Popular culture and politicians have endorsed it for years.

¹ The National Center for Education Statistics has a wealth of data concerning the black-white achievement gap. The executive summary of "Educational Achievement and Black-White Inequality" can be found here: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/inequality/6.asp>. The complete report can be found here: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001061>.

On the television show *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, Will Smith's character continually mocks his studious cousin for acting white. In his infamous diatribes, comedian Bill Cosby lambasts what he views as black antipathy for education undoubtedly animated by the belief that blacks shun education because of fear of being linked to whites. Barack Obama legitimated the idea in his keynote at 2004 Democratic National Convention. "Go into any inner-city neighborhood," Obama said, "and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white."

Others have shaped careers around the idea. Berkeley linguistics professor John McWhorter is one example. In his book *Losing the Race: Self Sabotage in Black America*, McWhorter proffers support for the theory that blacks handicap themselves in that they eschew education for fear of being labeled as "acting white."

Hoover Institute fellow Shelby Steele reached similar conclusions in his books *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* and *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*. In the former, Steele recounts the story of "Henry," a graduate student at the University of Utah who seeks to exploit white guilt and take the easy road in his journey towards his degree. As one commenter said of Steele's point: "This risk aversion, Steele claims, is an ever present reality whereupon blacks hesitate to venture into uncharted waters in pursuit of academic excellence for fear failure will reaffirm both white allegations of black incompetence and low intelligence as well as their own inner doubts as to their capabilities. The result leads to blacks scoffing at, or else ignoring, things bookish while charging those of their brethren who succeed academically with the offense of 'acting white.'"²

² <http://www.raightavern.org/steele.html>

While McWhorter and Steele are right leaning, commentators on the left, too, have assumed the veracity and power of the “acting white” pejorative. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert is one. “I have no idea,” he writes, “what the stats are, but I know this perverse peer pressure to do less than your best in scholarly and intellectual pursuits is holding back large numbers of black Americans, especially black boys and men.” Herbert recounts the story of a black female who, during return visits back home from college, was criticized by her friends for “acting white.”³

The “acting white” phenomenon had surely been “discovered” and widely discussed outside of colleges and universities. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, though, introduced the idea in the academic literature.⁴ Starting with the premise that there is a black-white achievement gap, they attempt to arrive at an explanation. Blacks have limited access to social and economic opportunities, they argue in their 1986 article. Whites control the educational system and the economic system insofar as they own the businesses at which blacks seek employment. There are, moreover, glass ceilings that impede black progress. This, Fordham and Ogbu contend, results in African-Americans devaluing the necessity of schooling. In the face of this, blacks build coping mechanisms, one of which is publicly stated ambivalence about school success.

The Fordham and Ogbu theory does not attack “black culture,” but rather employs the context of a legacy of slavery and systemic racism to explain why many blacks are not sold on the utility of being dutiful students. Invidious discrimination has dampened the ability to be successful through education and thus blacks understandably conclude that educational dedication is not worth the effort, Fordham and Ogbu posit. This translates to blacks concluding that schooling is something associated with whiteness and, therefore, a black

³ Bob Herbert, “Breaking Away,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2003. The online version can be found at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9404EED9133DF933A25754C0A9659C8B63>.

⁴ Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, “*Black Students’ School Success: Coping With the “Burden of ‘Acting White’*”, *Urban Review*, 1986, Vol. 18, pp. 176-206.

person who chooses this route is “acting white.” The burden here is that black students must choose between being “authentically” black and being academically successful.

Fordham and Ogbu, both anthropologists, (?)construct a simple but powerful explanation for relatively low achievement among African Americans. However, they do not conclude that the phenomenon is responsible for any portion of the achievement gap, only that it is a phenomenon that likely contributes to the lagging achievement of African Americans and thus should be addressed by educators. The Fordham and Ogbu study remains influential, even though it is not a quantitative study in which the findings can be generalized. Rather, it is an ethnography of one majority black high school in a poor area of Washington D.C. In 2001, Harvard economist Ronald Ferguson saw a similar phenomenon in the middle-class, diverse Cleveland suburb, Shaker Heights. There, Ferguson noticed that despite a long history of desegregation, a black-white education gap persisted. Ferguson noticed an anti-intellectual strain and emergence of the “acting white” phenomenon within this setting.⁵

Similarly, economist Roland Fryer has used statistical models in an attempt to answer this question: “Do high-achieving minority students have fewer, less-popular friends than lower-achieving peers?” Fryer concludes that as black students’ GPAs rise above 3.5, they have decreasing numbers of friends. “A black student with a 4.0 has, on average, 1.5 fewer friends of the same ethnicity than a white student with the same GPA” Fryer writes. This is in clear contrast to white students. White students with 4.0 GPAs are the most popular among their peers. Black students with 4.0 GPAs have similar popularity ratings as black students with 2.9 GPAs. Black males lose friends at a quicker rate than black females do.

However, Fryer found that in schools where blacks make up at least 80 percent of the student population there was no evidence to support the contention that high grades are a social curse. This, he asserts, “adds evidence of a ‘Shaker Heights’ syndrome, in which racially

⁵ Ronald Ferguson, “A Diagnostic Analysis of Black-White GPA Disparities in Shaker Heights Ohio,” in the *Brooking Papers on Education Policy 2001*, edited by Diane Ravitch, Brookings Institution Press.

integrated settings only reinforce pressures to toe the ethnic line.” Fryer posits that his findings do not support Fordham and Ogbu’s contention about “acting white” burdens being associated with low opportunity, because if they were right, segregated schools would be where the “acting white” thesis would be strongest since that is where opportunities are the most wanting. However, he also takes issue with the arguments that blame blacks for their own academic failures calling it “more judgment than an explanation.”⁶

Meanwhile, other scholars find scant evidence that the “acting white” fear explains the black-white achievement gap. In 2005, sociologists Karolyn Tyson, Domini R. Castellino and William Darity Jr. published a data-intensive study to dispute the notion of a pervasive culture in black America that resists intellectual pursuits for fear of being considered white.⁷ They investigated eight schools, and in only one did the researchers discover “ambivalence towards achievement among black students.” They found that black students avoided advanced placement courses not because they feared being labeled as white, but because they were unsure about their ability to take the courses. As the researchers put it, “[t]heir decision to opt out was motivated by their own concern that they might not be able to handle the amount or level of work required, and that their grades might suffer.” In other words, they were not animated by trepidation of being labeled as “acting white.”

In a study of high school sophomores, sociologists James W. Ainsworth-Darnell and Douglas B. Downey conclude that “African Americans maintain *more* pro-school values and are *more* likely to esteem their high-achieving peers than are whites.” The problem for black students, however, is that they too often do not have access to “material conditions” that would

⁶ For a lucid discussion of this research, see Fryer, Roland G. “Acting White” *Education Next*, Winter, 2006 www.educationnext.org

⁷ Karolyn Tyson, Domini R. Castellino and William Darity Jr., “It’s Not ‘a Black Thing’: Understanding the Burden of Acting White and Other Dilemmas of High Achievement,” *American Sociological Review*, 2005, Vol. 70 (August: 582 -605)

engender the “skills, habits, and styles rewarded by teachers.” In short, their findings belie the contention that “acting white” explains the black-white achievement gap.⁸

A 1997 study of 10th graders, however, suggests just the opposite. Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig conclude that black 10th graders who excel in school are no more likely to be unpopular than other students. The authors, though, do offer a caveat. “These results do not contradict the [belief] that high-achieving black students are sometimes taunted as “acting white”; it does suggest that, overall, these taunts do not inflict especially grievous social damage, and are compensated by some social advantage associated with high achievement.”⁹

⁸ James W. Ainsworth-Darnell and Douglas B. Downey, “Assessing the Oppositional Culture Explanation for Racial/Ethnic Difference in School Performance,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 63, No. 4, (Aug., 1998), pp. 536-553.

⁹ Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, “Weighing the ‘Burden of “Acting White”’: Are There Race Differences in Attitudes toward Education?”, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (Spring, 1997), pp. 256-278.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What Does the Research Lead Us To Do?

Educators who work with youth, policy makers who create laws, and members of the media who shape and moderate discussions about education and race will continue to grapple with the persistent black-white achievement gap for years to come. Academics, school principals and teachers expend enormous energy diagnosing the “cause” of the gap so as to enact an effective cure. If it were as clear cut a problem as self-sabotaging black children fearing the stigma of “acting white,” then a series of plausible solutions comes to mind. However, even studies that offer support for the existence of an “acting white” burden suggest that the achievement gap persists because of a complex web of often confounded factors. That black children fear being labeled white if they excel in school could indeed be one factor affecting some students some of the time and, considering the research as a whole, the problem may indeed be more prevalent in diverse schools. However, proceeding as if this is the only cause or the primary cause of the achievement gap would not be sensible either. Indeed, it seems likely that the media’s infatuation with this explanation and its acceptance by higher profile pundits may obscure other important, more complex, less “sexy” explanations for the gap. Thus, any responsible, productive discussion of “acting white” would include recognition that this phenomenon is likely but one factor affecting the performance of black children in school. The following recommendations for educators, policy makers and members of the media, emerge from the knowledge reviewed in this brief.

- **Educators** who notice the “acting white” phenomenon in their schools should work to actively counter the stereotypes, holding “debriefing” sessions with students to counter their misconceptions that high academic achievement is exclusively “white” territory.

- **Educators** should ensure that black students, especially those who attend segregated, isolated schools that are cut off from mainstream opportunity, come into contact with black professionals who have reached the pinnacle of their professions.
- **Educators** should not simply work to dispel myths related to “acting white” and introduce stories of black achievement, but attempt to understand why students hold such beliefs. Are students, surrounded by poverty, fatalistic? Does the school culture engender oppositional attitudes on the part of black students? Do black students in diverse schools feel undervalued? Simply criticizing students for holding such beliefs and acting on them, but not seeking to understand why they hold them, forfeits an opportunity to learn from students and help them accordingly.
- “Acting white” would ideally be one part of ongoing discussions among **educators** and students that help children form healthy racial identities, find academic success and assist educators in understanding the way in which the school might be inhibiting such healthy development.
- **Policymakers** should resist the temptation to find a simple, singular cause for the achievement gap in the compelling “acting white” theory. Support for programs that promote images and stories of African-American success that would counteract the phenomenon surely should be supported. However, funding for programs and policies and practices that provide equitable funding, broad curricular experiences for all students and that connect children to opportunities both within and outside of their neighborhood must continue with equal vigor.

- Although some research suggests that the “acting white” phenomenon may be more prevalent in diverse schools, the data do not support the conclusion that segregated, high-poverty schools are *ipso facto* healthier environments for black youth or that they would be more likely to engender academic success among black youth. Rather, **educators** in such diverse schools must simply be more vigilant in counteracting the “acting white” burden, and provide safe spaces for students to critically examine such views, while attempting to understand the factors that lead children to adopt such views.
- **Members of the media and public commentators** should temper discussions of “acting white” with the research-based acknowledgement that such a tendency is likely but one factor that may affect black achievement.
- Similarly, **members of the media and public commentators** should not accept the “acting white” burden as evidence of an anti-education “culture” among African Americans. Indeed, even the first research into this phenomenon characterized it as an intelligible response to long-standing racism and experiences of discrimination that might engender an “oppositional” identity. In other words, while the burden of “acting white” may be a negative force in its own right, it is most accurately seen as a symptom of larger causes.

In summary, the data offer enough evidence to tell us that we should all be deeply concerned about the prevalence and power of the notion that academic achievement is the exclusive territory of white students. That said, such well-placed concern and deliberate action should not be mistaken as a singular explanation or a principal cure for the achievement gap between white and black students. Ignoring and denying the “acting white” phenomenon will hurt children. At the same time, placing too much emphasis on the phenomenon, and failing to

see it in the larger context of the inequality and discrimination in which it lives, will also harm our children.

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