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Research Brief:

New Evidence on Why Black High Schoolers Get Accused of “Acting White”

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This research brief draws on new data to identify the behaviors that predict whether a student gets accused of acting white. It challenges the widespread perception that working hard to do well in school is a central reason that black high school students level the accusation at one another. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) is the most seminal source in the research literature for the (mis)perception that this brief challenges. Indeed, most readers of this brief will be familiar with the Fordham and Ogbu thesis, including some of the refinements that the authors offered in later work. However, research is not the only source of the idea. People give personal testimonies, attesting that high achieving black students are often more likely than their low-achieving peers to be the target of the “acting white” accusation. While some recent studies have suggested more complex explanations than mere rejection of high achievement (e.g., Carter, 2005; Tyson, Darity and Castelino, 2005; Horvat and O’Connor, eds., 2006; Fryer, 2005; Fryer and Austen-Smith, 2005), the idea that resentment or rejection of high achievement is the core motivation for the acting white accusation has remained strong without the type of evidence presented in this brief.

NEW DATA

The findings reported here are based on analysis of data from a survey conducted by the author in 2005 and 2006, involving 20 high schools across eight states. The schools are participants in the Tripod Project for School



Improvement (the legs of the *tripod* are *content*, *pedagogy*, and *relationships*).¹ While the surveys cover a broad range of issues for a number of racial groups, the focus of this research brief is very narrowly on why black high school students get accused of “acting white.” Related findings for this population and others, some supported by qualitative work, will appear in future writings.

The “acting white” statement around which this analysis is organized appeared on the survey form as follows: “At this school, people like me get accused of ‘acting white’.” To this author’s knowledge, this is the first study to pose such a direct question about acting white in a survey reaching so many students. Possible responses were, “Always,” “Usually,” “Sometimes,” “Usually not,” and “Never.” Additional items on the survey permit us to examine a range of possible explanations for why students accuse one another of acting white, including but not limited to the conventional wisdom concerning rejection of high achievement.

FINDINGS

Does GPA predict accusations of acting white?²

There is a relationship between high grades and the *acting white* accusation in the Tripod Project data, but it mainly appears in schools that are well integrated and even there, the magnitude of the association is modest. Figures 1 and 2 show the patterns for schools where the percentages of whites are “0-to-25 percent” and “over 25 percent,” respectively. Figure 1 shows that in schools where no more than 25 percent of the student body is white, around 70 percent of black students respond “usually not” or “never” concerning whether people like themselves are accused of acting white. Note that this is virtually independent of grade point average. In contrast, Figure 2 shows that in schools where at least 25 percent of the student body is white, 54 percent of black students who have A-range grade point averages report that people like themselves would “usually not” or “never” be accused. This is nine percentage points lower than the 63 percent for those with C-range grade point averages.

¹ The states for the schools in this report are OH, NJ, MA, NM, NY, MO, CA, and CN. The survey results become the basis for discussions and strategic planning in participating schools.

² While the focus of this brief is on black high schoolers, it is important to note that black students are not the only ones accused of acting white. For blacks and Hispanics, the expectation that they might ever be accused goes up as the percentage white goes up, while for whites, the probability of being accused drops as the percentage whites in the school rises.



Before accounting for explanatory factors other than GPA, this nine percentage point difference is statistically significant.

Why are “A” students more likely accused of acting white than “C” students?

To answer this question for black high school students, I estimated multivariate statistical equations with the response to the acting white question as the variable to be explained.³ The explanatory variables in the equation were responses to the following survey statements:

- *I speak proper English, even with my friends outside of school.*
- *Rock music is an important part of my life.*
- *I trust other students at this school, even if I don’t know them.*
- *On a typical day, I read a paper, magazine or book just for fun or pleasure.*
- *On a typical day, I chat (or use instant messaging) on my home computer.*

Students could respond “Always,” “Usually,” “Sometimes,” “Usually not,” and “Never.” In addition, we included a measure of inter-racial friendships:

- *How many of your friends are of a different racial group?*

Students could respond, “None,” “A Few,” “Some,” “Most,” or “All.”

Finally, we included the student’s response to the following question:

- *What was your grade point average last term for all of your classes?*

The student could mark any of twelve responses ranging from A or A-minus, all the way through D, D-minus, and F.⁴

Figures 3 through 6 below illustrate the findings. They pertain only to schools where more than 25 percent of the student body is white.⁵

³ Estimates used school-level fixed effects to isolate within-school variation.

⁴ Our past work suggests that the rank order of self-reported grades is highly correlated with official records and that the problem of exaggeration is greatest among students with the lowest official grades.

⁵ As illustrated in Figure 2, these are the schools where black students who earn A-range grades are more likely than lower achievers to be accused of acting white.



The pie diagram in Figure 3 concerns why black students who earn A-range grades in racially integrated schools are more likely to be accused of acting white than others who earn C-range grades. Each slice of the pie shows the percentage of the predicted difference accounted for by a particular explanatory variable; each variable (aside from grade point average) is a statistically significant predictor of acting white responses.

Even though (as shown in Figure 2) blacks with higher grade point averages are more likely to be accused of acting white, it appears that grade point average (as a measure of achievement) is not the real cause of the accusation. Instead, aspects of personal style that correlate with grade point average appear more important. Together, three such variables—speaking proper English, listening to rock music, and trusting other students who are strangers—account for more than three-quarters of the predicted difference in acting-white accusations. Once other factors are taken into account, grade point averages account for *none* of the predicted difference in why students with “A-range” versus “C-range” grades get accused of acting white.

Similarly, *irrespective of grade point average*, we can ask why some black students say they might “usually” or “always” be accused, while others say they would “usually not” or “never” be accused. Figure 4 shows that listening to rock music accounts for half the predicted difference and trusting strangers accounts for almost a quarter. Grade point average accounts for a statistically insignificant 2 percent.

The idea that black students are no more opposed to high achievement than other groups is reinforced by responses to the following survey item (which, by the way, does not help in predicting the acting white accusation, once other factors are taken into account). The item is: *“My friends think it’s important to work hard to get high grades.”* We have included this item on several surveys, including the one reported here, and the response pattern is virtually identical across racial groups. Tables 1 and 2 show the pattern for males and females, respectively. Asian females are the only group that really stands out; they are more likely than other girls to strongly agree with the statement.



Do students hold back when they fear being accused?

Finally, a reason that people are concerned about the acting white accusation is the possibility that students who fear being accused, and who believe that academic effort might attract the accusation, may hold back from doing their best in school. This is a valid concern.

Figures 5 and 6 (for males and females respectively) show percentages of students who responded, “Totally True,” “Mostly True,” or “Somewhat True,” (instead of “Hardly at All” or “Totally Untrue”) to the following statement: “*I sometimes hold back from doing my best in this class because of what others might say or think.*”

At every GPA level, the bars in Figures 5 and 6 are taller for the students who did not say “*never*” in response to whether people like themselves might be accused of acting white. The greatest problem appears to be for males: Almost half of black males who report A-range or D-range GPAs report it to be *at least somewhat true* that they sometimes hold back from doing their best.

Conclusion

The findings reported here suggest that black high achievers in racially integrated high schools are only modestly more likely than low achievers to perceive themselves as possible targets of acting white accusations. Further, the findings suggest that the reason high achievers are targeted more is not their high achievement, *per se*, but instead aspects of their personal styles such as the ways that they speak, the music they listen to and their propensities to be open and trusting of youth who are strangers. Leisure reading habits, propensities to chat with friends on the computer, and friendships with students of other racial groups provide additional, but very small contributions to the explanation.

There are several aspects of the standard discourse on “acting white” that in the past have seemed somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, past survey and interview data have not found systematic differences across racial groups in their endorsement of the idea that working hard to get high grades in school is important. Indeed, when there are racial differences, black students are sometimes the group that expresses the strongest agreement (Ferguson, 2002). On the other hand, black students often behave in ways that can be interpreted



as anti-achievement, including accusing some high achievers of acting white. They often self-report worse behavior compared to white classmates.

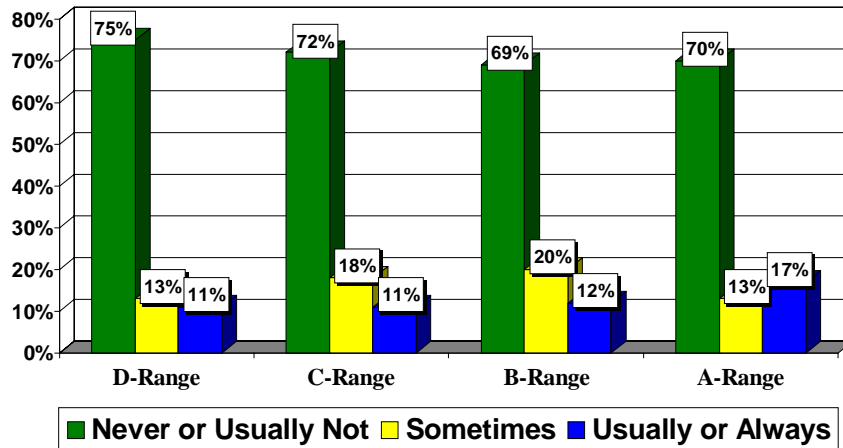
The resolution to this seeming contradiction may be that black students are prone to insist on racial authenticity in personal styles, and that high achievers tend somewhat more than others to have personal styles that seem racially inauthentic or even anathema to other black youth.

Finally, it may be tempting to dismiss the acting white issue as minor and unimportant. However, the final piece of the presentation above should give pause to any such inclination. Almost half of black males in integrated schools who perceive that people like themselves might be targets of acting white accusations, and who report receiving either A-range or D-range grades, indicate that they may hold back from doing their best in school because of what others might say or think. Females with low grades are in a similar position. These youth need help understanding why holding back academically may not solve their problem. To the degree that others' judgments about the racial authenticity of nonacademic elements of personal style are the basis of the acting white accusation, black youth need help understanding the phenomenon and adapting constructively. Holding back should not be the answer.



FIGURE 1: FOR HIGH SCHOOLS WHERE THE PERCENTAGE WHITE IS 0-to-25 PERCENT. Percentages of black students responding “never or usually not,” “sometimes,” or “usually or always” to the statement:

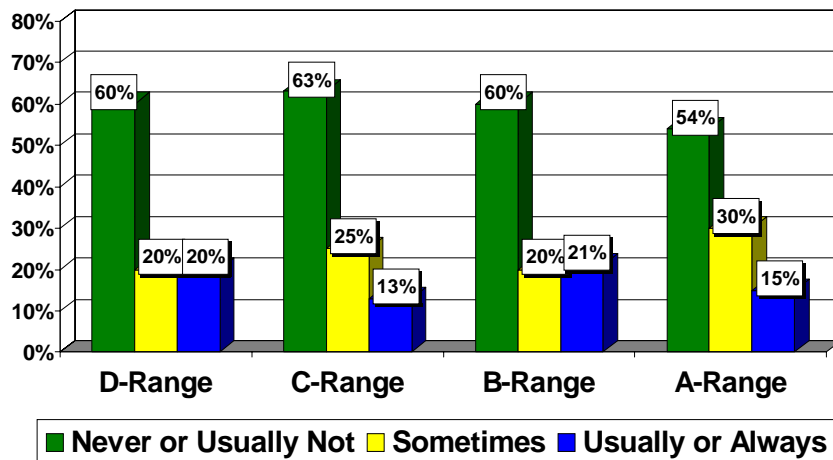
“At this school, people like me get accused of acting white.”



Source: Student surveys conducted by Ron Ferguson as part of the Tripod Project for School Improvement. D-Range, N=97; C-Range, N=381; B-Range, N=375; A-Range, N=115.

FIGURE 2: FOR HIGH SCHOOLS WHERE THE PERCENTAGE WHITE IS OVER 25 PERCENT. Percentages of black students responding “never or usually not,” “sometimes,” or “usually or always” to the statement:

“At this school, people like me get accused of acting white.”



Source: Student surveys conducted by Ron Ferguson as part of the Tripod Project for School Improvement. D-Range, N=89; C-Range, N=379; B-Range, N=363; A-Range, N=105.



Figure 3: Why black high school students with “A”-range GPA’s agree somewhat more than black students with “C”-range grades with the statement that, “*At this school, students like me get accused of acting white.*” Percentages of the predicted difference attributable to each listed factor in schools where 25% or more of students are white.

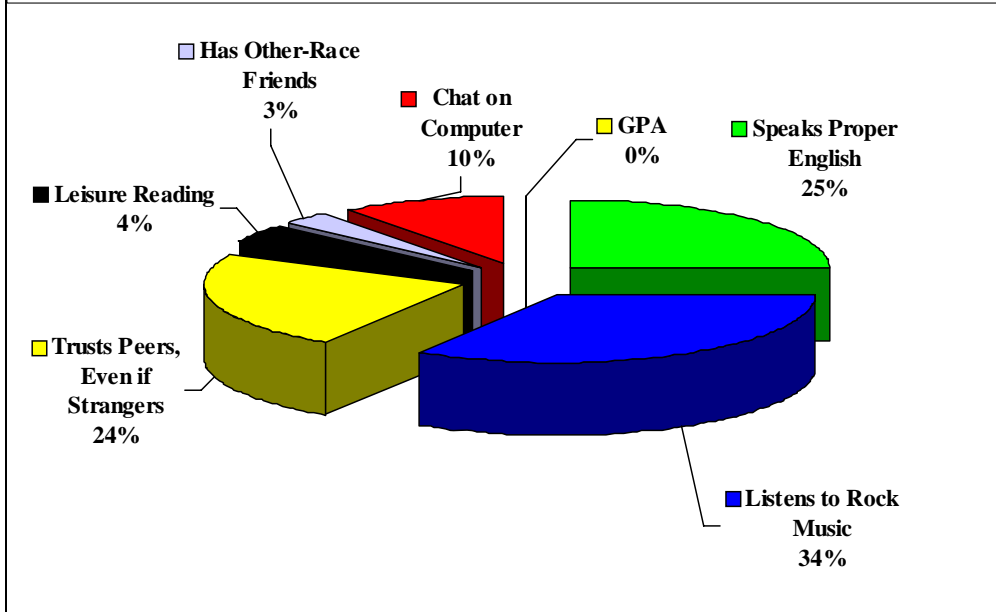


Figure 4: Considering *all* black high school students, why some respond that people like themselves “*usually*” or “*always*” get accused of acting white, while others say “*usually not*” or “*never*.” Percentages of the predicted difference attributable to each listed factor in schools where 25% or more of students are white.

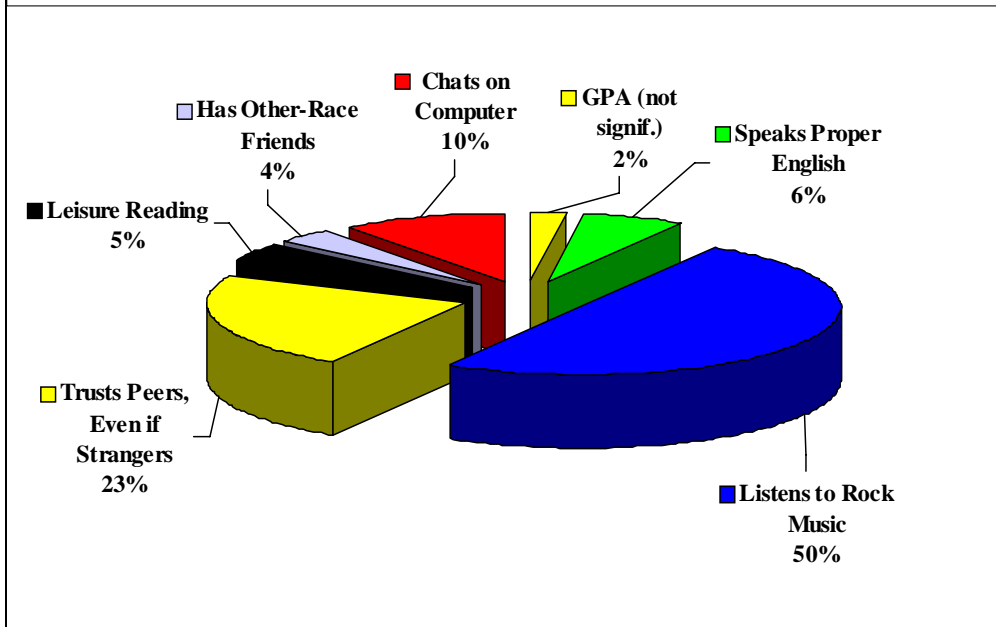




Table 1: Percent of secondary school males within each race/ethnic group selecting each response to, “*My friends think it’s important to work hard to get high grades.*”

<u>MALES</u>	Never	Usually Not	Some-times	Usually	Always	Row Total
Black (n=1808)	8.1	11.7	35.2	27.3	17.7	100%
White (n=3073)	7.8	13.4	35.4	32.3	11.1	100%
Hispanic (n=637)	6.6	13.5	33.4	32.7	13.8	100%
Asian (n=268)	6.7	7.8	31.0	36.6	17.9	100%

Source: Calculations by Ron Ferguson, using Tripod Project data.

Table 2: Percent of secondary school females in each race/ethnic group selecting each response to, “*My friends think it’s important to work hard to get high grades.*”

<u>FEMALES</u>	Never	Usually Not	Some-times	Usually	Always	Row Total
Black (n=2011)	6.7	9.5	32.3	29.8	21.7	100%
White (n=3207)	3.7	7.4	29.8	38.9	20.1	100%
Hispanic (n=719)	3.5	11.4	36.0	28.1	21.0	100%
Asian (n=237)	1.7	5.1	21.6	42.2	29.5	100%

Source: Calculations by Ron Ferguson, using Tripod Project data.



Figure 5: Percentages of black male high school students agreeing that it is *at least somewhat true* that, "I sometimes hold back from doing my best in this class, because of what others might say or think." Shown by GPA and by whether students responded "never" to the statement, "At this school, students like me get accused of acting white."

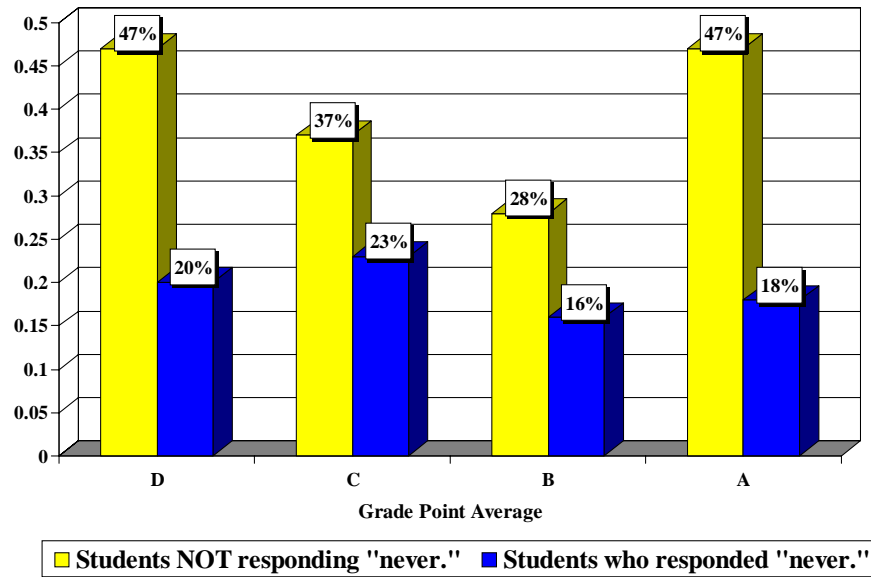
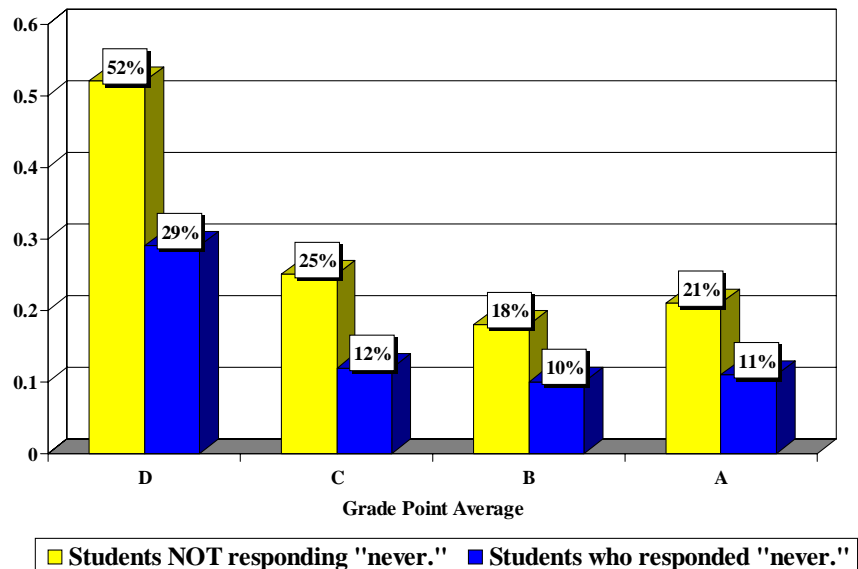


Figure 6: Percentages of black female high school students agreeing that it is *at least somewhat true* that, "I sometimes hold back from doing my best in this class, because of what others might say or think." Shown by GPA and by whether students responded "never" to the statement, "At this school, students like me get accused of acting white."





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