

Are We Barking Up the Wrong Tree?
Rethinking Oppositional Culture Explanations for the Black/White Achievement Gap

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Abstract

The Black/White achievement gap is a central concern among educational researchers, policy makers, and the general public. One popular explanation for this gap is the oppositional culture argument. For the past 20 years, researchers have attempted to pinpoint the extent to which African American peer groups devalue educational achievement and ridicule their high achieving peers for “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). To date, there is no conclusive evidence that such negative peer pressure is prevalent among Black students or unique to their peer groups. At best, we can say that some small segment of the Black student population experiences race-specific negative peer pressure. In light of this research, the author advocates moving beyond traditional cultural explanations for the Black/White achievement gap. Instead, he argues that more attention be given to the structural, institutional, and symbolic disadvantages that shape the racialized educational terrain that Black students navigate.

Explanations for Black/White gaps in achievement often focus on the culture of African American students. In their now classic *Urban Review* article, Anthropologists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) studied the experiences of eight high achieving Black students in a predominantly Black high school in Washington, D.C. They argued that these students dealt with a ‘burden of acting white’ because their high achievement was ridiculed by their African American peers as what the authors called “white” behavior. Fordham and Ogbu argued that African American students respond to inferior educational opportunities, differential treatment in school, and limited returns to education in the job market by developing oppositional orientations toward schooling.

As the original work on oppositional culture has been taken up by other analysts, peer culture has often become detached from its structural roots. For instance, rather than seeing peer interactions as a result of structural and institutional inequality, conservative commentators like John McWhorter (2000) define oppositional culture simply as “self sabotage.” The ‘acting white’ explanation has also made its way into the popular discourse about education. During his keynote address at the 2004 democratic national convention, then senatorial candidate Barak Obama invoked the ‘acting white’ notion when he argued for the need to “eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white” (also cited in Fryer 2006).

Fordham and Ogbu’s study, and the idea that oppositional culture contributed to the underachievement of Black students, spawned a small research industry. For the past 20 years, researchers from multiple disciplines have used various methods in an effort to pinpoint the extent to which African American peer groups devalue educational achievement and ridicule their peers for “acting white.” To date, there is no conclusive

evidence that such negative peer pressure is prevalent among Black students or unique to their peer groups. At best, we can say that some very small segment of the Black student population experiences race-based negative peer pressure. However, a substantial amount of scholarly energy and popular perception is bound up with this explanation, from researchers seeking to argue that oppositional culture does or does not exist (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell 2002; Tyson, Darity and Castellino 2005; Carter 2005; Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga 2002; Fryer 2005; Ogbu 2004; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Lundy 2003a; 2003b, among others) to school teachers and administrators seeking to combat Black students' oppositional orientations (whether or not they are real or imagined).

I argue that it is time for us to move beyond traditional cultural explanations for racial achievement gaps. While the data to support cultural explanations is inconclusive, we know that race shapes the structural, institutional, and symbolic realities of African Americans. I suggest that we may have been “barking up the wrong tree” in our search for race-based oppositionality. While we have been searching for peer effects, we have often downplayed the fact that Black students and their families face numerous race-based challenges when compared to whites, from the classroom and schools they attend, to the neighborhoods and home-based resources to which they have access. I argue that these racial differences are part of the education terrain that students must navigate. Race shapes this educational terrain at two levels – *material* and *symbolic*. First, it structures the material conditions of students' and parents' lives by shaping the *structural* and *institutional* resources to which they have access. Second, it structures students' and parents' lives symbolically by shaping how they are perceived by others. Our

understanding of African American peer cultures must be informed by an acknowledgment of these well established realities.

In what follows, I synthesize some of what can be gleaned from the research on oppositional culture. I then discuss how this approach often glosses over the structural, institutional, and symbolic realities of African American life in the contemporary United States. I conclude by proposing a refined approach to studying racial achievement gaps that builds on what we know from prior research and accounts for the racialized educational terrain through which Black students travel.

The Search for Oppositional Culture

Oppositional culture arguments, particularly the burden of acting white argument, suggest that African American students ridicule their peers for engaging in academically oriented behaviors that lead to high achievement. Black students, it is argued, avoid high achievement in order to avoid being accused of acting white (Ogbu 1974, 1978; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). As a result, Black students develop “a collective resistance to the white middle-class organization of school, or an oppositional identity that perceives schooling as a “white” domain and high achievement as being incongruent with their racial and ethnic identities” (Carter 2005: 5).

As Karolyn Tyson and her colleagues (2005) have argued, in order for this process to have serious implications for the Black/White achievement gap at least three conditions must apply. First, this pattern must be pervasive. A large percentage of Black students must have oppositional orientations toward education and high achievement. Second, this pattern must be race specific. Black students must be more opposed to

education than their White peers. Finally, Black students must associate acting white with achievement-related behaviors. To date, none of these conditions seem to apply.

A core problem with oppositional culture explanations for racial disparities in achievement is the limited empirical support for them (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell 2002; Tyson et al. 2005; Tyson 2002; Carter 2005). An increasingly well established body of survey, interview, and observational research challenges the widely held belief that Black students are more oppositional toward education than whites. Research demonstrates that African American students (as a group) are no less engaged or invested in education than are their white peers (Cook and Ludwig 1998; Ferguson 2002; Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). For example, survey research shows that Black students want to attend college at the same rate, spend about the same amount of time on homework, and have similar rates of absenteeism when compared to whites of the same social class (Cook and Ludwig 1998). Other work shows that African American students who do well in school are among the most popular with their peers and that African Americans possess more pro-school attitudes than whites (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). Recent work shows that African American students who achieve at very high levels (3.5 and above) may have fewer friends (Fryer 2006) but this is only the case in schools where blacks make up less than 80% of the student population and not in predominantly Black schools where increasing percentages of Black students attend (Orfield and Eaton 1996) or in private schools where the pattern disappears.

Ethnographic work also fails to find consistent support for the acting white hypothesis (Tyson 2002; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Carter 2005). Drawing on

interviews from eight schools in North Carolina, Tyson and her colleagues (2005) found that Black students were achievement oriented and experienced very little negative peer pressure related to academic achievement. In fact, only 2 of 40 Black students report experiencing race-based negative peer pressure. They also found that strong similarities in the experiences of high achieving Black and White adolescents, suggesting that negative peer pressure is not unique to Black students or more prevalent among them. In fact, they identify three types of oppositionality – racialized oppositionality (which is specific to African American students), generalized oppositionality (which exists among all students), and class-based oppositionality (which exists among white students from different social class backgrounds).

These patterns of oppositionality are shaped by the institutional arrangements of schools. In the few cases in which race-specific negative peer pressure is found, for example, it is in integrated schools in which whites were perceived as having greater educational opportunities. As they write:

[racialized oppositionality] is more likely to be part of the local school culture of schools in which socio-economic status differences between blacks and whites are stark and perceived as corresponding to patterns of placement and achievement”

(Tyson et al. 601).

They found a similar pattern of “class-based” oppositionality among whites when working class whites perceived exclusion from educational opportunities in comparison to their middle-class peers in the same schools.

While the charge of acting white is a problem for only a small group of Black students, another core issue for the oppositional culture argument is the extent to which

this charge is connected to achievement-related behaviors. The Fordham and Ogbu (1986) study suggests this connection, but none of the students in that study made an explicit connection between the charge of acting white and academic achievement nor did any of these students use the term acting white (Tyson et al. 2005). While some research suggests a link between acting white and academic behaviors (Neal Bartlett 2001; Horvat and Lewis 2003), this accusation is more often tied to *cultural behaviors* like listening to rock music, wearing certain styles of clothing, and “wearing shorts in the winter” (Neal Bartlett 2001: 82; Ferguson 2006). In most cases this accusation is attached to behaviors *unrelated* to academic performance (Carter 2005; Ferguson 2006).

Taken together, this work shows that oppositionality is not prevalent among, or completely unique to, Black students. It also shows that the charge of acting white is associated with cultural patterns often unrelated to academic performance. Survey, interview, and ethnographic data fail to find consistent support for the oppositional culture argument as a strong explanation for racial achievement gaps. This work does suggest that the subset of students who seem to experience negative peer pressure are more likely to be found in integrated contexts in which disparities in opportunity between groups are most pronounced (Tyson et al 2005; Fryer 2006; Horvat and Lewis 2003) though some work suggests slightly different patterns (e.g. Hemmings 1996). This highlights an important link between institutional context and students' peer cultures. As Fryer writes “...acting white is a vexing problem within a subset of American schools ... But I find that the way schools are structured affects the incidence of the acting white phenomenon” (2006: 54). Tyson and her colleagues extend this argument,

...the burden of acting white cannot be attributed specifically to black culture.

Rather, it appears to develop in some schools under certain conditions that seem to contribute to animosity between high – and low-achieving students within or between racial and socio-economic groups (Tyson et al. 2005: 583).

Given these findings we might expect to find race-based opposition in integrated schools, which are often found in metropolitan suburbs. This is just what John Ogbu claims to have found in his recent study of Shaker Heights, OH. He argues that Black students and their families are largely disengaged from the educational process in this district (Ogbu 2003). However, there is no convincing data to support the claim that Black students are substantially *more disengaged* than white students in his book (which lacks any meaningful comparative analysis) or in other research on suburban students. In fact, survey research from Shaker Heights and 14 other similar suburban districts (conducted and analyzed by Ron Ferguson at Harvard) does not show high levels of oppositional orientations among Black students. In fact, the research (undertaken in conjunction with the Minority Student Achievement Network) shows that African American students are more likely than whites to report that their friends think it is "very important" to "study hard and get good grades." Conversely, the percentage of students reporting that their peers make fun of them for doing well in school was low across racial groups (e.g. African American, Asian, Hispanic and White). Finally, as with the research using nationally representative data sets, students from all racial groups taking similar classes report spending about the same amount of time on homework (with the exception of Asian students who spend a bit more time) (Ferguson 2002).

A study building on this research in a similar suburban school district including interviews with African American, Latino/a, and white high school students as well as teachers, administrators, and parents is reaching similar conclusions. Consistent with Ferguson's survey findings, students report that high achievers are rarely teased for doing well in school. If anything, the students report that low-achievers are teased for not performing better and that students who struggle try to improve their performance (Diamond, Lewis and Gordon 2006). Therefore, even in the places where (based on prior research) we might expect to find oppositional culture, it does not appear to be prevalent.¹

What is abundantly clear from prior research on race and education is that there is a material and symbolic cost to being Black in the contemporary United States. These disadvantages are embedded in our social fabric and reflected in our social structures, schools, and perceptions of race and intellectual ability. Black students face a racialized educational terrain that creates material and symbolic disadvantages for them. This, I argue, has been overshadowed by our continuing search for oppositional culture. Below, I very briefly sketch the outline of this educational terrain and argue that we need to more carefully consider it as we study the achievement differences between Black and White students.

How Oppositional Cultural Explanations Gloss Over Structural and Institutional Realities

Black students face a number of educational disadvantages in their schools and classrooms when compared to white students. For example, Black students are typically taught by less qualified teachers than their white counterparts (e.g. non-certified teachers and teachers with limited experience) (Uhlenberg and Brown 2004). They are also

concentrated in lower educational tracks, which have less qualified teachers, provide students with less challenging course work, and result in less learning (Hallinan 1994; Oakes 1990). Not only are Black students given fewer opportunities to learn, teachers also hold lower expectations for them than for other students (Roscigno 1998; Ferguson 1998; 2004). And, while much of the difference in expectations can be attributed to students' prior performance, the impact of teachers' expectations is more powerful for Black students than for whites (Ferguson 1998). Therefore, whatever skill differences exist between Black students and their white counterparts when teachers make their initial assessments, they are compounded by the impact of these expectations on the students' performance. Teachers' lower expectations of Black students may also extend to the organizational level in low-income African American schools and lead teachers to abdicate responsibility for students' learning (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane 2004). Thus in their classrooms, Black students are given fewer opportunities to learn (e.g. less qualified teachers, less challenging and engaging material) and face lower teacher expectations than their white counterparts.

Moving beyond the classroom, the schools that Black students attend are often less conducive to their educational success. For example, in Chicago, the vast majority of schools placed on academic probation as part of the districts accountability efforts were majority African American and low-income (Bryk 2003; Diamond and Spillane 2004). Moreover, while the mechanisms are complicated to sort out, school segregation (in particular the concentration of low-income African American students in certain schools) leads to lower outcomes for students attending these schools even after controlling for students' prior achievement (Bankston and Caldas 1996). These patterns are particularly

troubling because schools in the United States have become increasingly (re)segregated in recent years (Orfield and Eaton 1996). As mentioned above, the concentration of low-income Black students in schools can depress teachers' expectations and sense of responsibility for what students learn – perhaps contributing to the lower student outcomes we see.

There are also differences that extend beyond schools and classrooms. Black children are more likely to live in poor households than white children. In addition, because of a history of social policy which limited African American's access to the major avenues toward wealth accumulation (e.g. purchasing suburban homes), Black families have far fewer assets than their white counterparts who earn the same incomes (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Sociologist Dalton Conley reports that among people earning less than \$15,000 per year, White families have median assets of \$10,000 while Black families have no assets. Among those earning \$75,000 or more per year the median assets for White families are \$308,000 while the median for Blacks is \$114,600 (Conley 1999). Parents with greater assets are free to use them to pay for tutors, purchase educational materials (e.g. computers), and pay for private schools and more expensive colleges. This means that even when looking at Black and White parents within the same social class we miss an important dynamic that contributes to material and educational inequality.

These differences in access to wealth are compounded by the fact that Blacks regardless of social class, are likely to live in segregated neighborhoods (Pattillo 2005). The result of this segregation is that Blacks often pay more for poorer housing, receive less appreciation on their property, live further from employment opportunities, and attend more segregated schools (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

has documented the racial cost of being African American by detailing its negative consequences for income and earnings, occupational mobility, labor market participation, home loan approvals, various interactions with the legal system (including exploding rates of incarceration), and every day forms of racial discrimination (Ibid.). Finally, moving beyond the family, African Americans must navigate more difficult neighborhoods, even when they are members of the middle-class (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pattillo 2005), and are far more likely to live in or near areas with high poverty rates which often have higher crime rates, poorer city services, and less effective schools.

Finally, there is a symbolic meaning attached to race which suggests that Blacks are intellectually inferior to whites and sees a disconnection between blackness and intellectual ability. As education researcher Theresa Perry argues “[t]he idea of African American’s intellectual inferiority still exists as part of the “taken for granted notions” of many people in the larger society, irrespective of political orientation” (Perry 2003: 96). These ideas impact the day-to-day school experiences of students ranging from teachers’ expectations of them in the classroom, to other students’ perceptions of their intellectual capacity when choosing study groups.² These social ideas about race and intelligence may also impact individual students’ performance through a process called stereotype threat – “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that might inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele 2003: 111).” Because Blacks’ intellectual capacity is questioned in the larger society, the anxiety created by stereotype threat can hinder academic performance.

To say the least, the deck is stacked against African American students and their families. To ignore all of these issues in the discussion of the Black/White achievement

gap is unfair to young people. Yes, students should be called on to work hard. But to ignore the way that race shapes the terrain that students must navigate makes calls for hard work seem disingenuous.

Rethinking Oppositional Culture Explanations

As the previous discussion highlights, oppositional culture arguments suffers from at least three important limitations. First, there is no consistent support for oppositional orientations being pervasive among, or unique to, African American peer groups. At best, oppositional orientations impact some small segment of the African American student population. Rather than over-generalizing from this subset of the population, we need to better understand which students are oppositional in what contexts. Second (and related to the first issue) the overemphasis on oppositional culture explanations has led analysts to overlook the heterogeneity of Black students' responses to education. Finally, the focus on oppositional culture often leads analysts to downplay the structural, institutional, and symbolic costs of being African American. Given these limitations, I argue that future research on racial achievement gaps contend with the following issues.

Given that only a small subset of students is impacted by negative peer pressure, we need research that emphasizes the *heterogeneity of students' cultural responses* to structures of inequality. Analysts have mistakenly generalized the cultural responses of a small subset of Black students and applied them to the entire group. If we know anything about adolescents from ethnographic studies it is that they form multiple social groupings and identities even in the same contexts (Willis 1977; Eckert 1989; Carter 2005;

MacLeod 2004 among others). Sociologist Prudence Carter (2005) has shown that African American and Latino/a adolescents have at least three distinct orientations toward schooling. There are the *cultural mainstreamers* who, while not completely raceless, “accept the ideology that “nondominant group members should be culturally, socially, economically, and politically assimilated” (Carter 2005: 29). There are also the *noncompliant believers* who recognize that certain cultural presentations (other than their own) lead to academic success, but choose their own cultural styles instead (even if this undermines their academic performance). Finally, there are the *cultural straddlers* who exhibit bicultural orientations that allow them to effectively navigate home, peer, and school cultures and to achieve academically. She also identifies very different patterns across gender. Girls were more likely to fall into the *cultural straddler* category and boys were more likely to fall into the *noncompliant believer* category. This highlights an important gender distinction that prior work has given little attention.

In his final paper, Ogbu (2004) acknowledges that “only one in five categories of Blacks among both adults and students is explicitly opposed to adopting White attitudes, behaviors, and speech” (Ogbu 2004: 28). Therefore, future research needs to specify for which students, and under what conditions, oppositional culture is an important issue and simultaneously attempt to understand the prevalence of other cultural responses.

In addition, we need to pay more attention to the interplay between institutional practices and students’ educational orientations. It appears that the institutional contexts in which students find themselves has a lot to do with their educational orientations (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Fryer 2006). Work shows that popularity is negatively related to high achievement (one measure of the “acting white” phenomenon)

only in racially mixed schools but not in private or predominantly Black schools (Fryer 2006). Likewise, Karolyn Tyson and her colleagues (2005) have shown that in schools where unequal educational opportunities are present and recognized by students (e.g. honors and AP classes are predominantly white), students' frustration are more likely to contribute to oppositional orientations. Absent these observable inequalities, we are unlikely to find race- or class-based oppositionality. Thus, it will be important for future work to closely examine the interplay between school context and educational orientations. It also seems prudent to challenge the unequal distribution of educational opportunities rather than emphasizing students' responses to them.³

This interplay between institutional context and students' cultural expressions is interesting in another way as well. It seems ironic that in a society that has often vehemently opposed African American educational access, tolerated unequal educational opportunities and resources across race, and equated Blackness and Black cultural styles with intellectual inferiority we would define *Black* culture as oppositional to education. The historical record consistently shows African Americans striving for access to quality education only to be denied it (Anderson 1988). This does not reflect a community that is opposed to education. In contrast, at least some analysts see the institutional devaluing of non-dominant cultural forms as fundamental to educational inequality (e.g. Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' of Delpit's 'culture of power'). One could reasonably argue that it is the culture of schooling itself that is oppositional to African American cultural expressions rather than the students being oppositional to education (Perry 2003).

Finally, the original work on oppositional culture demonstrated a keen awareness of the structural forces that shaped students' educational orientations (some of which

have been discussed above). However, much of the work that searches for oppositional culture underemphasizes the interplay between structural inequalities and students' educational orientations. We need to keep the *racialized educational terrain* front and center in our analysis of racial achievement gaps. There are tangible structural, institutional, and symbolic consequences to being African American that have educational implications for students. This unequal educational terrain has more powerful implications for the Black/White achievement gap than the much more illusive and less prevalent oppositional culture.

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Endnotes

¹ Another core argument of Ogbu's book is that racial disparities in achievement are not driven by social class because "in this relatively affluent suburb White and Black social classes are not too dissimilar." But they are dissimilar. Ogbu reports 1990 census data showing that the percentage of while 58% of Whites in Shaker Heights had family incomes averaging 50,000 to over 100,000 only 32.6% of Blacks have such incomes. Ogbu uses this to support his contention that social class standing is similar across racial groups (a point which the data undermine).

² In conversations with high achieving Black students from suburban school district during the annual student conferences of the Minority Student Achievement Network, students repeatedly discussed difficulties breaking in to the study groups of their White peers. These students suspected that the white students often doubted the Black students' ability to contribute.

³ This point was brought home to me in a conversation with a visiting Australian educator who was a principal from a school in Tasmania. Our meeting was about school leadership issues. About 20 minutes into our conversation, he stopped me, and he said, "We can talk about connecting leadership to school or classroom practices, we can talk about all of these other issues around school leadership, but, you know, I've been in schools in Boston and I've been in schools in the Boston suburbs, and the resources differences between those schools are so dramatic that I can't understand why people in the US talk about achievement gaps and don't talk about resource gaps." Our research must contend with how the unequal distribution of resources impacts how students respond to schooling.