WHAT DOES "ACTING WHITE" REALLY MEAN? RACIAL IDENTITY FORMATION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONG BLACK YOUTH

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Introduction

Academic achievement among African American youth has been one of the most contentious and misunderstood areas of inquiry in educational research. On a conceptual level, researchers working in this area have repeatedly committed several errors. Deficit-oriented thinking, combined with a failure to properly consider the interaction of identity formation, culture, and history, are commonplace in attempts to explain the educational experiences of African Americans. For example, in their widely-cited 1986 article entitled "Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of 'acting White,'" Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu propose that one significant reason for academic underachievement among Black youth is a broad cultural devaluation of educational attainment within African American communities. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) contend:

> Apparently, Black children's general perception that academic pursuit is "acting White" is learned in the Black community. The ideology of the community in regard to the cultural meaning of schooling is, therefore, implicated and needs to be reexamined (p. 203).

In the 15 years since this article was published in the *Urban Review*, the "acting White" hypothesis has gotten much attention, often uncritically, in the media (Gregory, 1992; Suskind, 1994; Pearson, 1994; Lewin, 2000). Fordham (1988; 1996) has published other works expanding on the original 1986 article, and the "acting White" hypothesis has been cited, again usually without criticism, in other major academic works (e.g. Massey & Denton, 1993; McLaren, 1998). Additionally, popular books seeking to exploit the deficit-oriented, cultural deprivation arguments about African Americans and education have also made wide use of the "acting White" hypothesis (e.g. McWhorter, 2000; see Gunn, Harpalani, & Brooks, 2001 for a critique).

While several commentators have critiqued Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) work, they generally have not undertaken a broad reinterpretation of the phenomenon. Where does the phrase "acting White" come from and what does it mean to Black youth? After briefly reviewing Fordham and Ogbu's article, I will build on established critiques to pose some answers to the questions. In the process, I aim to show how Fordham and Ogbu have misinterpreted the meaning of "acting White," and to reframe the issue from a developmental perspective.

Overview of the "acting White" hypothesis.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) begin by building on Ogbu's (1978; 1990) framework for classifying minorities into three groups: *autonomous minorities*, who are numerically in a minority (e.g. Jews, Mormons), *immigrant minorities*, who have come to the United States voluntarily with expectations of upward social mobility, and *subordinate* or *castelike minorities*, whom the majority group has incorporated involuntarily through slavery or subjugation (e.g. Blacks, Native Americans). Focusing on the latter group, the authors examine the affective dimensions of the relationship between Black and White Americans. They contend that this relationship is unique for two reasons: a) oppositional cultural identity - Black Americans have developed a sense of identity in opposition to White Americans because of the social, economic, and political subordination they have encountered, and b) oppositional frame of reference--Black Americans have developed protective devices to reactively promote Black identity by sustaining boundaries between themselves and the dominant White culture.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) claim that Black children learn these "twin phenomena" at an early age and that notions of identity become rooted in "fictive kinship," an intense sense of group loyalty and membership extending beyond conventional family relationships. Because of this notion of fictive kinship, which the authors claim began during slavery, Black Americans emphasize group loyalty in situations involving conflict and competition with White Americans. The twin phenomena, in conjunction, with fictive kinship, also influence perceptions of success.

Through the integration of these various ideas, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) theorize that Black students, particularly adolescents,

face the "burden of 'acting White'" if they are academically successful. The authors contend that the cultural orientation of the Black communities has equated school achievement with "acting White"; thus, Black students do poorly because "they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic efforts and success" (p. 177). Fordham and Ogbu claim that this occurs in both integrated and predominantly Black schools and involves both peers and elders in Black communities. Moreover, Fordham (1988; 1996) also contends that Black students who are successful must adopt a "raceless" persona, distancing themselves from Black cultural attributes. Thus, the "acting White" hypothesis asserts that Blacks have not historically valued education, viewing academic success as the domain of Whites and thus fundamentally in opposition to Black culture and identity.

Empirical refutation of the "acting White" hypothesis

Several lines of evidence call into question different elements of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "acting White" hypothesis. From a historical perspective, numerous accounts refute the authors' notion that Black Americans have not historically valued education. In a 454 page scholarly text on Black education before the Civil War, Carter G. Woodson (1919) notes, "the accounts of the successful strivings of Negroes for enlightenment under the most adverse circumstances read like beautiful romances of a people in a heroic age" (pp. iii; see also Spencer, Cross, Harpalani, & Goss, in press). Woodson details various phases of Black efforts towards education during slavery, illustrating vividly Blacks' motivation towards achievement. In writing about post-Civil War Black education, Anderson (1988) notes the esteem bestowed upon Blacks who attained literacy. In *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. DuBois (1935) discusses the drive of ex-slaves towards education, calling it one of the most amazing stories in Western history--a story that was sadly often stifled by White oppression. Other accounts also detail how Black communities underwent voluntary taxation to keep schools open, and how teachers and school administrators in these communities extended their efforts well beyond schools and classrooms (e.g. Walker, 1996). Thus, historical evidence clearly does not support Fordham and Ogbu's contention that Black communities have not valued education and that this devaluation is a reaction to White American racism. Indeed, these accounts highlight the resilience that African Americans have displayed in pursuing educational attainment.

Contemporary empirical studies also refute Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) assumption that Black Americans do not value education. Using data from the 1990 National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), a nationally representative sample of 17,544 tenth grade students, Cook and Ludwig (1998) report several findings that stand in contrast to Fordham and Ogbu. Their results indicate no differences in the number of Black and White tenth graders who expect to attend college, and after controlling for socioeconomic status, Blacks expect to stay in school longer than Whites. Also, when adjusting for family characteristics, Blacks are absent from school for fewer days than Whites. According to Cook and Ludwig, Black students in the NELS sample were more likely to report parental involvement in their schools, in the form of contacts with teachers or attendance at school meetings. After controlling for socioeconomic status, Black parents were also more likely to check their children's homework. Additionally, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) also use the 1990 NELS data set to reach similar conclusions that contradict Fordham and Ogbu's assumptions. According to their data, Black students were significantly more likely than White students to report that education was important for occupational attainment, and also to have optimistic occupational expectations. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey also found that Black students had more positive attitudes toward school than White students.

Data also indicate a positive relationship between academic success and peer popularity among Black students. Cook and Ludwig (1998) found that Black honor society members were significantly more popular than their classmates, and that academic success had a more positive impact on social status in predominantly Black schools than in predominantly White schools. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) reach similar conclusions. All of these lines of evidence contradict Fordham and Ogbu's "acting White" hypothesis.

A conceptual critique of the "acting White" hypothesis: Reframing the phenomena

Several major conceptual errors characterize Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) work. Although the authors acknowledge structural barriers to Black academic success, they employ a reductionist analysis that draws psychological inferences from a sociohistorical taxonomy (see Trueba, 1988). Ethnographic data used to support this analysis is not considered from a developmental perspective, leading to erroneous attributions that implicate Black culture for academic underachievement. Although the language of "identity" is used in their work, Fordham and Ogbu completely fail to consider identity formation processes, particularly with regard to race. Thus, they miss the meaning of "acting White" references entirely.

In order to understand the "acting White" phenomenon properly, racial identity formation must be considered. Racial identity development refers to the "process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group" (Tatum, 1997, p. 16). Cross's Nigrescence framework (Cross, 1971; Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991) is particularly useful to consider here. The Nigrescence model delineates a four stage progression through which Black Americans form racial identities. During the pre-encounter stage, individuals view the world from a White, Eurocentric frame of reference, consciously or unconsciously espousing pro-White and anti-Black attitudes. These attitudes begin to change with the encounter

stage, which involves an event or series of events through which individuals realize that they cannot fully be accepted in White society. Immersion-emersion represents a reaction to the encounter stage; in this phase, individuals become more interested in their own Black identities and their awareness of racism also increases. This stage may be characterized by anti-White attitudes. Internalization occurs as individuals achieve security with their own Black identities and move towards a more pluralistic perspective in which African Americans represent the primary reference group but attitudes are not anti-White. The Nigrescence framework has been modified to incorporate a more dynamic and flexible view of racial identity development; thus, the stages should not be viewed as a literal progression with strict, well-defined boundaries between them. Nonetheless, the stages in the Nigrescence framework do correspond to racial attitudes (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001). The pre-encounter stage represents Eurocentrism, the encounter stage characterizes a transition, the immersion-emersion stage suggests reactive Afrocentrism, and the internalization represents proactive Afrocentrism.

To understand what "acting White" means in different contexts, the link between racial identity and academic achievement must first be examined. In a recent study of 562 Black adolescents, aged eleven to sixteen from a Southeastern U.S. city, Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001) found that individuals with a Eurocentric orientation, as indicated by a high score in Cross's (1971, 1991) Pre-Encounter stage, show lower academic achievement and lower self esteem than those individuals who have a proactive Afrocentric orientation which is marked by the Internalization stage. While individuals with a reactive Afrocentric orientation (Immersion-emersion stage) performed poorly, the study indicates that a strong, proactive sense of Black cultural identity is associated with positive academic achievement for Black youth. It also contradicts the claims of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), who contend that Blacks must distance themselves from Black culture in order to achieve.

The study by Spencer et al. (2001) also illustrates the importance of considering both adaptive and maladaptive coping outcomes and shows how Black racial identity can be related to both. As part of normative development, adolescents of all ethnicities are struggling to find their own identities and striving for acceptance and approval. In a typical teenage environment, Black youth face the normative identity issues that all teenagers face. These issues are compounded as Black adolescents gain increased awareness of the negative stigma they face, adding to the net stress level they experience. As described by Spencer (1995; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997), youth react to stress by employing coping strategies, which in turn yield stable coping responses, or "emergent identities." If Black youth perceive a classroom, school, or any other setting as a context where they are devalued, they may cope reactively by defining the expectations of this context as "acting White," particularly as they explore their own racial identities. As noted earlier, Cross' s (1971) Immersion-Emersion stage represents may be characterized by anti-White attitudes, and these can occur in conjunction with the devaluation that Black youth often encounter in schools and other settings. However, this is reflective of identity development processes rather than cultural devaluation of education. Moreover, as Spencer et al. illustrate, proactive Afrocentric identity--Cross's Internalization stage--is related to positive academic achievement and high self esteem. Thus, given proper cultural capital to promote proactive Afrocentrism, Black youth do well academically and socially and also embrace their own heritage.

Also, as Spencer et al. (2001) note, "acting White has so many potential variations based on multiple contextual realities" (p. 28). Depending on the specific circumstances, various behaviors may be labeled as "acting White." In my high school, Black football players who attempted to gain the favor of a particular White coach (who had supposedly rejected other Black players in different ways) were said to be "acting White." Accusations of "acting White" are a manifestation of reactive Afrocentric identity, not a fundamental component of Black culture. While these accusations may be linked to attributes of Black culture (e.g. listening to certain kinds of music), they can also be linked to completely independent behaviors such as the one I just noted. The "acting White" phenomena, as it occurs, is not responsible for Black academic underachievement, nor is it reflective of a broad cultural frame of reference, as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest. It is simply one of many possible coping responses to feelings of devaluation that Black youth encounter.

Conclusion

It is interesting and significant to note that Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) article was not the first academic work to employ the phrase, "acting White." The earliest reference I found in a recent literature search was a paper written in 1970 by McArdle and Young entitled "Classroom discussion of racial identity or how can we make it without 'acting White.'" In this paper, McArdle and Young (1970) interviewed several Black and White high school students from Madison, Wisconsin. Regarding the Black youth in this sample, the authors note, "Their goal, to have equal rights and opportunities without 'acting White,' strengthened a sense of being 'Black and beautiful'" (p. 137)--essentially to be successful in the world and to simultaneously reach Cross' (1971, Cross et al., 1991) Internalization stage. This example suggests that these Black youth do not define success as "acting White," but rather that they perceive a racist society which devalues their cultural heritage, and that they are struggling to cope with it in an adaptive way. Their goal is to attain success in this society without assimilating and compromising their racial and cultural identities. Indeed, the very question posed by McArdle and Young suggests that the Black youth in their study believed it possible to "make it" without "acting White," a notion generally denied by Fordham and Ogbu.

As noted at the beginning of this commentary, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) assert that the Black community needs to re-examine

its attitude towards schooling. Numerous lines of evidence indicate that this line of reasoning is faulty. A more appropriate assertion is that American society needs to re-examine its attitude towards Black communities and provide for a more equitable and supportive set of educational experiences. This re-examination must include not only the oppression that Blacks have faced, but also the tremendous resilience, driven by proactive Afrocentric attitudes, that Black communities have displayed. Rather than changing the "cultural meaning of schooling" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 203) in these communities, we must change the context of schooling-to promote proactive Afrocentrism, and to provide all of the material and cultural resources necessary to properly educate Black youth in America.

Acknowledgement

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