INEQUALITY IN THE STRUCTURE OF CULTURAL MEANINGS: LEARNING
WHILE “BLACK” AND “LATINO”

Prudence L. Carter
Harvard University

(Paper in Revise & Resubmit Status for the Sociology of Education)

Please do not cite, quote or distribute this paper without the author’s permission

* This research was supported by dissertation support grants from the National Science Foundation (#SBR-9801981) and the Spencer Foundation. Thanks to Sheldon Danziger, Mary Corcoran and the Ford Foundation Program on Poverty, the Underclass and Social Policy for office and resource support. For comments and suggestions, I thank James Ainsworth-Darnell, Tony Brown, Darrick Hamilton, Lori Hill, James S. Jackson, Jennifer Lee, Samuel Lucas, Amanda Lewis, and Karolyn Tyson. Correspondence may be addressed to the author at the Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, 512 William James Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138 or via electronic mail at plcarter@wjh.harvard.edu.
ABSTRACT

This research challenges some deeply entrenched ideas about the role of oppositional culture, defined as resistance to “acting white,” in the academic and socioeconomic outcomes for various racial and ethnic minorities. This research offers results with a different articulation of how African American and Latino youths perceive “acting white.” The results reveal that these youths maintain high educational and career aspirations and do not disdain doing well in school and striving for high achievement. Rather, they create distinctive cultural identities around speech, dress, and interactional tastes and preferences. In this paper, I conclude that these cultural behaviors are the main dimensions of either “acting white” or “ethnic” for many minority youths and suggest how this alternative articulation is connected to school achievement and economic attainment. The analyses are based on a combination of survey and qualitative data collected from a series of in-depth individual and group interviews held with an inter-ethnic, mixed-gender sample of 68 low-income, African American and Latino youth, ages 13 to 20.
LOW-INCOME BLACK AND LATINO YOUTHS’ ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTATIONS: ASPIRATIONS, CULTURE AND RESISTANCE TO “ACTING WHITE”

From academic texts to newspaper accounts, scholars and writers are contending with explanations for the achievement gap between African American, Latino, and white students. One of the most popular explanations is the resistance to “acting white” thesis (Ford, Harris, Webb and Jones 1994; Datnow and Cooper 1997; O’Connor 1997; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Ferguson 1998a; 1998b; Tyson 1998; Belluck 1999; Waters 1999; Lewis 2000). In 1986, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu introduced this idea. They argued that many African American students associate achievement-oriented behaviors and attitudes as “acting white” and are therefore resistant to engaging in such behaviors as studying hard and getting good grades. With the publication of their oft-cited and well-received article, Fordham and Ogbu set the contours of a debate that continues into the present moment.

The concept of oppositional culture, frequently defined as resistance to “acting white, has had wide implications in sociology and has been incorporated in various bodies of research on stratification and social inequality. Much of the sociological research suggests that some racial and ethnic minorities remain mired in poverty not only due to powerful structural barriers, such as economic transformations, residential location and segregation, but also due to their oppositional culture and the inappropriate values, beliefs and behaviors associated with it (Wilson 1996; Massey and Denton 1993; Anderson 1990). The new immigration literature has also embraced oppositional culture
as one possible influence on the mobility patterns of new immigrants of color (Waters 1999; Portes and Zhou 1992). Finally, this idea of oppositional culture has gained much currency in the education literature and has fostered much debate among social scientists from various fields with a focus on explaining achievement differences (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997; 1998; Ferguson 1998b; O'Connor 1997).

Although they may provide sympathetic perspectives on the collective impact of limited opportunity and its influence on educational and mobility patterns, scholars who incorporate the oppositional culture thesis in their research tend to do two things. First, these arguments generally do not differentiate between normative values and beliefs; and subjective, distinctive styles, tastes and cues—all components of group identity that shape cultures (Merton 1968; Swidler 1986; Foley 1991; Gould 1999). Cultural norms, tastes and preferences, which encompass shared meanings within groups, can differ from societal norms, which define “right” and “wrong” and are usually shared among social groups (Merton 1938; 1968; Gould 1999).

Recently, some scholars have tried to loosen the stronghold that the oppositional culture theory has played in the explanation of racial disparity in achievement {Ainsworth-Darnell, 1998 #1;Cook, 1998 #38;O'Connor, 1997 #148;Tyson, 1998 #197}. They argue that the evidence supporting the idea that the burden of “acting white” accounts for current differences in test and school performances is not compelling. Still, much, if not all, of the recent research in this area has taken at face value Fordham and Ogbu’s definition of “acting white.” In the past, researchers who challenge Fordham and
Ogbu’s work have striven to prove either that their findings are not generalizable to all Black and Latino students or that these students share the same achievement norms as their White counterparts (Cook and Ludwig 1998).

Yet, meanings of “acting white” require clarification. Although several have challenged the thesis that resistance to “acting white” refers to an anti-school achievement orientation (e.g., Cook and Ludwig 1998; Tyson 1998; O’Connor 1997), they have not provided an alternative articulation of the meanings and the implications of these meanings of resistance to “acting white.” One question that the data presented here raises is whether social scientists have privileged the analysts’ interpretations over the actual system of meanings applied to this term invoked by low-income African American and Latino students. For instance, few, if any, have questioned why the African American students in Fordham and Ogbu’s study did not explicitly employ the concept of “acting white” when describing high-achieving students, but rather used the term “brainiac,” a universal term used throughout the U.S. school systems (see Fordham and Ogbu 1986: 188-197). Some researchers may likely racialize the “nerd” concept for students of color and conflate it with the idea of “acting white.”

This research supports some of the findings that certain minority students associate particular behavioral traits with “acting white.” In contrast, however, I will suggest that those behaviors pegged as “white” represent differences in both individual and cultural tastes that intrinsically have little to do with an appreciation for school achievement. Thus, my results call into question their conclusion that resistance to “acting white” leads to a rejection of high academic achievement. Instead, I show that
despite some pessimism, these particular Black and Latino youth still aspire and expect to be academically mobile. In fact, they maintain very high aspirations and strongly endorse beliefs about the connection between education and socioeconomic mobility.

Finally, in this paper, I question whether social scientists can continue to ignore African American and Latino youths’ persistent verbal endorsement of dominant achievement ideology, even in the face of limited opportunities that they recognize. Some researchers argue that an attitude-achievement paradox exists among minority students, where they verbally endorse dominant achievement ideology but do not support it in their academic performances. Mickelson (1990) found that in the abstract, students accepted certain mainstream beliefs about education, maintained high aspirations and a taste for achievement and success, yet when considering their own material realities, they maintained markedly different expectations of how school worked for them. This distinction compels some scholars and researchers to believe that certain groups of minority students only pay lip service to dominant achievement ideology (Ogbu 1991).

If many minority students maintain high aspirations and expectations, which Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) show in their study using a national sample of African American students, then is it possible that some structural and cultural processes derail them from fulfilling their commitments and realizing their expectations? I argue that the structure of cultural meanings in our society ignores the importance of substantive tastes, styles and preferences, of non-dominant groups.² As a result, low-income students of color find themselves often wrestling with the negotiation of their own “taste culture” (to borrow sociologist Herbert Gans’ (1975) characterization of
different social groups’ cultural lifestyles) in educational institutions where another (i.e., dominant) taste culture is privileged. Thus, I posit that another way to examine the resistance to “acting white” phenomenon is not from a dominant perspective of deviance but rather how various students of color navigate the structure of cultural meanings embedded within schools. They often seek academic mobility without culturally emulating the social group to which they attribute their marginalization. However, cultural conflict ensues in school when they employ their own taste cultures, often impeding these students’ academic progress.

BACKGROUND & CONCEPTUAL ARGUMENT

The resistance to “acting white” thesis, an application of the oppositional culture frame of reference theory, suggests that in the face of a historical legacy and present-day context of racial subordination, high unemployment and limited political opportunity, racial and ethnic minorities make cultural adaptations to survive their situation (Ogbu 1974; 1978; 1991). Such cultural adaptation includes taking an oppositional stance to high academic achievement, since it is perceived that it primarily benefits middle class Whites, viewed as the chief beneficiaries of opportunities in U.S. society. Oppositional culture theories tend to implicitly value the cultural cues used by schools and other dominant social organizations to signify achievement orientations. Second, these theories ignore the very real tensions between the symbolic cultural boundaries set by poor African American and Latino students—which often have little to do with these students’ taste for achievement and success—and the cultural markers used by school authorities to
circumscribe successful schooling behaviors. Oppositional culture theorists tend to attribute downward mobility to the stylistic cultural differences of lower status racial and ethnic groups. Yet, their refusal to admit the value of non-dominant groups’ taste cultures, however, perpetuates inequality in the structure of cultural meanings embedded within schools.

Who is defined as either a “successful” or “smart” student is often predicated on the styles and tastes of the dominant social group, and this goes above and beyond exhibiting behaviors such as studying or getting good grades. In a stratified society, achievement often depends on the degree to which individuals can employ dominant cultural capital, such as valued expressions, possessions, or interactional and language styles (Bourdieu 1977; 1986). For example, particular tastes for high cultural activities, art, music, and language may influence the social outcomes for an individual (DiMaggio 1982; {DiMaggio, 1985 #365}). But what happens when students come to school with a different taste culture or even another cultural “tool kit,” to invoke Swidler’s (1986) metaphor for culture?. For Swidler, "[c]ulture in this sense is more like a style or a set of skills and habits than a set of preferences or wants" (1986: 275). Further, what happens when students do not perceive that their cultural ways are incompatible with academic achievement? Socially marginalized students can maintain high academic aspirations and strong tastes for upward mobility. Yet, they may seek higher attainment without forsaking their own cultural “tool kits.”

Employing folk definitions of race and ethnicity, many low-income African American and Latino students tend to racialize certain tastes and styles based on its main
subscribers. In other words, they categorize language, music and art appreciation, dress
styles and other indicators of tastes as either “black,” “Spanish,” “white,” or other, if they
perceive that Blacks, Latinos, or Whites, respectively, primarily subscribe to these tastes.
And these categorizations can be further qualified with birthplace, ethnic, gender, and/or
socioeconomic specificity. Thus, for example, the most basic articulation of “acting
white” is about the categorization of certain stylistic and cultural actions. Furthermore,
theses findings will show that resistance to “acting white” is not about a rejection of high
academic achievement, but rather about an unwillingness to accept certain tastes and
styles associated with Whites as the cultural standard or default.

Often, low-income African American and Latino students’ assertion of their own
cultural styles, tastes and preferences, and not the ones rewarded by schools, has
consequences for their academic attainment. They confront the grim reality that only a
certain type of kit works—that which incorporates dominant cultural capital. Either these
students have limited access to this particularly functional toolkit, and/or they refuse to
accept it because they see value in their own tool kit. Thus, what becomes problematic is
how these students negotiate their perceptions of the prescribed signifiers for smartness
and intelligence. Gould (1999) writes that most deficiencies in performance among racial
minorities stem not from these cultural attributes, but from the ways that they are
processed in white-dominant organizations. As social organizations, schools quite
possibly constrain pro-achievement behaviors among many minority youth because they
only recognize one cultural “tool kit” as legitimate. Consequently, when students
encounter school authorities adherent to dominant cultural tool kits, conflict arises for
many of them. The students whom I interviewed perceived that the structure of cultural meanings embedded within their schools facilitated student-teacher conflict. As social agents, some disengaged from school and others encountered much disciplinary problems—all of this despite their stated desire for academic achievement and upward mobility.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

These findings draw extensively on a mixed-methods approach: both survey and interview data collected from a sample of 68 low-income, native-born African American and Latino males and females, ages 13-20 (See Table 1 for sample breakdown). The group of Latinos consists primarily of 1st and 2nd generation Puerto Rican and Dominican youth, while the African American youth have ancestral roots that stretch mainly from the southern U.S. and New York. My respondents, along with other members of their families, are research participants in a larger quasi-experimental longitudinal and separately funded study of 317 low-income African American and Latino families from different neighborhoods in Yonkers, NY. All of my respondents’ families, which lived in government-subsidized housing, are poor. Until 1994, before half of them moved to east Yonkers as a part of a housing experiment, they spent many of their formative years growing up in the same high poverty, predominantly minority neighborhoods in southwest Yonkers. Despite their neighborhood differences, the research respondents are socially matched on key socioeconomic traits. Table 2 shows that there are no significant differences on key demographic and family characteristics by neighborhood type.
I contacted and sampled all the adolescents living in the two housing complexes, one located in each neighborhood. These two complexes were chosen because the largest concentration of youth from the larger family study lived there.

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

(TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE)

Yonkers itself is an interesting research setting. Located north of New York City, it is the largest city in mostly suburban Westchester County (pop. 189,000 in 1990). Racially diverse and highly segregated, Yonkers has a public school system that faced a major challenge in 1980. The U.S. Department of Justice, the federal Office for Civil Rights and later by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) accused city officials and the Board of Education for intentionally maintaining racially segregated schools. In May 1986, federal appeals court Judge Leonard Sand ordered the school district, found guilty as charged, to develop a plan that would ameliorate the problem of school segregation. The plan created by the Yonkers Board of Education sought to bring about voluntary school desegregation through choice, centered on magnet schools and a series of voluntary students transfers to schools. School officials instructed black, Hispanic, and white students to board school buses and crisscross the city to attend newly created magnet schools. In this sample, seventy-two percent of the respondents attended one of the public, magnet middle or high schools in the restructured Yonkers, NY School district. Fifteen percent of the respondents had
already obtained either a high school diploma or a GED; eight percent had some college experience. Another 13% percent were high school dropouts (see Table 3).

(TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE)

Over 80% responded affirmatively and participated in my research study. I interviewed these youth over a 10-month period from November 1997 to August 1998. On average, the individual interviews lasted about 1 ½ hours and consisted of two parts: a survey comprised of widely used and reliable measures and a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol. The survey included measures indicating attitudes and beliefs about the connections among education, perceptions of discrimination, life outcomes and career mobility. I used Mickelson's (1990) abstract attitude measures to ascertain differences in views toward the education and the opportunity structure. Her indicators measure adherence to the principle of schooling as a vehicle for success and economic mobility for young Hispanic and Black people. It consists of seven items asking such questions as "Young Black [Hispanic] people like me have a chance of making it if we do well in school" and "Education really pays off in the future for young Black [Hispanic] people like me." The abstract scale scores range from a low of 7 to high of 35, with high scores ranging from 28 to 35, indicating general agreement with dominant achievement ideology.6

In addition, I used some items from Mickelson’s “concrete” attitude scale to measure their adherence to beliefs about the connections between education and mobility, given their perceptions of their parents and their actual experiences. These items
included statements such as “My parents face barriers to job success, despite their belief in a good education” and “People in my family have not been treated fairly at work, no matter how much education they possess.” Using the above-mentioned scale and item measures, I generated some descriptive statistics of these youths’ beliefs about the links between education and socioeconomic mobility. In addition, the survey included measures on mothers’ work status and years of schooling. While the small sample size precluded any sophisticated statistical techniques or causal modeling, the analyses used were sufficient to discern any meaningful patterns and to take the reader beyond an anecdotal or simple case study method.

With the semi-structured, open-ended interviews, I made inquiries into the research participants’ beliefs about opportunity, educational and career aspirations, school performance, delinquent behaviors, job attainment, gender roles, and “appropriate” ethnic or cultural behavior among their peers and family (e.g., speech, dress, demeanor, actions). Questions included “In your family, are there expectations related to your [racial or ethnic] background, to how you should act? What about among your friends? How do you feel about these rules? What are your feelings about the ways you’re “supposed” to behave as a [member of racial or ethnic group]?”

Finally, data gathered from three single-sex group interviews, which averaged about two hours, with the same research participants were used to complement and triangulate the data gathered from the individual interviews and surveys. Similarly, these semi-structured group interviews explored the meaning behind beliefs, attitudes and actions that deal with racial, ethnic and gender identity, as well the research participants’ beliefs
about the opportunity structure, race relations, and the means to success and achievement in this society. This approach allowed opinions and beliefs to “volley” back and forth through the group. Group interviewing also allowed me to elaborate upon statements and locate the bases of shared and collective meanings {Frey, 1991 #70; Lofland, 1984 #239}. All of the individual and group interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded. Observations occurred during the specific interview contexts, often in the respondents’ homes or a local neighborhood center, and during the time I spent talking to my respondents, their families and friends after their interviews were completed.

Using a phenomenological inquiry that allows the respondents’ to “tell” their own personal perspectives—revealing how they “make sense” of the world, given present and past social experiences (McCracken 1988; Patton 1990), I decided early in the research to take a more inductive approach and to allow the meanings behind resistance to “acting white” to reveal themselves. In the process, I learned that this phrase did not possess a central role in the common, everyday interactions. Thus, my respondents did not invoke the notion of “acting white” often, but rather they negotiated how they could actively demonstrate their “Blackness” and “Spanishness.” At times, however, the term “acting white” arose spontaneously. For example, during an all-female group interview, one teen accused her younger sister of “acting white” in front of me because of how she talked. In that exchange between Joyelle, her sister Janelle and me, there was an assumption that since I shared the same ethnic background, I would understand naturally how Janelle “talked white” by simply listening to her speak.

In other instances, discussions of (resistance to) “acting white” arose in response to
certain questions about how my respondents felt that “had to behave” according to their peers. Finally, in some instances, the respondents hesitated to speak explicitly about race and ethnicity, although they implied these meanings, and waited for me to probe. These youth mentioned that they did not want to appear to be too “racial” [sic], a phrase used to describe their concern for appearing too race-conscious. Therefore, in some interviews at any moment I believed that the respondent was hinting at ideas that were pertinent to these notions, I decided to ask directly about “acting racial/ethnic” or “acting white;” often to the respondents’ relief. In the data that follow, I present my questions and probes, as well as comments about gesticulations and voice inflections, which are critical to understand many of the meanings and rationales provided by these respondents.

RESULTS

Debunking the Myth of Anti-School Values

One of the central tenets of the oppositional culture frame of reference framework and the resistance to “acting white” thesis is the notion that racial minorities level their aspirations and expectations because of a legacy of racial and economic oppression (Ogbu 1974; 1978; 1991). In this study, neither the survey nor the interview data support the assertion that African American and Latino youths’ maintain low values about educational achievement and job success. Although 77% of the respondents believed that structural barriers such as job discrimination existed, this belief did not thwart their positive declarations of their own chances of success and mobility. Like other research using nationally, representative comparative samples of Black and White youths, these
data confirm that Black and Latino youth maintain aspirations either as high as or higher than their White peers' aspirations (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997; Solozano 1992).

Scale items from Mickelson’s “abstract” attitude scale reveal that 97% of the respondents agreed that high achievement in school pays off in the future for young Black and Hispanic youths. Almost an equally high percentage, 94%, believed that education was a practical means to success (See Figure 1). The mean scale score of 30.10 supports the conclusion that the youths in this sample generally subscribed affirmatively to the dominant achievement ideology. In general, they subscribed to the simple formula that school performance leads to a high school diploma, which consequently facilitates the acquisition of a college credential and later a “good” job. Furthermore, being African American or Latino did not limit the possibilities of their career choices, although their actual breadth and knowledge of career choices was limited. While they hailed from families with extremely limited means, 84% of these youths desired to attend college or a higher level of school, and 60% of them aspired to hold professional and managerial jobs, with physician, lawyer and businessperson leading as the top three career preferences (Refer to Table 3).

(FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE)

The following comments of 13-year-old Ngozi Gordon typify the responses I received when probing about the role of education in their lives.

Interviewer: What does success mean to you?
Ngozi: Finish school…and college

Interviewer: Is there anything you want to do with your life?

Ngozi: Go to college

Interviewer: Why is it important for you to finish college?

Ngozi: Cause if I don’t then I won’t get what I want.

Interviewer: Which is?

Ngozi: Have a house, a car and a good job

Like many other American youth, Ngozi and her peers accepted an instrumental approach to education. That is, they considered the diploma (whether college or high school) a means to “getting paid.” For many “getting paid” (see Sullivan 1989) entailed fantasizing about and aspiring to high prestige jobs that have been both romanticized and glamorized in the media. Quite rationally, these youths saw the professions as channels to economic mobility, improving their financial status, and this was foremost in their minds as the following exchange with 15-year old Joyelle reveals:

Interviewer: You say you want to be a lawyer and a doctor. I’ve heard a lot of people say that they want to do that. What’s so appealing about law or medicine?

Joyelle: You get a lot of money.

Interviewer: So the number one reason you choose what you want to do is based on how much money you’re gonna make?

Joyelle: Yeah.
Interviewer: Do you know how much work it’s going to take?

Joyelle: I know it’s a lot.

Interviewer: What if I told you that it takes 12 plus 4 years of college plus 3 more years of school? It takes 19 years of school.

Joyelle: So!

Interviewer: It doesn’t make a difference to you?

Joyelle: No, I’ll be a lawyer.

Joyelle desired to pursue a “respectable” and financially rewarding career—an aspiration that would take her along an academic trajectory that was not questioned.

Although the majority of the respondents acknowledged the necessity of academic achievement for occupational success, they displayed a healthy disrespect for the romantic tenets of achievement ideology. That is, while the “Education-and-effort-lead-to-success” mantra was the acceptable belief, it was also understood that this dictum does not hold true equally for all social groups in our society. Figure 2 shows that 69% of the students generally believed that in spite of education’s value, their families and they either faced or would face many obstacles to job success. Still, 63% disagreed that education rarely pays off with good jobs. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the respondents believed that job discrimination existed and that Whites either did not care or desired to staunch the progress of their racial or ethnic group.

A bivariate correlation analysis in Table 4 shows that perceptions of job discrimination were significantly and positively associated with the beliefs that families would not be paid or promoted based on education. These two measures have a
significant and positive correlation, signifying that the more respondents believed that job
discrimination existed, the more likely they were to believe that their family members
would not experience promotions commensurate with their level of education (r=.421;
p<.01). Table 4 also shows a positive association between the parents’ educational level
and the belief that job discrimination existed (r=.281; p<.05), suggesting that those
students whose parents had the highest educational attainment were more likely to
believe that job discrimination existed. These results resonate with other findings that
even middle class African Americans, despite their success, maintain persistent,
pessimistic viewpoints about racial discrimination and prejudice, which do not deter them
from upward mobility (see Collins 1989; Hochschild; 1995; Feagin 1991). Similarly, my
respondents exhibited more pessimistic beliefs about the access to opportunity for their
family members and themselves because of racial discrimination.

(FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE)

(TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE)

Before I address this question, first I offer the reader my findings on just what
“acting white” means to many contemporary African American and Latino youth. Then,
the findings will suggest how as these youth negotiate their own cultural tool kits with
perceived teacher preferences for the culturally-dominant tool kit, resistance to authority
ensues—quite possibly to the detriment of their aspirations.

African American and Latino Youths on “Acting White”
The survey findings presented above already show that the overwhelming majority of these respondents did not maintain either anti-achievement values or leveled aspirations. Yet, they did invoke the notion of “acting white.” In these interview data there were fifty-one explicit occurrences when the notion of “acting white” arose either spontaneously or was drawn out by the researcher through probing when implicit references were made to it. Four main dimensions to “acting white” emerged: 1) speech styles; 2) dress styles; 3) primary social interactions at school with Whites; and 4) behaviors which suggest that one is “being stuck up” or “trying to be better than others.” While the four dimensions of the behaviors described as “acting white” in my study generally overlapped with items found on Fordham and Ogbu’s list, the meanings and implications arising from my data diverge significantly from theirs and those which have remained dominant in the current sociological imagination. Before I delve into these meanings, a few caveats are in order. First, my respondents distinguished between the ideas of “acting” and “being.” “Being white” and “acting white” constitute two different essences, although frequently respondents would refer to a co-ethnic as simply “white” without explicitly using the word “acting” in conjunction with “white.” In these latter instances, they did not ascribe another racial group to the co-ethnic but instead imputed social and cultural traits associated with Whites. “Being white” indicated that an individual was born as a person of primarily European descent. Physical traits, parentage, and other ascribed traits would belie any of their co-ethnics attempts at “being white;” unless they could physically and hereditarily pass for white.
Second, when talking explicitly about “acting white,” the African American and Latino youths often invoked a pan-minority identity, sharing similar meanings about what it meant, although they made it clear that their black and “Spanish” cultures are not equivalent. Mainly differences in clothing and music styles, as well as a different language system (Spanish versus the speech styles employed by the African American youth) separated them culturally. The Latino youths’ descriptions of their cultures appeared to mirror their parent culture(s) more than the Black youths. In many ways, being “Spanish” connoted behaviors and values associated with either traditional Puerto Rican or Dominican cultures. For example, the Puerto Rican and Dominican youth were almost twice as likely as the African American youth to celebrate certain ethno-specific holidays such as All King’s Day, observed in their parents’ or grandparents’ home country.

1. Speech Styles
The most frequent reference to “acting white” pertained to the imitation of Whites’ style of talk or the lack of slang usage, which is a commonly shared source of communication among these minority youths. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of the mentions of “acting white” referred to language. In instances, when questioned specifically about what “acting white” meant, the typical responses mirrored that of 15-year old Samurai:

Interviewer: Something out of a big vocabulary? So if they don’t know slang, it makes them sound white?
Samurai: Yeah. Like I might be talking on the phone, and he might be like, ‘Oh you see the new Jordans out. Oh they is butters, they is phat.’ A White person ain't gonna say that. ‘Fine. [He mimics what he perceives as ‘white talk.’] Did you see the new Charles Barkley’s? They're nice; I really like them. My mother says that she's gonna buy them for me on Wednesday.’ It's like that. It's not the proper English that they use; it's just… they're not hip to everything. It goes all back to the rap and the neighborhood that you in.’ It's like that. So [they're] not used to being all around, ‘Oh that's phat.’ Like different words come out like every year that person, every week different words come out.

Interviewer: Does acting white and acting black go beyond language; is there anything else that makes a person act black or white other than how they speak?

Samurai: No.

Interviewer: So it's not about any other kind of behavior. What you want to do in life?

Samurai: No, definitely not what you want to do in life.

Much of “talking white” pertained to the speaker’s voice inflection, in which a different enunciation was easily recognized and to the failure of co-ethnics to use the respondents’ own lexicon, a compilation of easily made-up and variable words and phrases that defied the grammatical structures of Standard English.
Even one of the highest achieving students in the sample, 15 year-old Adrienne, a student who is enrolled in gifted and honors classes, declared that others’ accusations of her “acting white” were basically about her language and style of talk:

Adrienne: Yep, like some boys in school expect me to speak Ebonics or whatever, so they call me a “White girl.” They like, ‘Come here, White girl,’ cause of the way I talk. I tell them I’m not a thug. I go to English class; this is the way I talk. This is my grammar. I’m not going to sit here and make myself look stupid talking about some “What up, yo’.” That’s not English! So you do get picked on if you speak a certain way or you act a certain way. I know some of the boys say White girl just because of the way I talk. And I don’t see how you can distinguish between a Black person and a White person talking because of the way they talk. They’re just talking. A Black person has to speak stupid in order for you to know that they’re Black?

Others like Bettina, a 19-year high school graduate, not only spoke Standard English primarily but also possessed the ability to oscillate between what she deemed as “white talk” and “black talk:”

Interviewer: So people [frequently] say that [you talk white]?
Bettina: Yes!

Interviewer: Why are they saying that to you?
Bettina: Because I’m different. I mean there are times when I know how to have fun. I know how to relax; I know how to have fun. But there are also
times when if I know that I’m going to the doctors, or if I have to go to a preliminary meeting about this or that, I know how to talk. I know how to dress, and I know how to act. I’ve always had to face off against people because I chose to use what people call “big words” over slang all the time. Through junior high school and parts of high school, yeah, I chose to talk BeBop... You’re gonna experience that, but you gonna have to choose what you like over what you don’t like...I know that if anything ever happens on the street, I could tell you what it means. I could tell you what this person is talking about, but it doesn’t mean that I have to speak it.

Here Bettina admits that she knew how to switch “tool kits,” depending on the cultural context. Again, she confirms that “acting white” deals more with speech patterns likely to be privileged in work and school settings. Meanwhile, both Adrienne and Bettina valued Standard English” and understood it as a form of cultural capital that could translate into mobility, provided other factors (e.g., lack of access and material resources) did not preclude their attainment. They also appeared to recognize the power imbued in Standard English, particularly in those moments when they associated it with “being intelligent.” For example, Adrienne relegated her peers’ speech to ignorance and stupidity.

Unlike Adrienne, who appeared to avoid and derogate the tool kit embraced by her peers, Bettina, a college-bound high school graduate, admitted that she knew how to “have fun,” speak “BeBop,” and maintain dual tool kits. Researchers have shown that those minority students like Bettina, who possess these multiple capabilities and tools
tend to be successful both academically and socially (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1991; Hemmings 1996; O’Connor 1997). Foley (1991) describes the possession of dual linguistic capital, a form of cultural capital, as “dual communicative competence.” Meanwhile, Adrienne, who clings to the dominant tool kit, was academically successful, although her conversation with me revealed that she had a tougher time among her peers because she fully rejected many of their styles. Both Adrienne and Bettina not only recognized but also bought into the idea that to be more socially and economically mobile, they had to rely more on the dominant cultural repertoire for academic and socioeconomic attainment.

In contrast, most of my respondents resembled Samurai and preferred to employ their own distinctive speech codes, aware the qualitative differences between what they deemed as “white” talk and “black.” This is also the group of individuals with which many scholars writing about oppositional culture, race, poverty and education have been concerned. What distinguishes these students from either Adrienne or Bettina can range from either the structural (e.g., school and classroom placement) to the meso-structural (i.e., school ties)—which I will discuss below—to even the social psychological (e.g., the influence of teacher ratings on the students’ academic self-concept), which others discuss (Spencer 1985). Certainly, these in-school processes and factors could potentially explain why many African American and Latino students in the same socioeconomic and ethnic positions behave differently.
2. The Youth Factor: Dress Styles as Identifiers

The second most frequent reference to “acting white” (nearly 1/3 of the comments) centered on dress styles and tastes—some of the key markers of my respondents’ racial and ethnic identity; and they made distinctions between their own styles and that of White youths’ styles. Styles of dress and peer group formations, the sites and symbols of adolescence “coolness” (Danesi, 1994 #47), play critical roles in the establishment of identity. These social practices preoccupy many of the youths’ thoughts about how to behave at school. Rosaria, one of the highest achieving students in the sample and also one of the four respondents who had been sanctioned for “acting white,” called attention to this issue:

Rosaria: Like I like to dress preppy, with the khakis, the crisp shirt and a scarf around my neck. The kids in my class are all like: ‘You dress so preppy. Why are you so preppy?’

Interviewer: How do they want you to dress?

Rosaria: I guess like they do.

Interviewer: What’s that the hip-hop style?

Rosaria: Yeah, with the baggy pants and stuff.

Interviewer: How do they want you to talk?

Rosaria: That’s another thing. Like my they say you talk…you talk…cause I speak intelligently, they want to say that I talk white. I speak intelligently. It’s not Spanish; it’s not black; it’s not white. No one has claim on who can talk intelligently. My friend is always saying that to me.
Interviewer: Well, who are the kids who tend to have tastes in clothes and music more like you?

Rosaria: That’s a hard question that I don’t want to answer. It makes me uncomfortable.

Interviewer: Why? Because it makes you…

Rosaria: …seem like I really am White. Because it would fit right in with what my friend wants to say. I just like these things and I don’t think that my friend is right.

Rosaria’s last comments proved to be a poignant moment for both her and me. I gathered from her voice inflection and demeanor that she wanted to answer the question about which students tended to have tastes in clothes and music as she. Yet, she felt a need to preface her comments about why the question would make her feel uncomfortable because she feared how others and I would perceive them. Rosaria felt very self-conscious that her answer might conform to her co-ethnic friends’ expectations about her “acting white.” Although she liked to dress preppy and listened to pop singer Michael Bolton, she felt strongly that she had the freedom as a Dominican American to maintain these tastes as much as some of her co-ethnic peers valued Hip Hop music and clothing styles.

Loresha underscores Rosaria’s comments, pointing out how she would be “acting white,” based on speech and dress styles:

A White person acting black is [one who wears] the baggy clothes, the pants hanging down so that their boxers can see. And a Black person acting white is
like hippie, you know. Like straight slacks and plaid shirts. You know, and just talking, talking correct English. You know, not slang all the time. That's a Black person acting white.

For these youths, the creation and reinforcement of styles—e.g., language, dress, and interaction—signified their racial or ethnic identities. Having forged a distinction among their White peers, other ethnic groups and themselves, they dressed in a variety of clothing styles, or listened to different genres of music, in addition to creating speech code of their own, to preserve their sense of cultural uniqueness. Individuals like Rosaria, who shared an ascribed status but who did not conform to the cultural repertoire of her co-ethnics, threatened the already tenuous reins they held over this domain and was sanctioned accordingly.

Meanwhile, Rosaria, like Adrienne, wanted to avoid displacing herself from her ethnic group. Thus, she challenged the racial and ethnic coding of dress, while Adrienne challenged the coding of the usage of Standard English. Speaking Standard English language and dressing with a preppy style had to be devoid of any racial and ethnic proprietorship. That way, if either Adrienne or Rosaria chose to embrace Standard English and not ethnic youth slang or even certain styles of dress, in their minds they would still be Black and Latina (or “Spanish”), respectively. This strategy resonates with the “racelessness” described by Fordham (1988) respondents, when students tended to disassociate themselves from their ethnic group. However, unlike Fordham’s respondents, Adrienne and Rosaria identified strongly as African American and Dominican, respectively and asserted their pride in their heritages. I gathered this from
their “very proud” responses to how they felt about their racial and ethnic pride and heritage. Moreover, Adrienne and Rosaria both discussed the lack of political and economic power they perceived for African Americans and Latinos. Some of Rosaria’s and Adrienne’s ethnic consciousness had been shaped by their perceptions of how certain school policies benefited the high-tracked, mostly white students in their schools. Adrienne also discussed how the thinking of several African American writers had influenced her. At the same time, Adrienne expressed her discomfort with the label “minority,” while Rosaria questioned college affirmative action programs, because of the perceived stigma associated with these notions. In short, these two high-achieving students embraced beliefs and strategies more complicated than one described as either raceless or without ethnicity.

3. Primary Interaction with Whites

Other data show how “acting white” described those co-ethnics who primarily interacted with Whites at school, the third most common reference. Twelve percent (12%) of the references to “acting white” referred to primary social interactions with Whites. Not only would minority students be “acting white” if they socialized at school with Whites only, but also white students would be branded as “acting black” or “acting Spanish” if their primary peer associations were Black or Latino, respectively. While discussing with me racial and ethnic relations in their schools, 18-year old Maxwell and 16-year old Heather, both African American, made these points:

Interviewer: Now do any Black people try to be like the White people?
Maxwell: Umhmm (affirmative). There are some White boys. They don’t want to be with no Black kids. They rather hang with some Indians or White boys or Puerto Ricans, kids like that.

****************

Heather: People could judge you the way they want to judge you. Like if I was White and then I'd be around like a lot of Black people, they'd be like, ‘Oh she's White,’ but [if] she's staying around a lot of Black people, she wants to be Black. Or I'm Black and I hang around with nothing but a lot of White kids or Arabics [sic] or Dominicans, ‘Oh, she wants to be Spanish at times or she wants to be Indian at times.’

Maxwell explicitly labeled those peers who chose not to interact primarily with other Black youth as “White boys,” and Heather confirms this practice. Further, Heather reveals that this practice is not limited to black-white interactions, but to any inter-racial or –ethnic interactions that appear to favor one group over another. Other research has shown that epithets such as “white-washed” have been used to express disapproval of members who appear to have rejected an affiliation with their respective racial or ethnic communities {Benjamin, 1991 #14; Landry, 1987 #346; Neckerman, 1998 #146}. This third dimension of “acting white,” having to do with the youth’s primary peer interactions, connects to the fourth most frequent dimension: actions that appear to subordinate an individual’s particular ethnic group and elevate his/her own status at the expense of insult to other group members.
4. Supremacy and Subordination: Looking Down on Another

Historically within marginalized communities, distancing oneself from the racial group has played itself out along class lines. Middle class African Americans—a group that has burgeoned over the decades—have been chided for distancing themselves from their lower-income co-ethnics (Landry 1987; Benjamin 1991). Many thinkers suggest that in poor urban schools and neighborhoods, this social and economic mobility has come to be defined as inconsistent with “authentic” black identity (Fordham, 1988 #65). However, the issue is more complex than that. Particularly, in the case of African Americans, who share a long legacy of subordinate social and economic status, a sense of “fictive kinship” (Fordham 1996) pervades the ethnic community, forging a connection that transcends class lines.

My respondents appeared to express disapproval when they either believed or perceived that the boundaries of ethnic solidarity were being transgressed, specifically when co-ethnics acted in a way that denigrated other members of the group. They referred to such actions as “white” and verbally sanctioned others who behaved this way. While describing her interpersonal relationships over her time in high school, a 20-year old Puerto Rican young mother highlight it best:

Interviewer: Were there any Hispanic and Black kids who tried to act like the White kids in school?

Vincenzia: It was one Puerto Rican girl.

Interviewer: Did you pick on her too?
Vincenzia: Yeah! Cause if she Puerto Rican, why she trying to act white!

Interviewer: What would she do?

Vincenzia: She would act real conceited, the same way they was acting. She used to look at you like you was lower than her, and I used to hate that. She did that shit to me one time. That’s one of the girls I fought with. (She laughs.)

Vincenzia expressed her disapproval not only verbally but also physically by fighting, although her comments suggested other interpersonal issues with her schoolmate. If a co-ethnic were to lose this respect and loyalty, then respondents were likely to believe that this individual had simply emulated behaviors of those they perceived as associated with the subjugation of racial and ethnic minorities—Whites. In those moments, to accuse another co-ethnic of “acting white” meant to wield a stinging reminder of how he or she has embraced behaviors of those who in the opinion of 14-year old Avery “think they [are] smarter or better than us [racial minorities].”

**THE LINK BETWEEN “ACTING WHITE” AND SCHOOL**

Each of the dimensions of “acting white” found to be most salient in this study has some connection to how students perceived and responded to school. The following analysis offers three key insights. First, it reveals that students accused of “acting white” could vary in achievement levels, ranging from low achievers to high achievers. Second, the analysis suggests that a correlation between high achievement and accusations of “acting white” may exist given how classrooms are structured racially and ethnically through ability-grouping and how ideas and tastes are transmitted within these classroom
spaces. Finally, while respondents tended not to associate “acting white” with high academic achievement, their conversations with me revealed how they perceived schools as a social institution that devalues their cultural tool kits and rewards those students embracing the dominant kit.

Burden of Being Perceived as “Acting White” or a “Nerd?”

Only four of the student respondents declared that they had been accused of “acting white.”

Of the three students still in middle and high school, one was a “lower achiever;” and two were “high achievers.”

Janelle, a lower achiever, was sanctioned as “acting white” by her sister in front of me during an all-girl interview because she spoke like one of the “Clueless” girls. The fourth was a high school graduate with a blemished record who intended to attend college. Overall, respondents did not racialize being smart, doing well in school, or getting good grades (See Table 5). Furthermore, none of the high achievers (twenty percent of the sample) conveyed that their peers sanctioned them for “acting white” because they did well in school or obtained high grades. Peers teased the four students labeled as “acting white” because of their styles and preferences—the two most frequent dimensions mentioned. Adrienne, Bettina, and Janelle were labeled as “acting white” because of how they talked. Rosaria’s peers teased her because of how she dressed and even her musical taste for the pop singer Michael Bolton. Neither Adrienne nor Rosaria, the two high achievers, conveyed the impression that they were either unpopular or sanctioned for doing well in school.

(TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE)
When asked how they and their peers treated those kids who performed well in school, responses varied. Respondents’ descriptions of “smart” students ranged from geeky and nerdy to intelligent and nice, from polite and quiet to pretentious to popular and boring. When asked about the students who were most likely to be picked on by others, the “unpopular,” not the “smart” kids topped the list. Of course, these categories were not mutually exclusive. Students were more likely to describe some high achievers as “nerdy” (a pervasive term in the American high school lexicon) than as “acting white.” Usually, this descriptive reflected the common view that nerds focus so much on their academic achievement that they do not have a social life {Kinney, 1993 #352}. Although “nerds” are singled out for their superior academic performance, many are primarily ridiculed for either having low levels of social skills, being unpopular or not dressing in the faddish clothing styles. John, a very popular high achiever, underscored this point: “You know being who I am, [my schoolmates] expect me to wear name brand stuff…hang with such and such people lie you know they say like they don't want you to hang with the low profile [unpopular] people.” In short, the issue here for high achieving minority students did not have much to do with “coping with the burden of ‘acting white,’ but rather coping with the social burden of being seen as a “nerd” (Kinney 1999).

Classroom Peer Ties and the Transmission of Tastes

Research shows that high achieving students are more likely to speak and be literate in standard American English; to cultivate an appreciation for classic Western (Anglo) literature, music, and art; and to display other traits that they and their teachers associate
with middle-class groups and professionals (Hemmings 1996). The majority of the high achievers (64%) was enrolled in the honors and gifted classes based on their academic performances. In their predominantly white, high-tracked classrooms, these high achievers had more contact with the styles and behaviors perceived as “acting white” (i.e., dress styles, musical tastes, linguistic forms, and primary peer associations). Many of these cultural attributes are transmitted and shared through peer ties formed at school.

Alma, a college sophomore at New York College, contrasted her and her brother Alberto’s (see below) school experiences to me. Alma was a high achiever, while Alberto was a more average 12th grader who was planning to apply to Syracuse University. Alma explained: “I think that it [the difference] had to do with what classes…most of my classes in high school were honors classes, and there was a different crowd there than with those kids who were in more comprehensive classes.”

Alma and the other high achievers in the study were significantly more likely to mention Whites as a part of their social network. On average, they had more Whites as friends (6%) than the lower achievers (1%), very likely because of their classroom composition and the ties made within these settings. Moreover, 55% of the high achievers, compared to 19% of the lower achievers, responded that their classes were comprised of either “almost all” or “very many” White students. The lower achievers’ classes were more than twice as likely to report a Black and Latino student majority in their classes as the high achievers (see Figure 3). Comments from two “high achievers” in the sample, Michael, a very shy 13-year old African American male, and Rosaria
(introduced earlier), 17-year old Latina and recently admitted to fashion design school, highlight the racial and ethnic composition of their classes:

Interviewer: Do you ever get any flack from other kids for being bright and doing well in school?

Michael: No.

Interviewer: Do you ever get called names like "brainiac" or anything like that?

Michael: No.

Interviewer: Do those kinds of things happen at your school?

Michael: Yes.

Interviewer: They do? Who tends to get called those kinds of names?

Michael: The White people.

Interviewer: Why the White people?

Michael: 'Cause they're mostly the people who are in honors.

********************

Interviewer: Who tends to be in the tech programs and who tends to be in the trade programs?

Rosaria: It’s mostly White, then Spanish, and then African American. The trade is mainly Black and Hispanic.

Interviewer: So does that mean that there are mostly White kids in your honors classes?
Rosaria: Yeah. Like in my English class, there is only one African American kid and a few more Hispanics.

Both Michael and Rosaria were the exceptional cases in their respective classes, being either the only or one of a few students of color. The racial and ethnic imbalance that occurs when either ability grouping or tracking begins is impossible to ignore. Several researchers have shown the effects of ability grouping on the perpetuation of school inequality (Hallinan and Sorensen 1983; Oakes 1985; Gamoran 1986; 1987; Lucas 1999).

If patterns show that in racially integrated schools, white students occupy the top of the educational achievement hierarchy, then numerous African American and Latino students might perceive that section as the “white” niche and may even want to avoid it. For example, 13-year old Jeremy dreaded entering the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, which included advanced classes that could be obtained for college credit, because his mostly Black friends would be attending the “regular” high school. Although he protested, Jeremy’s mother was making him attend the school with the IB program the next year. Conversely, in multi-racial schools, teachers and administrators may fail to either encourage or place minority youths in the higher ability-grouped classes (Hallinan and Sorensen 1983; Oakes 1985; Lucas 1999).

Strong, primary peer interactions with white students in school possibly allow more exposure to cultural attributes likely to be described as “acting white” and thus suggest reasons why minority high achievers could be more likely described as “acting white.” These data imply certain things about status relations. Although respondents did not sanction a peer for his or her intelligence, they were labeled as “acting smart,” when their
cultural styles seem to resemble those of smart White kids (see also Ferguson, 1998 #57). Smartness is associated with “acting white” at the moment when the accused has not only appeared to embrace “white” cultural behaviors and styles but also has put on “airs” as perceived by the accuser, which makes the latter feel subordinated or looked down upon—the fourth dimension discussed above. A duality exists here: it appears, as Monique, a lower achiever, said: “People don’t really care [if you are smart].” No, being smart is valued. If a smart student were picked on in school, according to 16-year Raul Juarez, it was because their peers felt that “they were conceited, that they didn’t want to do nothing for nobody.” Thus, depending on its presentation “acting smart,” like “acting white,” can be associated with subjugation and lurks within the boundaries of immodesty and superiority.

The Perceived Consequences of Black and “Spanish” Styles in School

I surveyed my respondents about their relationships with teachers, and they shared their perceptions of their teachers’ and administrators’ reactions to their cultural styles. Some explicitly mentioned that teachers marked them as low achievers based on appearance and behavioral stereotypes, and these low expectations partially explained some of their ambivalence about school. When describing her school situation, Nina declared that teachers targeted those students who chose the distinctive urban looks of African American and Latino youth, described often as “black” and “Spanish,” respectively as the low achievers:

Nina: Like I say, the way you present yourself to someone—that’s the approach that they [teachers] take upon you. And some Black kids, you know,
when they go to school, you know, the first thing the teacher looks at is how you present yourself. So you come to school with the baggy pants and hat to the back, with the radio, they look at you and be like, ‘I'm not going to waste my time.’ But they see the other, like you know, not the whole (person)...White or Black, but when they see another fellow, male or female—you know, quiet, and then that's the one they'll spend more time with. But not knowing that person [who] came with the baggy pants, could be more intelligent, you know, have more intellectuals [sic] than a quiet person.

Another student, Alberto, the brother of Alma who attended New York College, described an encounter with a teacher who had pegged him as a drug dealer based on his outward appearance:

Alberto: Towards the end of the year [the teacher] asked me, because before my nails were long--because before I used to work at jobs. So he would characterize me because the watch and the clothing that I wore once. He was like that he knew what I did. And I asked him what was that. And he was like that [he] knew…and whatever it is that I do leads nowhere in life--that all it does is just catch me a death. He didn't actually say it but he just gave hints in what he was getting at.

Interviewer: So he thought that you were a drug dealer?

Alberto: Yeah.
Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Alberto: Of course, you get insulted.

Interviewer: Did you say something back to him?

Alberto: No. I paid no mind to him. But deep down inside you feel insulted that him saying when you actually work hard and try to succeed. And you try to show something for it that they stereotype you as thinking, or whatever he got. He got it as just being another drug dealer...and not even thinking that he worked for it. Or that he worked hard for it.

Neither Nina nor Alberto described situations that were completely isolated from larger school forces. In fact, the New York Times reported in 1998 that these youths’ school district had recognized the cultural gaps between its students and teachers. To ameliorate the problem, the district had ordered that its teachers take part in a summer program designed to help them recognize the different learning styles and backgrounds of multicultural student bodies (Brenner 1998).

Many Black and Latino youths’ different cultural tool kits are not intrinsically incompatible with achievement and mobility. Yet, there are possible negative student outcomes for students with different styles and orientations. Some rebel and challenge teachers on their interactions with them. Seventeen-year old Rayisha contrasted herself to the high honor roll students and said: “They’re quiet; they’re not loud, like me.” Rayisha admitted that she did not hesitate to “tell a teacher about herself” if she felt that a teacher was “picking on her.” In one instance, Rayisha described how she counseled a
higher achieving friend and classmate to challenge a teacher who had given her friend a relatively low grade in a gym class. Rayisha’s friend told her that she “was not like [her].” Meanwhile, Rayisha, a self-admitted rebel, was on the brink of academic failure.

Often, the academic “rebels” were either pushed out or took themselves out of the classroom by dropping out; or they embraced alternative visions for economic mobility, in which high academic achievement was not crucial (see Solomon 1991). Unlike those youth who had the most academic success in school and who enlisted the cultural cues and tastes that the school and classroom structures supported readily, students like Rayisha and Teresa flirted with school failure because they challenged classroom decorum in uncompromising ways. Employing familiar interactional styles, Rayisha searched for stimulation and engagement; but in a school milieu that either could not tolerate these challenges to authority or could not provide the proper support, her behaviors backfired on her, bringing about more failure than success. The last time I saw them, Rayisha did not know whether she would graduate from high school.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Overall, my findings offer a challenge to some deeply entrenched arguments about the role of oppositional culture, defined as resistance to “acting white,” in the academic and economic mobility outcomes of various racial and ethnic minorities. Contrary to the view that Black and Latino students perceive high achievement as “acting white” and thus reject schooling, this research suggests that resistance to “acting white” is mainly about the assertion of particularistic cultural styles that are not perceived to be
incongruous with achievement and mobility. These students attempt to take advantage of their own cultural competencies, which conflict with certain “strategies of action” existent dominant cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986). From their perspectives, the notion of “acting white” deals with a set of styles and symbolic vehicles, such as speech and dress styles. Resistance to “acting white” connotes more than anything else these youths’ refusal to adhere to the cultural default setting in U.S. society, that which is seen as normative or “natural”-- the generic American, white,” middle-class tastes for speech and interaction codes, dress and physical appearance, music and other art forms. And, the most likely reason these descriptions of “acting white” have more to do with music, language and interactional styles, and dress is because they constitute the terrain on which the disempowered often fight their social (and even physical) battles.

At the same time, my respondents subscribed to dominant achievement ideology, which supports the findings of other studies that have shown Black youth to possess more optimistic attitudes than their White counterparts {Portes, 1976 #383; Solorzano, 1992 #371; Ainsworth-Darnell, 1998 #1}. These shared values also underscore Swidler’s argument that social action is not determined by values, but rather “action and values are organized to take advantage of cultural competences” (Swidler 1986: 275). Moreover, in the references to “acting white,” I found two other main dimensions to the concept: “acting white” resonates with Black and Latino youths’ group experiences around racial and economic subordination. Hence, they verbally challenged those co-racial or ethnic members who behaved in ways that suggested “looking down upon” another member or “thinking that he or she were better.” That is, “acting white” signified
a refusal to adhere to social actions that purportedly derogate these African American and Latino youths’ own racial and ethnic groups. Finally, “acting white” signified any group member’s proclivity to avoid primary contact with co-ethnics. Some of these behaviors included co-racial or ethnic members’ exclusive association with Whites.

To address the question of what connection these descriptive meanings have to schooling and inequality, these data suggest why high achieving minority students may be more likely exposed to styles deemed as “acting white.” First, although twenty percent of this sample was comprised of high achievers, only two had been accused of “acting white” and not for reasons of high achievement. At the same time, racially integrated schools can structure peer associations in the classroom through either ability grouping or tracking that place high achieving African American and Latino students mainly in contact with white students. This type of grouping very likely facilitates the idea that some students of color disassociate themselves from others since they may maintain peer ties with other racial or ethnic groups and thus tastes and preferences in contrast to those used to mark in-group membership. In short, peers may perceive their classmates situated in white-dominant settings where different cultural styles and tastes prevail as “acting white.”

A worthy contribution of the oppositional culture framework is its attempt to bridge the structural and the cultural dimensions of social inequality. While the wealth of evidence on structural inequality remains convincing about its impact on differential achievement and mobility outcomes among racial and ethnic groups, a weakness in the literature is narrow attention given to the impact of a structure of cultural inequality.
existent in contemporary society. Indeed, the skills required for educational attainment should go beyond how one talks, dresses, or interacts. Yet, “one can hardly pursue success [school or otherwise] in a world where the accepted skills, style, and informal know-how are unfamiliar” (Swidler 1986:275) or, as I would add, not easily appreciable. In other words, “acting white” and its attributes characterize social performances suffused with power in the hierarchy of cultural practices and meanings. As a result, struggles over cultural power and legitimacy can emerge in schools between students and school authorities.

This research does not dismiss the idea that either success or mobility in this society is closely linked to an individual’s use of certain dominant cultural styles and tastes. Quite apparently, several of the cultural styles and preferences described as “acting white” conform to the dominant forms of cultural capital, such as the employment of Standard English. Ethno-specific cultural resources can also function as capital and facilitate in-group mobility, although in the status hierarchy, this particular set of resources may be severely de-valued and limit socioeconomic attainment (Carter 2002).

Admittedly, one methodological limitation of my study is its reliance more on student data and the exclusion of data obtained directly from teachers. However, several other researchers have found that teachers’ judgments of students’ non-cognitive traits, in addition to their judgment of cognitive abilities, have significant effects on their evaluations of student performance (Bowles and Gintis 1976; DiMaggio 1982; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, and Shuan 1990; Ferguson 1998b). As gatekeepers, teachers define the stratification system, granting rewards to those students who embrace the “right” cultural
signals, habits and styles (Farkas et al. 1990; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Swidler 1986). As a result, as these researchers have found, teachers’ own social origins exercise a strong influence on how they respond to students in the classroom, potentially affecting the academic performance of students from differing cultural, racial or class backgrounds (Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson 1987; Ballenger 1992; Ferguson 1998a). Furthermore, other school ethnographic research shows that when students actively critique or resist the intellectual, political, and cultural girdles of schooling, their academic outcomes suffer (Willis 1977; Fine 1991; Solomon 1991; Deyhle 1995). In short, school officials may fail to see how they can encourage classroom disengagement through their own personal interactions with students and the tenor that they set within the classroom.

Also, studies suggest how the impact of certain cultural tool kits extends beyond the school and is connected to mobility in the workplace. For example, Moss and Tilly (1996) found that employers critically judge racial and ethnic minorities who do not employ selective “soft skills” or non-cognitive skills such as a certain type of interactional and communicative style and demeanor. Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) found that among Chicago employers, those Blacks who were likely to be hired were the ones who signaled to employers that they possessed certain dominant cultural capital—e.g., a style of dress, manner and speech. Thus, success in both school and the labor market might depend on the degree to which these youth can primarily embrace some of the styles that they label as “acting white,” especially around language and interactions with Whites.
Full consensus about what behaviors and practices could be racialized as either “black,” “Spanish” or “white” did not exist. In several instances, respondents in this study contested their peers’ racial and ethnic categorizations of behaviors. Those students who most likely contested these classifications were also most likely to support beliefs about the connection between dominant cultural styles and socioeconomic mobility in practice. Also, the findings from this study might vary if a mixed-class sample of Black and Latino youth had been used. Although reports show that middle-class minority youth invoke the notion of “acting white” (Belluck 1999; Kaufman 1996), they may either place emphasis on different social factors or they may have significantly more access to resources that would help them more effectively negotiate their cultural styles. To facilitate a more fine-tuned understanding of how race, ethnicity and class determine these meaning systems about “acting black,” “Spanish,” “white,” (or even “other racial and ethnic groups”), larger studies could include variation by class and region. These studies could highlight the extent to which these meaning systems both converge and diverge between classes and within racial/ethnic group classification. Moreover, other research might venture into cross-racial comparative studies between racial and ethnic minorities and White youth in the constructions of “acting black,” “Spanish” and “white”, either for themselves or others. Some findings from this study suggest that there exist White youth who are described as “acting black” or “acting Spanish.” How do White youth who “act black” or “act Spanish” negotiate their school, peer and home spaces both similarly and differently from their African American and
Latino peers? Do they categorize themselves as such? (For some work on this, see Perry 2002).

A major thrust of this research is to encourage researchers to re-conceptualize how resistance to “acting white” is associated with academic and mobility outcomes for Black and Latino youth. At present, the prevalent articulation of resistance to “acting white” in various bodies of sociological literature describes a pathological value system that deters the social, economic, and political progress of many poor African Americans and Latinos. A major claim is that to embrace “acting white” means to be success-oriented, while resistance to “acting white” signifies a rejection of achievement-oriented behaviors. As evident from these data, that claim cannot be made unequivocally. When persistent and inequitable group experiences hold for poor, urban minority youth, the critical inquiry cannot simply look to cultural differences as an adequate explanation; it must also recognize how dominant social groups define and control social mobility and success.

And when elite social groups define and circumscribe what is appropriate for success and achievement, poor African American and Latino youth face choices that pit their cultural toolkits against the dominant toolkit, creating serious consequences: persistent educational and socioeconomic inequality.

1 For a discussion on the similarity between Lewis’ culture of poverty thesis and the oppositional culture theory developed by John Ogbu, see Peterson (1991).

2 See {Gans, 1975 #77} for a discussion on the idea of taste cultures and their role in the democratic process.

3 For a discussion on the similarity between Lewis’ culture of poverty thesis and the oppositional culture theory developed by John Ogbu, see Peterson (1991).
The original study in which my respondents participated was under the direction of other principal investigators with whom I worked from 1993 to 1995. While the original study from which I selected my research participants examines neighborhood difference on the attainment of low-income families, a comparison of these youth by neighborhoods is not my intent here.

The estimated reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) was .71 for the abstract or normative attitudes scale.

I did not use Mickelson’s full six-item “concrete” attitude scale because of a low Cronbach’s alpha, indicating low reliability. Also, refer to endnote #8.

In her analyses, Mickelson used the mean linear sums of all affirmatively answered items on this attitude scale, instead of the mean sum of the Likert scale. Mickelson’s mean linear sum for a non-random sample of 1,193 public high school Black and White students in Los Angeles was 5.18. In this study, the mean linear sum of all answered items in agreement with the dominant achievement ideology was 6.29. In short, my respondents were significantly more favorable to dominant achievement ideology than those in Mickelson’s sample (p< .01).

Within academic literature, the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are generally used to refer to all people in the United States whose ancestry is predominantly from one or more Spanish-speaking countries. However, my Dominican and Puerto Rican American respondents referred to their ethnic groups under the rubric “Spanish”—referring to the one obvious commonality they share, language.

Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect the respondents’ privacy and identity.

Unless otherwise indicated, these data come from individual, as opposed to group, interviews.

Although Mickelson (1990) is right to argue for a differentiation between abstract and concrete attitudes and beliefs about the value of education, arguably some of her concrete measures could be categorized as abstract and conversely some of her abstract indicators
appear more concrete in nature. For example, many respondents could have interpreted this particular item (labeled as a “concrete” item by Mickelson) as a more ideal (i.e., “abstract”) connection between education and jobs, and not have interpreted it with regards to their own personal situations.

13 All four of these youths were female, which raises some questions about the role of gender. Shown elsewhere, the notion of “acting white” is often gendered and more likely to be associated with females (see Carter, 1999).

14 I divided the students into two categories based on their self-reported grade point averages. Of the 49 students in the sample who are presently still in secondary school (either junior high or high school), approximately 20% were categorized as high achieving students. These were the students who achieved at least one standard deviation above the mean grade point average of the entire sample. Intentionally, I use “lower” (instead of “low”) to capture the idea that this group performed less well than the “high achievers” but not at the expense of characterizing the average students (included in this group) as low achievers.

15 “Clueless” refers to a television sitcom spin-off of a popular movie about the coming of age of a very wealthy, offbeat White teenager and her friends living in Beverly Hills, California.

16 According to my respondents, the converse was possible, too. White students could pick up on the youth cultural styles and practices that were more prevalent in a minority-dominant high school. During my interviews and field observations, it was not uncommon to hear students talk about White peers who tried to “act black” or “Spanish.”
REFERENCES


------. 1991. "Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities in Comparative Perspective." Pp. in


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>Ages 13-15</th>
<th>Ages 16-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 (60%)</td>
<td>13 (50%)</td>
<td>38 (56%)</td>
<td>17 (50%)</td>
<td>21 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td>17 (40%)</td>
<td>13 (50%)</td>
<td>30 (44%)</td>
<td>17 (50%)</td>
<td>13 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total N</strong></td>
<td>42 (100%)</td>
<td>26 (100%)</td>
<td>68 (100%)</td>
<td>34 (100%)</td>
<td>34 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Family Context by Neighborhood Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Southwest (High Poverty, Predominantly Minority)</th>
<th>East (Low poverty, Predominantly White)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample (N=)</td>
<td>(31)</td>
<td>(37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income below $10,000</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage earner in the household</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent Household</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent less than high school grad</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever Received AFDC</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Sample School Enrollment, Performance and Aspirations Data (N=68)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERCENT</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in School</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtained High School Diploma or GED</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had Some College Experience</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropped Out of High School, no GED</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned Mainly B or Higher Grades(^a)</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in Academic/College Prep Courses(^a)</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in Special Education Classes(^a)</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspired to Attend College and/or Graduate School</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspired to Hold Professional/Managerial Jobs (^b)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Based only on those currently enrolled in middle and high school (N=49)

\(^b\) Based on the 1980 National Opinion Research Council (NORC) occupational codes
Table 4. Correlation Matrix of Variables associated with Beliefs about the Connections between Race and Job Opportunity And Parents’ Work and Educational Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief that Not Promoted Because of Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Belief of Job Discrimination</th>
<th>Parent’s Work Status</th>
<th>Parent’s Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief that Not Promoted Because of Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>1.00 (68)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief of Job Discrimination</td>
<td>.421** (68)</td>
<td>1.00 (67)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s Work Status (1=Yes)</td>
<td>.114 (68)</td>
<td>.110 (67)</td>
<td>1.00 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s Education</td>
<td>.139 (68)</td>
<td>.281* (67)</td>
<td>.317** (68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Two-tailed) ** p < .01; * p < 0.05 level
Table 5. Frequencies of the Dimensions of “Acting White”

(N=51 Occurrences)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Percentage of Times Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference to Speech Styles</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to Dress Styles</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to Primary Association with Whites</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to Superiority/Subordination</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (^a)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Note: The “Other” category includes various singular responses with frequencies of one.
Figure 1. Attitudes about the Role and Value of Education
(N=68)

Education really pays off in the future for young (Black/Hispanic) like me

Getting a good education is a practical road to success
for a young (Black/Hispanic) person like me

Achievement and effort in school leads to job success later on

If everyone in America gets a good education, we can end poverty

The way for poor people to become middle class is for them to get a education

Young (Black/Hispanic) persons like me have a chance of making it if we do well in school

School success is not necessarily a clear path to a better life

Percent Who Agree
Figure 2. Respondents’ Cognitive Attitudes about Education, Opportunity, and Race Relations

(N=68)

Parents face barriers to job success, despite their belief in a good education

Job discrimination exists (some to a lot)

Whites either don’t care about the progress of racial/ethnic minorities or want to keep them down

People in family have not been treated fairly at work, no matter how much education they possess

Parents and people like them [respondent] are not paid or promoted based on education standards

Studying in school rarely pays off later with good jobs

Percent Who Agree

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Note: These data are based on perceptual measures, which asked students to report whether certain racial or ethnic groups comprised either “almost all,” “very many,” “some,” or “none” of their classes. The reader will note that for the low achievers, the percentages do not sum to 100%, which indicates some overlap in their perceptions of Black and Latino students in the classroom. By chance, the percentages add to 100% for the high achievers. The main intent of this chart is to show the contrasting differences in reports (which most likely correspond to the actual percentages) between the two achievement groups.