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It's Not "a Black Thing": Understanding the Burden of Acting White and Other Dilemmas of High Achievement

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For two decades the acting white hypothesis—the premise that black students are driven toward low school performance because of racialized peer pressure—has served as an explanation for the black-white achievement gap. Fordham and Ogbu proposed that black youths sabotage their own school careers by taking an oppositional stance toward academic achievement. Using interviews and existing data from eight North Carolina secondary public schools, this article shows that black adolescents are generally achievement oriented and that racialized peer pressure against high academic achievement is not prevalent in all schools. The analysis also shows important similarities in the experiences of black and white high-achieving students, indicating that dilemmas of high achievement are generalizable beyond a specific group. Typically, highachieving students, regardless of race, are to some degree stigmatized as "nerds" or "geeks." The data suggest that school structures, rather than culture, may help explain when this stigma becomes racialized, producing a burden of acting white for black adolescents, and when it becomes class-based, producing a burden of "acting high and mighty" for low-income whites. Recognizing the similarities in these processes can help us refocus and refine understandings of the black-white achievement gap.

Almost 20 years have passed since Fordham and Ogbu (1986) published the article, Black Students' School Success: Coping with

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the "Burden of Acting White." Yet it remains among the most influential publications addressing the academic underachievement of black students and the black-white achievement gap. Social scientists have produced little empirical evidence to substantiate the claim that an "oppositional peer culture" or a "burden of acting white" is pervasive in the black community, or that either explains the underachievement of black students or some part of the black-white achievement gap. Still, there is strong public belief in these assertions. Indeed, as we found in this study, the acting white theory significantly influences how schools address problems related to black underachievement, which, in turn, helps to determine whether these solutions ultimately can be effective. Thus, further assessment of this hypothesis is a critical step

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toward understanding and addressing the problem of the black—white achievement gap.

In this article, we review the burden of acting white hypothesis, describe the current debate, and use interview data from eight secondary schools in North Carolina to assess the hypothesis. We find that a burden of acting white exists for some black students, but that it is not prevalent among the group. None of the black middle school informants reported discussions or expressed any concern about acting white related to academic behavior or performance, and only a small minority of the older informants did so. Moreover, high-achieving black students across the sample schools were not deterred from taking advanced courses or striving to do well because they feared accusations of acting white or other teasing. Equally interesting, in some schools, highachieving white students experienced a similar but more pervasive "burden" of high achievement. That is, both black and white high-achieving students sometimes encounter forms of hostility from lower-achieving peers.

This study contributes to the current debate on the burden of acting white hypothesis in several important ways. First, few qualitative studies addressing this hypothesis have focused on more than one or two schools. We gathered qualitative data from students and staff at eight secondary schools. The multisite design permitted greater attention to the potential influence of contextual aspects of schools. Second, the indepth nature of the interviews allowed us to probe more deeply and specifically into issues related to a burden of acting white, including particular academic behaviors and decisions, factors that large-scale surveys generally do not capture. In particular, our focus on the decisions students make with regard to the academic level of the courses they take (e.g., electing honors versus regular classes) is unique. Finally, we attempted to distinguish a burden of acting white from other more generic dilemmas of high achievement.

We argue that the burden of acting white cannot be attributed specifically to black culture. Rather, it appears to develop in some schools under certain conditions that seem to contribute to animosity between high- and low-achieving students within or between racial and socioeconomic groups. This may help to explain the mixed research findings regarding the existence

of an oppositional peer culture or a burden of acting white among black students. For example, studies by Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998), Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (2002), Ferguson (2001), and Kao, Tienda, and Schneider (1996) have discounted the oppositional culture hypothesis. Similarly, Cook and Ludwig (1998) found no support for the related burden of acting white hypothesis. Conversely, Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga (2002) and Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1992) claimed to find evidence of an oppositional culture among black students. Yet researchers generally have not paid attention to the process by which all students absorb and interpret various messages from their school environments. In particular, experiencing and witnessing inequality within schools may foster the type of animosity evidenced in the oppositional attitudes of teenagers toward school.

THE "BURDEN OF ACTING WHITE" HYPOTHESIS

Among black Americans, the term "acting white" is used in reference to blacks who use language or ways of speaking; display attitudes, behaviors, or preferences; or engage in activities considered to be white cultural norms (Bergin and Cooks 2002; McArdle and Young 1970; Neal-Barnett 2001; Perry 2002; Tatum 1997). Although understandings of what comprises acting white may vary (by region, social class, or age, for example), some understandings remain remarkably constant (e.g., listening to heavy metal music is almost always considered a "white" preference). The term also has come to be used with respect to indicators of academic performance and success (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Neal-Barnett 2001). For example, using focus groups to understand how black teenagers define "acting white," Neal-Barnett (2001:82) reported that the list of items the students identified included "being in honors or advance placement classes," in addition to "speaking Standard English, dressing in clothes from the Gap or Abercrombie and Fitch rather than Tommy Hilfiger and FUBU, [and] wearing shorts in the winter."

Fordham and Ogbu (1986), drawing on Fordham's qualitative study of one predominantly black urban high school and the narratives of eight academically capable black students, posited that acting white was part of a larger oppositional peer culture constructed by black Americans in response to their history of enslavement, and the discrimination and persistent inequality they face (including discriminatory treatment in the labor market). The oppositional identity was said to be "part of a cultural orientation toward schooling which exists within the minority community" (p. 183). Academic achievement is not valued in the community because it is perceived as conforming to standard norms of success among white Americans (see Spencer et al. 2003 for a counterargument). Moreover, it does not pay off for blacks as it does for others. Consequently, black students striving for academic success have their cultural authenticity as blacks called into question and are accused of acting white.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) claimed that the choice between representing an authentic "black" self and striving for academic success creates a "burden of acting white" and contributes to the relatively low academic performance of black students (for examples of similar assertions, see Herbert 2003; McWhorter 2000; Wasonga and Christman 2003; Weissert 1999). However, the findings did not show that any informant in the original study related accusations of "acting white" directly to academic achievement, or ever used the term.

EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENTS OF THE HYPOTHESIS

Only within the past 10 years have the main propositions of the oppositional culture thesis, including "the burden of acting white," been examined empirically. Two high-profile studies (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998), both using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), found little evidence of either an oppositional culture or a burden of acting white among black adolescents. For example, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey's (1998) analysis of NELS data showed that blacks actually had more pro-school attitudes than whites, and Cook and Ludwig (1998) reported finding little difference between black and white adolescents in the degree to which they valued academic achievement. The results of the latter study also suggested that there were more social benefits than costs to high academic achievement for black students.

Another more recent analysis of survey data from schools in Shaker Heights, Ohio, also found little evidence of a black adolescent peer culture oppositional to achievement (Ferguson 2001). Ferguson found that black and white students with similar family background characteristics were not very different in terms of their satisfaction with school, interest in their studies, or opposition to achievement (2001:387). Qualitative studies (Akom 2003; Carter forthcoming; Tyson 2002), too, have failed to substantiate the acting white and oppositional culture hypotheses. 1 Yet, there is empirical evidence consistent with some of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) claims (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Ford and Harris 1996; Mickelson and Velasco forthcoming; Steinberg et al. 1992). Neal-Barnett's (2001) focus groups with black adolescents showed that high-achieving black students often encounter charges of acting white, and some respond in ways that undermine their academic performance. In Horvat and Lewis' (2003) study of two urban high schools, one racially diverse and one predominantly black, two of eight high-achieving participants reported being accused of acting white. Only in one instance, however, was the charge clearly in response to academic behaviors, as opposed to speech or other behaviors. In that case, the student attended the racially diverse school (43 percent white, 16 percent black, and 41 percent other).

In a survey of black fifth- and sixth-grade students at an all-black, low-income school, Ford and Harris (1996) found that half of the sample knew students who were teased for academic achievement, 26 percent reported being rejected when they made good grades, and 16 percent reported not having as many friends when they achieved. However, because reference to acting white was not included in the survey and the sample was all black, it is not clear whether these peer-related achievement problems were peculiar to black students. On the surface, the

¹ Akom's research site was a 98 percent black urban high school. Carter's study used interview and survey data from black and Latino/a adolescents, ages 13–20 years, in a low-income urban community. Tyson studied two all-black elementary schools.

reported behaviors appeared to be indistinguishable from the general culture of mediocrity that "shuns academic excellence," which a number of studies have reported among students of all ethnicities (Coleman 1961; Cookson and Persell 1985; Steinberg 1996). The latter explanation would be consistent with the reports of Cook and Ludwig (1998), Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998), and Ferguson (2001), all of whom found black and white students sharing similar attitudes toward school.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) used quotes from eight students to describe how a burden of acting white undermines blacks' academic performance. Their informants said they attempted to downplay or camouflage their ability using such strategies as being the class clown, being involved in athletics, or doing just enough to get by. The participants in Horvat and Lewis' (2003) study also attempted to camouflage and downplay their achievements in the presence of lowerachieving peers. However, students in virtually all racial and ethnic groups confront similar dilemmas with respect to high academic achievement, and they also tend to use similar strategies (Cookson and Persell 1985; Kinney 1993; Steinberg 1996). As Coleman (1961) showed long ago, the problem most high schools face is that learning and achievement are not what matter most to adolescents. Popularity and looking good are the top concerns, and doing well in school does not do much for popularity. Dilemmas of high achievement are neither new nor unique to African Americans, yet many researchers have not carefully separated the effects of being a teenager from those of race, gender, and class.

The experience of being ridiculed because of high achievement is not identical in nature for all groups. As described earlier, some issues are peculiar to black students. However, to claim that a distinctive burden of high achievement exists for black students, we must be able to distinguish between the typical culture of mediocrity found among students from all racial and ethnic groups (i.e., general oppositionality) and a peer culture among blacks that specifically racializes and devalues achievement and achievement-related behaviors. This important distinction has been missed in other studies (Ford and Harris 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Horvat and Lewis 2003).

Finally, in some cases, findings regarding the link between black achievement and acting white or an oppositional culture may reflect methodological problems. Farkas et al. (2002) reported that "very good" black females in high minority schools were more likely to be put down by peers than were other students. The authors interpreted this as evidence of an oppositional peer culture among black students. Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (2002), however, identified methodological flaws in the study and argued that the data of Farkas et al. (2002) show an oppositional peer culture among about 4 percent of blacks in the sample, a figure too small to explain the black—white achievement gap. Again, we argue that all dilemmas of high achievement are not properly defined as a burden of acting white.

Differences in methodological approaches are important, but they do not fully explain the conflicting results reported in the literature. Key questions remain. Do high-achieving black students experience a burden of high achievement distinct from that experienced by other adolescents? Are black students concerned about excelling academically because of a belief that academic striving and high achievement is antithetical to black cultural authenticity, or that it may be perceived as such by others and therefore negatively sanctioned?

We provide answers by drawing on data from a larger study investigating North Carolina public schools. Specifically, we evaluate the evidence for a burden of acting white in light of the following premises. To claim a burden of acting white, two primary conditions must be present: ridicule or criticism directed toward black students must be racialized and it must be specifically connected to academic behaviors (rather than behaviors such as dress or speech), decisions, or performance. However, even if those two conditions are met, the burden of acting white cannot be implicated in the black-white achievement gap unless such peer criticisms are demonstrably part of the local school culture (i.e., widespread) and shown to affect black students' academic behaviors (e.g., withholding of effort) or decisions (e.g., electing not to take high-ability courses). Similarly, the burden of acting white cannot be implicated in the black-white achievement gap if the criticisms directed toward high-achieving black students are no more significant than

those directed toward high-achieving students in general.

DATA AND METHODS

In 2000–2001, we undertook a study for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) examining the underrepresentation of minority students in rigorous courses (advance placement [AP] and honors) and programs (academically and intellectually gifted [AIG] and academically gifted [AG]) in public schools throughout the state.² The NCDPI study provided an opportunity to address the claims advanced by the burden of acting white hypothesis. However, these data were not collected exclusively or specifically for that purpose.

SAMPLING SCHOOLS

We used data collected annually by the NCDPI from all public schools to assess the extent of minority underrepresentation in rigorous courses and programs statewide. For each school, we developed a Disparity Index to calculate the ratio of the percentage of minority students in advanced courses and programs relative to the percentage of minority students enrolled in the school. We then measured underrepresentation of minority students in the AP and honors courses that most North Carolina high schools offer. Next, in cooperation with the NCDPI staff, we designed a survey to assess the programs and courses available at each school, the criteria for enrollment, and the processes for identification. Elementary/middle school surveys gathered current (2000-2001) data on gifted programs and enrollment by race and gender. High school surveys gathered data on advanced curricular offerings, but not enrollment.³ The surveys were completed by principals, assistant principals, or school counselors.

For a more detailed analysis, we selected a subsample of 11 schools from the total sample of schools returning surveys and interviewed students, teachers, counselors, and principals at these schools. Our goal in the design of the original study was not to generate a representative sample of schools. We deliberately included some schools that over- and underrepresented minority students in advanced courses and programs to learn more about the factors that might affect minority access to and participation in more challenging curricula. We also sought some diversity in the subsample in terms of school socioeconomic status, racial composition, and urbanicity.4 Because of our particular interest in the high school placement process, in which students presumably have a choice in the courses they take, we selected a larger number of high schools than middle schools. Finally, in the current analysis, we excluded the three elementary schools because we found that students at that level were dealing with slightly different issues. For example, as others have noted (Spencer 1984; Tyson 2002), race was not a salient category for the grade school children we interviewed. Table 1 presents descriptive information for each of the eight schools we discuss. The generalizability of our findings is limited by the small number of schools. The shortage of suburban schools in the sample prevented a more thorough analysis of the influence exerted by locale effects.

THE SCHOOLS AND ADVANCED CURRICULA OFFERINGS

For this analysis, ⁵ we focus on the presence of black students, rather than all minorities, in rigorous courses and programs. As shown in Table 2, black students were underrepresented in the gifted program at one middle school (Jackson) and well represented at the other middle school (Kilborn). ⁶ Both schools also offered acceler-

² Individual schools use either "academically gifted" (AG) or "academically and intellectually gifted" (AIG), so we use both terms in this study according to which was used by a particular school or informant.

³ We received 866 (47%) completed elementary/middle school surveys and 231 (52%) completed high school surveys. These mail-in rates are higher than average for school surveys (U.S. Department of Education 1997).

⁴ School socioeconomic status is determined by participation in free or reduced-priced lunch programs.

⁵To ensure anonymity, the names of all schools and informants have been changed.

⁶ Data for 1999–2000 were used to assess the minority presence in rigorous courses in high school and to select the subsample of schools. The figures

Middle Schools **High Schools** Jackson Kilborn Banaker Clearview Avery Dalton East Franklin Student Race Black, % 50 10 39 13 88 60 27 54 White, % 49 87 85 8 38 60 71 30 Other, % 2 2 2 4 2 2 2 16 Principal a WM WM WM BM WM WF BM WM Lunch, % b 37 48 12 38 28 17 43 798 School Size 659 987 1.038 1,139 1,725 2,015 1,443 White Income, \$ 56,226 39,152 43,204 66,940 43,489 48,648 55,602 43,531 Black Income, \$ 27,203 26,483 32,057 26,960 39,287 27,362 28,266 28,993 Locale Suburb Rural Rural Urban Rural Rural Urban Urban

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Schools 1999–2000

Notes: Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding. Data for 2000–2001 are similar in most cases and identical in others (e.g., middle school figures are identical for both years). White and black incomes are of those living in school county. WM = white male; BM = black male; WF = white female.

ated classes in math (pre-algebra in seventh grade and algebra in eighth grade) and language arts, open to any qualified student. Kilborn Middle School also offered AP courses, for which students received high school credit.

Across the high schools, black students were underrepresented in all but 2 of 19 AP courses and 1 of 13 honors courses under consideration (Table 2), although in a few cases, the ratio approached parity. Dalton High School showed the most severe underrepresentation of black students in both AP and honors courses. A general pattern of underrepresentation statewide limited our ability to select a more varied subsample of schools. However, one school (Banaker High School) showed a black majority in each of the courses studied. Most schools offered an average of 6 AP courses per year, but Avery High School offered just 3 and Banaker offered 10. Banaker also offered an International Baccalaureate (IB) program that provides indepth study of subjects from an international perspective. A few schools also offered college

for most courses in 2000–2001 were not significantly different. However, we use the 1999–2000 figures in this report (Table 2) because it takes time for attitudes to form, and the attitudes we assess in the interviews likely developed from recent rather than current experiences.

prep classes, which are less exclusive than honors or AP courses.⁷

SAMPLING INFORMANTS

Although we were required to work with school officials to identify students, the characteristics of our sample mirrored the student population of the schools as a whole, with only minor exceptions. Specifically, the achievement, and in two cases, the grade level, mix at the schools was more limited than in the student population. For example, all the student participants at Kilborn Middle School were 8th graders, and 12 of the 14 participants at Franklin High School were 11th graders. Our informants also tended to be higher-achieving students, particularly the white students (Table 3).

Few of the 36 white secondary school informants reported earning grades lower than C. Only one earned grades below D, and a larger proportion of whites reported that they were academically gifted.⁸ The black informant group

^a Race and gender of school principal.

^b Percent of lunches that are free or reduced priced.

⁷ At Avery High School, the standard courses, which generally do not have grade point average (GPA) enrollment requirements and have not been weighted, are called "college prep."

⁸ We asked principals to distribute consent forms to a mix of minority and white students at different grade levels, some enrolled in regular academic courses only and some enrolled in advanced courses. School staff may have selected higher-achieving

Percent Black	Middle Schools		High Schools						
	Jackson	Kilborn	Avery	Banaker	Clearview	Dalton	East	Franklin	
Student Body	50	10	13	88	60	39	27	54	
Academically Gifted	9	11	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
AP Biology	NA	NA	25	64	12	0	17	NA	
AP English	NA	NA	9	75	0	7	12	46	
AP Calculus	NA	NA	NA	65	17	0	40	50	
AP History	NA	NA	5	84	NA	9	10	40	
Honors Biology	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	23	NA	
Honors English	NA	NA	3	83	27	6	12	46	
Honors History	NA	NA	0	89	30	12	11	42	

Table 2. Disparity in Percent of Black Student Enrollment in High Ability Courses and Programs 1999-2000

Notes: The percent black in each school remains the same in 2000–2001 and in most cases the pattern of results is not significantly different. Data for 2000–2001 are available from first author upon request. AP = advanced placement; NA = not applicable or not offered.

was more diverse, with a mix of high-achieving and average students. Overall, there were few low-achieving students in the group. This is not a limitation because the theory we are assessing was developed with reference to the experiences of academically capable students, half (4) of whom were high achievers. Furthermore, we had 40 black participants attending eight different schools, whereas Fordham and Ogbu (1986) studied the experiences of eight black students attending one school.

INTERVIEWS

A team of three or four black female interviewers spent one day at each school conducting interviews. We interviewed a total of 85 secondary school students (Table 3): 40 black, 36 white, and 9 other students of color (this report focuses on the black and white students only). The duration of the interviews was 45 to 75 minutes. Eight students requested not to be tape-recorded. The remaining interviews were taped and transcribed.

The interviews were semistructured. We asked students a standard set of questions addressing their grades; which courses they were taking; how they made these choices; their attitudes toward school, learning, achievement, peers, and teachers; and other related aspects of

students (possibly to have only their "good" students participate), or higher-achieving students may have been more likely than others to return consent forms agreeing to participation in the study.

the school experience. We posed questions to students regarding their own, their friends', and their peers' reactions to high- and low-achieving students and placement in rigorous courses and programs, issues at the center of the acting white phenomenon. Because the NCDPI study did not contain individual-level socioe-conomic status data, we also collected information from students on parent education and employment (Appendix Tables A1 and A2 provide this data for each informant quoted).

School staff self-selected into the study on the basis of their availability the day of our visit. At each school, we interviewed principals, counselors, and teachers. At the eight secondary schools, 67 adults were interviewed (Table 3) about the selection of courses and programs offered by the school, student placement and course selection processes, student attitudes toward particular courses and achievement, perceptions of and expectations for students, and efforts to increase the participation of minority and low-income students in rigorous courses and programs.

DATA ANALYSIS

We used two methods of textual analysis: manual and computer-based (ATLAS) approaches. Two research assistants and one of the authors read the transcripts and coded interviews for fac-

⁹ Parent educational and occupational data for all the participants are available from the first author upon request.

	Black	White	Hispanic	Native American	Asian	Female	Total
Students ^a	40	36	3	1	5	52 (61%)	85
MS	9	12	1	0	2	14 (58%)	24
HS	31	24	2	1	3	38 (62%)	61
Previous Gifted Identification	22	25	1	1	1	35 (70%)	50
Ever taken AP (HS only)	15	13	1	0	2	22 (71%)	31
Ever taken Honors (HS only)b	11	8	0	0	0	11(58%)	19
Mother's Education ^c							
Less than HS	1	1	0	0	0		
HS	11	11	0	0	3		
Some college	4	2	0	0	0		
Technical/vocational	3	1	0	0	0		
AA degree	6	3	0	0	0		
BA/BS degree	13	13	2	1	1		
Advanced degree	1	3	0	0	0		
School Personnel	20	45	0	2	0	44 (66%)	67
Teachers	10	30	0	1	0	28 (68%)	41
Counselors	7	6	0	1	0	13 (93%)	14
Administrators	3	9	0	0	0	3 (25%)	12

Table 3. Selected Characteristics of Informants by Race and Gender

Note: Data are shown as number (n) with exception indicated. MS = middle school; HS = high school; AP = advanced placement.

tors such as perceptions of students in particular courses and programs, self-perceptions, friends' encouragement and support for academic endeavors, friend and peer response to achievement, and self-reported reasons why students took particular classes. Coders individually summarized each interview in terms of these factors and highlighted the corresponding dialogue. They summarized the interviews by race and school and included quotes that best illustrated each interpretative point. The three coders agreed on almost all interpretations and generally chose the same quotes to illustrate particular points. We then identified the dominant patterns across the interviews.

The qualitative software program ATLAS helped us uncover the process by which a burden of acting white emerges by capturing the achievement and related social experiences of students, their understanding of those experiences, and the context in which they occurred. The analysis focuses on students' own accounts and interpretations of their behavior, experiences, and decisions. For an alternative viewpoint, we also include excerpts from our interviews with school staff.

RESULTS

We begin by addressing the achievement orientation of black students as assessed through their course selection decisions. ¹⁰ Then we address the nature of black adolescents' peer culture with regard to academic striving and achievement, assessed through the experiences of high achievers. Finally, we address similarities and differences between black and white adolescent peer cultures related to achievement.

BLACK ADOLESCENT ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTATION

Contrary to the notion that black students do not value academic achievement, we found an expressed desire to do well academically among all informants. In explaining their course choices, students' responses overwhelmingly centered

^a Data are based on school's identification of a mix of white and minority students enrolled in different courses.

^b This count does not include students who have ever taken AP.

^c Information on mother's education is more complete than that on father's education.

Note that these decisions are not unconstrained. Students' ability to select advanced classes is, at least in part, a cumulative effect of past curricular experiences.

on how they thought they would fare in the class, including whether they thought they were academically prepared, how willing they were to take on the anticipated amount or level of work, and whether they were likely to earn a good grade. The following statement highlights this trend:

As far as the honors class, don't take it unless you absolutely have to. [laughs] I wouldn't advise that. It's not—it will bring your grade point average down, just taking it will bring anybody's grade point average down. [Whitney, black female senior at Avery High School]

Many black students opted out of advanced classes, but none reported doing so because of concerns about negative peer reactions to achievement, even when they encountered such reactions.

Each middle school offered a gifted program and accelerated classes for qualified students. We asked students whether they participated in these courses and programs and whether they had a desire to do so. Shandra, a black female seventh grade student at Jackson Middle School, gave the following response when asked if she wanted to be in the gifted program, which is one of the most visible, and as far as students are concerned, unequivocal signs of superior ability: "Well, not really, because I'm lazy and you have to do more projects and stuff, but besides the projects, yes." Although Shandra had not been invited to participate, she was not opposed to being in the gifted program, so long as it did not entail more work for her. Shandra reported earning As and Bs, and was enrolled in the seventh grade pre-algebra class, so there was no evidence that she was averse to academic success.

Another black student at Jackson Middle School, Les, reported dropping out of the gifted program "because, like, some of the things, I couldn't get it." Consequently, Les decided to "start back on general—on the basics." He also opted to take general math instead of pre-algebra. Les's grades (which included Cs and an F) were not as good as those earned by most of the other black informants. His decision to avoid the advanced classes appears to have been motivated more by his doubts about his ability to master the course materials than by an unwillingness to work hard.

Marc, another seventh-grade black male at Jackson Middle School, pushed for an opportunity to participate in the gifted program:

Interviewer: So who recommended you in sixth grade to take the test again?

Marc: Nobody. It was my choice. . . . I went, um, to ask them to take the test again. 'Cause I figured if nobody asked me, then I would never be in AG, so, I decided to take the test over again. I decided that, I guess if I didn't take the test in sixth grade that I wouldn't have another chance to take it again.

Marc said he took the IQ and achievement tests to hold himself "to a higher standard." At the same time, however, he elected not to take prealgebra because, as he put it, "I have trouble with the work I have now." Opting into the gifted program but out of other advanced courses suggests that Marc may have been interested mainly in the gifted label. If holding himself to a higher standard had been his first priority, it seems likely he would have accepted the challenge of taking pre-algebra. Yet, his seeking the opportunity to participate in the gifted program indicates that, like the other black informants, Marc was comfortable striving for academic success and being perceived as smart.

The narratives of the black high school students, though similar to those of their younger counterparts, were more often tied to concerns about the future, including getting into a "good college" and getting a "good job." Thus, although the desire to do well was clear, what that meant varied for individuals. For some black adolescents, doing well included taking higher-level courses to improve college options, grade point averages, or both:

James: Almost every, every class that was honors that I could take, I took. [black male senior at Clearview High School]

Interviewer: And how did that come to be?

James: Well it started out with I just wanted to achieve, wanted to excel. I want to go to college. I wanted to go to Chapel Hill [University of North Carolina], so I knew that I had to achieve, so I decided, okay, I will start taking honors classes and they will help me out.

Interviewer: When your mom and dad were helping you pick out classes and you decided to do this IB program, did you have any reason to take the classes?

Tyler: I wanted to stay ahead academically, you know, having a, have an edge on the competition. You know, I wanted to make sure I would be prepared for college. [black male junior at Banaker High School]

Interviewer: Okay, and in, now that you've been in high school, why did you choose to take the honors and AP classes?

Tamela: Well I'm, I mean, I like challenges. You know what I'm sayin'? I don't like to take just somethin' that I could get by on, or whatever. And I also wanted to have some honors and AP courses under my belt depending on which college I'm gonna apply to. [black female junior at Dalton High School]

These comments are at odds with theories positing that black students learn ambivalence toward academic achievement in their communities (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). 11 Concerns of black students about getting into the college of their choice and doing well once there are not consistent with a fear of academic striving.

For other black students, particularly the lower-achieving informants, doing well did not require taking advanced courses. The goal was to get good grades, regardless of the class level.

Interviewer: Why have you chosen the ones [classes] that you have?

Paul: They're easier ... [laughs] [black male junior at Avery High School]

Interviewer: Do you like being in those college prep classes?

Paul: Yes ma'am.

Interviewer: Why? What do you like about it? Paul: Everything. I mean—I mean I can do honors, but I don't know if I could be working that hard. I'd probably slack off. So I just take regular college prep.

Interviewer: Now where do the black kids fit into these groups [of students who take honors or regular classes—athletes, those considered popular or smart, or those who dress awkward], into these groups that you just described? Are they a group on their own; are they mostly what group?

Jessica: I mean, they could fit in either [honors or regular classes] group. I don't know, but I think they're more likely, say [in] regular classes. [black female senior at Clearview High School]

Interviewer: How come?

Jessica: I don't know. Maybe they feel they can't do it or something. The people that I'm around, that's the way they feel. They wouldn't be able to make the grade in the class to pass.

Black adolescents appeared to be more afraid of failure than of success. Average and lowerachieving students also had a desire to do well in school, and for some, avoiding advanced classes was one strategy to ensure that they would. A concern with poor academic performance is the opposite of what might be expected in a peer culture that demeans academic achievement. Indeed, as Fordham and Ogbu (1986:196) noted, doing poorly is one way for students to "minimize the stress" of being perceived as a high achiever. Yet our informants and the peers they described were more concerned about low than high achievement. No interviewee said or implied that reluctance to enroll in advanced courses on their part was connected to an oppositional peer culture. Rather, reluctance was connected to students' self-perceptions of ability.

BLACK ADOLESCENT PEER CULTURE AND HIGH ACHIEVEMENT

None of the black informants at Avery, Franklin, Banaker, East, or Clearview high schools reported problems with black peers related to high achievement. Some welcomed public recognition of their achievement, and even sought it, as did the students Mickelson and Velasco (forthcoming) studied. At these schools, black students reported receiving support for academic accomplishments and striving, especially among friends, just as the black females did in the study of Horvat and Lewis (2003). Our black informants at Clearview High School, all of whom were enrolled in advanced courses, insisted that excelling academically was not a problem and said that they did not feel any pressure to underachieve, even when they were the "only one" in a particular advanced course. The comments of their peers and friends mostly concerned the difficulty of the advanced courses.

Interviewer: How do you think students in this school react to you personally and the AP group generally with respect to your being involved in the program?

James: That's a wide variety of reactions. It ranges from "Man, I can't believe you're taking this, this is really hard. Why are you messing with it in your senior year? You should be relaxing" to "Oh man, you are taking that? You must be smart," and stuff. And that kind of thing. [black male senior at Clearview High School]

¹¹ There was no clear pattern with respect to students' family background and their course level. See Appendix, Table A2.

Interviewer: What do other students in the school say about, you know, taking honors courses, or anything. Does there seem to be any sort of, um, you know, pressure not to take honors courses or AP courses?

Hakim: On some courses, I think, there might not, I mean, there might be some pressure on with "Oh man, that's just too hard." You know. "You might fail this." [black male junior at Clearview High School]

No ambivalence about achievement is evident in these statements. Instead of other blacks sanctioning them for academic striving, peers and friends in their comments give mostly cautions about the difficulty of the advanced courses. We found a similar pattern at other schools.

At Banaker, the predominantly black high school, one AP/IB teacher reported that her regular instruction students "looked up to" the IB students because they "appreciated" the fact that the IB courses were tough, and "admired" the students who were able to meet the challenges of the program. Banaker students, especially, dismissed any suggestion that as high-achieving black students, they were ostracized by their peers.

Interviewer: Did your friends have any reaction to you being in the IB program or at any time during elementary and junior high?

Tyler: Not really, not any negative reactions. You know, they always, you know, say, "You're so smart," stuff like that, whatever. I don't think any had animosity towards me. [black male junior at Banaker High School]

Interviewer: Did your friends have any other types of reactions to you taking these classes?

Michelle: They thought I was crazy for taking, [laughs] especially taking like the AP class, and plus honors classes. They thought I was crazy. And it was like, "Well, I just gotta handle it." But they were pretty much supportive. [black female senior at Banaker High School]

Interviewer: Have your friends had any reaction to you being in these classes?

Kimmi: Well, you know how your friends do. They just feel like, "We know you're going to take the honors classes or something." And they'll be like, "Don't let yourself go down (in the rankings), because we know you got to be third, fourth, or do something." And they'll try to be like, "Yeah, you got the highest grade" or something. But not anything like, "You're a nerd." Nothing stupid like that. [black female junior at Banaker High School]

High-achieving students appeared to enjoy a certain level of respect among their friends at Banaker High School, where informants also flatly denied that acting white was an issue.

Interviewer: Have you ever heard anybody in this school accuse anybody else of acting white, or anything like that?

Ernest: No. [black male senior at Banaker High School]

Interviewer: No? Ernest: Hunh-uh.

We pressed the black informants on the question of peer and friend response to achievement to be sure that we were not missing some part of their experience. Many found these questions somewhat amusing, because achievement simply was not an issue.

Interviewer: And here, do you get any sort of reaction from any of your friends about being in the honors classes?

Zora: No. [black female junior at Avery High School]

Interviewer: Not at all? Nobody ever says anything?

Zora: No. [laughs]

Interviewer: Okay, how about-

Zora: Because a lot of them take them too. So, I mean, we don't talk about it.

Interviewer: Right. Okay, how about students just around the school, not necessarily the people you hang out with, but people who are just kind of walking in the hall . . .

Zora: Naw. [laughs a little]

Interviewer: Nothing? Why do you keep laughing?

Zora: It's just funny, I mean, we don't talk about that.

Interviewer: How do your friends—how do your friends react to your being in college prep and not honors classes?

Paul: We never talk about it. [black male junior at Avery High School]

Interviewer: Okay. And how do you feel about them being, you know, those who are in the honors—

Paul: We never talk about it.

That some black students did not discuss their academic pursuits and achievements with friends is not surprising. Steinberg (1996) reported similar findings for a diverse sample of students. Furthermore, in interviews with school personnel we found support for the claims of Avery High School students that high achievement was not a problem for blacks at

their school. For example, a new assistant principal (a black woman) commented that she had not seen as much peer pressure to underperform among minority students at Avery as she had seen at her previous school:

I was really impressed, last year, the first time report cards went out and many of the minority students . . . walked up to me and said, "Ms. H, look at my report card," and I saw As. That was a different experience.

In some schools, however, black students expressed concern over racial isolation in advanced classes, supporting Ferguson's (2001:352) assumption that "honors and AP courses may be socially isolating for black students" and Mickelson and Velasco's (forthcoming) findings in a study of high-achieving black students in the Charlotte-Mecklenberg School system in North Carolina. This was the case for our informants at the two middle schools and at Dalton High School in particular. Crystal, the only minority student in her eighth-grade gifted class at Jackson Middle School, found isolation from peers of similar background troubling. When asked whether she hung out with her gifted classmates outside class, Crystal responded, "Only a couple," adding that she did not "get along" with some of them "at all." She called these students "the other group . . . the preps" and noted that "some can be snotty at times." According to Crystal, the preps are "rich people," "white," and "they, like, live in the Winston neighborhood."

This sense of standing apart from the dominant population in advanced courses, especially a population perceived as arrogant, causes peculiar discomfort for some students. The other two black informants in the gifted program at Jackson Middle School had one another for company in the seventh-grade gifted class. Neither expressed any concerns about feeling different, isolated, or left out.

At Kilborn Middle School, Pelham, a black male, indicated that he had no problem being labeled as gifted, but as one of only two blacks in his gifted classes, he felt "a little bit odd being there" when the topic of one class was slavery. Elaborating, he said, "I don't know—it's like, you know, everybody looking at me, or something like that, if it's, you know, slavery." Pelham's discomfort with particular topics in the predominantly white advanced classes is not unlike that expressed by black adolescents in

other studies (Hemmings 1996; Mickelson and Velasco forthcoming; Tatum 1997). Interestingly, however, Pelham's and Crystal's discomfort did not deter them from being in the gifted program.

High-achieving black students at Dalton High School also persisted in advanced classes although they encountered similar problems of isolation. Note the similarity between the following description of students in the advanced classes at Dalton High School and that of Crystal's peers in the gifted classes at Jackson Middle School mentioned earlier:

Tamela: You have the snooty people, who only want to talk with you if you live in Eden Terrace, or if you like— [black female junior at Dalton High School]

Interviewer: What is Eden Terrace?

Tamela: That's like the little preppy tow—, sub-urb—

Interviewer: Uh-huh, and is that predominantly—

Tamela: Yes, it is. It's predominantly white. They have a lot of teachers, a lot of prominent people in the community that live out there, so—I mean, if you live in Eden Terrace, and if you make a certain amount of money, or whatever, you're in their little clique group, or whatever.

Tamela went on to explain that her classmates did things to offend her and to question her presence in the advanced classes. She reported getting "certain vibes" from some of the white girls (whom she described as "really snobby"), indicating that they did not want her in the classes (e.g., they "make little gestures and snicker" when Tamela gets "a higher test grade than them"). Interestingly, having been classmates since middle school, neither removed the racial boundary between the white students and Tamela nor erased their questions about her ability.

A BURDEN OF ACTING WHITE

Dalton High School's high-achieving black students contended with more than social isolation. This rural school with more than 1,700 students was the only school in which we found evidence of a burden of acting white with respect to achievement. Sociologically, this case is significant because, as Buroway (1991) has argued, as an exception to the pattern found at the other seven schools, it can provide impor-

tant theoretical insight that may improve the theory as a whole.

Both students and school personnel mentioned oppositional attitudes among blacks. Teachers, principals, and counselors repeatedly traced the underrepresentation of minority students in the school's advanced courses to aspects of an oppositional culture among minority students. Some adults noted that it is not "cool for minority students to be smart," and that black students are "embarrassed" about their ability. Others maintained that black students "don't place a high value on education," and that males, especially, are "averse to success" because it constitutes "betraying their brothers." Thus, to address the problem of minority underrepresentation in advanced courses, the school sought to ease high-achieving black students' isolation in the courses and insulate them from the criticisms of their peers by establishing a club for these students to come together.

Our two black student informants confirmed the presence of an oppositional culture, and particularly a burden of acting white, at Dalton High School. Our interviewees, one senior and one junior, were high-achieving females enrolled in honors and AP courses. Both had been accused of acting white by their black peers because of their academic behaviors. ¹² We emphasize these cases to acknowledge that this experience is real, and as many journalistic accounts attest (see, for example, the *New York Times* series "How Race Is Lived in America," June to July 2000), it can be extremely difficult and painful for some.

Interviewer: Okay, do your friends have any reaction to you being in the AP and honors courses?

Tamela: Oh man, they—a lot of people, well my good friends that are, that are in my honors English class, most of 'em, we take almost the same kinda course loads so, I mean, we support each other. And then I have some other black friends that say that I'm too smart, I'm trying to act white, or whatever, because I'm in such hard classes. [black female junior at Dalton High School]

Tamela did not seem upset by these remarks. She continued to hang out with some of the same students who accused her of acting white. The other student, Alicia (black female senior at Dalton High School), experienced harsher treatment and reacted more strongly. She recalled being called "white girl" and "Oreo" by fellow blacks in middle school after she had been placed in an accelerated class with only whites. She described that period as "hell." Alicia's middle-class background, which differed from Tamela's more modest socioeconomic status, further distinguished her from the many black students at Dalton High School who lived in nearby housing projects. 13 It also may have contributed to how Alicia's white peers perceived her. She quoted one white female as saying, "Alicia, you're not black-you speak correct English, you take honors courses. You're not what I picture as black." Highachieving black students in other research (Tatum 1997) report similar incidents.

A black counselor at Dalton High School recalled that a few years earlier her daughter "was the only black on the principal's list" and often "the only black in the core courses." At the principal's request, the counselor had conducted a survey of minority students and found that many were concerned about social and racial isolation in advanced courses:

They did not like being in honors courses because often they were the only ones.... Also, some of the kids felt that if they were in these honors classes, that there appears, the black kids look at them as if they were acting white, not recognizing that you could be smart and black. A lot of white kids looked at them, basically, "You're not supposed to be smart and black, so why are you here?"

An important and often overlooked consequence of the underrepresentation experienced by minorities in advanced classes is the perpetuation among both blacks and whites of stereotypes about black intellectual ability and the value of education in the black community.

Stark underrepresentation in honors and AP classes also leaves high-achieving black students vulnerable to being perceived as arrogant

¹² We do not know whether Dalton High School's high-achieving black males encountered the same problems, but we did observe that some attended a meeting of the school club for high-achieving black students.

¹³ According to students' reports, blacks at Dalton High School were noticeably less well off than whites.

by their peers. As Alicia put it, "I've had to deal with things from other black students, black students who see that I am smart; they seem to think that I think I'm better than them." Her conscious efforts to avoid "com[ing] off like I think I'm better than other people" were undermined by the visual disparity of her presence in advanced classes, leaving Alicia feeling frustrated and angry:

I think when you walk by a door and see one or two spots [blacks] in a class, I think that's when you start perceiving, "Oh, they must be stuck up, rich preppy people." The problem comes from society because it is ingrained in us that blacks must act, speak, dress a certain way and if you deviate from those expected norms your blackness is questioned. I question it myself. I'm being denounced and rejected by blacks and that's ridiculous.... I've changed so much since ninth grade. I came in here timid because I am black, and I was the only black person in my honors classes.

For some students, the visual image of racial patterns of academic placement may mean little. For others, however, it may be a constant reminder of the cultural system of white superiority, prompting ideas that link whiteness with certain academic behaviors. Thus, the threat posed to black students by such stereotypes can extend beyond the test-taking situation that Steele (1997) described. Alicia found her most basic self-understandings called into question:

If you make all As, you're white. If you're not coming in here with Cs and Ds and Fs, then something's wrong with you. You don't have a life—that's what it was. They thought I didn't do anything else but study. . . . You are called a betrayer of your race, and then you start questioning your blackness as I did. And I was like, "Well, what *is* wrong with me?"

Although Dalton High School was the only school at which informants explicitly linked academic achievement to accusations of acting white, one student at Jackson Middle School, located in a suburb of a county with a relatively large gap in black—white median income, discussed acting white with regard to other, nonacademic behaviors. This important distinction is clear in the following exchange.

Interviewer: What about different racial groups in this school? Are there, is it integrated, do black

and white students hang out together all the time, or are they more separate? How does that work?

Marc: Most of the time, but a lot of the black people think that they're better than the white people, or vice versa. Or the black people will always pick on the white people about what they do [inaudible], and if you're black and you act like you're white, then they would hold it against you. The black people would not like you as much. . . . Well if you're black and you act like you're—you do stuff that the white people do, then, then, like skateboarding and stuff like that, then they say that you're white and that you, I don't know how to really say it, they just say that you're really white and that you don't care about everybody else that's black. And stuff like that. Like if you surf or if you talk differently, like "dude" or something like that. 'Cause sometimes I say that. [black male, seventh grade at Jackson Middle School]

Interviewer: Okay. So do black students tease you sometimes?

Marc: Sometimes.

Interviewer: Are there other things besides skate-boarding or surfing that are labeled as white?

Marc: Mm, just about everything that black people don't do. Like if it's not associated with, like—I'm not talking about with the school—but drugs or shooting or something like that, then it's considered black.

Interviewer: What about AG?

Marc: AG is really mixed up. I mean, most of the people in AG that I know of are white. I'm one of the few black people that are in AG.

Interviewer: Okay. So, does anybody say, "You're in AG, you're white, you act white"?

Marc: No.

Interviewer: They don't associate that, only when you say "dude" and talk about surfing?

Marc: Yeah, stuff like that.

In the schools we studied, a burden of acting white was not pervasive in black peer groups. Black students sometimes were teased for achievement or for being smart, but that teasing was not usually racialized, and therefore was no different from the typical teasing (i.e., general oppositionality) other high-achieving students experience. Moreover, as the following quotations from black and white students illustrate, some of our informants perceived much of this teasing as harmless, and most downplayed its importance.

Interviewer: What kind of reaction did your friends have about you being in this (IB) program? You said most of your friends are in it, right?

Barbara: Yeah. But like people that were my friends before I came here and stuff, are like, "Oh, she's a smart girl now." And like, when someone

needs help, everyone comes to me and like, "I know you know how to do this, cause you're in IB." And every—a lot of people joke about it and stuff. [black female sophomore at Banaker High School]

Interviewer: How do your friends react to your being in this program (honors and AP)?

Lila: They're like, "Geesh, what's wrong with you?" [laughs] I don't know. They make fun of me a lot for my grade point average. They call me by the number instead of my name. But, I don't know, it's a lot of playful joking. [white female junior at Avery High School]

Ned: If they know you are in honors or AG, they think you are a genius. People see you in different ways, mostly it's a good way, but they also see you as limited in scope, like someone that does nothing but study all day long. [white male junior at Franklin High School]

Maggie: There were like five of us in the [gift-ed] class, and then in my [gifted] math class there was about ten, it doubled for math, but it was like I felt kind of left out from everybody else, and people would like, be like "You guys are too smart, y'all smarty-pants." And it kind of got better like in the eighth grade because a lot more people came into the AG program ... and in high school it's like more accepted and it's okay to be in honors, but in fifth grade it was kind of like a funny thing. [white female junior at Avery High School]

Clearly, among both whites and blacks, perceptions of high-achieving students are not entirely positive. Nor is the experience of the white high achiever always positive. Comments such as "What's wrong with you?" "Limited in scope," "kind of a funny thing," and "felt kind of left out" highlight the negative side of being perceived as "too smart" and are consistent with other research findings. Thus, contrary to the implications of the burden of acting white and oppositional peer culture hypotheses—that white students generally have superior standards for academic achievement and are embedded in peer groups that support and encourage academic striving—the experiences described by some of our white informants indicate the presence of a much less achievement-oriented academic culture. Our findings are consistent with those of other studies showing black and white students differing little in the degree to which they value academic achievement (Cook and Ludwig 1998; Ferguson 2001).

Hannah, a white female senior at Clearview High School, described a particularly egregious form of ridicule she experienced from white peers. Explaining that some girls at her school did not like her or her friends because they were "smart" and played sports, Hannah reported that one girl taunted her by saying, "I used to have a friend like you who was perfect. She killed herself. . . . It just got to be too much for her; she was number one in her class too; she played volleyball and everything and she ended up killing herself." We asked if she thought a lot of people saw her as "perfect":

Hannah: No, because I'm wild. Interviewer: Wild. how?

Hannah: I don't try to act, it's like I still want to be [Hannah], I don't try to be like arrogant and everything in front of everybody else, like I'll be the first one to declare, "I'm going to write on this desk," or "I'm stupid," I don't try that arrogance.

Hannah's strategy of acting "wild" is similar to tactics described by black students in Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) article. Hannah did not say she acted wild specifically to camouflage her achievement, but she acknowledged that this behavior deflected attention from her achievement and reminded people that she was not "perfect."

A BURDEN OF HIGH ACHIEVEMENT AMONG WHITES

Hannah's narrative uncovers a pattern of deepseated animosity between higher- and lowerachieving students in some schools, especially when the former group is perceived to be socially or economically advantaged. We found the most striking cases of such animosity at Clearview High School and Kilborn Middle School. Evidence of similar animosity also was present at East High School and Dalton High School. All but East High School have relatively large percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches, and are located in rural areas. We found no animosity toward higher-achieving students at Banaker or Franklin high schools. At Franklin, school staff emphasized that most students came from similar, modest backgrounds (Table 1). One white teacher, when asked to explain why minority students at Franklin were well represented in advanced courses (Table 2), offered the following opinion:

Well, you know, we're from a very low-wealth county and, uh, it's not, the wealth is not, the whites

don't have all the money. It's just as many poor whites as there are poor blacks or poor Indians. We're all in the same boat together. So in some areas it may be a racial, socioeconomic breakdown to it; it's not here. We don't really have an upper class.

At Dalton High School, few white students mentioned animosity between high and low achievers, but that omission may reflect the fact that all white informants were high achieving and, with the exception of one, Lexie, all were socioeconomically advantaged (e.g., parents had at least a four-year degree). Lexie, whose parents had no more than a high school education, had experiences in the advanced classes similar to those Tamela and Crystal described. Lexie felt alienated from her AP classmates and did not socialize with them, apparently because, beginning in middle school, the social class differences between them created a boundary. "I was the rejected alien, the one in the corner," she told us, and she continued to view her peers as not "approachable." The group boundaries drawn between students in middle school carried over to high school. Even as a senior, Lexie continued to maintain distance from her more privileged peers.14

Socioeconomically disadvantaged whites at Clearview High School told similar tales.¹⁵ For example, Ingrid, whose parents held working-class jobs, explained why she was "not close to" fellow AP students:

We have like, out here we have like the high spots [unclear], I guess you would say, the ones that were well brought up with the wealthy parents and things like that. And then we have the middle class and their parents work for what they get, they work hard and everything, but they're just not as well off, and then we have like the low class, the ones that have hardly nothing and things like that. I would say, I'm not being judgmental, not trying to be, but the majority of the smarter kids taking the honors courses are the well-off kids, because I think a lot of them are pressured into it maybe by their parents. [white female senior at Clearview High School]

Ingrid noted that "the low class" students in advanced classes sometimes were ridiculed for trying to be like the high-status "well-off" students

Interviewer: And would they [lower class students] typically be in honors classes?

Ingrid: Most of them aren't. Now you have some of them that are really smart and that are [sounds like imitate] and they get picked on for it because they don't look as nice as some of the other ones do.

Interviewer: Who picks on them?

Ingrid: Different people, not necessarily the people actually in the class with them but the other people saying, "I don't know why you're in there, you're not smart enough, you're not like them."

Interviewer: So they get picked on for being in the honors classes?

Ingrid: I guess for, because other people can look at them like they're trying to be like them, but you know you can't be.

The unmistakable similarity between this account and the "burden" Fordham and Ogbu described as peculiar to black students suggests that the composition of advanced courses may encourage the development of these attitudes and help breed animosity.

Visible social status disparity in track placement appears to affect how students perceive those classes and the students who take them, as other research also shows (Mickelson and Velasco forthcoming; Tatum 1997). Sennett and Cobb's (1972:82) work on the sources of social class injury in schools discusses this sorting process among younger students:

In the Watson school, by the time the children are ten or eleven the split between the many and the few who are expected to "make something of themselves" is out in the open; the aloofness developing in the second grade has become open hostility by the sixth. . . . What has happened, then, is that these children have directed their anger at their schoolmates who are rewarded as individuals rather than at the institution which is withholding recognition of them.

¹⁴ Another white informant at Dalton High School indicated that because she was "smart" her friends thought "I think I'm better than them." She did not refer to status group distinctions, however, nor did the white informant at Avery High School who described an almost identical situation.

¹⁵ Socioeconomic data by race for the schools were not available, but our interviews with black students at Clearview High School showed less perception of class differences between blacks and whites than found at Dalton High School (where we interviewed far fewer black students). Intraracially, however, the interviews showed more animosity among white students at Clearview tied to a greater perception of class differences among that group.

Among the older students in our sample schools, hostility directed toward wealthy higher-achieving students usually marked them as snobs. For instance, a white student at East High School told us about a friend in advanced geometry who, she said.

... really didn't want to be in the advanced class because she didn't want to be categorized as one of the snobs. Because a lot of people in advanced geometry or the advanced classes are—this is kind of weird to put this—but they're kind of rich and they really are snobs. [Anna Beth, white female sophomore at East High School]

This perception of snobbery led some parents to veto their children's participation in gifted programs. Ingrid's mother, for example, would not let her participate in her elementary school's gifted programs: "She said that she didn't want me to think I was better than other kids." Ingrid explained:

[Now] I understand why she did that . . . [A] lot of the students, some of the smarter ones, think that they're a lot better than the other ones that have learning problems and things. . . . They just exclude you from them as far as like everybody has their own little clique, and they're like, "Well, we're the smarter people and the other people are dumb," kind of thing. [white female senior at Clearview High School]

Interviews at Kilborn Middle School revealed similar resistance to gifted placement among low-income whites. According to school staff, parents in the rural farming town where the middle school is located sometimes refused to have their children tested for admittance into the gifted program because "they don't want their kids to feel like they're better than anybody else." The principal reported hearing this from parents "all the time." A teacher who mentioned this attitude among parents added that it came mostly from low-income parents. The teacher, who believed that low-income parents' academic expectations were low, cited this and the fact that parents did not want their kids identified as smart as possible explanations for lowincome children's underrepresentation in Kilborn's gifted program.

White student interviewees at Kilborn Middle School identified a "high and mighty" attitude (evidenced by "acting like you are better than everyone else") among students taking accelerated classes. Words like "snobby," snooty," and "snotty," as well as comments about students

who think they are "better than [others]" came up often in descriptions of high-achieving students, especially those perceived as "rich." Joey, a white male eighth grade student whose parents were high school graduates, told us he thought some of his classmates in the AP classes were "kind of snobby" and explained that these students "parents have high up jobs, and they—they are high-up people." Adam, a white male eighth grade student from a working-class family, who is taking advanced classes, concurred, noting that some of his classmates "act like they are better than you in some ways."

We asked Sarah, a white female student at Kilborn Middle School who was not taking advanced classes, whether the students who had been in the gifted program of her elementary school were the same people currently enrolled in AP classes. Her response—"I really don't know because they're more of the preppier people; I don't hang out with the preppy people"—shows the distance between the "haves" and the "have nots" at the school. Sarah added that some of the AP students "are just snobbish" and noted the arrogance of the "preps."

Interviewer: Okay. Well, tell me about the different groups of kids at the school.

Sarah: Okay. There are people like me—just try and stay away from—we're not really, we're not the rich, rich people, you know, just like the normal, average kid, I guess you could say. And then we have preps, as we call kids who think they're better than everyone else because they have more money or whatever.

Students in the advanced classes at Kilborn Middle School also faced ridicule. According to Linda, a white female in the eighth grade gifted program at Kilborn Middle School, AP students are "put down by others ... because they're smart," and are teased "about just the way they look or something." Carrie, also in the gifted program, reported that students are embarrassed to be known as smart:

Carrie: I think—they don't—some people don't like to be known as smart. I don't know why, but that's just how they feel. [white female, eighth grade at Kilborn Middle School]

Interviewer: Are these people that you're thinking of, are they in fact "smart," or are they people who are not—who don't think of themselves as smart?

Carrie: They are smart. They are really smart and they can be—like a bunch of people chose not to be in that class, because they didn't—they just

didn't want to be known as one of the smart kids, I guess. I don't know. Which, I mean, I just don't see—there's nothing wrong with it. It's something to be proud of.

Interviewer: Is there—do you perceive that there's a stigma attached to being smart in this school?

Carrie: I don't—a bunch of people think there is, but there's not, really. I mean, there used to be. Like in elementary school, people that were smart, they'd get beat up a lot. [chuckles] . . . Well, not really with girls. With boys. The, like, the puny, smart guys got picked on all the time.

Although Carrie insisted that she was proud to be in the gifted program, she admitted that when she was in the third grade, she had at first not wanted to be in the program "because I thought my friends might not be my friends anymore. . . . I just thought that they might be embarrassed to hang out with me, because I would be one of the dorks."

The sense that students enrolled in the accelerated classes were arrogant may partly explain why these students were ridiculed by others, and why being smart might be burdensome in some schools. At Kilborn Middle School, where nearly half of the student body received free or reduced-priced lunches, and where the accelerated classes were perceived as dominated by the "rich people," low-status students seemed to turn academic striving and smartness on its head, a process of inverted social closure, demeaning what they once publicly valued. To the extent that students value smartness, its uneven distribution is problematic. Studies investigating what happens when students are not able to realize the goal of academic success have found that some students construct subcultures that reject, at least outwardly, the school's values and assessments (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Stinchcombe 1964). Subsequently, these students seek ways to earn respect and esteem that do not depend on the school's valuation. Our findings show a similar pattern. Some groups of students—in this case, low achievers, earn respect and esteem at the expense of others—in this case, high achievers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study assessed the burden of acting white hypothesis. Our interviews revealed ambivalence toward achievement among black students at just one of eight secondary schools. Contrary to the burden of acting white hypothesis, the black students in this study who avoided advanced courses did so for fear of not doing well academically. Their decision to opt out was motivated by their own concern that they might not be able to handle the amount or level of work required, and that their grades might suffer. With few exceptions (e.g., Spencer et al. 2003), researchers have not considered that black adolescents, like other students, need to feel competent, and that they work to preserve a positive self-concept.

Racialized ridiculing of high-achieving black students was evident for only 2 of 40 black adolescents, both of whom attended the same school. 16 A similarly designed study with a larger sample of schools, including more with characteristics similar to Dalton High School's (e.g., racially mixed, large black-white income and placement gaps) would likely have shown more evidence of a burden of acting white for black students. Significantly, however, despite the real pain and frustration allegations of acting white may cause, it did not deter our informants from enrolling in advanced courses or striving for academic success. Thus, our data provide little evidence to suggest, as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) claimed, that a burden of acting white is a "major reason" why black students do poorly in school and a key contributor to the achievement gap.

In constructing the theory of a burden of acting white, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) overlooked important similarities between the experiences of their informants and those of white students. Indeed, the narratives of black and white students at the eight schools in our study suggest that a burden of high achievement (either racialized or class-based oppositionality) may be a common experience in some

¹⁶ We found evidence of a burden of acting white in another study we conducted involving 65 high-achieving black students at 19 high schools. However, it was not widespread, and the school context mattered. For example, preliminary analyses identified about ten cases in which students reported encountering racialized oppositionality. All were cases of students attending racially mixed schools, and almost all the students were isolated from other blacks in advanced classes. Few of these students were in schools in which an oppositional culture was embedded, however.

schools in which high-status groups are perceived to be privileged in placement and achievement. Our results support Blau's (2003:54) assumption that "the racial composition of a school's body of retained students and low-status students sends a signal to all students in the school," because when socioeconomically advantaged students appear to be overrepresented in advanced courses, we also find a pattern of animosity directed at that group.

We do not have data on the social class composition of courses to substantiate the students' views that "rich" students dominated the higher-level courses, but many studies on tracking confirm their perception that these students have an unfair advantage in course placement (Gamoran 1992; Gamoran and Mare 1989; Hallinan 1994; Lucas 1999; Oakes 1985). Moreover, given that "situations defined as real are real in their consequences," it seems likely that some students may choose lower-level academic classes, in which they can expect the comfort of being among peers of similar background, rather than advanced courses, in which they may anticipate feeling socially isolated or conspicuous in their difference. Some students also seem especially concerned to avoid being perceived as exhibiting the arrogance of privilege.

The charge of acting white directed toward black students striving for academic success involves much more than opposition to white cultural norms. In a society characterized by patterns of race and class privilege, the charge of acting white is loaded with the resentment (misdirected) of the less privileged toward the few individuals among them who receive the coveted rewards bestowed by those in power. Where black students do possess oppositional attitudes, this orientation is not likely to arise merely from their having been born black. Rather, oppositional attitudes appear to be connected to everyday experiences of inequality in placement and achievement. Mickelson and Velasco (forthcoming) came to a similar conclusion in their study of high-achieving black students. For black adolescents, academic achievement can become yet another characteristic delineating the boundaries of whiteness—a conspicuous marker similar to "wearing shorts in the winter."

We found a similar process among low-status whites. Class distinctions provided a way for them to understand their relative underachievement while maintaining a sense of dignity and respect in the face of disparate outcomes. For low-income white students, patterns of placement and achievement can become another indicator of social class, marking the boundary between the "haves" and the "have nots." Most problematic for whites, similar to that for blacks who faced a burden of acting white, was the perception that the low-status student was attempting to assume the characteristics of the "other," especially an air of superiority or arrogance.

Inconsistencies in research findings related to an oppositional peer culture among black students become more understandable once the importance of context is recognized. Thus, we speculate that a focus on school structures rather than culture may produce greater insight and more consistent results. As we found in the current study, the degree of inequality and how it is perceived by students varies across schools. The combination of particular factors (e.g., percentage of student body receiving free or reduced-priced lunches and the gap in black—white median income in the area) appears to affect how students perceive inequality. The patterns identified in this study suggest that institutional structures may shape how culture is enacted in school in response to a burden of high achievement among black students, whether it manifests itself in opposition to white norms or-as is common to most adolescentsas concern about being perceived as arrogant, a "dork," or a "nerd." Students in all racial and ethnic groups confront similar dilemmas of high academic achievement, and they also tend to use similar strategies of downplaying achievement (Harter 1990; Kinney 1993; Steinberg 1996). Thus, we join Mary Patillo-McCoy (1999:208) in concluding that "radical systemic changes, not the reorganization of people's cultural beliefs," are the solution to oppositional peer cultures in schools. Patterns of social inequality reproduced and affirmed in tracking exacerbate the well-documented antiachievement ethos among America's youth.

Our study suggests that there are three distinct types of oppositionality to high achievement. The first is a general oppositionality, in which peer taunts take the form of labels such as "nerd," "dork," or "brainiac," and may cross racial and class lines. The second type, which is the form we set out to detect and explain in this study, is racialized oppositionality, in which peer taunts directed at black high achievers by other blacks include labels such as "Oreo" or the charge of "acting white." The third type, also found in this study, is class-based (intraracial) oppositionality, in which peer taunts include "snooty" and charges of persons acting "high and mighty" or like they are better than others. 17 The second type is more likely to be part of the local school culture of schools in which socioeconomic status differences between blacks and whites are stark and perceived as corresponding to patterns of placement and achievement. Similarly, the third type of oppositionality is more likely to be part of the local school culture of schools in which socioeconomic status differences among whites are stark and perceived as corresponding to patterns of placement and achievement. 18 Further research is needed to further refine and test these hypotheses.

Commonplace notions concerning the burden of acting white have captured the sociological imagination. Yet, surprisingly, sociologists have not paid enough attention to similarities in the daily experiences of black and white students in schools. Designing studies that provide greater detail on students' experiences will allow researchers to identify the nuances that distinguish a burden of acting white from other more generic problems of high achievement that confront the average teenager. The empirical foundation underlying the burden of acting white thesis is fragile at best. Until we recognize that these processes generalize beyond one specific group, we will continue to go astray in our efforts to understand the black—white achievement gap.

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¹⁷ The accusation of acting as if you are "better than" others usually is linked to charges of acting white as well. Among blacks, class-based condemnations may also include the label "bourgie."

¹⁸ Our data suggest that school locale (e.g., urban, rural) also may be significant, but it is not clear how or why. Moreover, other research (including our own and that of Mickelson and Velasco [forthcoming]) shows that a burden of acting white exists for black students in urban schools. It seems likely that certain combinations of school factors can create a "perfect storm" effect, producing a burden of acting white for some students.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Demographic Information on Student Informants Quoted

Schools	Student Informant	Grade	Race	Gender
Jackson Middle School	Crystal	8	Black	Female
	Les	7	Black	Male
	Marc	7	Black	Male
	Shandra	7	Black	Female
Kilborn Middle School	Adam	8	White	Male
	Carrie	8	White	Female
	Joey	8	White	Male
	Linda	8	White	Female
	Pelham	8	Black	Male
	Sarah	8	White	Female
Avery High School	Lila	11	White	Female
	Maggie	11	White	Female
	Paul	11	Black	Male
	Whitney	12	Black	Female
	Zora	11	Black	Female
Banaker High School	Barbara	10	Black	Female
C	Ernest	12	Black	Male
	Kimmi	11	Black	Female
	Michelle	12	Black	Female
	Tyler	12	Black	Male
Clearview High School	Hakim	11	Black	Male
	Hannah	12	White	Female
	Ingrid	12	White	Female
	James	12	Black	Male
	Jessica	12	Black	Female
Dalton High School	Alicia	12	Black	Female
	Lexie	12	White	Female
	Tamela	11	Black	Female
East High School	Anna Beth	10	White	Female
Franklin High School	Ned	11	White	Male

Note: To ensure anonymity, the names of all schools and informants have been changed.

Table A2. Demographic Information on Students' Parents

		Mother		Father ^a		
Schools	Student	Education	Employment	Education	Employment	
Middle						
Schools						
	Crystal	AD	Administrator	HS	Factory Worker	
Jackson	Les	HS	Food Service	NA	NA	
	Marc	Less Than HS	Teacher	DK	Construction Worker	
	Shandra	BA	Teacher	NA	NA	
	Adam	HS	Nonemployed	HS	Plumber	
Kilborn	Carrie	BA	Educator	BA	Stock Broker	
	Joey	HS	Self-employed	HS	Manufacturing Position	
	Linda	DK	Nonemployed	BA	Manager	
	Pelham	DK	Assistant Principal	HS	Magistrate	
	Sarah	Less Than HS	Sample Person	NA	NA	
High Schools						
Avery	Lila	HS	Homemaker	Some College	Quality Assurance Position	
	Maggie	HS	Secretary	HS	Express Courier Position	
	Paul	Some College	Secretary	Some College	Butcher	
	Whitney	Some College	Nursing Assistant	Some College	Service Position	
	Zora	BA	Accounts Payable	BA	Contractor	
	Barbara	BA	Dietician	DK	Service Position	
Banaker	Ernest	Some College	Computers	NA	NA	
	Kimmi	BA	Teacher	BA	Laboratory Scientist	
	Michelle	HS	Machine Operator	Tech/Voc	Unemployed	
	Tyler	BA	Teacher	AD	Statistician	
Clearview	Hakim	HS	Machine Operator	Tech/Voc	Truck Driver	
	Hannah	BA	Teacher	NA	NA	
	Ingrid	Some College	Textile	Less than HS	Carpenter	
	James	HS	Mill Manager	HS	Construction	
	Jessica	AA	Film Technician	NA	NA	
Dalton	Alicia	AA	Self-employed	BA	Community College Administrator	
	Lexie	HS	Lead Agent	HS	Coordinator	
	Tamela	AA	Nonemployed	NA	NA	
East	Anna Beth	HS	Secretary	HS	Manager	
Franklin	Ned	AA	Assistant Teacher	AA	Manager	

Note: To ensure anonymity, the names of all schools and informants have been changed. AD = advanced degree; HS = high school; Tech/Voc = technical/vocational.

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^a DK = informant doesn't know; NA = not applicable (informant lives in single-parent home and has no contact with other parent).

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