A Review: The Role of Race and Culture in the Academic and Social Attainment of African American Youth

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Introduction

In the fields of sociology and anthropology, much of the past and current social attainment literature attributes the conspicuous differences in educational and job mobility between black and white youth to cultural and linguistic deficiencies. Theories of "defective" cultures that emphasize how racial minorities deviate from Euro-American cultural norms have been popularized in the debate about differentiation in social attainment processes (Anderson 1994; Bourgois 1995; Hannerz 1969; Lewis 1969; Liebow 1967; Ogbu 1974; Ogbu 1978). All of these models attribute some of the persistent, unequal social and economic outcomes for African Americans to cultural differences relative to White Americans.

Culture-based arguments used in the discussion of racial inequality and disparity generally fall along two lines: the cultural resistance and the cultural deprivation paradigms. The social scientific discourse on oppositional identity and culture spans far back in history, one in which the notions of power and domination are woven throughout the global social, civic, and political culture. An examination of this discourse on oppositional culture reveals that it manifests itself in myriad forms: for example in class revolutions (Marx 1978); slave rebellions (Genovese 1974); poor workers' movements (Piven and Cloward 1979); or nonconformist dress and language-oriented subcultures (Hall and Jefferson 1993; Kelley 1994). The argument, which maintains that because the possibility of real upward mobility and equal access to the polity seems so remote, members of oppressed social groups begin to challenge the legitimacy of dominant ideology.

For instance, research on African American youth often invokes the notion of "oppositional culture and identity" to explain low school achievement, delinquency, and limited job mobility, or to explain why these youth reject certain dominant norms and behaviors. Some have argued that some African American youth reject certain actions because they believe them to be the province of the dominant group (i.e., white middle class). Under the impression that certain behaviors only benefit Whites, Black youth begin to perceive these behaviors as "acting white" (Fordham 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1978; Solomon 1991; Urciuoli 1996).

The anthropologist Signithia Fordham's and John Ogbu's highly influential article, "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden of Acting White'" has been used as the basis for several analyses about the role of the resistance to "acting white" phenomenon in the lives of African American youth. Fordham and Ogbu provide a lengthy, though not exhaustive, list of the attitudes and behaviors that constitute "acting white," based on ethnographic research among black students at Capital High School in Washington, D.C. in the 1980s. Specifically, behaviors and attitudes labeled as "acting white," and thus worthy of sanction, included: (1) speaking Standard English; (2) listening to white music and white radio stations: (3) going to the opera or ballet; (4) spending much time in the library studying; (5) working hard to get good grades in school; and (6) getting good grades in school (1986: 186).

Several social scientists have theorized about the concept of "acting white," and its implications in the lives of adolescent racial minorities (Anderson 1990; Fordham 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Kelley 1994; Ogbu 1978; Solomon 1991; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995). Yet, interestingly most of the empirical studies about the fear of "acting white" among racial minorities have been based on Fordham's and Ogbu's articulation (1986) of "acting white" and resistance to "acting white."

Notably, the most critical dimensions of this idea of resistance to "acting white" have centered on those elements that pertain to school behaviors and performance. If taken at face value, the prevalent Fordham-Ogbu articulation of poor school performance as *resistance* to "acting white," and a form of social opposition, raises many questions. Mainly, the issue arises with the argument that the fear of "acting white" is a significant cause of poor school achievement among some racial and ethnic minorities. Historically African Americans have challenged the legality of perceived white prerogatives of going to school, learning to read and write, and claiming positions exclusively above the existent "job ceiling." Historians inform us that racial and ethnic minorities did not devalue literacy and educational achievement (Bullock 1967; Genovese 1974; Kluger 1975). Other popular and academic accounts inform us that even black nationalist organizations such as the Black Panther Party addressed the importance of an educated black populace and supported education in their 10-point program and through their community service programs (Meier, Rudwick and Broderick 1976).

Other race-based cultural arguments resonate greatly with the "culture of poverty" thesis championed by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the 1960s. Lewis (1969) contended that a distinctive set of cultural patterns and values among the poor—antithetical in nature to "mainstream" culture—impairs poor individuals' attempt at full participation in myriad social, political and economic institutions. A result of poor individuals' feelings of hopelessness and their despair over their marginal positions in a class-stratified, highly individualistic society, this "culture of poverty" sig-

nified an adaptation to the miserable social and economic conditions they faced.

Similarly, models of oppositional culture often maintain that a historical legacy of involuntary servitude, subjugation, high unemployment, and lack of political opportunity have compelled certain racial and ethnic minorities to culturally adapt and to develop another way of life to navigate throughout the confines of society. Thus, for example, African Americans might respond to both perceptions and actual practices of job discrimination and consequently reject school because of the belief that it only benefits white, middle class students (Ogbu 1978; see also Wilson 1987; Wilson 1996). Other research has focused on the street corner, delinquent and violent variant of oppositional culture that rejects mainstream values and work ethics (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995). In his latest book ***Code of the Street***, Anderson (1999) has written about a violent "street" culture perceived to be pervasive in poor, urban Black America. In Anderson's estimation, the push and pull of this "street" culture upsets the realization of many poor, Black Americans' dreams and career aspirations.

On one hand, both of these models seriously consider how the opportunity structure (i.e., access to jobs and educational resources) influences the aggregate social, economic and political outcomes for many African Americans. On the other hand, these models frequently render culture as a major factor facilitating the reproduction of these outcomes. As a result, these ideas about a particular black culture, deviating from the mainstream, render culture as overly deterministic of African Africans' social and economic attainment. As a result, the research on cultural resistance and oppositional culture among African Americans often lacks explanation of the intraracial differences among individuals who occupy a similar social or political status in U.S. society. That is, some of this research with a racial and culturally based focus homogenizes the social experiences of African Americans, allowing little explanatory latitude for either between-class, -gender, or -status variation.

Alternative Theorizing about Culture and Inequality

Recently, researchers and scholars, however, have tried to loosen the stronghold that the burden of "acting white" thesis has played in the explanation of racial disparity in achievement (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Carter and Wilson 1997; Cook and Jens 1998; O'Connor 1997; Tyson 1998). They argue that the evidence supporting that resistance to "acting white" accounts for current differences in test and school performances is hardly compelling. These new studies have shown that minority youth do not equate high achievement in school and upward mobility with "acting white," and that the cultural repertoires they embrace do *not* include any dimensions of anti-intellectualism or anti-achievement. The low-income African American respondents in Carter's study described various social actions as "acting black," an alternative, though not mutually exclusive, system of shared meaning from "acting

white." The findings suggest that their resistance to fully assimilate and conform to the school's cultural expectations about ways of being and styles are more likely to facilitate school disengagement, not an alleged association of excellence in school with that of the Other or whiteness.

Further, contrary to the resistance to "acting white" thesis, research has shown that African American youth do not necessarily sanction their high-achieving African American students for "acting white," but rather they used the universal term that exists in probably every American high school lexicon—"nerd." "Nerd" was the most frequent descriptor of smart youth in Carter's study, and 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). 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.

Mickelson's study (1991) found that African American students possessing an oppositional identity do not necessarily reject the universal or general notions of dominant (achievement) ideology. Like their white counterparts, middle class and working class African Americans subscribe to abstract or universal achievement ideology and claims about the connection between achievement and success. Paradoxically, it is the limitations of the African American students' *concrete* social experiences that are likely to compel them to reject the ideology about the connection between achievement and success. Different strategies to navigate within a racially and ethnically hierarchical society could be employed by minority adolescents. Yet, we have little knowledge of why some racial minorities either a) fully acculturate; or b) negotiate and subscribe to a "minority culture of mobility" (Neckerman, Carter and Lee 1999)—which follows mobility patterns similar to whites; or c) label such behaviors and practices as "acting white" and consequently resist and rebuff them.

Others ask whether the rejection of "acting white" is synonymous with the rejection of "acting middle class." Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (1991) remind us that within the black lower class, there has always been a "hidden middle class," comprised of poor people who have "middle-class" values and participate in activities typically engaged in by members of the middle class. Sociologist Carol Stack had argued previously that "the black urban poor, assuming a cooperative life style, are simultaneously locked into an intimate, ongoing bond with white culture and white values"—which mass media, schools and employers reinforce (1974: 125). This research begs the question of how social capital, operationally defined here as access to various informational networks, varies within and between all class strata among African Americans and influences their social outcomes.

Meanwhile, other scholars have found that African Americans who feel the conflict between "making it," or rather assimilation to dominant society, and group identification adopt certain other strategies. For example, Fordham (1988) describes "racelessness" as one pragmatic strategy to confronting this dilemma. She has described those minority students who disavow a strong ethnic identity and instead subscribe to a more individualistic, race-blind strategy to achieve educational and social mobility as "raceless." One limitation of her analysis is that she only considers the binary oppositions: the fully assimilative and the strongly resistant. She also ignores individuals to whom racial group identification is important and who contest the limited accessibility of dominant (i.e., white middle class) institutions, but who still behave in ways that do not risk their social and economic mobility. This challenge calls for more comparative studies on the mobility strategies of African Americans and would take into account the intersection of race, class, gender and various forms of capital (e.g., human, cultural, and social) and the limited opportunity structure available to African Americans.

Research on other ethnic communities has found that they view the acquisition of skills in the majority-group language and culture as an "additive," leading not to a rejection of their minority-group identity and culture but instead to a form of biculturalism (e.g., Gibson 1988). If this work is applied to the social situation of African Americans, it raises several important issues. One question that has not been sufficiently addressed in the current literature is why many native minorities do not view majority-group language and culture as "additive," rather than a loss of one's cultural group identity. Finally, does a latent form of opposition exist within these negotiated or accommodative practices and behaviors? Accommodative strategies do not prevent individuals from offering pointed critiques of racial, ethnic or gender exclusion in American society. Thus, social scientists must ask whether patterns of accommodation without assimilation, or negotiation, actually constitute conformity to dominant authority and social relations.

Given the persistent aggregate social, economic and political outcomes for African Americans, the critical inquiry cannot simply look inwards to the cultural dynamics, but it must also make demands from the structural forces that mutually reinforce the cultural patterns of our day. At the same time, much social behavior transcends race, ethnicity, class, and gender and other social markers, and some practices are shared by all of us who live within U.S. society. Although the cultural bases of the workplace and U.S. schools are often imbued with inequitable power relations that should be contested, certain universal sets of shared meanings must endure to facilitate communication across all groups. Hannerz has captured the problem and offered a solution that should be taken seriously:

> What is needed is a body of culture that can serve as a symbolic

> basis for group cohesion [among racial and ethnic minorities] while the group is in strenuous economic and political movement. This does not mean that the whole way of life has to be culturally distinct. It is enough that what there is of such group symbolism keeps people committed to the mobilization (1969: 197).

Practically speaking, we require a cohesive set of meanings to facilitate interracial, ethnic, and class interaction and participation. However, as sociologist Mark Gould has written, "the standard of neutrality institutionalized in the [social] organization presumes the life-world, the tacit common-sense culture, of whites" (Gould, 1996: 23). Hence, the challenge lies in the quest for the establishment of a fair and equitable opportunity structure that also affirms distinctive racial and ethnic groups and their cultural repertoires.

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