

BLACK STUDENTS' SCHOOL SUCCESS: COPING WITH THE "BURDEN OF 'ACTING WHITE'"

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Basic premise: Some minorities experience a disproportionate amount of school failure. Why?

1. Adaptation in adult life to limited social and economic opportunities.
 - a. White American control of schooling.
 - b. Substandard schooling ("compulsory ignorance" required of slaves)
 - c. Job ceilings, so that even when they succeed in school, they have limited access to job opportunities and wages commensurate with their academic accomplishments.
 - i. **Result: disillusionment about the value of schooling.**
 - ii. **Result: distrust of public school system and intentions of educators.**
2. In response to substandard schooling and barriers in the adult opportunity structure, black Americans develop "survival strategies" and other coping mechanisms.
3. One of these strategies is that some individuals in certain minority populations are *ambivalent about success*.

"You must be twice as good to go half as far."

"Don't get the big head, don't blow your own horn."

Our main point in this paper is that *one major reason black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success*. Why is this so, because

- white Americans traditionally refuse to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and because
 - black Americans subsequently begin to doubt their own intellectual ability,
 - begin to define academic success as white people's prerogative, and
 - begin to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously from emulating white people in academic striving.

Consequently, "many black students who are academically able do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and do poorly in school."

A cultural orientation in school which defines academic learning in school as "acting white" and academic success as the prerogative of white Americans results in

- social pressures against striving for academic success, and
- fear of striving for academic success.
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Autonomous minorities:

minorities in a numerical sense (women, gay community).

Immigrant minorities

came to US voluntarily to improve their economic, political, and social status (Irish Americans, Italian Americans, Asian Americans).

Subordinate (castelike) minorities:

involuntarily and permanently incorporated in American society through slavery or conquest (African Americans, American Indians, Mexican Americans).

Status Mobility System (folk psychology of "making it," learning how to "get ahead")

Oppositional collective (social) identity: a sense of peoplehood in opposition to the social identity of white Americans because of the way white Americans treat them in economic, political, social, and psychological domains, including white exclusion of these groups from true assimilation (is there really a "melting pot"?)

Response to oppression

Oppositional cultural frame of reference: devices used to protect one's identity and for maintaining boundaries between them and white Americans.

Subordinate minorities regard certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and meaning as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans. To do so it to "act white." To join the enemy.

How do oppositional identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference enter into the process of schooling?

- through the minorities' perceptions and interpretations of schooling as learning the white American cultural frame of reference which they have come to assume to have adverse effects on their own cultural and identity integrity.
- peers have a powerful influence
- **to "act white" is to give up one's minority identity**

Fictive kinship and schooling

What is fictive kinship?

- A kinshiplike relationship between persons not related by blood or marriage in a society, but who have some reciprocal social or economic relationship.
- A cultural symbol of collective identity (playkin, brotherhood and sisterhood, soul brother and soul sister, blood).
- A sense of peoplehood in opposition to white American social identity.
- The medium through which minorities distinguish the "real" from "spurious members.
- One learns the criteria for fictive kinship from parents and peers.

But being black does not result in automatic membership. One can be denied membership to the fictive kinship because one's behavior, activities, and lack of manifest loyalty are at variance with those thought to be appropriate and group-specific.

One function of the fictive kinship is to invert the negative stereotypes and assumptions of whites into positive and functional attributes (dialect—ebonics, group loyalty in opposition to whites—O. J. Simpson?)

"Acting White" at Capital High

"Acting white" attitudes and behaviors (early 1980s)

1. Speaking standard English
2. Listening to white music and white radio stations
3. Going to the opera or ballet
4. Spending a lot of time in the library studying
5. Working hard to get good grades in school
6. Getting good grades in school
7. Going to the Smithsonian
8. Going to a Rolling Stones concert
9. Doing volunteer work
10. Going camping, hiking, or mountain climbing
11. Having cocktails or a cocktail party
12. Going to a symphony orchestra
13. Having a party with no music
14. Listening to classical music being on time
15. Reading and writing poetry

So how do black students cope with the burden of acting white?

Camouflage ability from other students (participate in athletics, which are viewed as in the black domain)

Cloak ability in other activities ("lunching" – class clown, pretend not to have to work hard)

Maintain low profile

Acquire the help of bullies or hoodlums in exchange for assisting them with their academic work

Put the brakes on academic performance

Carefully select persons with whom to interact

What should be done?

1. Change students' perceptions of what is available to them as adult workers in the labor force.
2. Increase opportunities available to students who are unable to find unemployment.
3. Eliminate educational barriers, both the gross and subtle mechanisms by which schools differentiate the academic careers of black and white children.
4. Recognize burden of acting white and make it a target of educational policies and remediation efforts.
 - a. Schools should reinforce black identity in a manner compatible with academic pursuit.
 - i. Understand the influence of the fictive kinship.
 - ii. Develop programs, including counseling, to help students learn to divorce academic pursuit from the idea of acting white.
 - b. Black community should develop programs to teach black children that academic pursuit is not synonymous with one-way acculturation into a white cultural frame of reference.
 - i. Black children's general perception that academic pursuit is "acting white" is learned in the black community.
 - ii. Ideology of the community in regard to cultural meaning of schooling is implicated and should be reexamined.
 - iii. Provide visible and concrete evidence for black youths that the community appreciates and encourages academic effort and success. Recognize excellence in scholarship as is presently recognized excellence in sports.