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# Straddling Boundaries: Identity, Culture, and School

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This article presents the results of an investigation of the following questions: How do low-income African American and Latino youths negotiate the boundaries between school and peer group contexts? Do variable forms of negotiation exist? If so, what are they, and how do they manifest? In addressing these questions, the author posits two arguments that directly challenge the “acting white” thesis. The first is that black and Latino students’ academic, cultural, psychological, and social experiences are *heterogeneous*. This article examines three groups of low-income African American and Latino students who differ in how they believe group members should behave culturally—the cultural mainstreamers, the cultural straddlers, and the noncompliant believers. Second, this article returns to the sociological signification of four dimensions of the phenomenon of (resistance to) acting white and highlights the varied responses of the three groups to the social boundaries that collective identities engender and that status hierarchies in schools produce. Straddlers appear to traverse the boundaries between their ethnic peer groups and school environments best. The analyses are based on a combination of survey and qualitative data that were collected from a series of in-depth individual and group interviews with an interethnic, mixed-gender sample of 68 low-income, African American and Latino youths, aged 13–20.

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American Sociological Association  
Mon, 06 Nov 2006 21:15:57

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**R**ace, ethnicity, culture, and identity: We can almost guarantee that these four social factors play a role in the academic well-being of all students—complexly so. Yet verifiable explanations for why and how they matter continue to elude social science researchers and educators. For most, if not all of us, our socialization as racial and ethnic beings begins early in life, and much of this socialization occurs during the compulsory years of schooling, from preschool to high school, and even further during the collegiate years and beyond. Racial and ethnic identities emerge in the contexts of macrostructural, cultural, and individual-level forces; they are neither static

nor one dimensional; and their meanings, as expressed in schools, neighborhoods, peer groups, and families, vary across time, space, and region (Dolby 2001; McCarthy 1993; Yon 2000). But perhaps, more critically, what is relevant in the field of educational research is *how* ethnic and racial identity and the concomitant cultural behaviors matter to educational outcomes. This question has been most pressing when researchers have examined the significantly lower levels of educational achievement of racial and ethnic minority students, such as African Americans and various ethnic groups that are categorized under the panethnic label “Latino” (Kao and Thompson 2003).

From academic texts to newspaper articles, scholars and writers have contended with identity-based and cultural explanations for the observed achievement gap among African American, Latino, and white students (Datnow and Cooper 1997; Ford and Harris 1992; Jencks and Phillips 1998; Lewin 2000). One of the most popular cultural explanations that has been offered is the resistance-to-acting-white thesis. With the 1986 publication of their often-cited and well-received article, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) defined the contours of a continuous debate. Specifically, they discussed how African American students residing in an impoverished neighborhood in Washington, DC, came to define achievement-oriented behaviors and attitudes as acting white and were therefore resistant to studying hard and getting good grades. Fordham and Ogbu concluded that many African American students have come to perceive high academic achievement as the territory of white students, since whites are believed to be the primary beneficiaries of opportunity in U.S. society. Hence African American students, they argued, perceive academic excellence as a form of whiteness.

The acting-white thesis exemplifies a certain component of Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory, one of the most dominant theoretical frameworks in the race, culture, and achievement literature explaining why "involuntary" or native minority students perform less well in school than do "voluntary" or immigrant minority students. Briefly, Ogbu (1978, 1988, 1991; see also Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu and Simons 1998) posited that the descendants of persons who were *involuntarily* brought to the United States via slavery, conquest, or colonization react negatively to continual experiences with subjugation, racism, and discrimination. And as a form of collective resistance, these descendants reject behaviors that are considered to be the province of the dominant white middle class. Consequently, they develop a cultural identity that departs from that of middle-class whites, which these students view as threatening to their minority identity and group solidarity (Ogbu 1991:16, 2004:5).<sup>1</sup>

The prevalent narratives about native

minorities' school achievement generally tend to differ from those of some immigrant minority youths, who are more often characterized as assimilative and willing to subscribe to the cultural codes of academic success (Gibson 1988; Ogbu and Simons 1998; Waters 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Some researchers, however, have been careful to explode the "model minority" myth and to note the diversity in educational experiences and ethnic orientations within immigrant minority groups (Lee 1996). For example, segmented assimilation theorists have argued that depending on contextual and social factors, immigrant minority youths can pursue a mobility trajectory by emulating middle-class white society (acculturation), availing themselves of resources in a productive ethnic enclave, or undermining their attainment by adopting the adversarial stance of a downwardly mobile native minority culture (Portes and Zhou 1993). Nonetheless, the spectrum of cultural orientation and identity, as it pertains to school achievement, is seemingly much wider and more diverse for immigrant students than for native minority students.

When researchers apply binary markers to ethnic and racial minority students—for example, native minority versus immigrant minority, oppositional minority versus model minority, acting black versus acting white—their explanations frequently obscure the *heterogeneous* cultural and educational experiences of students within various ethnoracial groups. While psychologists have conceptualized and observed multiple dimensions in the identities of African Americans (Phinney and Devich-Navarro 1997; Sellers et al. 1998), many sociological studies have tended to mask the diversity in academic experiences and cultural approaches, especially when they did not analyze the behavioral variations *within* these groups.

This article reports on an investigation of the following questions: (1) How do low-income African American and Latino youths negotiate the boundaries between school and peer-group contexts? (2) Do variable forms of negotiation exist? (3) If so, what are they, and how do they manifest? In addressing these questions, I also posit two arguments that directly

challenge the acting-white thesis: First, black and Latino students' academic, cultural, psychological, and social experiences are *heterogeneous*.<sup>2</sup> That is, multiple frames of ethnoracial identity and cultural orientation exist among African American and Latino students that supplant either purely assimilative or assimilitative versus oppositional stances in society. Relying on a multidimensional perspective of racial identity, I show how three groups of black and Latino students in a similar economic position differ in their interpretations of how race and culture affect their day-to-day academic and personal lives. These students differ in their racial and ethnic ideology and in their cultural orientations. Here, ideology concerns the individuals' beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about how they feel group members should act, which would include students' perspectives about what it means to act white or act black or "act Spanish"—the phrase invoked by Latino students in this study (Sellers et al. 1997).<sup>3</sup>

Some students may filter most of their interactions with whites and others outside their group through the lens of their racial and ethnic identities, while others may be less apt to invoke race and ethnicity and to view experiences through other social identities (O'Connor 1999). In an article published after his death, Ogbu (2004:28) conceded a similar point when he discussed five conceptual categories of black Americans and claimed that "only one of the five categories . . . among both adults and students is explicitly opposed to adopting white attitudes, behaviors and speech"; he referred to this group as the resisters.<sup>4</sup> This article, in comparison, presents actual empirical evidence of the coexistence of students who share the same social-class backgrounds but who maintain different racial and ethnic ideologies and school behaviors.

Second, this article returns to the sociological signification of phenomena, such as (resistance to) acting white, and highlights how student agents respond to the social boundaries that collective identities engender and that status hierarchies in schools produce. Generally, studies using qualitative methods have focused more on either confirming or disconfirming that acting white pertains to academic achievement or on providing a list that enumerates the concept's various meanings (Bergin and Cooks

2002; Horvat and Lewis 2003; Neal-Barnett 2001; O'Connor 1997; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). As a result, black and Latino students' practices have been detached from their structural, political, and cultural significances or, rather, the interracial and intraracial group dynamics that are played out for students inside the school and within peer groups. The analyses presented here interrogate the sociological meaning behind four specific dimensions of (resistance to) acting white: (1) language and speech codes; (2) racial and ethnic in-group/out-group signifiers centered on cultural style via dress, music, interaction, and tastes; (3) the meanings of group solidarity symbolized by the racial composition of students' friendship and social networks at school; and (4) interracial dynamics about the superiority of whites and the subordination of racial and ethnic minority groups. The findings highlight the complexity of the (resistance to) acting-white phenomenon and shift the focus away from an overly simplistic equivalence of this phenomenon with the rejection of academic excellence.

Finally, the findings indicate that the students who strike the best academic and social balance are those whom I refer to as "cultural straddlers." Straddlers understand the functions of both dominant and nondominant cultural capital (Carter 2003) and value and embrace skills to participate in multiple cultural environments, including mainstream society, their school environments, and their respective ethnoracial communities. While straddlers share cultural practices and expressions with other members of their social groups, they traverse the boundaries across groups and environments more successfully. The straddler concept illuminates another place on the spectrum of identity and cultural presentations for African American and other ethnic minority youths that splinters the acculturative/oppositional binary divide.

## **SOCIAL BOUNDARIES, IDEOLOGIES, AND IDENTITY**

Scholars and researchers continue to write about acting white on the basis of meanings

in the literature that are regarded as acceptable by the research community (etic), whether or not these meanings actually capture and explore the constructed accounts, descriptions, and interpretations of black and Latino youths themselves (emic). Some have linked resistance to acting white to black and Latino students' teasing their coethnic peers for being smart (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; McWhorter 2001); others have conflated acting white with low popularity among same-race peers when black and Latino students maintain high grade point averages (GPAs; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga 2002; Fryer and Torrelli 2005); and others have associated it with racializing certain cultural forms, such as tastes in dress and music and linguistic codes (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Neal-Barnett 2001). Meanwhile, in continuing to use narrow measures of the concept, large-scale survey analyses produce contrasting, mixed, or ambiguous results about the existence of oppositional culture and the acting-white effect as causes of black and Latino students' relatively lower achievement than Asian and white students' (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Farkas et al. 2002; Fryer and Torelli 2005; Massey et al. 2003).

Given the nature of U.S. racial history, it should come as no surprise that behaviors pertaining to acting white are examples of boundary making and the maintenance of particular ethnospecific styles and tastes. An important area of sociological research, boundary making constitutes the production and maintenance of cultural identities among members of a racial group (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Social psychologists working on group categorization and identification have examined the in-group/out-group boundaries that individuals draw to differentiate themselves from each other by drawing on criteria for community and a sense of shared belonging within the particular subgroup (Jenkins 1996; Tajfel 1982). Social groups develop both tangible and symbolic social boundaries, and these social boundaries, as Barth (1969) described, entail criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion. On the one hand, social boundaries may serve positive functions for racial and ethnic

students, since these students use different cultural resources instrumentally to gain acceptance as "authentic" (or real) members of a social group, to foster social solidarity, or to provide themselves with alternative means to judge their self-worth and to maintain high self-esteem (Crocker and Major 1989). On the other hand, social boundaries, as they interact with specific school practices, may correspond to either how welcomed or included students feel in their schools. For example, some black and Latino students may believe their teachers' evaluations of them are based on the degree to which they embrace particular dominant or "white" cultural codes that these students perceive as "other" and not "them."

The school's cultural environment can engender an assimilationist ideology, which presupposes that the proper ends in education will have been achieved when minority groups can no longer be differentiated from the white majority in terms of education, economic status, or access to social institutions and their benefits and when nonwhite students act, speak, and behave as much as possible like the white middle class (Rist 1977; Sager and Schofield 1984). In the meantime, many black, Latino, and other nonwhite students may not view their cultural codes as incongruent with academic achievement or see whites as the social group to emulate fully (Deyhle 1995). On the surface, this last point appears to converge with Ogbu's thesis about an oppositional cultural identity among select racial and ethnic minority groups; it differs substantively, however, since I argue that blacks, Latinos, and other subordinated groups can both believe and engage in education fully and still critique the norms of assimilation that exist in most schools (cf. Gurin and Epps 1975).

Nonetheless, many black and Latino students also differ in how they either critique or approach the norms of conformity pertaining to certain cultural codes. Having developed a multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI), Sellers et al. (1998) argued that members of any group will vary in their beliefs—or ideology—about how other group members should act or behave when it comes to race and culture.<sup>5</sup> In a systematic analysis

of interviews with 68 low-income African American and Latino youths who were in middle school, high school, or college or had dropped out of school and who lived in New York, I found significant variation in the ideological dimension of the students' racial and ethnic identities as they discussed their racial and ethnic statuses in society and the cultural differences among students at school. Although I found that all the youths maintained self-concepts in which their racial or ethnic identity was a central component, three types of ideological profiles emerged. I refer to these types as the cultural mainstreamers, the noncompliant believers, and the cultural straddlers. The descriptions of these ideal types capture the differences in the sociocultural and ideological approaches discussed by others who have considered the phenomena of assimilation, opposition and resistance, and some form of accommodation without assimilation (Darder 1991; Dawson 2001; Gibson 1988; Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994). Each group differs in how its members approach and handle "white" cultural, economic, and political dominance.

*Cultural mainstreamers* emphasize both the similarities between racial and ethnic minority groups and whites and the incorporation of the former into the opportunity structure. The students in my study were characterized as cultural mainstreamers if they generally expected group members to act according to traditional assimilationist values, which call for minority groups to accommodate to and ultimately be absorbed into American schools, workplaces, and communities (Gordon 1964). Cultural mainstreamers accept the ideology that members of a non-dominant group should be culturally, socially, economically, and politically assimilated, yet they can be racially and ethnically aware.

In contrast, *noncompliant believers* subscribe to a dominant achievement ideology and are even aware of the cultural norms prescribed for academic, social, and economic success. However, they favor their own cultural presentations (for example, "black" or "Puerto Rican") and exert little effort to adapt to the cultural prescriptions of the school and white society. In short, while they believe in the worth of education, they are not neces-

sarily high achievers. Generally, their school performances range from average to low. Ideologically, the noncompliant believers are critical of the systemic inequalities that they perceive the school to uphold; yet, the term *noncompliant* does not necessarily signify either an antischool mentality or distaste for high achievement, which most oppositional culture frameworks suggest. Culturally, the noncompliant believers choose to embrace their own class and ethnospecific styles, tastes, and codes and opt not to conform to the mainstream (marked as "white") and middle-class ways of being.

The *cultural straddlers* bridge the gap between the cultural mainstreamers and the noncompliant believers. They are obviously strategic navigators, ranging from students who "play the game" and embrace the cultural codes of both school and home community to those who vocally criticize the schools' ideology while still achieving well academically. The straddler concept corresponds, to a degree, with the bicultural perspective that social psychologists in the United States have described (LaFramboise, Coleman, and Gerton 1993; Phinney and Devich-Navarro 1997)—that is, viewing oneself as both an ethnic or racial minority and an American. In fact, Phinney and Devich-Navarro presented a multidimensional (versus linear) view of biculturalism and found evidence that African and Mexican American students vary in the extent to which they identify with their ethnic and national heritages. Some are "blended biculturals" and identify with a combination of both cultures, others are "alternating biculturals" and move back and forth between their two cultural worlds, and still others are "separate" in their identity and are embedded primarily within their ethnoracial culture.

The focus on the straddlers in this article is less on the psychological (i.e., identity) and more on the *behavioral* differences among the three groups that I discuss, however. The results presented here are more about how they negotiate their specific ethnic peer cultures, school environments inscribed with white middle-class cultural codes, and mainstream U.S. society that is tacitly understood to be controlled by middle-class whites. I

describe them as straddlers instead of bicultural because they, like most of us, participate in myriad cultural environments—family, peer groups, ethnic community, neighborhoods, school, interracial settings, the workplace, and even ideological domains<sup>6</sup>—that require different types of cultural competencies and currencies.

Adolescent cultural straddlers simultaneously sustain a strong racial or ethnic identity and achieve academically by effectively managing their academic success among their peers (cf. Horvat and Lewis 2003). Some cultural straddlers may resemble Gibson's (1988) Punjabi Indian students, who viewed the acquisition of skills in the majority-group language and culture as "additive" and thus avoided rejecting their own identity and culture, instead embracing a form of biculturalism that led to their successful participation in both cultures. Although the cultural straddlers I interviewed sought successful participation in multiple cultural environments, unlike Gibson's students, they did not avoid equating certain behaviors with acting white. Other cultural straddlers resemble the participants in Akom's (2003) study who were high achievers and critical of systemic inequalities in schools and society, although the youths in my study did not necessarily maintain racial and ethnic ideologies that were linked to a specific political, cultural, and religious organization like the Nation of Islam.

In what follows, I present an analysis of these three types of students who vary in their racial and ethnic ideologies, school performances, and aspirations and show how they express and deal differently with the acting-white phenomenon. First, I present results that examine the students' educational attitudes and self-reported school performances. These results confirm prior findings that, overall, African American and Latino students embrace dominant or mainstream beliefs about the value of education. Using Mickelson's (1990) attitude-achievement paradox scale, it also shows that the divergence in black and Latino students' "abstract" (or normative) and "concrete" (or cognitive) educational beliefs is further associated with whether a student is a cultural mainstreamer, a cultural straddler, or a non-

compliant believer. Second, I show how these three groups differentially discuss and treat the avoidance-of-acting-white phenomenon and reveal that this social dynamic has little to do with the students' equating academic excellence with whiteness and more to do with the students' views about group dynamics and social boundaries among the races at school.

## METHODS

This study's findings draw extensively on a mixed-methods approach, both survey and interview data collected from a sample of 68 low-income, native-born African American and Latino male and female youths, ranging in age from 13 to 20. The 26 Latinos (38 percent of the 68 participants) were primarily first- and second-generation Puerto Rican and Dominican youths, while the ancestral roots of the 42 African Americans (62 percent of the participants) stretched mainly from the South to New York. Slightly more than half the participants (56%) were female, and 69% were younger than age 18. The participants, along with other members of their families, were participants in a larger quasi-experimental longitudinal and separately funded study of 317 low-income African American and Latino families from different neighborhoods in Yonkers, New York. I contacted and sampled all the youths who had participated in the larger study and who lived in one of two large low-income housing complexes that were located in two different areas of the city—one, a high-minority and high-poverty area, and the other, a predominantly white and middle-income area.<sup>7</sup> All the participants' families were poor and qualified for government-subsidized housing. At least 90 percent of them were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children from 1994 to 1998. Over half lived in homes with an annual household income of less than \$10,000, and 71 percent lived in single female-headed households.

Yonkers, New York, located north of New York City, is the largest city in mostly suburban Westchester County (population 189,000 in 1990). Racially diverse and highly segregated, Yonkers has a public school system that faced

a major challenge in 1980. The U.S. Department of Justice, the federal Office for Civil Rights, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People accused city officials and the Board of Education of intentionally maintaining racially segregated schools. In May 1986, Judge Leonard Sand, of the federal appeals court, ordered the school district, found guilty as charged, to develop a plan that would ameliorate the problem of school segregation. The plan that the Yonkers Board of Education created sought to bring about voluntary school desegregation through choice, centered on magnet schools and a series of students' voluntary transfers to other schools. School officials instructed black, Hispanic, and white students to board school buses and crisscross the city to attend newly created magnet schools. In this sample, 72 percent of the participants attended one of the public, magnet middle or high schools in the restructured Yonkers school district. Fifteen percent of the participants had already obtained either a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED), 8 percent had some college experience, and 13 percent were high school dropouts (see Table 1).

More than 80 percent of those who lived in the housing developments and whom I contacted responded affirmatively and participated in the study. I interviewed these youths over a 10-month period from November

1997 to August 1998. On average, the individual interviews lasted about 90 minutes and consisted of two parts: a survey comprised of widely used and reliable measures and a semistructured, open-ended interview protocol. The survey included measures of attitudes and beliefs about the connections among education, perceptions of discrimination, life outcomes, and career mobility. I used Mickelson's (1990) "abstract" and "concrete" educational attitude measures to ascertain differences in views toward education and the opportunity structure. The abstract educational attitude scale measures adherence to the principle of schooling as a vehicle for success and economic mobility for young Hispanic and black people. It consists of seven items with such questions as "Young Black [Hispanic] people like me have a chance of making it if we do well in school" and "Education really pays off in the future for young Black [Hispanic] people like me." This scale's scores range from a low of 1 (very pessimistic) to a high of 5 (very optimistic), indicating agreement with the dominant achievement ideology.<sup>8</sup>

The concrete educational attitude scale is rooted in students' beliefs about their family members' experiences and when educational credentials may not have been fairly rewarded by the opportunity structure. Scale scores range from a low of 1 (very strong pessimism)

**Table 1. School Enrollment, Performance, and Aspirations (N = 68)**

Parameter	Percentage
Enrolled in School	72
Obtained a High School Diploma or GED	15
Had Some College Experience	8
Dropped Out of High School, no GED	13
Earned Mainly B or Higher Grades <sup>a</sup>	49
Enrolled in Academic/College Preparatory Courses <sup>a</sup>	31
Enrolled in Special Education Classes <sup>a</sup>	16
Aspired to Attend College and/or Graduate School	84
Aspired to Hold Professional/Managerial Jobs <sup>b</sup>	60

<sup>a</sup> Based only on those who were currently enrolled in middle and high school (N = 49)

<sup>b</sup> Based on the 1980 National Opinion Research Council occupational codes.

to a high of 5 (very strong optimism). The statements to which the students responded included "My parents face barriers to job success, despite their belief in a good education"; "People in my family have not been treated fairly at work, no matter how much education they possess"; "People like me are not paid or promoted based on education"; and "Studying in school rarely pays off later with good jobs."<sup>9</sup> On this 5-item scale, each statement would yield an agreement score of 1 to 2 (strong pessimism), a mixed-views score of 3 to 4, and a disagreement score of 4 to 5 (very strong optimism). While the small sample precluded any sophisticated statistical techniques, the analyses I used were sufficient to discern any meaningful patterns and to take the reader beyond either an anecdotal or individual case-study approach.

In the semistructured, open-ended interviews, I inquired about the participants' beliefs about opportunity, educational and career aspirations, school performance, delinquent behaviors, job attainment, gender roles, and "appropriate" ethnic or cultural behavior among their peers and family (e.g., speech, dress, demeanor, and actions), and racial ideology. Data gathered from three single-sex group interviews, which averaged about two hours, with the same participants were used to complement and triangulate the data gathered in the individual interviews and surveys. Similarly, these semistructured group interviews explored the meaning behind beliefs, attitudes, and actions that deal with racial and ethnic identity, as well as the participants' beliefs about the opportunity structure, race relations, and means to success and achievement in this society. This approach allowed opinions and beliefs to "volley" back and forth through the group. All the individual and group interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded.

To ascertain the participants' racial or ethnic ideology, I asked each one the following questions: (1) "In your family, are there expectations related to your [racial or ethnic] background, to how you should act? (2) What about among your friends? (3) How do you feel about these rules? What are your feelings about the ways you're "supposed" to behave as a [member of racial or ethnic

group]?" (4) What are your feelings about how you're "supposed" to behave as a (racial/ethnic identity)? (5) How much say or power do you think black [Spanish or Latino] people have in American life and politics? (6) Why do you say that? and (7) For you personally, do you think that your chances in life depend more on what happens to black [Spanish or Latino] people as a group, or does it depend more on what you yourself do?

Each student was coded as a cultural mainstreamer, a cultural straddler, or a noncompliant believer on the basis of how he or she responded to these questions, specifically how the student felt in-group members should behave regarding language, dress, friendships, political attitudes, and so forth. Although they may have commented on and recognized the degree of social inequality in U.S. society, those who maintained an assimilationist perspective on how to incorporate themselves in school and beyond were coded as cultural mainstreamers; 5 of the 68 students fell into this category. Those who openly criticized systemic inequalities and described how they strategically moved between the mainstream worlds of school and work and their peers drawing on multiple cultural codes were characterized as cultural straddlers; 21 students met these criteria. Finally, those who criticized systemic inequalities and made explicit comments about maintaining their own specific ethnoracial or cultural styles and lambasted other same-race or co-ethnic peers for choosing to emulate whites were coded as noncompliant believers; 38 students fell into this category.

In terms of academic achievement, I divided the students into two categories on the basis of their self-reported GPAs. Of the 49 students who were still in secondary school (either junior high school or high school), approximately 20 percent were categorized as high achieving; these students had achieved at least one standard deviation above the GPA of the entire sample. The remaining students were categorized as "lower" achievers. I use *lower* instead of *low* to capture the idea that this group performed less well than the high achievers, but not at the expense of characterizing the average students (included in this group) as low achievers.

Using a phenomenological inquiry that allowed the students to reveal how they “make sense” of the world, given present and past social experiences (McCracken 1988; Patton 1990), I decided early in the research to take a more inductive approach and to allow the meanings behind resistance to acting white to be revealed. In the process, I learned that this concept did not play a central role in the common, everyday interactions of a significant percentage of the participants. While half the youths made explicit references to the idea, others did not invoke the notion but, rather, negotiated how they could actively demonstrate their “blackness” and “Spanishness.” At times, the term *acting white* arose spontaneously. For example, during an all-female group interview, one teenager labeled her younger sister as acting white in front of me because of how she talked. In that exchange between Joyelle, her sister Janora, and me, there was an assumption that since I was of their ethnic background, I would understand naturally how Janora “talked white” by simply listening to her speak.<sup>10</sup>

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

## FINDINGS

### ***Beliefs About Education and Achievement***

As in prior studies (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997; Solorzano 1992), the findings confirm that this group of low-income black and Latino youths maintained high aspirations and subscribed to the dominant ideology about the value of education. Using Mickelson’s 7-item scale of abstract educational attitudes (or dominant achievement ideology), ranging from a low of 1 (very strong pessimism) to a high of 5 (very strong optimism), I found a mean linear scale score of 4.3, which supports the conclusion that the participants maintained the belief that education is critical to social mobility. That is 97 percent of the students agreed that high achievement in school pays off in the future for young black and Hispanic youths, and 94 percent believed that education is a practical means to success. Furthermore, being poor and African American or Latino did not limit the possibilities of their career choices, although their actual breadth and knowledge of career choices were limited. Although they hailed from families with extremely limited means, 84 percent of these youths wanted to attend college or a higher level of school, and 60 percent of them aspired to hold professional and managerial jobs, with physician, lawyer, and businessperson the top three career preferences (see Table 1).

How did the students compare across the three racial ideological groups? Table 2 shows no significant statistical differences among the three groups in their normative beliefs about education. In general, all the students upheld the normative belief that education is a means to social and economic mobility. However, the cultural mainstreamers and cultural straddlers were significantly more optimistic than were the noncompliant believers about the actual impact of education, given their social circumstances—namely, that once they were educated, discrimination would not impede their full economic attainment. As Table 2 reveals, in terms of concrete attitudes, the cultural mainstreamers and strad-

dlers had average scores of 3.36 and 3.10, respectively, and, as I predicted, the noncompliant believers were the most pessimistic, with a score of 2.76. In addition, the cultural straddlers had the smallest gap between their views about education's ideals and their views about how education influences access to opportunity, given one's race, ethnicity, and class-background. In other words, their concrete and abstract attitudes deviated, on average, by fewer points than did those of the cultural mainstreamers and the noncompliant believers, which implies that the cultural straddlers' beliefs converged more in terms of their perceptions of the ideal and real effects of education.

Furthermore, these concrete-attitude scores correspond significantly to the mean GPAs provided by the students who were in middle or high school at the time of the interviews. Table 2 shows that the cultural mainstreamers had GPAs of about 90 (out of a possible 100), while the cultural straddlers had GPAs of 80, and the noncompliant believers had GPAs of 73.

In addition, the majority of the participants aspired to attend college: all 5 cultural mainstreamers, 21 out of 25 cultural straddlers, and 31 out of 38 noncompliant believers. Aspirations are not equivalent to expectations, however. Aspirations signify what a student dreams of or envisions, given ideal conditions, whereas expectations take into account a student's reality—his or her actual material, familial, and/or academic circumstances—which may or may not support the student's aspirations. Thus, it is not uncommon for the proportion of students who expect to attend college to be lower than the proportion of those who aspire to attend. Whereas all 5 cultural mainstreamers and three-quarters of the cultural straddlers (18 of 25) expected to attend college, less than half the noncompliant believers (17 of 38) did.

So what does all this mean? As in Mickelson's (1990) study, I found a positive association between the students' concrete attitudes and their GPAs. In addition, the students' scores on the concrete scale support the finding that racial and ethnic minority students do not fully subscribe to the myth that schooling and education are the great

equalizers. Despite their rankings, all three groups had mixed feelings about the benefits of education, especially for people from racial and ethnic minorities. It should come as no surprise that these students doubted that educational systems and job markets work for them. In fact, their responses resonate with researchers' findings that even middle- and upper-middle-class African Americans, in spite of their economic successes, maintain critical political views of the opportunity structure in U.S. society because of experiences with racial discrimination and prejudice (Collins 1989; Feagin 1991; Hochschild 1995). But their critical views do not deter them from their desire for upward mobility.

Similarly, the mixed concrete views of the cultural mainstreamers and the cultural straddlers in the study did not deter them from doing well in school or from intending to go to college. Although these students acknowledged the necessity of academic achievement for occupational success, many displayed a healthy disrespect for the romantic tenets of achievement ideology. That is, while the mantra that education and effort lead to success was the acceptable belief, they also understood that it does not hold equally true for all social groups. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of the students believed that despite the value of education, their families faced many obstacles to job success.

The literature on the attitude-achievement paradox suggests that black students are more likely to maintain significant differences in concrete attitudes and educational practices than are whites. This analysis of low-income black and Latino students revealed a more specific pattern linked to racial and ethnic ideology, concrete attitudes, and achievement. In addition, it shows that even high-achieving African American and Latino students may maintain somewhat mixed or pessimistic views of the real effects of education. Yet if the cultural mainstreamers and the cultural straddlers are more inclined to attain educational success, then the noncompliant believers become the critical academic cases. And the question remains, How are racial, ethnic, and cultural meanings associated with their attitudes and behaviors? In the next section, I show that although the cultural main-

**Table 2. Mean Abstract and Concrete Educational Attitudes and GPAs, by Racial Ideological Orientation (1 = very strong pessimism to 5 = very strong optimism)**

Group	Mean Abstract Attitude Score	Overall Assessment	Mean Concrete Attitude Score	Overall Assessment	Mean GPA <sup>a</sup>	Percentage Aspiring to Attend College	Percentage Expected to Attend College
Cultural Mainstreamers ( <i>n</i> = 5)	4.63	Optimistic	3.36	Mixed	90 <sup>b</sup>	100	100
Cultural Straddlers ( <i>n</i> = 25)	4.17	Optimistic	3.10	Mixed	80	84	89
Noncompliant ( <i>n</i> = 38)	4.33	Optimistic	2.75 <sup>c</sup>	Mixed	73	82	55 <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> GPAs are based only on the number of those in secondary school at the time of the interviews.

<sup>b</sup> Significant mean differences among all three groups ( $p = .00$ ).

<sup>c</sup> Marginally significant mean group differences between the noncompliant believers and the other two groups— $p < .10$ .

<sup>d</sup> Significant mean group differences between the noncompliant believers and the other two groups.

streamers, the cultural straddlers, and the noncompliant believers shared some cultural understandings of the meanings of acting white, their responses and acceptance of certain cultural practices differed.

### **The Sociology of (Resistance to) Acting White**

In the analyses, I counted 51 explicit references to the phenomenon of (resistance to) acting white across 37 interviews. Either these references arose spontaneously, or the students explained in detail when I probed after their implicit references to it. Generally, all three groups agreed on what acting white meant, but they differed in how they responded to or embraced these behaviors. Four main dimensions of acting white emerged: (1) collective and individual signifiers in language and speech codes; (2) racial and ethnic in-group/out-group signifiers centered on cultural style via dress, music, interaction, and tastes; (3) the meanings of group solidarity symbolized by the racial composition of students' friendship and social networks at school; and (4) interracial power dynamics of superiority and subordination.

The most frequent reference to acting white pertained to language and speech styles. Peers teased co-ethnic or same-race peers for how they spoke if they perceived the latter as emulating whites, rather than speaking black slang, a commonly shared communication style among these urban minority youths (Labov 1972; Morgan 2002), both black and Latino. Fourteen-year-old Samurai, a noncompliant believer, demonstrated for me just what talking white meant:

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

out like every year that person, every week different words come out.

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

Samurai: No.

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

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

Samurai, a noncompliant believer who did not link whiteness to achievement and aspirations, chose to speak what he dubbed as "black talk." From my interactions with him, it was clear, however, that he was aware of the distinctions between how he spoke and the principles of Standard English, as was evident by the sudden change of subject-verb agreement in his elaboration of these differences. When either a same-race or co-ethnic peer avoided using an established local lexicon, which, according to Samurai, could include a compilation of easily made-up and variable words and phrases that defied the grammatical structures of Standard English, and spoke only in Standard English in a certain style that the students associated with either whites or white youth culture, they were acting white. Samurai referred to peers like 15-year-old Adrienne, a cultural mainstreamer, who revealed that her schoolmates' called her "white girl:"

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

Adrienne told me that she had a tough time among her peers because she rejected many of their speech codes and other cultural styles. Refusing to uphold some of her peers' prescriptions of blackness, she relegated some of her schoolmates' speech to ignorance and stupidity. Adrienne also believed that the use of Standard English was an indicator of intelligence, unlike Ebonics or black youth slang, which she spoke about in a desultory tone. When I invited Adrienne to a group interview with other neighborhood girls in the study a few days later, she declined because she did not get along with them. Later, the other girls told me that they believed Adrienne behaved like an outsider, acting as if she "were different and better than [they]." This instance illuminates the in-group/out-group dynamics that the students perpetuated through the construction of stylistic boundaries. It also highlights how students used these ethnospecific cultural resources to signify a peer's authenticity as a racial group member in good standing (Carter 2003).

Recognizing the delicate balances of power, identity, and the signifiers of "authentic" group membership, some students switched between speech codes in different social contexts. Having recently entered the workforce, Moesha Latimore, a 19-year-old recent high school graduate, like Adrienne, thought that speaking Standard English signaled intelligence. But unlike Adrienne, who was a cultural mainstreamer, Moesha was a cultural straddler, and she contested any stereotypical associations of black vernacular with ignorance:

See I know people, who can act ignorant as anything, but they are also smart, and they can also talk in an intelligent way. It's just that when you talk with your friends, you talk in a certain way, or when you're at work or wherever you're at, you have to act intelligently. "We're [African Americans] not ignorant; there are just certain ways that we talk to each other. It might not seem right, but that doesn't mean we're dumb."

Moesha had accepted the idea that to be taken seriously academically and professionally, she needed to speak Standard English. At the same time, she valued the speech codes

that she shared with black friends and family members, which for her fostered community and group cohesion. Thus, she chose to draw on her familiarity with black speech codes to signify her racial authenticity—currency that allowed her comfortably to invoke the collective "we" in her characterization of the African American community.

Dress styles and tastes, another site of adolescent "coolness" (Danesi 1994) and ethnoracial and cultural boundary making, characterize the second most frequent reference to acting white (mentioned 31 percent of the time). Having forged a distinction among their white peers, other racial and ethnic groups, and themselves, these students dressed in a variety of clothing fashions or listened to different genres of music, in addition to creating their own speech codes, to preserve their sense of cultural uniqueness. Again, I found that if a student crossed the racial or ethnic peer group's dress boundary, then he or she, like Rosaria, an 18-year-old Dominican American cultural mainstreamer, was teased for acting white:

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

Prudence: How do they want you to dress?

Rosaria: I guess like they do.

Prudence: What's that, the hip-hop style?

Rosaria: Yeah, with the baggy pants and stuff.

Prudence: How do they want you to talk?

Rosaria: That's another thing. Like they say you talk . . . you talk . . . cause I speak intelligently, they want to say that I talk white. I speak intelligently. It's not Spanish, it's not black, it's not white. No one has claim on who can talk intelligently. My friend is always saying that to me.

Prudence: Well, who are the kids who tend to have tastes in clothes and music more like you?

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

Prudence: Why? Because it makes you . . .

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

Rosaria's last comments proved to be a poignant moment as I gathered from her tone and demeanor that she wanted to answer the question about which students tended to have tastes in clothes and music like hers. Yet, she felt a need to preface her comments about why the question would make her feel uncomfortable because she feared how others and I would perceive them. A self-conscious Rosaria felt that her answer might confirm her Dominican and black friends' beliefs about her acting white. Although she liked to dress preppy and listened to pop singer Michael Bolton, she felt strongly that she had the liberty as a Dominican American to maintain these tastes as much as some of her co-ethnic friends valued hip-hop music and clothing styles. Students like Rosaria, who held an ascribed minority identity but who did not conform to their co-ethnic peers' cultural styles, threatened the already-tenuous reins that their Dominican and black peers held over this youthful domain of status and identity. Consequently, Rosaria risked being charged that she acted white.

Yet Rosaria wanted to avoid being perceived as less ethnic than her peers. Thus, she challenged the racial and ethnic dress code, just as Adrienne challenged the coding of the usage of Standard English. Speaking Standard English and dressing in a preppy style had to be devoid of any racial and ethnic proprietorship. That way, if either Adrienne or Rosaria chose to embrace Standard English, not ethnic youth slang, or even certain styles of dress, in their minds they would still be black and Latina (or "Spanish"), respectively. This strategy resembles the "racelessness" described by Fordham's (1988) interviewees, who tended to disassociate themselves from their ethnic group. However, unlike Fordham's interviewees, Adrienne and Rosaria identified strongly as African American and Dominican, respectively, and asserted their pride in their heritages, as was evident in their "very proud" responses to the survey questions about their racial and ethnic heritages.

While cultural mainstreamers like Rosaria confronted the boundaries of alleged "black," "Spanish" and "white"<sup>11</sup> cultural practices through their peers' evaluations of speech and dress styles, the noncompliant believers perceived that they faced the evaluations of teachers, the cultural gatekeepers of school, who policed the boundaries of either appropriate or respectable dress. One student who did not share Rosaria's more preppy and standard tastes explicitly discussed his thoughts about how a teacher perceived him as a drug dealer because of his hip-hop" or "black" dress style:

Alberto: Toward the end of the year [the teacher] asked me . . . [s]o he would characterize me because the watch and the clothing that I wore once. He was like that he knew what I did. And I asked him what that was. And he was like that [he] knew . . . and whatever it is that I do leads nowhere in life—that all it does is just catch me a death. He didn't actually say it, but he just gave hints in what he was getting at.

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

Alberto: Yeah.

Prudence: How did you feel about that?

Alberto: Of course, you get insulted.

Prudence: Did you say something back to him?

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

Alberto, aged 17, was a noncompliant believer, yet the product of a Dominican family with two high-achieving sisters, one of whom was a college graduate and the other, Alma (whom I introduce later), was enrolled in a local college and aspired to attend Syracuse University. Yet, he grappled with the idea that his teacher perceived him as a participant in illegal activities. Alberto dressed like a typical urban youth with a taste for hip-

hop music and its attendant dress styles: long gold chains, baggy pants, and a baseball cap cocked to the side. In comparison, John, a 13-year-old African American cultural straddler, a high achiever and a popular school athlete, said that he felt the pressure to negotiate his peers' expectations about his dress, his friendships, and his schooling. As a cultural straddler, John had found a way to maintain his popularity by keeping up with the styles of his black peers, in addition to hanging out with students at school who were perceived to be nerdy and not particularly sociable.<sup>12</sup>

John: You know, being who I am [my school-mates] expect me to wear name-brand stuff . . . hang with such and such people like, you know, they say, like they don't want you to hang with the low-profile people.

Prudence: Who are the low-profile people?

John: The kids that usually do all their school-work, and they don't really go anywhere after school, you know, they just go home and do their homework and stay in the house.

In this section, I have described the two most common references to acting white or to acting black or Spanish that the participants used. These findings confirm what other researchers have documented (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Neal-Barnett 2001), namely, that students explicitly discuss the idea of (resistance to) acting white in terms of linguistic and dress styles. The findings also show that the application of this idea transcends a student's achievement level—that is, whether the student is a high achiever or a low achiever. In addition, the findings highlight the social significance of the processes of (resistance to) acting white, how students create in-group/out-group stylistic boundaries to maintain ethnospecific identities. Students' respect for the value of education is not at stake, however. Rather, what is at stake is how students use the symbols and meanings they attach to different racial, ethnic, and cultural identities as measures of inclusion and exclusion. In the next section, extrapolating from the students' comments, I discuss how the institutional practice of tracking fueled the dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and boundary making as the students

evaluated the racial and ethnic makeup of their peers' social networks at school. Consequently, students in high tracks who had primarily white friends were viewed as acting white.

### ***Peer Ties and the Implications of Tracking***

A third set of findings reveal how the students used acting white to describe co-ethnics whose primary social interaction at school was with whites. Twelve percent of the references to acting white referred to primary social interactions with whites. Moreover, strong, primary peer ties with white students in school are likely to allow more exposure to cultural attributes described as acting white and thus suggest reasons why minority high achievers could be more likely described as acting white.

In multiracial schools, few African American and Latino students are placed in higher ability-grouped classes (Hallinan and Sorensen 1983; Oakes 1985). If white students occupy the top of the educational achievement hierarchy in racially integrated schools, then numerous African American and Latino students may perceive that section as the "white" niche and may even want to avoid it. As a result, the token few who are given the opportunity to enroll in these classes may have the reservations that 13-year-old Jeremy, one of the cultural straddlers, had. Jeremy dreaded entering the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, which included advanced courses that may be eligible for college credit, because his mostly black friends would be attending the "regular" high school. Although he protested, his mother insisted that he attend the school with the IB program the following year.

In their predominantly white, high-track classrooms, the highest achievers are more likely to have contact with the styles and behaviors that were perceived as white (dress styles, musical tastes, linguistic forms, and types of social interaction), since students tend to share and transmit various cultural attributes through their associations with one another. Alma, a college sophomore at Manhattan College, contrasted her and her

brother Alberto's school experiences. Alma was both a high achiever and a cultural straddler, while Alberto was an average high school student and a noncompliant believer. Alma explained: "I think that it [the difference] had to do with what classes . . . most of my classes in high school were honors classes, and there was a different crowd there than with those kids who were in more comprehensive classes."

Alma and the other high achievers in the study were significantly more likely to mention that whites were part of their social network. A much higher proportion of the high achievers (55 percent) than of the lower achievers (19 percent) responded that their classes were comprised of either "almost all" or "very many" white students. The lower achievers were more than twice as likely as the high achievers to report that the majority of the students in their classes were black and Latino (see Figure 1). Moreover, the high achievers mentioned more whites as friends than did the lower achievers, probably because of the composition of their classrooms and the ties they made within them. A cultural straddler who had both Dominican and white friends, Alma admitted that she had to negotiate between them in terms of their expectations of her self-presentation:

Alma: I think that my Hispanic friends always want me to speak Spanish and like be proud. My white friends, if they find out that I'm Hispanic, they go "Oh, you're Hispanic. You don't act like it." And I'm like "Oh, how should we act?"

Prudence: What do they say?

Alma: They give me the same stereotypes like "Do you know how to dance?" I'm like but do all Dominicans [know how to dance]?

Alma and several of the other high achievers in the study told me that they generally were either the only or one of a few students of color in their classes. And although Alma admitted that she maintained friendships with non-Hispanic white and Dominican students who were not in her classes, if she had maintained friendships with mainly white students, she would likely be characterized as acting white.<sup>13</sup> Eighteen-year-old Maxwell, a

noncompliant believer, would agree. While discussing racial and ethnic relations in schools with me, Maxwell was apt to sanction peers who refused to hang with their same-race or co-ethnic peers in school:

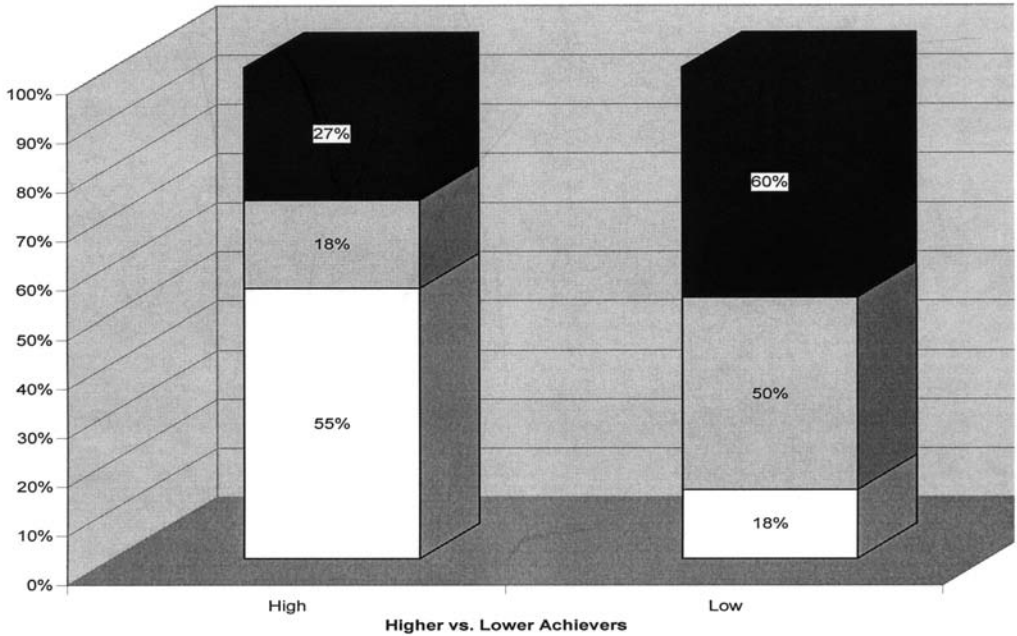
Prudence: Now do any black students try to behave like the white students?

Maxwell: Umhmm [affirmative]. There are some "white boys." They don't want to be with no black kids. They rather hang with some Indians or white boys or Puerto Ricans, kids like that.

Without hesitation, Maxwell explicitly labeled peers who chose not to interact primarily with other black youths as "white boys," when I questioned him about black students who emulated whites. Prior research has shown that epithets, such as "white-washed," have been used to express disapproval of members who appear to have rejected an affiliation with their respective racial or ethnic communities (Benjamin 1991; Landry 1987; Neckerman, Marchena, and Powell 1998). Showing his allegiance to same-race friendships, Maxwell was also critical of his black classmates who chose to socialize primarily with other racial or ethnic groups, indicating that he thought it was essential for his black peers to maintain an association with other black youths.

### **Smart Status and "Looking Down"**

The last set of findings appear to articulate further Maxwell's beliefs about racial loyalty and affiliation and reveal how students linked other aspects of blacks' and Latinos' comparatively lower status than whites in a racially polarized society with meanings of acting white. Approximately 1 in 10 of the students' evocations of the acting-white label dealt with their beliefs and perceptions of when the boundaries of ethnic solidarity were being transgressed, specifically when they felt that co-ethnics acted in ways that either disrespected or denigrated other members of their ethnic or racial group. Some students believed that when co-ethnic or same-race peers touted their smartness at the expense of another or put on "airs," then those students believed that there were better than



**Figure 1. Students' Reports of Classroom Racial/Ethnic Composition**

Note: These data are based on perceptual questions that asked students to report on whether certain racial or ethnic groups comprised either "almost all" or "very many" of their classmates. The reader will note that for the low achievers, the percentages do not sum to 100, which indicates some overlap in their perceptions of black and Latino students in the classroom. By chance, the percentages total 100 for the high achievers. The main intent of this figure is to show the contrasting differences in reports (which most likely correspond to the actual percentages) between the two achievement groups.

other students. In these moments, putting on airs or acting in a superior manner reeked of the same dynamics of racial dominance that these students encountered, and, consequently, they were likely to describe students who behaved this way as acting white. I found that the noncompliant believers were the most sensitive to these dynamics. As Monique, a 13-year-old noncompliant believer, said: "People don't really care [if you are smart]." For Monique, being smart was valued. If students teased smart students in school, however, according to 16-year-old Raul Juarez, another noncompliant believer, they did so because they felt that the smart students "were conceited, that they didn't want to do nothing for nobody."

Some students also expressed disapproval when they perceived that peers transgressed the boundaries of ethnic solidarity, specifical-

ly when co-ethnics acted in a way that denigrated other members of the group. They referred to such actions as "white" and verbally sanctioned others who behaved this way. As I delved into her school history, Vincenzia, a noncompliant believer and 20-year old single mother, admitted to being a high school bully and described some conflict with a schoolmate whom she perceived as acting white. She explicitly discussed her disapproval:

Prudence: Were there any Hispanic and black kids who behaved like the white kids in school?

Vincenzia: It was one Puerto Rican girl.

Prudence: Did you pick on her, too?

Vincenzia: Yeah! Cause if she Puerto Rican, why she trying to act white?

Prudence: What would she do?

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

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

A cultural straddler, 15-year-old Valerie, who was one of the highest achievers in the study and who was enrolled in the gifted program, navigated between the cultural politics of race and her peers at school differently. On the one hand, Valerie shared similar ideas about the meanings of acting white as the other participants across all three groups. On the other hand, in responding to the issue of putting on airs, Valerie attempted to distinguish between behaving naturally and authentically and merely “acting” instrumentally to achieve a popular or higher status: “There are a lot of [black] people who have a lot of white friends who see nothing wrong with it. If you don't try to act like what you are not, if this is the way that you naturally are, then there is no problem with it. But if you are just acting, then it is no good,” In the meantime, Valerie refused to embrace any behaviors that would denigrate her race: “Don't do nothing that would degrade you, and don't do anything that would make people think less of your race, even when they already think less of it.” Valerie moved back and forth between the cultural worlds of her mostly white classmates in the gifted program and her mostly black friends, all of whom were

enrolled elsewhere in less rigorous high school courses, more fluidly. Unlike some of the cultural mainstreamers in the study, however, she never alluded to any instances of being described as acting white. She did not dismiss her co-ethnic peers' cultural forms, nor did she brand them as ignorant, unlike Adrienne, the cultural mainstreamer introduced earlier. Like John, Valerie negotiated between her peers and her work: “I hang out with them [her friends]. I talk to them and converseate [*sic*]. If I didn't like [what they were doing] or I thought that it was a bad idea, I would tell them, ‘No, I'll see you later. That's all right. And they understand.”

Within marginalized communities, distancing oneself from the racial group has historically played itself out along class lines. Middle-class African Americans—a group that has burgeoned since the advent of the civil rights era—have been chided for distancing themselves from their lower-income co-ethnics (Benjamin 1991; Landry 1987). Some writers have suggested that in poor urban schools and neighborhoods, this social and economic mobility has come to be defined as inconsistent with an “authentic” black identity (Fordham 1988). However, as the analyses of the findings of this *within-class* study have shown, the issue of distancing is not just a class phenomenon. “Groupness” for these students who had inherited a legacy of subordinate social and economic statuses also engendered strands of “fictive kinship” (see Fordham 1988). Peers who dared to desecrate these fictive kinship lines by looking down on co-ethnic peers who did not embrace or have the dominant cultural markers of academic success, competence, and strong aptitude were equated with the racial group in U.S. society that has historically appeared to wield power in inequitable ways. In other words, they were acting white.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The dimensions of acting white discussed in this article have some connection to how this select group of low-income black and Latino students approached school and one another. The findings presented here offer four key

insights. The first insight is that black and Latino students who share similar socioeconomic backgrounds vary in their approaches to the (resistance to) acting white phenomenon. The results suggest that defining the avoidance of acting white as an antischool stance and as a central feature of specific minority cultures masks the diversity of ideological and cultural perspectives within these groups.

Those who appeared to traverse best the social boundaries between their ethnic peer cultures and their school environments were the cultural straddlers—students who demonstrated multiple cultural competences and deployed varied cultural tools and resources to strike a more effective balance among the various cultural spheres in which they participated. Rather than succumb to the acculturative/oppositional culture divide, straddlers navigated between dominant and nondominant communities, choosing to be intercultural (for a review of this concept, see Sussman 2000) and accepting and seeking facility with multiple cultural repertoires. Yet as other researchers have shown, the continuum of culture and identity is not necessarily linear or bipolar. Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997), for example, offered a more complex, multidimensional understanding of identity, suggesting that variation exists even among those who have bicultural identities. That is, biculturalism is not just a fixed midway point on the identity spectrum between sole identification with one's ethnic culture or with the larger society. Some students can move back and forth among different cultural environments, strategically alternating and turning cultural codes on and off, while others appear to be more "blended" and identify with their multiple social identities simultaneously.

The second insight is that students who are labeled as acting white vary in achievement levels, ranging from low achievers to high achievers. Of the four participants who declared they had been labeled as acting white, two were either average- or lower-achieving students, and the other two were high achievers. Overall, the black and Latino participants subscribed to the dominant achievement ideology, which supports the findings of other studies that black youths

have more optimistic attitudes than do white students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Portes and Wilson 1976; Solorzano 1992). Contrary to the view that black and Latino students perceive high achievement as acting white and thus reject schooling, the findings suggest that resistance to acting white is mainly about the assertion of particularistic cultural styles that are not perceived to be incongruous with achievement and mobility.

The third insight is that students' contention with acting white has broader sociological meanings than the ones that are generally ascribed to it in the literature on the sociology of education. For those in this study, resistance to acting white connotes more than anything else their refusal to adhere to the cultural default setting in U.S. society that is seen as normative or "natural"—white American middle-class tastes for speech and interaction codes, dress and physical appearance, music, and other art forms. Moreover, the label "acting white" also signifies group members' proclivity to associate mainly with students from outside their ascribed racial or ethnic group. Some of these behaviors included these members' exclusive association with whites. The participants also challenged co-racial or ethnic members who behaved in ways that suggested they were "looking down upon" another member or thinking that they were better." That is, acting white signified a refusal to adhere to social actions that purportedly derogate these students' own racial and ethnic groups.

The final insight is related to the question of what connection these descriptive meanings have to schooling and inequality. The data indicate that high-achieving minority students may be more likely to be exposed to styles that are deemed white. They suggest that if a correlation between high achievement and accusations of acting white exists, it may be mediated by students' placements in school and these placements' influences on the racial and ethnic composition of students' friendship networks (Moody 2002). For instance, Tyson et al. (2005) found that when black students are disproportionately underrepresented in high-track classes, peers outside these classes are more likely to accuse

their co-ethnic peers of acting white, but when black students are proportionately represented across the tracks in schools, evidence of accusations of acting white to high-achieving students is not found. Using the Adolescent Health data, economists have shown that the popularity of black students with GPAs of 3.5 or higher (out of 4.0) in all-black high schools does not decrease among co-ethnic peers, as it does among the same achievers in predominantly white schools (Fryer and Torelli 2005.) These studies have also confirmed that resistance to acting white is not really a core ethno-racial feature but, rather, an indication of something about race and group dynamics among black, Latino, and white students in different school contexts. Racially integrated schools may structure peer associations in the classroom through ability grouping or tracking that places high-achieving African American and Latino students mainly in contact with white students. This type of grouping likely facilitates the idea that some students of color disassociate themselves from others, since they may maintain peer ties with other racial or ethnic groups and thus tastes and preferences that are different from those that are used to mark in-group membership. In short, peers may perceive their classmates who are situated in white-dominant settings where different cultural styles and tastes prevail as acting white.

Since the results of this study are based on a small sample of low-income students, more research is needed before generalizations can be made. Further research could show how the results may vary if the study included a mixed-class sample of black and Latino youths. Although reports have shown that middle-class minority youths invoke the notion of acting white (Belluck 1999; Kaufman 1996), these youths may either emphasize different social factors or have significantly greater access to resources that would help them more effectively negotiate their cultural styles. To facilitate a more fine-tuned understanding of how race, ethnicity, and class determine these meaning systems about acting black, Spanish, white, or even other racial and ethnic groups, larger studies could also include more variation by race, ethnicity, and region. Such

studies could highlight the extent to which these meaning systems both converge and diverge between classes and across racial/ethnic group classification in different parts of the country. Some findings from this study suggest that some white youths are described as acting black or acting Spanish. How do these white youths negotiate their school, peer, and home spaces both similarly and differently from their African American and Latino peers? Do they categorize themselves as such? (cf. Perry 2002)

This article aims to encourage researchers to reconceptualize how resistance to acting white is argued to be associated with academic and mobility outcomes for black and Latino youths. The prevalent articulation of resistance to acting white in various bodies of social science literature is a value system that deters the social, economic, and political progress of many poor African Americans and Latinos. Such a view implies that to embrace acting white means to be success oriented, while to resist acting white signifies a rejection of achievement-oriented behaviors. As is evident from the findings presented here, that claim cannot be made unequivocally. Nonetheless, several of the cultural styles and preferences that have been described as acting white may underwrite dominant forms of cultural capital, such as the use of Standard English and styles of dress. Studies have shown that the impact of certain cultural tool kits extends beyond the school and is connected to mobility in the workplace (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 1996). Thus, success in both school and the labor market may depend on the degree to which these youths can primarily embrace some of the styles that they label as acting white, especially in relation to language and interactions with whites.

Invariably, it is a matter of individual choice whether to listen to soft rock, dress in hip-hop style, speak Standard English, or maintain certain peer associations. We know that different students' abilities to deploy and use certain cultural styles can determine how they become classified when social boundaries exist among groups—that is, an “us” versus “them” phenomenon. Yet, when privileged and socially powerful groups define

and circumscribe what is appropriate for success and achievement, the choices that some students in this study made, especially the noncompliant believers, will have unintended consequences. For socially marginalized students, success in and attachment to school have “never been simply a matter of learning and competently performing technical skills; rather, and more fundamentally, [they have] been a matter of learning how to decode the system” (Stanton-Salazar 1997:13). The system encompasses the school’s cultural environment, which engenders an allocation of resources, including prestige, social standing, and evaluations that are based on the degree to which students possess dominant cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977; Farkas et al. 1990; Lareau 2003; Lewis 2003). Rather than take an either-or approach, cultural straddlers, compared to noncompliant believers and cultural mainstreamers, broker the boundaries among multiple cultural environments, instead of choosing one set of cultural codes over another. One implication is that schools that implement practices that promote interculturalism may yield better academic and social results among their minority students than those that do not. The challenge will be to create school societies in which educators, parents, and students value and work to incorporate effective methods for developing cultural expansion among all the principle stakeholders.

## NOTES

1. Classic works in the field, meanwhile, have revealed that the oppositional culture phenomenon is not a specific ethnoracial one, since white poor and working-class boys have been found to have attitudes that are contrary to those of the mainstream and low academic achievement (Gans 1962; MacLeod 1995; Willis 1981).

2. Throughout the text, I use *black* and *African American* interchangeably. Racial terms comprise numerous ethnic groups, however. All the black students in this study, with the exception of one, are African American. The youths of Hispanic heritage in the study varied in their racial identification as

black, white, or no race at all. I use the term *Latino* to refer to the group of students whose parents immigrated to the United States from countries in Central and Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean.

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

4. Ogbu’s four other categories of blacks included the assimilationists, the accommodators without assimilation, the ambivalents, and the encapsulated.

5. The other three components of Sellers et al.’s MMRI include racial centrality, salience, and regard. *Racial centrality* concerns the extent to which people define themselves with regard to race—that is, the degree to which they make their racial identity a principal part of who they are. *Salience* refers to the extent to which one’s race is a relevant part of one’s self-concept; it is usually concerned with a particular event or situation and the degree to which one is inclined to define oneself in terms of race in that social situation. *Regard* refers to a person’s evaluative judgment of his or her race, the extent to which he or she feels positively about it.

6. See the discussion by Meyerson and Scully (1995), who introduced the concept of tempered radicals—individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations and to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization.

7. Although the original study from which I selected my participants examined neighborhood differences in the attainment of low-income families, a comparison of these youths by neighborhoods is not my intent here.

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

9. I constructed a scale from four items of

Mickelson's six-item concrete educational attitude scale that yielded the highest reliability statistic, or Cronbach's alpha, which was a modest .43. The two items that I excluded were "All I need to do for my future is read, write, and make change" and "When my teachers give us homework, my friends never think of doing it." While the latter item contributes to the validity of the scale, I do not mention it here because it taps into another social dimension of students' academic realities that, on the surface, has less to do with their concrete attitudes about race and education.

10. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the youths' privacy and identity.

11. The black and Latino students also differentiated between their ethnospecific cultural styles; for example, Fernanda, a high-school graduate and Puerto Rican cultural straddler, told me that her friend chided her for dressing too "black" and not in "Spanish.

12. Generally, I found that almost all the participants were more likely to describe certain high-achieving students as either "low-profile" or nerdy, rather than as acting white, when they believed that these peers focused on their academic achievement at the expense of not having a social life (Kinney 1993). Also, they were primarily ridiculed for either having low levels of social skills, being unpopular or not dressing in the faddish clothing styles.

13. According to the participants, the converse was possible, too. White students could emulate black and Spanish cultural styles and practices that were more prevalent in a minority-dominant high school. During my interviews and field observations, it was not uncommon to hear students talk about white peers who tried to act black or Spanish.

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This research was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (SBR-9801981) and the Spencer Foundation. Thanks to Sheldon Danziger, Mary Corcoran, and the Ford Foundation Program on Poverty, the Underclass and Social Policy for office and resource support during this article's conception. For comments and suggestions on various versions of this article, I thank James Ainsworth-Darnell, Tony Brown, Darrick Hamilton, Lori Hill, Reena Karani, James S. Jackson, Jennifer Lee, Roslyn Mickelson, Amanda Lewis, and Karolyn Tyson. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2001 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Washington, and at the Malcolm Wiener Inequality and Social Policy Seminar, JFK School of Government, Harvard University. Address correspondence to Prudence L. Carter, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, 504 William James Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138; e-mail: [plcarter@wjh.harvard.edu](mailto:plcarter@wjh.harvard.edu).