Reassessing the "Burden of 'Acting White'": The Importance of Peer Groups in Managing Academic Success

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In 1986 Fordham and Ogbu introduced the idea that black students continue to underperform in school because of their cultural opposition to "acting white." This notion of the burden of acting white and Ogbu's cultural ecological theory more broadly have provided one of the dominant theories used to explain the black-white achievement gap. The research presented here offers a reassessment of the burden of acting white and directs researchers to examine the variation to be found in students' peer groups. This article highlights the ability of students to sustain an authentic black identity and to achieve academically by effectively managing their academic success among their peers.

The publication of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986:177) article introduced the notion of "acting white" as "one major reason [why] Black students do poorly in school." Fordham and Ogbu's argument has helped researchers to gain valuable insights into the reasons that underlie the difference between the academic achievements of black students, especially middle-class black students whose SAT scores are lower than one would predict, given their parents' social position, and those of other students. It added another piece to the puzzle of the mechanism by which inequality is reproduced in school settings.

Acting white is one concept of the cultural ecological theoretical framework that Ogbu constructed to explain the variability in academic achievement of different ethnic groups. To summarize briefly, cultural ecological theory asserts that the specific historical context and conditions of an ethnic group's incorporation into a dominant society shape and influence the subsequent interactions between a group's culture and the opportunity structure. Within this framework, black Americans, defined as an involuntary minority group, are characterized as cynical and embittered because of their accurate assessment that, relative to white Americans, they do not receive comparable returns to their hard work in school. As a result, they develop an oppositional social identity that defines "certain activities, events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986:181). Included with a host of other behaviors, performing well in school is defined as white. Consequently, according to this theory, academically successful black students feel bur-
dened because of the psychic stress associated with assuming the role of the Other and the loss of connection with other blacks who perceive that they are acting white.

The concept of acting white has been the center of much controversy. Popularized by some journalists (Hill 1990; Raspberry 2000), it has been oversimplified, leading many to overlook the collaboration and culmination of multiple forces on the educational outcomes of the black students. The premise has also generated debate within academic circles. Many scholars have called into question the validity of the concept of the burden of acting white, providing evidence that challenges its explanatory prowess and points to the influence of other factors on the academic performance of black students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998). Others (Foley 1991; Slaughter-Defoe 1990) have argued that Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) thesis overlooks or minimizes within-group variation. Other significant research has sought to modify and cultivate components of this theory.

Studies have found that black students have an abiding faith in education, yet their outcomes do not match this faith (MacLeod 1987; Mickelson 1990; Ogbu 1978). Mickelson (1990) made the important distinction between abstract attitudes (attitudes toward education that are grounded in the dominant ideology) and concrete attitudes (attitudes toward education that are based on poor returns from investing in education and participating in the opportunity structure). Her findings showed that concrete attitudes are a better indicator of students’ academic achievement than are abstract attitudes.

Other studies have questioned the premise that involuntary minority students define academic success as the prerogative of white Americans (Flores-Gonzalez 1999; O’Connor 1997). O’Connor (1997) identified black students whose knowledge of a limited opportunity structure did not constrain their academic pursuits. These students’ interpretation of the collective struggle of members of their ethnic group inspired their academic activities and aspirations, as well as their confidence in social agency and social change. Hemmings (1996) also disputed the acting-white thesis. After investigating how academically successful black students at two high schools reconciled their black identity and model student identity, she concluded that the students responded “directly to the particular cultures that they encountered in their schools” (p. 24).

Our findings further complicate and cultivate the acting-white thesis. This article discusses an ethnographic study of academically successful black female high school seniors from various class backgrounds. We closely examined the data for evidence of the burden of acting white as one of the dominant factors that influenced students’ academic success and school experiences and found that the burden of acting white did not play a dominant role in the participants’ lives. We argue that this finding is due, in large part, to the diversity within the black peer group.

The participants in our study navigated and negotiated multiple friendship groups within the black peer group. There were some instances of students modifying or downplaying their academic success among some black peers, which echoed the burden of acting white. Ogbu (1988, 1990, 1992; see also Fordham and Ogbu 1986) referred to this activity as “camouflaging.” However, we contend that camouflaging is one piece of a larger practice that we call managing academic success. Although managing academic success includes camouflaging behaviors, it also includes instances in which students share their academic success with peers who are supportive of their academic endeavors. By using this term, we expand the understanding of the challenges to and supports for academic success for black students. Managing academic success includes not only the accommodations made by students to hide or downplay their success among some peers, but the sharing of academic success that we witnessed among the participants in our study. The participants did not camouflage their academic success with all their peers. Within certain circles of their black peers, they were able to discuss freely and receive applause for their academic achievements and aspirations.

In 1996, Fordham drew attention to the complex motivations of high-achieving black
in the academic performance of black students, our study highlighted the diversity of the black peer group and the differential influence of one’s peers. According to the acting-white premise, the peer group plays a prominent role in students’ academic achievement. Fordham and Ogbu (1986:183) offered this characterization of the peer group:

At the social level, peer groups discourage their members from putting forth the time and effort required to do well in school and from adopting attitudes and standard practices that enhance academic success. They oppose adopting appropriate academic attitudes and behaviors because they are considered “white.” Peer group pressures against academic striving take many forms, including labeling, exclusion from peer activities or ostracism, and physical assault.

Thus, according to this characterization, the low academic performance of black students is due, in part, to black peers’ undermining and thwarting their academic efforts through negative peer pressure.

This characterization of the peer group does not sufficiently allow for diversity within the black peer group. By treating the black peer group as an undifferentiated body and the few black students who desire academic excellence as anomalies, the acting-white thesis does not support the existence of clusters of aspiring black students who encourage and support one another’s academic aspirations. Recognition of the diversity within the black peer group would provide black students with additional resources to support their academic strivings and help them to guard against the psychic stress that Fordham and Ogbu (1986) identified as being associated with academic achievement. Moreover, this expansion of the black peer group requires the development of alternative concepts to explain the educational strategies used by black students. Responding to the different expectations of various groups of friends within the larger peer group necessitates black students’ development and implementation of navigational skills. The concept of managing academic success may prove helpful in this endeavor and suggests that students may “resist” various and multiple constructions of their roles in school.
METHOD

The data presented here were collected by the first author between November 1994 and June 1995 at two public urban high schools in California. The data were obtained in extensive observations (100 hours at each school site), as well as interviews. Observations of students in the two schools were conducted throughout the school year. Ongoing observations were conducted in the college counseling offices, lunch areas, student hangouts, and some classrooms in both schools. Data were also collected at special events held throughout the year, such as Back to School Night, College/Career Nights, athletic events, plays, and concerts. These observations were designed to collect data about the school in general, as well as data that were specific to the students who participated in the study.

In addition to this extensive participant observation, one- to two-hour interviews were conducted with 8 college-bound, female black students in their senior year of high school. Additional interviews took place with 8 of the participants’ best friends, 8 of their parents, 2 of their college counselors, the 2 high school principals, and 2 teachers. Thus, an effort was made to gain an understanding of each young woman in a broader and deeper social context.

The interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded. In identifying the themes that emerged from the data, the first author relied on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), as well as codes that were derived from the research questions and the theoretical framework that guided the study. All the names are pseudonyms, and some details on the participants and the schools have been altered to protect their anonymity.

The racial and class compositions of the student bodies at the two schools varied. Lincoln Preparatory High School is a predominantly black public high school (Grades 9–12) with 3,500 students from predominantly low-income families, whereas Wilson High School (Grades 9–12) has 3,000 students of various racial and social-class backgrounds. Both schools house magnet programs. At Lincoln, 40 percent of the senior class is college bound, and at Wilson, 86% of the senior class is college bound. Appendix A presents a summary of the schools’ characteristics, and Appendix B provides information on the participants’ family backgrounds.

The study was guided by an interest in understanding students’ educational experiences and their plans for the future. It focused specifically on the college-choice process of these young women, all of whom were planning to attend college. In light of this focus, the sample was divided into two categories: those who had at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree or higher and those who did not. Students were selected whose grade point average was between 2.75 and 3.5, had been or were currently enrolled in at least one honor or Advanced Placement class, and whose SAT I or PSAT scores ranged between 800 and 1270. At each school, the counseling staff provided a list of students who met these academic criteria, and the college counselor provided information about each student’s family background to determine her appropriateness for the study. One student who was selected declined to be interviewed. All the other students who were asked to participate agreed to do so.

Although the research presented here provides some evidence that the acting-white thesis cannot be broadly applied to all students, the reach of these findings is limited by some methodological factors. The implications and meanings to be drawn from this work are constrained by these limitations. First, for reasons of feasibility, the study included only female students. We know from previous work that young black women tend to be more academically successful than do young black men (Hubbard, 1999; Roach, 2001; Trent, 1991). In addition, Ogbu (personal communication, June 2001) noted that he and other ethnographers have found that young black women are less affected by the burden of acting white. So, while this work may contribute to our understanding of academically successful young women and their school experiences, the findings cannot be generalized to all black students.

Similarly, the study examined only the experiences of academically successful female students, who appear to have developed
strategies for managing their academic success. It is possible that there were students in the same schools who were less successful in managing their academic success. With the data presented here, we were unable to capture the experiences of students who may have not succeeded because of the burden of acting white. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the experiences of students who were not deterred by accusations of acting white.

**MANAGING ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

The acting-white argument posits that black students who succeed academically do so at the peril of being accused of acting white and being cast out from their black peer groups. Our findings call into question the relevance of this argument as a lens for understanding the schooling experiences of all black students. Rather than find one peer group at each of these schools that disapproved of academic success for black students, we found that friendship groups within the larger black peer group offered positive reinforcement for academic success. As the participants navigated between their peer groups, they actively "managed" their academic success. Part of managing their academic success included camouflaging activities, such as downplaying accomplishments with some peers. However, we also found that the participants cultivated relationships with other academically successful peers in their schools. In these circles, they shared their accomplishments and found support for their academic success. We call this process *sharing success*. This term refers to the participants’ willingness to reveal their academic success among like-minded peers. It also encompasses the ways in which the participants shared one another’s academic success by supporting and taking pride in their peers’ accomplishments. In the following sections, we describe how the participants camouflaged their academic success with unsupportive peers and shared their accomplishments with friends who encouraged their academic achievements.

**Camouflaging with Unsupportive Peers**

For Fordham and Ogbu (1986), camouflaging is a strategy that academically successful black students use to hide or detract attention from their academic prowess. Our research did, indeed, record activities that can be defined as camouflaging. However, these instances had a distinctly different character from what Fordham and Ogbu suggested. All the participants from the two schools had black peer networks that valued their academic success. Still, there were times when they needed to camouflage their academic success with other friends. Some participants censored themselves when they were with their less academically successful peers, not mentioning their recent academic accomplishments. Others downplayed their exploits. Vanessa, who was enrolled in a calculus course and was planning to attend a prestigious four-year college, said this about talking with her friends about their school experiences or post-high school plans:

I try to play myself down. I don’t talk about my thing. I’ll probably say, “Where do you want to go? Let me talk to you about what you’re doing.” Like when people ask me what math class I’m in, I say, “Oh, I’m just in math.” Because everyone goes, “Ooh!” I don’t like to make people feel uncomfortable.

The participants did not talk of being sanctioned or ostracized by their peers because of their academic success, however. Vanessa was concerned that she would make her peers feel uncomfortable, but she did not mention that she was bothered by her own success. Other students reported similar patterns. Thus, although academic success added the burden of having to juggle friendships and expectations, it did not seem to have impaired the participants’ ability to succeed or to have left them without black friends, as Fordham and Ogbu indicated.

Some participants talked about changing their way of speaking to different audiences. However, they often viewed the ability to make these adjustments as an asset, rather than as a burden. In an excerpt from an essay she wrote for a college application, Dana described the
way she adjusted her speech when she moved from a predominantly white neighborhood to a predominantly black neighborhood:

Naturally, after some time, I developed the customs and language of my peers, which gives me the advantage of speaking two languages: standard English and "black dialect." When [I'm] interviewed by a college recruiter, I am confident, rather than intimidated, and able to display proper manners. Immediately upon arriving home, "Whaz up? (What's happening?), "let's kick it" (let's relax), "I'm chillin" (I'm relaxed) are conversational pieces used with my friends.

Rather than see the need to codeswitch as a burden, Dana viewed it as an asset. She was pleased that she could talk in the slang of her peers and be able to converse comfortably in Standard English.

Two participants—Dana and Lauren—reported that they had been labeled as acting white. Yet this label also appeared to be something that they were able to manage. Although it may have troubled them in some respects, it did not seem to deter them from meeting their academic goals or maintaining strong relationships with their black peers. Both girls used camouflaging strategies in these social spheres. Dana reported that she had been called an "Oreo" when she first came to Lincoln before she became involved in the life of the school and adapted to her new surroundings. She went on to become a cheerleader and officer of the Young Black Scholars (YBS). She also had an active social life and had received several invitations to both the junior and senior proms.

Lauren described how some students had said she was acting white. When asked if students from different peer groups treated her differently, she replied:

I think, yes. The black people who, say, aren't as smart as me or Renée or whoever else they say, "Oh, you act white" because we're in high classes or whatever, and that really upsets me. They say we talk white. I don't even have like proper English or whatever, but they say we talk white because we use all these big words and everything. To me, that's total ignorance. That's stupid to me. They need to grow up and actually know what's going on. I just don't think it's fair.

Lauren thought their behavior was rooted in envy and immaturity:

First off, it's jealousy. Maybe because they really wanted . . . I can't say they really want to be because I don't know what their situation may be. It's jealousy because we're going to, like, succeed, and maybe they won't, or it's just something to do because kids are like mean, anyway. They're like immature. They're just immature, so it's like jealousy and immaturity. That's all.

Both Lauren and Dana were able to manage their academic success and handle the infrequent accusations of acting white. Dana adapted to her new surroundings by modifying her speech, and Lauren made sense of and discounted the accusations of her peers as signs of jealousy and immaturity.

Moreover, Dana and Lauren, along with the other participants, had strong peer groups who valued their academic success and appeared to validate them in that way. These students were not set apart from their peers in the "nerd clubs." Two were cheerleaders, over half were in YBS, and one was the president of her student body. They were engaged in the lives of the schools they attended. They were not relegated to the sidelines of social life. These social groups offered important forms of social support.

Ogbu (1990, 1992) described students' involvement in activities as part of a specific strategy to camouflage their achievements and to avoid the "braniac" or "nerd" distinctions that are often assigned to academically successful black students. Although the participants also engaged in activities, their engagement did not appear to be part of a strategy that was aimed at camouflaging their academic success. Some saw engagement in particular activities as a way of trying out specific careers. This was true of the students who participated in the Peer Counselors (students who were trained in school to respond to telephone calls after school hours from students who felt that they needed to talk about their concerns), as well as one student who participated in the student government.

The participants often managed to balance both academic success and an active social life. Lashanda, who was committed to her
schoolwork but liked to have fun and party, said this about her friends:

They start something, they just won’t finish it. They know how I am. I’m a fun person to be with. They know, they wonder, “Dang, she goes to parties and stuff,” I go home and do my homework, “and she still gets good grades. How can she do this [party and also be a good student]?” I’m like, to them I’m like, Dang. She’s really smart and she’s really got her head set, but she’s still doing this, too. How can she do both of them? For them, it’s just one or the other.

Even though she associated with peers who did not do well in school and spent the bulk of their time partying, Lashanda never wavered in her commitment to her schoolwork or her desire to go to college. As her mother noted:

Lashanda always knew she was going to go to college. I didn’t think Wilson motivated her to go to college or whatever because she already had a mind, “That’s what I’m going to do, and I know what it takes. I like to live a certain way—like a certain lifestyle, and in order for me to live that certain lifestyle, I have to go to college. I have to get my education.”

Like other academically successful black students, Lashanda strove to fit in with the larger community of black peers, yet she was also committed to succeeding as a student. In the way that Lashanda managed her academic success, we can see a reinterpretation of the roles of agency and resistance in her life. While Lashanda could be seen as resisting dominant stereotypes of black students as nonachievers by making a conscious effort to go home and get her work done, she also resisted one peer group’s framing of her as acting white or being a braniac by partying as well. Thus, through exercising her agency, Lashanda forged a new middle pathway in which she both resisted accusations of acting white and the stereotypes about black students.

Indeed, the participants used camouflaging strategies to deflect and deter their peers’ accusations of acting white. However, there are important distinctions to note. First, in some instances, the use of camouflaging strategies was not motivated by a fear of ostracism. Vanessa downplayed her academic success to protect her friends’ feelings. The students who were active in the student government and the Peer Counselors chose to do so because they were interested in related professions. Although Fordham and Ogbu (1986) may have defined these activities as camouflaging, the motivating influences we observed encouraged us to rethink this designation. Furthermore, the participants did not camouflage their academic success with all their peers, only with certain peers whom they feared would call them names. With other friends, they were free to discuss their academic success. Their navigation of these two social worlds is what we refer to as managing academic success. The participants’ interactions with unsupportive peers reflected their ability to discern and diffuse potentially negative sanctions. These students demonstrated a sense of agency that allowed them to negotiate multiple standards of success.

**Sharing Academic Success with Supportive Peers**

Managing academic success encompasses dual and, at times, contradictory behaviors expressed with different groups of peers. Whereas the previous section detailed how the participants camouflaged their academic success with unsupportive peers, this section discusses how they shared their academic success with supportive peers. Sharing refers to the candid divulgence of academic activities, achievements, and aspirations with supportive peers. These peers responded to the participants with words of encouragement, contributing to the affirmation and validation of the participants’ academic pursuits. Sharing also entailed the participants’ roles in these friendships. That is, the participants listened to and supported the achievements and aspirations of their peers. Sharing was a reciprocal practice in which the participants and their peers endorsed and supported one another’s academic achievements and aspirations.

All the participants found support from their friends (from both good students and poor students) for their academic success. They had strong peer groups who valued...
their academic success and appeared to validate them in that way. The participants were not set apart from their peers in the “nerd clubs” or relegated to the sidelines of social life. Rather, they were engaged in the life of the schools they attended; two were cheerleaders, over half were in YBS, and one was the president of her school’s student body. These social groups offered important forms of social support, as Lauren described in discussing her own peer group:

They’re always, “I’m so proud of you. You have a job, you’re still in school, and you’re not pregnant.” All this other good stuff. But it makes me feel good. I like things like that—other people giving me compliments. Say, “Oh, you’re doing so good and [I’m] so proud of you,” you know.

One participant from Wilson, Raquelle, whose main friends were also planning to attend college, commented that she was viewed as the “smart one” in her group. When asked how it felt to labeled the “smart one,” she said: “I kind of feel it to be like flattering sort of because they [her friends] always say, ‘Oh Raquelle. She’s so smart. If you want to talk to the smart one, it’s Raquelle.’ I feel kind of special.” Raquelle also had friends from her neighborhood who stopped going to school in the eighth or ninth grade. These friends, many of whom had children before age 16, also took pride in her accomplishments. When asked how these friends treated her, she said:

They just treat me as one of them. School’s not a subject that really comes up as far as my neighborhood is concerned. They’ll say, “How was your day at school?” “Fine.” They accept me for what I am and what I do. If I am smart, I am smart. It seems they really congratulated me, if anything, especially now. So many of my friends have told me, “I’m so proud of you.” Basically pushing me on.

Like many young people, Raquelle had more than one set of friends. One peer group from school was comprised of smart and successful young women much like herself. Another peer group consisted of her neighborhood friends who were not college bound. However, she received support from both groups for her success.

Other students had peers with similar academic goals. At times, the support and encouragement the participants received had a competitive edge. Shakira described conversations among her peers this way:

There’s a little competition at Lincoln. I like it. It’s a good competition because it’s not too competitive, which is very good, but you got to go to college. “You’re not going to college? What do you think you’re going to do? What are your plans out of life?” Everybody realizes that the way to not necessarily get ahead, but to be that professional, you have to go to college. So, everybody says, “What college are you going to?” “Well, I’m going to this. Well, what do you want to be?” “I’m going to be this, and when we come back for the 10th reunion, I’m going to be the most successful person.” It’s like a little friendly competition there, which is really good.

Some of these peer groups of academically successful and committed students had been in place for years. One participant described her peer group as follows:

We’ve been together so long. We’ve all been together since the seventh grade. Me and Aquila have been together since the sixth, and then I went to Simms and then I met Vanessa and Nancy in the seventh. We’ve all been best friends since the seventh grade.

Another participant described a similarly longstanding and close-knit peer group from her school. She said: “Our friends have been friends since they first came to Wilson or before that. Like Raquelle, me and Lashanda [and] Renée, we all stuck together.” Both these peer groups were comprised of young academically successful black women who tended to support one another. They were generally in the same classes and belonged to the same student groups, such as YBS and Peer Counselors.

These peer groups often talked about attending college. While the focus of the data collection was on college and the interviews took place during the senior year when the students are making plans for the future, the fact that these conversations took place frequently and spontaneously indicates the degree to which it was acceptable among these peer groups to discuss plans that were
a direct result of their academic success. When both the participants and their best friends were asked about their conversations, they reported that they talked about where they would be attending college and what it might be like to be in college. Racquelle’s best friend, Renée, said this about these conversations:

It’s like an everyday chatter. Like you talk about what you’re going to wear. All my friends, they’re going to go to college. Raquelle, she’s going out of state. My best friend, she doesn’t want to go to a university. She wants to go to a [junior college]. She’s going to major in business administration; her mother’s managing Pep Boys, so she wants to follow in her mother’s footsteps. I want to [take] accounting because I like math. We talk about college all the time. It’s like everyday conversation.

Another student noted the difference between her old school in Chicago and the culture that she encountered when she moved to California in the seventh grade. She said: “I moved to California, and everyone was talking about, ‘When I grow up, I’m going to go to college.’ When I lived in Chicago, no one was talking about college.” The participants at Lincoln and Wilson had strong peer networks with other black students in their schools who were similarly college bound. They also seemed to be comfortable with academic success and the idea of continuing their education in college. Attending college had a concrete meaning for many of them.

Many of the participants thought that academic success and attending college were essential to becoming the people they wanted to be. With characteristic confidence, Lashanda clearly stated her plans:

Going to college, that’s just like my main goal in life to complete, not just to go, but to complete it and get a decent job and to be able to support myself. Once I do that, I’ll be happy. That’s what I live for—to be able to support myself and get the things I want.

Racquelle linked her educational success, specifically being successful enough to go to college, to getting a “good job.” This desire to get a good job was linked to a desire both for material possessions and to gain a degree of freedom and independence:

I don’t want to just sit back and be on welfare, working at McDonald’s. I want to make something, be something, of myself. Get married, have a family, a nice career, nice car, big house, lots of money.

For Lauren, attending college also seemed to mean the ability to claim her rightful place in society. She talked about the meaning of a college education and her desire to be free from want: “It means obtaining knowledge of different things so you can succeed in life. Basically, getting a degree in something so you have a career where you can like make money and not be in a bind, ever.” Later in the interview, she picked up this theme again:

Going to college means that you want to further your education. That you want to learn more, experience more, be something. Strive, at least to be something. It’s just showing some effort. Showing a big, big effort. If I don’t go to college and I don’t feel that I’m going to be anything that I want to be or anything that I ever dreamed of being. . . . I could never be a teacher if I didn’t go to college. I could never be a journalist.

The participants connected their academic success to their other goals. They had peers both within and outside school who either shared or encouraged their academic motivation. These students were not cast out of their peer groups because of their academic success. Rather, academic success was a part of their peer culture and their identity. Some participants even thought that there was a “college culture” at their schools that promoted academic success. The skill with which they managed their academic success reflects their personal sense of agency. Although some of the participants used camouflaging behaviors with unsupportive peers, they were able to share their academic selves, their accomplishments, and their dreams with their supportive peers.

One way to interpret these findings is to use the theoretical lens offered by Fordham (1996). Fordham argued that both students who do well in school and those who do not are resisting stereotypes associated with black students. Although our findings underscore
this assertion, we found that the students “resisted” in different ways, depending on the peer group that was present. This finding leads to the suggestion that resistance is nuanced and situational in daily life.

The participants encountered peers who had different expectations of their academic performance. As we noted earlier, some participants were called names and accused of acting white by some of their peers, yet they all found and surrounded themselves with peers who endorsed their academic success and aspirations. Thus, the participants managed their academic success as they moved between different social spheres, responding to various expectations, at times using camouflage practices and at other times freely discussing their academic activities.

**Racial Identity**

Critical to this discussion is the notion of racial identity. Not only did the academically successful participants feel supported by certain members of their peer groups, but they possessed a strong racial identity as young black women. Although some participants maintained friendships with white peers, they all maintained strong friendships with black peers. Some of these friendships were with fellow students in school who were not as successful academically as the participants, and some were drawn from neighborhood contexts or were made up of childhood friends. However, all the participants had strong peer relationships with other young black women.

The participants talked about attending historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as a way of maintaining or strengthening their identity as black women. Of the eight participants from these two schools, five reported applying to HBCUs and expressed serious interest in attending them. Even the three who did not express an interest in HBCUs looked for colleges that had a “strong black community.” As Vanessa put it, “I do not want to go to a school that has, like, one black person.” These young women wanted to be a part of a black community. They clearly identified themselves as black and wanted to be surrounded by others with similar back-grounds. The notions of the importance of a black community ranged from the social to the academic, as this quote from Lauren indicates:

> The whole social aspect of it. There will probably be more black teachers there. They give you more individual attention—it’s such a small school. Your professors try to work with you [on a] one-on-one basis.

Raquelle saw attending an HBCU as a chance to be surrounded by people who were like her:

> The reason why I want to go to an HBCU is that it seems like people always feel good when you see someone like you and you’re embraced by someone like yourself. I just think I would feel more comfortable. It’s in the South, and a lot of them—because we were looking around—they have a church on campus, and a lot of [the students] go to church. That’s like how I grew up, and I kind of want to get back to that. I think basically the culture thing. I guess back to that. Going there—I mean, I’m not only going to get a good education, but I’m going to be educated . . . as a black woman. I just think I’m going to learn, just being in that environment. I don’t know how to put it: just being in an environment—the environment of an all-black college—it’s just gonna be . . . I think it’s a special experience.

Renée also applied to an HBCU. She saw attending an HBCU as an opportunity to learn more about herself as a black woman:

> I just think it will be a totally different experience. In school, I haven’t really learned anything about my culture, and I just think—I know for a fact—that going to a black college, I can learn so much that I didn’t have the opportunity to learn in my 12 years of school.

These young women clearly saw their racial identity as central to who they were. None considered adopting a raceless persona. Moreover, their academic success did not result in experiences of affective dissonance. On the contrary, many participants sought to strengthen their racial and cultural identities and thought that attending an HBCU was a way to do so.

However, the participants were also clearly influenced by other competing identities in
their lives. The following field note was drawn from observations made in the college counseling office. Odette, a young black woman who was the best friend of one of the participants, asked the first author to read over her college essay. Odette expressed concern about being seen as a whole person, rather than simply as a black student, when she applied to college:

Odette wrote this essay about seeing what she sees when she looks in a mirror. But she was not happy with that essay. She showed it to a teacher who knows her well, and the teacher said that it "was not her." She [Odette] talked about writing an essay about how society perceives her as a girl who is black and whose mother is on welfare, but that that is not all that she is. People have told her she said that she should apply to Harvard and Stanford because she would get in because she is black. She said this really offends her. She said she is who she is and not the sum of her outward appearances and marks and tags that make her who she is in society.

Like Odette, the other young black girls in this study had a strong black identity but did not consider that identity to encompass their totality as people. This ability to define themselves was, similar to Odette's, often fraught with conflict and struggle. Odette struggled with the way society sees her. This is another example of a participant desiring recognition of her racial and cultural affiliation as well as her academic ability.

**DISCUSSION**

Our work sought to complicate and cultivate one element of cultural ecological theory: conceptualizations of the black peer group. We expanded and built on Fordham's (1988, 1991, 1996), Fordham and Ogbu's (1986), and Ogbu's (1974, 1978, 1992, 1995) descriptions of peer groups to suggest that there are multiple friendship groups within black peer groups. Some of these groups apply negative peer pressure to those who excel academically, and others support the academic excellence and college attendance of black adolescents. These friendship groups coexist. As students interact with different peers, they manage their academic success through various educational strategies, including camouflaging behaviors, all the while demonstrating that it is possible to construct a healthy racial identity in which academic achievement and aspirations neither compete nor conflict, but complement, culturally constructed notions of what it means to be black.

Characterizing the black peer group as a homogeneous collective that is opposed to academic excellence has led researchers to underexamine the heterogeneity of the black peer group and the differential effects and influences that friends and peers exert on the academic strivings of black students. This study presented the experiences of young black women who found positive support among their black peers. These peer groups countered negative influences and positively affirmed the participants in their academic pursuits. The participants were not uniformly ostracized because of their academic prowess; they were also embraced and celebrated. They deftly responded to various sets of expectations regarding their academic success. This ability to navigate different peer groups illustrates the participants' recognition of multiple ideas of what it means to be black and their agency to resist ideas about blackness that were contrary to their own.

Moreover, the positive reinforcement that the participants received from their friends helped to mediate the affective dissonance that cultural-ecological theory associates with black students' academic performance. Rather than fear the loss of their black identity, the participants, with the encouragement and support of their black friends, were able to reconceptualize academic excellence as the province and prerogative of black Americans, too. The support of black friends helped them guard against the psychic stress that some black students endure when they do not have the strength and backing of like-minded black peers.

Narrow conceptualizations of the black peer group limit the arsenal of identified educational strategies that are available to black students. Camouflaging strategies are all responses to negative peer pressure. Our finding that the black peer group is actually mul-
tidimensional requires an understanding of how students manage their success. An expanded understanding of the concept of the black peer group calls for an understanding of alternative educational strategies that black students use. More than camouflaging or downplaying their intellectual prowess, the various orientations of the peer groups demand that black students have the ability to discern and discriminate among friends when they decide to disclose information about their academic achievements and aspirations or to disavow claims to academic excellence. Ambitious academically successful students with like-minded friends do not need to camouflage their achievements but can openly share their academic aims and accomplishments; they use camouflaging behaviors during interactions with peers from whom they fear sanctions. This article has presented the concept of managing success as a viable tool. The skills and abilities encompassed in the management of success ensure the social and psychic survival of academically successful black students as they navigate and negotiate diverse circles within the black peer group.

The participants demonstrated that being black and being smart are not incongruent. These young women were active members of their high schools, not because they wanted to deflect attention from their presence in advanced classes and their standing on the honor roll. They were involved in athletics, the student government, and the YBS program because these ventures represented genuine interests and concerns. Their peer groups neither undermined nor derailed the intellectual potential and career aspirations of these young women. Rather, members of their supportive peer groups often provided the energy and emotional support that the participants needed to persevere. As opposed to comparing themselves to their white counterparts, several participants described friendly competitions among their friends as a source of inspiration and motivation.

The black-white achievement gap remains one of the most pressing problems in education today. Understanding how to improve the academic achievement of black students and how to remove roadblocks to their success are crucial. We point to the positive power found in some black peer groups as a promising avenue for further exploration.

**NOTES**

1. It is important to note that although the original article that set off the acting-white debate was coauthored by Fordham and Ogbu, since then, both have published several works independently. Both Fordham’s and Ogbu’s independent works have taken the acting-white premise in different directions. Although we review and acknowledge this divergence, our review is necessarily brief and may not fully capture the nuances in the emergent conceptual differences.

2. In addition, the basic premise of Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) argument, that persistent structural inequalities remain for blacks, has come under attack in the debate on affirmative action as some writers have called for an end to the cult of “victimhood” (McWhorter 2000).

3. The first author, who is a white woman, deliberately chose to include only female students in the study. In conducting these interviews, she crossed the boundary of race and often class. Developing rapport with the participants was challenging but achievable. She thought that adding the further barrier of gender by including male students would make it more difficult to establish rapport.

4. Most of the data presented here were generated in response to general interview questions on race and school climate. Questions that elicited the participants’ reflections on the burden of acting white included these: What is it like to go to school here? What is it like to be black at this school? Can you tell me about your friends? Do people from other peer groups ever treat you differently?

5. One criticism of much of the research on black Americans in general is that they are examined in one monolithic group, and the socioeconomic variations among them are not acknowledged or accounted for (Omi and Winant 1986; Wilson 1980). In designing this study, we deliberately included students from different class backgrounds.
6. All the participants subsequently attended and graduated from college. See Appendix B for more details.

7. YBS is an organization that was founded in 1983 by 100 Black Men, a civic and community-based organization that serves as a catalyst for change in disadvantaged communities. Its mission is to "enhance the academic performance of African American high school youths through enrichment workshops and programs which support and prepare scholars to be competitively eligible for University admissions and success" (YBS 2003). The organization describes the program as "a serious program dedicated to ensuring college preparation leadership development, community responsibility and successful life planning" (YBS 2003). The program assists students in pursuing a college education. In addition to sponsoring YBS High School Clubs, YBS conducts workshops, programs, seminars, and conferences throughout the year in the city under study.

APPENDIX A

Schools Summary Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Lincoln</th>
<th>Wilson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of school</td>
<td>Public comprehensive high school</td>
<td>Public comprehensive high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>3,500 (Grades 9–12)</td>
<td>3,000 (Grades 9–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General socioeconomic composition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial composition</td>
<td>85% black, 43% white, 15% Hispanic</td>
<td>31% Hispanic, 16% black, 8% Asian, 2% Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor-to-student ratio</td>
<td>1 to 514</td>
<td>1 to 600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average SAT I Compositea</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage college bound</td>
<td>40% (two- and four-year colleges)</td>
<td>86% (two- and four-year colleges)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aNational SAT I average: 900, California SAT I average: 900, and National SAT I average for blacks: 740.
## APPENDIX B

### Summary of Interview Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and Student</th>
<th>Mother’s Education</th>
<th>Father’s Education</th>
<th>Mother’s Employment</th>
<th>Father’s Employment</th>
<th>Family Structure</th>
<th>College Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wilson</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Parents divorced; both remarried; both remarried; father lives in another state</td>
<td>University of California, Berkeley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>Manager, electronics firm</td>
<td>Business professional</td>
<td>Parents married, one older brother</td>
<td>Santa Monica Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raquelle</td>
<td>Completed 10th grade</td>
<td>NA&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>NA&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Parents never married, two younger brothers</td>
<td>University of California, Santa Cruz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lashanda</td>
<td>Completed 9th grade</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>Raises foster children</td>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>Parents were married, two older sisters and one older brother</td>
<td>California State University, Long Beach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lincoln</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakira</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>Bank teller</td>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>Parents were married; mother remarried after father’s death; one older brother</td>
<td>Marymount College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>Police dispatcher</td>
<td>Construction worker</td>
<td>Parents married, one younger brother and one younger sister</td>
<td>University of Southern California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viana</td>
<td>Completed 10th grade</td>
<td>NA&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Part-time service-industry worker</td>
<td>NA&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Parents never married, one older sister</td>
<td>University of California, Berkeley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalisa</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>Completed high school</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>NA&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Parents divorced; father lives in another country; two older brothers</td>
<td>University of California, Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> To protect the anonymity of the participants, the names of the colleges that the participants attended were changed. The colleges and universities listed here are similar in size, selectivity, and geographic location to those that the participants actually attended.

<sup>b</sup> NA indicates that the participants were asked about their fathers but had no information about them. In these two cases, the participants had not had contact with their fathers for some years and did not consider their fathers part of their lives.
REFERENCES


Mickelson, Roslyn Arlin. 1990. “The Attitude-


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