

Acting white: the social price paid by the best and brightest minority students

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"Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white." --Barack Obama, Keynote Address, Democratic National Convention, 2004

Acting white was once a label used by scholars, writing in obscure journals, to characterize academically inclined, but allegedly snobbish, minority students who were shunned by their peers.

Now that it has entered the national consciousness--perhaps even its conscience--the term has become a slippery, contentious phrase that is used to refer to a variety of unsavory social practices and attitudes and whose meaning is open to many interpretations, especially as to who is the perpetrator, who the victim.

I cannot, in the research presented here, disentangle all the elements in the dispute, but I can sort out some of its thicker threads. I can also be precise about what I mean by acting white: a set of social interactions in which minority adolescents who get good grades in school enjoy less social popularity than white students who do well academically.

My analysis confirms that acting white is a vexing reality within a subset of American schools. It does not allow me to say whose fault this is, the studious youngster or others in his peer group. But I do find that the way schools are structured affects the incidence of the acting-white phenomenon. The evidence indicates that the social disease, whatever its cause, is most prevalent in racially integrated public schools. It's less of a problem in the private sector and in predominantly black public schools.

With findings as potentially controversial as these, one wants to be sure that they rest on a solid base. In this regard, I am fortunate that the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Adhealth) provides information on the friendship patterns of a nationally representative sample of more than 90,000 students, from 175 schools in 80 communities, who entered grades 7 through 12 in the 1994 school year. With this database, it is possible to move beyond both the more narrowly focused ethnographic studies and the potentially misleading national studies based on self-reported indicators of popularity that have so far guided the discussion of acting white.

The Meaning of the Phrase

Though not all scholars define acting white in precisely the same way, most definitions include a reference to situations where some minority adolescents ridicule their minority peers for engaging in behaviors perceived to be characteristic of whites. For example, when psychologist Angela Neal-Barnett in 1999 asked some focus-group students to identify acting-white behavior, they listed actions that ranged from speaking standard English and enrolling in an Advanced Placement or honors class to wearing clothes from the Gap or Abercrombie & Fitch (instead of Tommy Hilfiger or FUBU) and wearing shorts in winter!

Only some of these behaviors have a direct connection...

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How nonprofits are boosting NYC's brightest minority students. By Sara Dorn and Susan Edelman. View author archive. "The Mayor's Office is well aware that the top diversity talent is exiting the public school system in droves, because those students are being offered a choice that is more beneficial to them, where they can achieve higher college goals, such as greater Ivy acceptances," said a source familiar with private schools. "But the mayor is not being transparent with the public in making those numbers of exiting top students available to be a full part of the analysis." According to city Department of Education data, a stunning 27 percent of high-performing black and Latino students offered seats in Acting white was once a label used by scholars, writing in obscure journals, to characterize academically inclined, but allegedly snobbish, minority students who were shunned by their peers. Now that it has entered the national consciousness--perhaps even its conscience--the term has become a slippery, contentious phrase that is used to refer to a variety of unsavory social practices and attitudes and whose meaning is open to many interpretations, especially as to who is the perpetrator, who the victim. I cannot, in the research presented here, disentangle all the elements in the dispute, but Among poor and minority students. An Analysis of Competing Models of School Effects. Geoffrey D. Borman and Laura T. Rachuba. This report was published by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk. (CRESPAR), a national research and development center supported by a grant (No. R-117-40005) from. well-funded schools with quality resources and more advantaged and academically. successful peers, presumably, stand a better chance of achieving resilient academic. outcomes. Like the effective schools characteristics, though, few authors have noted clear. mechanisms through which a school's resources and the composition of its student body. may actively build resilience within students. 1.