

# The Price of Acting White

By Richard Morin

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*"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 speech, 2004 Democratic National Convention

It may be even worse than Obama imagined: It's not just black children who face ridicule and ostracism by their peers if they do well in school. The stigmatizing effects of "acting white" appear to be felt even more by Hispanics who get top grades.

At least that's the claim of Harvard economist Roland G. Fryer Jr. and graduate student Paul Torelli, who have mined an unusually detailed data set on teenage students to study the relationship between performance and popularity in public and private schools.

As commonly understood, acting white is a pejorative term used to describe black students who engage in behaviors viewed as characteristic of whites, such as making good grades, reading books or having an interest in the fine arts.

The phenomenon is one reason some social thinkers give to help explain at least a portion of the persistent black-white achievement gap in school and in later life. Popularity-conscious young blacks, afraid of being seen as acting white, steer clear of behaviors that could pay dividends in the future, including doing well in school, Fryer said. At the same time, the desire to be popular pushes many whites to excel in the classroom, enhancing their future prospects.

Certainly that's what the data suggest is happening, Fryer said. Among white teens, Fryer and Torelli found that better grades equaled greater popularity, with straight-A students having far more same-race friends than those who were B students, who in turn had more friends than C or D students. But among blacks and especially Hispanics who attend public schools with a mix of racial and ethnic groups, that pattern was reversed: The best and brightest academically were significantly less popular than classmates of their race or ethnic group with lower grade point averages.

"For blacks, higher achievement is associated with modestly higher popularity until a grade point average of 3.5 [a B+ average], then the slope turns negative," Fryer and Torelli wrote in a new working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research. A black student who's gotten all A's has, on average, 1.5 fewer same-race friends than a straight-A white student. Among Hispanics, there is little change in popularity until a student's average rises above a C+, at which point it plummets. A Hispanic

student with all A's is the least popular of all Hispanic students, and has three fewer friends than a typical white student with a 4.0 grade point average.

Fryer and Torelli based their conclusions on a federally funded survey of 90,118 junior high and high school students in 175 schools in 80 communities nationwide during the 1994-95 school year. The resulting data set contained a wealth of information on each student, including the number of friends they had and who those friends were. To prevent an inflated tally, the researchers counted students as friends only if each listed the other as a friend.

The researchers used this data to construct a social status index based on the number of friends of the same race that a student had in the school, adjusted for the popularity of each friend. Thus, someone who had lots of unpopular pals was rated lower than someone whose shorter list of friends might include such typically sociable types as cheerleaders or the student body president.

Digging deeper, they found that their overall results did not change significantly when they examined all of a student's friends, regardless of race. High-achieving Hispanics and blacks also had fewer friends, even when there was a relative abundance of same-race friends with similar GPAs in their classes.

They also found that more blacks "acted white" in schools where less than 20 percent of the students were African American, while hardly any did in predominantly black schools or in private schools. "These findings suggest the achievement gap is not about cultural dysfunctionality," Fryer said, and that contrary to conventional wisdom, the phenomenon may be more prevalent among blacks living in the more affluent suburbs than among those living in the inner city. (There were no majority-Hispanic schools in the study.)

Why is "acting white" absent in mostly black schools?

That's easy, said Fryer, who is African American. He recalled his own experience growing up and attending predominantly black schools in Daytona Beach, Fla., and Dallas. "We didn't act white -- we didn't know what that was," he said, stressing that he prefers data to anecdote. "There were no white kids around."

## **Two Sociologists Enter a Bar. . . .**

Who says the social sciences aren't good for a laugh?

Certainly not your Unconventional Wiz, who has dined out for more than a decade on delicious bits of research that are smart and funny.

Now comes "The Sociologist's Book of Cartoons," published by the American Sociological Association and on sale as part of its centennial celebration. It features 86 cartoons, most of which were published in the New Yorker magazine, including some as long ago as the 1920s and '30s.

The 'toons poke playful fun at social scientists and their preoccupations. One panel evoked sociologists' professional fixation with dating and mating. It featured a woman outside her door, saying to her date: "I had a nice time, Steve. Would you like to come in, settle down and raise a family?"

Another cartoon makes a distinction between sociologists, psychologists and political scientists and those who do so-called "hard" science, such as physicists, chemists and the like. "I'm a social scientist, Michael," a father tells his young son. "That means I can't explain electricity or anything like that, but if you ever want to know about people, I'm your man."

A few others have little or nothing to do with the social sciences . . . but they're funny, so who cares?

The book opens with a wry introduction by ASA President Troy Duster of New York University. He notes that the ASA has always had a sense of humor. In fact, until 1959 it was known as the American Sociological Society, or ASS.

"While there were many good, even compelling reasons for the name change, was there not some self-humor lost?" Duster lamented.

### **Anonymous Approval**

Contrary to perceptions in some quarters that the news media's credibility is sinking like a stone, most Americans reject the claim that journalists use anonymous sources too often, and a clear majority trusts the media to report the news accurately and fairly, according to a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll.

Nearly two in three said reporters use unnamed sources in news stories either the right amount of time or not often enough, while a third faulted journalists for using anonymous sources too frequently. Nearly six in 10 -- 58 percent -- also said they trusted the news media to "fully, accurately, and fairly" report the news, compared with 44 percent in a similar question Gallup asked in a poll conducted last September during the controversy that followed a "60 Minutes" report by then CBS anchorman Dan Rather about President Bush's National Guard service.

A total of 1,003 randomly selected adults were interviewed last month for the Post-ABC survey.

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