

THE “NINE LIVES” OF OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE?

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ANGEL HARRIS, *Kids Don't Want to Fail: Oppositional Culture and the Black-White Achievement Gap*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 336 pages, ISBN 978-0-674-05772-2. Hardcover, \$35.00.

KAROLYN TYSON, *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White After Brown*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 240 pages, ISBN 978-0-199-73645-4. Paper, \$24.95.

Some of the more influential research on race and education published in the last few decades comes from the work of John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham (Fordham 1988; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu 1978, 1987, 1991, 2003). In Ogbu's writing about the oppositional culture hypothesis, he argued that Black students frame their relationship to schooling through the lens of their historic marginalization in the United States. Out of their understanding of their systematic disenfranchisement, Ogbu suggested that “they not only generate theories [that] contradict dominant notions of status attainment and produce disillusionment about the instrumental value of school; but develop substantial distrust for school and its agents which then suppresses commitment to school norms” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 259). Together, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) expanded on these ideas in their article on the “acting White” hypothesis suggesting that students not only disengage from school themselves, they also put pressure on their Black peers not to work hard in school lest they be accused of “acting White.” Together these two interconnected theories have gained substantial notoriety and have become part of the general commonsense about why Black students are not doing better in school—“the problem,” it is believed, is the academic disengagement or “oppositional culture” of African American students.

In fact, since these ideas were first published, the “acting White” hypothesis and the related oppositional culture argument have captured scholarly and popular imagination in discussions of educational achievement (Carter 2005; Farkas et al., 2002; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Fryer and Torelli, 2010; Horvat and Lewis, 2003; Ogbu

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2003; Tyson et al., 2005). The idea that Black students underperform in school because their peers discourage them from achieving has taken on a life of its own as arguably *the* most popular explanation for Black-White achievement gaps (O'Connor et al., 2006). At the 2004 Democratic National Convention, as part of his “coming out” onto the national stage, then Illinois Senator Barack Obama (2004) gave a featured speech in which he posited the following:

Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will . . . tell you that parents need to teach, that children can't learn unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television and *eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white* [emphasis added].

Like many other writers, commentators, and public voices, Obama suggests that this “slander” is a major problem and one that needs to be addressed (Cosby and Pous-saint, 2007; Haberman 2006; Herbert 1995; McWhorter 2000; Steele 1990). Similarly, Shelby Steele (1990) asserts in his book *The Content of our Character*, “Too often . . . students . . . see studying as a sucker's game and school itself as a waste of time” (p. 51). Or as Clyde Haberman (2006) put it in a *New York Times* op-ed piece:

And there is the inescapable reality that hitting the books, essential to making it in medicine (or any other profession), is *often mocked as 'acting white'* (emphasis added)—an anti-education mindset that some leading black figures, like the comedian Bill Cosby, have attacked in recent years as fostering a culture of failure (p. B1).

While many social scientists *wish* public discussion and policy making were more informed by scholarship, the regular deployment of key ideas from the “acting White” and oppositional culture hypotheses as *fact* in these public forum provide instead an example of how some research can become way more influential than it should be. Despite its popularity in the press, a whole spate of research has challenged the thesis that Black students either possess an oppositional orientation toward education or reject school as a “White thing” (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Akom 2003; Carter 2005; Cook and Ludwig, 1998; Diamond et al., 2007; Harris and Robinson, 2007; Horvat and O'Connor, 2006; Lewis 2003; O'Connor 1999; Tyson 2002; Tyson et al., 2005). Two scholars, Angel Harris and Karolyn Tyson, have already produced some of the most highly regarded scholarship questioning the superiority of oppositional culture explanations, and have recently published books further testing that theory—respectively, *Kids Don't want to Fail: Oppositional Culture and the Black-White Achievement Gap* and *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students and Acting White After Brown*. In ways that complement one another nicely, these two books brilliantly confront both the basic suppositions and the empirical foundation of the ideas, putting what we can only hope are the final nails in the coffin.

BLACK KIDS WANT TO LEARN

Professor Angel Harris intends *Kids Don't Want to Fail* to be a comprehensive test of the oppositional culture, or what he calls “resistance,” theories for explaining racial achievement gaps. As he explains, he is testing a complicated theory one piece at a time to see if *any part* of it has empirical support. He operationalizes the oppositional

culture theory into a conceptual model and then tests each piece. Essentially, do Black students underachieve in school because a set of beliefs about the limits they will face in society leads them to disengage from school? Do Black students perceive themselves as marginalized? Does that perception affect their feelings about school? School engagement? School-related behaviors? The theory as originally outlined by John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham involves a set of linked components, like a tower of Lincoln Logs—as each piece is removed, the whole structure begins to topple.

In examining the first part of the theory, the idea that generational messages to Black youth about limitations in the opportunity structure will negatively impact their academic commitment, Harris finds no support. Black parents report continuing to experience discrimination. They expect their children to face similar barriers throughout their lives and they talk to their children about such barriers. However, Harris finds that this socialization about the possible discrimination or racism they may face in the future does not negatively affect Black youth’s academic investments. No one familiar with the history of Black struggles to gain access to good schooling will be surprised that Black parents and youth attribute great value to schooling (Anderson 1988). In fact, despite perceiving more barriers to future mobility (or perhaps because of this perception) Black youth attribute more value to schooling than do similar White youth. Black parents’ positive messages to their children about schooling positively affect students’ outcomes. That Black parents’ are conveying positive messages about the importance of education does not mean that they are not also cautioning their children about the discrimination they may face as they navigate the world. Yet, as has been found more generally in research on racial socialization, Black parents’ protective warnings intended to educate their children about possible future discrimination they may face do not negatively affect the students’ school engagement (Bowman and Howard, 1985). These messages are distinct and not contradictory. As Harris states, “Adolescents from groups in weaker positions within society with regard to race and gender make nuanced distinctions about what schooling can do for them (improve their life chances) and what it cannot (lead to sex/racial equality in wages and other life-chance outcomes)” (p. 182).

Harris also finds no evidence for a pervasive culture of Black oppositionality to school. There is, for example, no evidence that academically successful Black students experience ostracism from their peers, or experience widespread social costs for doing well in school. In fact, drawing on three datasets from two countries with over thirty indicators of academic orientation, Harris finds that with several exceptions, Blacks and Whites have remarkably similar academic orientations, and that where they differ, Blacks often have more “pro-school” orientations. For example, Black youth spend the same amount of time on homework and educational activities as White youth but seek help with school more often. Their school performance is unrelated to their ability to make friends or get along with their peers, and Black youth actually have fewer negative attitudes toward school than White youth. After controlling for socioeconomic differences, Blacks spend marginally less time on academic activities on the weekend (though they spend equivalent time during the week). What Harris does find is that all youth become more disaffected with school over time. There is nothing “Black” about this disaffection, however. It is a universal effect that is unrelated to achievement gaps.

Firing one more arrow into the heart of theories of Black culture as negatively impacting achievement, Harris tests out another of Fordham’s (1986, 1988) theories—that Black kids have to become raceless or distance themselves from Blackness in order to be successful. Again, as with findings in the literature on racial socialization (Bowman and Howard, 1985), Harris finds that not only is Black fictive kinship not

incompatible with schooling, “the only racial attitude that is associated with declines in achievement, educational aspirations, and value attributed to school is regret for being Black” (p. 138). In fact, a strong racial/ethnic identity, including a sense of closeness to a larger Black community and happiness with being Black, was positively associated with achievement.

So why, Harris asks, are Black youth not doing better in school? He provides at least one part of the answer as he investigates the reasons that Blacks’ investment in school and their desire to do well there do not always translate into success. Specifically, Harris asks if one of the main problems in past studies of the oppositional culture hypothesis is that those analyses fail to take into account students’ skill levels prior to adolescence. A big flaw in the oppositional culture theory is “it assumes that Black youth have the academic skills to be successful but choose to not employ them in favor of academic failure” (p. 144). As he argues, many studies of school achievement gaps focus on adolescents because it is at this stage (as opposed to the elementary school years, for instance) that we imagine we can hold them accountable for their academic outcomes. This is despite the many years of preceding schooling. Drawing on the first three waves of the National Education Longitudinal Study, Harris finds that if Black students entered high school with the same academic preparation as Whites, they would be 70% closer to White students in terms of achievement (whereas changes in their academic behaviors would close the gap at most by 13%). Essentially, Harris argues, if some Black youth engage in counterproductive schooling behaviors in high school it is because of deficits in skills not the reverse. “My major claim is that the skill deficiency prior to the stage of development during which the resistance model is applicable renders the current version of the oppositional culture theory less plausible” (p. 162).

In conclusion, Harris argues for turning attention away from Black youth culture and focusing it instead on improving Black students’ overall schooling experiences (e.g., retraining teachers who seem to misread Black youth and have lower expectations for them). He also suggests the need to focus on early skill development, for it is over many years of differential schooling opportunities—what Darity and Jolla (2009) have called the curriculum gap—that the small skills gaps that exists when students enter school become substantial. Apropos of his title, and hopefully of no surprise to many of us, Harris concludes that Black youth do not want to fail.

INTEGRATION INTERRUPTED/WHERE OPPOSITION EXISTS, SCHOOLS CREATE IT

Professor Karolyn Tyson’s *Integration Interrupted* nicely complements Harris’ book as it examines similar questions but draws primarily on qualitative data, bringing students’ voices to the discussion. She uses a slightly different approach but like Harris, finds that the focus on “acting White” or oppositional culture as an explanatory frame for understanding achievement gaps is largely misplaced. Tyson begins by closely examining the logic of the “acting White” hypothesis. She asks, do students link ideas of race and schooling, as the theory suggests, and if so, why?

Using data from four studies that she conducted in schools across North Carolina, Tyson begins by tackling the idea that the “acting White” phenomenon is a problem of Black peer culture. She shows first that this “phenomenon” does not actually represent a pervasive pattern, and second, that where ideas about race and schooling are linked, it is school structures and practices that link them, not Black peer dynamics. If we are concerned about students thinking that doing well in

school is a “White” thing, she argues, the real culprit is *racialized tracking*—the pervasive patterns of deeply racialized ability groupings within supposedly desegregated schools. Racialized tracking is a problem nationally, particularly in schools with moderate to large Black student populations (30%–60%) where such tracking exacts, as she puts it, “enormous costs” for these students (p. 8). It has received too little attention despite the “anguish it has wrought” (p. 9) for Black students trying to navigate in these contexts. “With Black and White students largely segregated within the schools they attend, racialized tracking has made it possible to have desegregation without integration. It is this school-based pattern of separation that has given rise to students associating achievement with whiteness” (p. 6). Thus, she argues, *if* students generally, and Black students in particular, link ideas of Blackness or Whiteness with school behavior or engagement (e.g., the idea that high achievement in school is equivalent to “acting White”), it is a lesson they are learning *in* school. It is *school practices*, such as racialized tracking, that make the link between race and achievement, not Black youth culture. This reframing is important as it suggests that the solution to “the problem” would be a reorganization of school structures rather than a retooling of Blacks youths’ orientation to that structure.

However, as Tyson gets into the meat of her findings, she goes beyond contesting the source of “acting White” and instead fires an arrow directly into the heart of the idea that “acting White” should be seen as a cause of differences in educational outcomes, much less the principle cause. In her various examinations of how and where “acting White” appears in North Carolina elementary and secondary schools, she finds **no** evidence of it in the elementary schools she studies, nor any evidence of it in predominantly Black schools. Moreover, she finds only minor evidence of the “acting White” phenomenon even in settings where one would be most likely to find it—those contexts with racialized tracks¹ that other scholars have identified as subject to “acting White” patterns (Fryer and Torelli, 2010). Even in these settings, she finds that “acting White” as an accusation surfaces only rarely. For example, in a study of sixty-five high-achieving Black students across nineteen high schools from three districts, only thirteen (or 20%) reported *ever* being accused of “acting White,” and all of those thirteen were still in AP and other advanced courses. Thus, even in desegregated schools with rampant racialized tracking where she finds only nominal evidence of accusations of “acting White” getting deployed, she finds even less evidence that it functions as a significant deterrent to achievement.

It is not, she shows, that Black students isolated in advanced courses do not confront some struggles with their peers. Eleven of the students she spoke to did discuss adjusting their behavior to conform to local peer culture, but almost all “stayed the course academically.” Even when these students struggled with some teasing, they strove for academic success. More importantly, as Tyson notes, most of the teasing that high achievers faced was the kind of generic teasing of “nerds” rather than racialized teasing (Kinney 1993).

Of more consequence, she finds extensive evidence that Black students in advanced classes struggle with feelings of isolation, loneliness, and being left out. For adolescents already deeply concerned with fitting in, contexts where achievement is deeply associated with Whiteness raise multiple issues for Black students. The most important struggles, however, result not from their Black peers’ hostility. Instead, high-achieving Black students make their way through predominantly White academic and social contexts that undermine their confidence on multiple levels. This pattern emerges as Tyson delves into the question of why more Black students are not taking advanced courses, given that students ostensibly have some choice in the matter.

Tyson finds first that the current tracking system is not, in practice, as open as it is imagined to be.

In the past, race and class were explicitly used to organize tracking, but the system is now at least formally “race-neutral.” Based on her research, however, Tyson argues that the new “laissez-faire system of tracking operates to produce outcomes not unlike the older, more formal system” (pp. 159–160). Academic pathways set up in elementary and middle school persist into high school, restricting students’ real choices. For example, in North Carolina, Black students are much less likely than their White classmates to be assigned to the gifted program. Tyson reports that in 2003, 18% of White students were identified as gifted, compared to 3.8% of Black students. White students thus comprised 90% of the gifted program even though they made up just 59% of the state’s student population. As John Diamond and I find in our research in our forthcoming book, *Despite the Best Intentions*, White parents’ engaged advocacy to push their children up academic hierarchies contributes to these gaps. Once students make it into the gifted program, however, the recognition has a long lasting “anointment effect,” not only giving students access to better learning opportunities but also bestowing a confidence boost that persists into the future, assuring those labeled as “gifted” that advanced tracks are their “natural” place. Further, as Darity and Jolla (2009) state:

the under-identification of black students for G&T programs reinforces deeply held beliefs about black cognitive and cultural inferiority. It gives aid and comfort and seemingly confirming evidence to those who believe that racial academic disparities can be explained by black genetic endowments or by black collective cultural dysfunctionality (p. 108).

Thus, racial imbalances in ability grouping in elementary school literally and metaphorically reverberate forward throughout students’ academic careers.

All students, Tyson argues, regardless of race and gender, are looking for both a good academic and social fit when they select courses. They want to be successful, and they want to be comfortable. White students were “less likely than others to feel conflicted about where they belonged” academically and socially because advanced classes were filled with their friends and people like them (p. 155). Black students who want to pursue advanced curriculum do not have this luxury, having to enroll in these courses despite the absence of friends. Tyson finds that high-achieving Black students still enroll in advanced courses but face many challenges and barriers with which White students do not have to contend.

Tyson concludes the book by highlighting how far that North Carolina’s supposedly “officially desegregated” school system is from actually being integrated. School structures like racialized tracking build on cultural belief systems that already link race and intelligence and contribute to “stereotyping of students” (p. 165). Both Black and White students are trying to make sense of the daily realities they confront in their schools. While this sense-making leads a small minority of high-achieving students to very occasionally face taunts that they are “acting White,” Tyson demonstrates conclusively that concerns about the impact of oppositional culture are grossly overstated. There is very little evidence that even the very few high-achieving teens who faced such taunts actually altered their behavior. However, she concludes: “By leaving racialized tracking unchallenged, we require some students to negotiate and devise strategies to minimize the fallout from a system that they neither created nor consented to, a system that demonstrably determines winners and losers based on their race and class” (p. 172).

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Aside from their general interrogation of oppositional or resistance theories, these books share several important themes. First, in putting the magnifying glass on oppositional culture theories, both authors point out a range of limitations in how the theory has been evaluated previously. For example, Tyson points out that one common past “test” of the “acting White” hypothesis was to look at the relationship between achievement and popularity for Black students; were high-achieving students less popular because their peers were rejecting them? These “tests” however, ignored the reality that most high-achieving Black teens in diverse schools spent almost no time around other Black students in their courses. If they were found to have fewer Black friends, it was not necessarily because other students had contempt for them or their accomplishments but because they seldom saw them. Similarly, in *Kids Don’t Want to Fail* Harris points out problems in past studies of the oppositional culture hypothesis, most of which had failed to take into account students’ skill levels prior to adolescence.

Both authors also highlight the kernel of truth in oppositional culture theories. That is, Black students do operate within a societal context that often disparages Blackness and in which there are pervasive negative stereotypes about Black intellectual capacity (Steele 1997, 2010). These youth operate in a context that is, in many ways, oppositional towards them. Black youth then face the dual task of assembling a positive sense of self while discrediting negative narratives associated with Blacks in the wider culture. This is a task that all Black students face but that is perhaps more challenging for high-achieving Black students as, similar to patterns found in research on the Black middle-class, they are much more likely to be spending time in predominantly White spaces where their status is likely to get directly and indirectly questioned if not challenged (Feagin 1991; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Forman 2003; Lacy 2007; Landry 1987). Thus, both authors discuss how race clearly matters for Black students’ experiences, even if it does not matter in the ways captured in oppositional culture theories (O’Connor et al., 2007).

In fact, another point both authors make in their books would be unnecessary if it weren’t for the still-pervasive negative stereotypes about Black youth. That is, that all kids, including Black children and youth, want to learn. The broad patterns Harris captures and the voices of the students Tyson interviews show a group striving for success, sometimes inefficiently, sometimes without all the skills they need to be successful, but striving nonetheless. As Tyson’s (2002) work on elementary school students demonstrates forcefully, Black children begin school achievement-oriented, “they are excited and enthusiastic during learning activities and care deeply about achievement” (p. 1169).

As Tyson addresses throughout *Integration Interrupted* and as Harris’ *Kids Don’t Want to Fail* discusses in the conclusion, what we need to confront more directly are the institutional structures and processes that produce actual and perceived competencies. There are deep and widespread disparities in the quality of educational experiences Black and White students receive in the United States today (Lewis and Manno, 2011). Despite widespread declarations that we are living in a post-racial society, race not only continues to shape opportunity structures, but new forms of old racial common sense continue to shape how we understand the resulting inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Forman 2004). It is Black youth’s actual experiences in school, not a cultural disposition they bring with them from home, that leaves some of them discouraged or disengaged in later years. Black youth strive for academic success within local and national contexts that often undermine their

confidence as their competence is implicitly or explicitly questioned (Steele 1997, 2010). A widespread “curriculum gap” or “opportunity gap” further exacerbates the problem, leaving some Black youth short on needed skills and hampering their ability to achieve at their desired level. Oppositional culture theories stand in the way of confronting these realities as they distract us from the real and complicated challenges. The solutions Tyson and Harris propose (e.g., detracking; eliminating gifted programs and replacing them with rigorous, high-quality core curriculum for all; and doing away with policies and practices that mark and visibly separate students; confronting teachers’ low expectations for Black students) would rightly require us to fundamentally rethink the way we have organized teaching and learning today.

A critique of both texts is that they do not give more attention to the fundamental dynamics that make these theories so popular in the first place. A major question one confronts after reading the two books is, “Why are we still talking about this?” And neither author really confronts the question of why the original theory “made sense,” and in fact continues to make sense, to so many—why it was and is so popular despite all the evidence questioning its explanatory power. To be sure, while I hope Harris and Tyson have finally done the important job of ending our reliance on “acting White” and oppositional culture theories as good explanations for achievement gaps, there are reasons to remain cynical about whether its death knell has truly been sounded. In a talk recently, I referred to this as the “theory that would not die,” for I imagine what should now be understood as the “folk theory” of oppositional culture will persist as one of the popular explanations of achievement gaps despite all the empirical evidence to the contrary—despite the fact that both these authors make very careful social science arguments building on rigorous empirical analysis of multiple data sets to show that the oppositional culture and “acting White” theories are not “optimal.” While wishing they were perhaps a bit more strident in this conclusion, what is missing from both discussions is the recognition that, read differently, oppositional culture theories are, in effect, “optimal” to the extent that they have effectively helped many to make sense of differential schools outcomes and to do so in ways that require almost no adjustment to the way schools are currently organized. The theory remains popular because it fits so nicely with dominant ideas (i.e., colorblind ideology) that racial inequality persists today because of the cultural deficiencies of minorities. Of course, “the problem” is Black culture. Within a larger context in which colorblind racial common sense reigns supreme (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Forman 2004; Forman and Lewis, 2006), oppositional culture theory does important work to reassure many that our educational systems remain meritorious—“if only all were committed to taking full advantage of the opportunities available,” the thinking goes. The lessons here are many, including that while we do need to, of course, continue to be thoughtful in our design and conduct of research, we also need to be cognizant of the difficulties in actually trying to shift ideas about racial and educational realities much less the difficulties in actually trying to change what is a vastly unequal educational system.

As John Diamond and I argue in our forthcoming book, *Despite the Best Intentions*, understanding what is “racial” about racial achievement gaps requires engaging with the full and multifaceted consequences of White supremacy.² The consequences of this racial order shape the kinds of resources different families have to deploy on behalf of their children as well as the kinds of experiences their children are likely to confront in schools. Segregation levels in schools are still high (Kozol 2005; Orfield and Gordon, 2001; Orfield and Lee, 2005; Orfield and Yun, 1999). Majority minority schools today have far fewer educational resources than majority White schools.

And, as *Integration Interrupted* and other recent qualitative research in schools shows, even when Black and Latino are in desegregated schools, they continue to face subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination (Ferguson 2000; Lewis 2003; Lewis and Manno, 2011; Morris 2005; Tyson 2011).

Black youth today indeed face many hurdles to attaining a high quality education. Topping the list of challenges they face are deep and persistent structural racial inequalities and a popular common sense that suggests they are largely responsible for their own subordination. Near the bottom of the list, as both Tyson and Harris conclusively show in their new books, would be bad attitudes toward schooling and/or negative racialized peer pressure. As James Anderson (2004) put it recently “being blamed for one’s own subordination is a cross that African Americans have borne for centuries (p. 360). Hopefully, *Kids Don’t Want to Fail* and *Integration Interrupted* will nudge us further along towards removing that cross from the shoulders of Black youth in the future.

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NOTES

1. Carla O’Connor and colleagues (2011) have labeled such racialized tracks *Racially Stratified Academic Hierarchies* (RSAH).
2. Frances Lee Ansley (1989) has defined this contemporary White supremacist racial order as follows “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutional and social settings” (p. 1024).

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