

## Racial Differences in Academic Orientations

# Testing the Oppositional Culture Explanation in Desegregated Schools: The Impact of Racial Differences in Academic Orientations on School Performance

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Recent studies suggest that anti-achievement attitudes and behaviors that are specific to black students occur most commonly in integrated or predominantly white school contexts. Accordingly, this study examines the degree to which racial differences in achievement-related attitudes and behaviors (collectively called academic orientations) actually contribute to corresponding differences in academic performance among nearly 25,000 students attending integrated secondary schools in the United States. The findings suggest that when controlling for socioeconomic status indicators, black students exhibit more pro-academic orientations than their white counterparts. School racial composition did not significantly influence these dynamics, and the racial composition of black students' friend groups showed modest but inconsistent influence on academic orientations. Finally, the authors demonstrate that racial differences in expressed academic orientations have only negligible consequences for student performance, and thus do not show much promise for explaining or remedying black/white achievement disparities in secondary schools.

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## Introduction

The oppositional culture argument (Ogbu 1978, 1991, 2003)<sup>1</sup> and the “acting white” hypothesis (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) are popular explanations for black-white differences in students’ educational outcomes (O’Connor, Horvat, and Lewis 2006). These theories suggest that, for myriad socio-historical reasons, black students are less oriented toward academic achievement than their white counterparts. While a growing body of empirical studies raises questions about these arguments (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997, 1998; Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell 2002; Harris 2006, 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Wildhagen 2011a; see Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga 2002 for an exception), some recent work suggests that racialized opposition to schooling is most likely to emerge among black students attending racially integrated schools (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Ogbu 2003; Tyson 2006, 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005), particularly where educational opportunities are unequal (Tyson 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). To date, however, only a few studies have systematically examined how a school’s racial composition may impact black students’ education-related attitudes and behaviors (Goldsmith 2004; Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder 2001; Wildhagen 2011b).

The current study builds on previous work by conducting a comprehensive inquiry into whether black-white differences in achievement-related attitudes and behaviors—discussed here collectively as academic orientations—vary according to school racial composition. We first establish the impact that specific academic orientation indicators have on actual academic performance, including students’ educational aspirations, time spent studying and paying attention in class, affect toward schools, and experiences with academic peer pressure. Then, building specifically on Goldsmith (2004) and Wildhagen (2011a), we estimate the degree to which racial differences in students’ academic orientations have implications for racial performance disparities.

Third, given that racial peer effects and school racial composition have been hypothesized to influence black students’ academic orientations, we extend the existing research by estimating the unique contributions that school racial composition and the racial composition of black students’ friend groups have on these outcomes. No previous analyses have considered both a comprehensive set of such indicators and also the impact of school and friend group racial composition on these educational attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, few previous studies have considered the impact of academic orientation differences on actual academic performance at all. Thus, this study provides a uniquely integrated and comprehensive test of the emerging theories regarding the oppositional culture and acting white hypotheses.

We proceed as follows. First, we discuss the relevant literature on oppositional culture and acting white, and then detail how our inquiry extends recent empirical work. Next, we assess the degree to which a comprehensive set of theoretically derived attitudinal and behavioral indicators relate to actual academic performance. For indicators that predict actual performance, we then estimate any racial differences in these indicators independent of students’ socioeconomic

backgrounds, including the effect of school and student friend group racial composition on academic orientations. Finally, we discuss the implications of racial differences in academic orientations for racial achievement disparities in secondary schools.

## Oppositional Culture, “Acting White,” School Context, and Racial Disparities in Educational Outcomes

Disparities in the test scores, grades, and educational attainment of black and white students in the United States are well documented (Ferguson 2007; Jencks and Phillips 1998), and popular explanations for these patterns include the oppositional culture argument and the related “burden of acting white” hypothesis. Related cultural attribution concepts such as the “cool pose” (Majors and Billson 1993) and “self-sabotage” (McWhorter 2001) have made it into mainstream discussions on the causes of racial inequality as well. Recently, Republican US congressman and former vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan (2014) rationalized problems in America’s inner cities as being a cultural matter, saying on Bill Bennett’s talk show *Morning in America* that “We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work . . . There is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with.” Then—Illinois State Senate candidate Barack Obama argued that we needed to “eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white” during his keynote address during the 2004 Democratic National Convention—an issue that he and First Lady Michelle Obama have raised on multiple occasions since (Henderson 2014; Obama 2004).

The oppositional culture and acting white hypotheses are built on Ogbu’s (1978, 1991, 2003, 2008) cultural ecological theory, which states that to understand racial minorities’ experiences in education, we need first to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary minorities. Involuntary minorities (e.g., blacks, many Mexican Americans, and American Indians) were incorporated into the United States by force, and thus have distinctly different relationships to dominant social institutions, such as schools, from voluntary minorities, who are distinguished by having chosen to come to the United States. Voluntary minorities in the United States generally make favorable comparisons between their current conditions and the conditions they faced in their homelands, whereas involuntary minorities tend to compare their own conditions unfavorably with those of whites (Ogbu 1991). Given perceived differences in returns to their education, as well as limited access to high-quality schools and educational opportunities, Ogbu hypothesized that involuntary minorities develop an oppositional stance toward schools and thus limit their efforts to succeed in them. This resistance to education, Ogbu argued, is a main reason education disparities between black and white students in US schools have persisted (Ogbu 1978, 2003, 2008).

In a related argument, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have suggested that high-achieving black students face negative social sanctions for their pro-school attitudes and behaviors. Fordham and Ogbu studied a majority black urban

school, and although students there did not use the term “acting white” (as pointed out by Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005), the authors interpreted the negative social sanctions that the high-achieving black students experienced as being representative of the burden of acting white. Fordham and Ogbu ultimately argued that high-achieving black students find their racial authenticity being questioned by their same-race peers, and thus they engage in several masking and diversionary practices to avoid being socially ostracized.

Meanwhile, although the oppositional culture and acting white hypotheses are popular achievement disparity explanations, a number of studies have challenged their generalizability (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Carter 2005; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Downey 2008; Harris 2011; Horvat and O’Connor 2006; O’Connor 1997; Tyson 2002; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Wildhagen 2011a; for alternative interpretations, see Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga [2002]; Mickelson [2006]; Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown [1992]). Studies of nationally representative samples in particular have found that independent of students’ social backgrounds, in the aggregate US school population there are few racial differences favoring whites in students’ attitudes toward school or their achievement-related behaviors (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998; Downey 2008; Harris 2011; Wildhagen 2011a). However, more recent research suggests that racialized stigmatization based on students’ level of academic achievement may emerge in particular school contexts (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Tyson 2006, 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) found that while race-based opposition was infrequent across the eight North Carolina secondary schools they studied, when it did occur, it emerged in racially integrated schools where white students were the numerical majority, had greater economic resources, and were perceived to have greater educational opportunities within the school. This contextualization is aligned with Lucas and Berends’s (2002) finding that *de facto* tracking is in fact most prominent in racially integrated schools. Tyson (2011) has expanded on this work, highlighting how racialized tracking in these contexts can lead some black students to associate high academic achievement with being white.

Wildhagen (2011b) found similarly that, while there is no pattern of racialized social sanctions for high achievement or pro-school behaviors in general in American high schools, there is some evidence of a racialized relationship between high achievement and social sanctions in schools where white students are systematically reported by teachers to be putting forth more effort in class than black students. Wildhagen also found that the relationship between AP course enrollment and its typical qualifiers of test scores, grades, and academic awards is attenuated for blacks. This effect is similarly exacerbated by school-level racial engagement gaps, lending more credence to the idea that, where they exist, phenomena related to oppositional culture may be attributable to certain school racial dynamics, and thus are not readily observable in studies utilizing aggregate data alone.

Furthermore, these nuanced contextual factors may have been present but overlooked in previous inquiries that corroborate oppositional culture theory.

For example, in his qualitative study in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, Ogbu (2003) built on his oppositional culture argument by hypothesizing that black students' academic disengagement was a major cause of the achievement gap in that locale and beyond. Ogbu argued more specifically that, despite what he considered to be comparable economic conditions across races in Shaker Heights, there was still a prevalent "low-effort syndrome" (17) in which black students "were not highly engaged in their school work" (18).

A closer review of the Shaker Heights community, however, shows that the black and white populations there are actually not comparable in socioeconomic terms. Ogbu himself (2003) reported at that time that while 58 percent of white Shaker Heights communities had average family incomes of between \$50,000 and \$100,000, only 33 percent of black families did. Moreover, according to 2006 US Census Bureau data, only 35 percent of black Shaker Heights residents age 25 and older had college degrees, while more than double that proportion of whites in the same age group had at least that level of education (76 percent). The census reports also suggest that the median family income for blacks in Shaker Heights was \$60,436, compared to \$108,216 for whites. Dramatic differences in family structures have also been reported in Shaker Heights, with 50 percent of black students living with one or no parents, compared to just 11 percent of white students (Ferguson 2007). Thus, it is plausible that in Shaker Heights, rather than a general and culturally based academic orientation phenomenon, what Ogbu (2003) observed was more closely related to what recent scholarship suggests: racialized opposition to achievement may result from the interplay between race, class, and academic status in individual institutions (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Wildhagen 2011b).

Meanwhile, a handful of studies have also found both direct and moderating effects for oppositional culture phenomena based on school racial composition alone. Fryer and Torelli (2010) found that in public schools with a student population less than 80 percent black, black students systematically experience a decrease in the number of friends they have once their GPA rises above 3.5. Yet, this pattern begins to dissipate as schools become more than 80 percent black and totally disappears in all-black schools or private schools. Goldsmith (2004) found similarly that independent of students' social background, community context, and prior achievement, not only do black and Latino students have more positive academic orientations than their white counterparts from similar backgrounds, their attitudes were also more positive in high-minority and ethnically mixed schools than they were in mostly white schools.

Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) found that school attachment was higher for black students in schools with a higher percentage of blacks, although behaviors related to academic engagement among the black students in their study did not vary by school racial composition. To date, however, observations based purely on racial composition are not completely consistent, since both Wildhagen (2011b) and Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) produced full and partial null findings, respectively, regarding the effects of racial composition alone. These disparate results are possibly attributable to the range of indicators and measures used to capture academic orientations across studies; therefore, a

comprehensive examination of the effects school racial contexts have on a wide set of academic orientation indicators would help reconcile these differences in results.

Also, in considering the mechanisms for the effects of school racial composition, Goldsmith (2004) hypothesized that the relationship between having higher academic orientations and attending high-minority schools is at least partly related to a minority peer effect that normalizes and strengthens these attitudes among groups of blacks and Latinos, although such effects have rarely been tested at the friend group level. Wildhagen (2011b) did examine the racial composition of students' three closest friends as it related to their experiences of social sanctions and found no significant effects, but additional studies are needed to further examine this possibility across a broader number of friends and academic orientation indicators. It would thus be helpful to the field to consider friend group characteristics in testing oppositional culture and acting white hypotheses across contexts—a consideration undertaken in the present study.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, because recent evidence on the effects of oppositional culture has largely been context specific and qualitative, very few studies have closely examined the most essential question regarding this phenomenon: whether it actually predicts racial differences in educational outcomes. As Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell (2002) noted, "It is important to remember that the goal of oppositional culture theory is to explain racial/ethnic differences in school performance. Merely locating racial differences in behavior that we think represents peer-group opposition does not constitute support for the theory unless these behaviors also mediate racial differences in school performance" (pp. 161–62). Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell found that two specific indicators of negative peer effects spotlighted by previous research were neither robust predictors across repeated samples nor consequential for actual achievement differences. Wildhagen (2011a) found no evidence that any relationship between social sanctions and achievement explains racial disparities in achievement outcomes in the national aggregate of high school students. However, Fryer and Torelli (2010) did in fact find that the popularity penalty accounts for approximately 11 percent of the achievement gap among black and white high achievers specifically. Still, these are the only three studies we are aware of that examine this relationship, and each uses fairly specific and very different indicators, yielding some variation in results that warrant further investigation.

In sum, while the oppositional culture and acting white hypotheses are popular explanations for black-white achievement disparities in US schools, emerging research has begun to substantially narrow the context in which these phenomena may actually occur. The most likely context seems to be integrated schools, particularly those that have disparate opportunity structures within their walls, and with some suggestion of particularly strong effects in predominantly white schools. To date, however, among the few oppositional culture studies that acknowledge the potential effects of school racial composition, the research has been disparate in instrumentation and design. Moreover, few studies have considered racial composition of the friend group as a factor, and only a handful of inquiries have considered the actual effects these orientations

have on achievement, with mixed approaches and results. Given these inconsistencies and gaps in the extant research, this study provides a comprehensive examination that accounts for several emerging trends in oppositional culture discussions, including simultaneously considering the effects of school setting, friend group racial composition, and the impact of any race-based differences in academic orientations on actual racial disparities in achievement.

## The Present Study

Using survey data from nearly 25,000 students at 101 middle and high schools across 10 states, we first examine how well academic orientation indicators relate to actual student achievement, and then estimate whether potential racial differences in these indicators have implications for racial achievement disparities (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Wildhagen 2011a). In the process, we build directly on the available qualitative studies (Tyson 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005) and large-scale quantitative inquiries (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Goldsmith 2004; Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder 2001; Wildhagen 2011b) that explore how any race-based opposition to schooling may be influenced by a school's racial composition. We also extend this body of research by examining hypothesized peer effects (Goldsmith 2004) through our estimations of the degree to which the racial composition of students' close friend groups serves as a vehicle for pro-academic orientations among black students. Our research hypotheses are based on four major tenets of oppositional culture and acting white arguments:

1. Being less academically oriented will be negatively associated with achievement for all students.
2. Overall, black students will report more oppositional orientations toward schooling—lower educational aspirations, fewer positive and more negative peer pressure experiences, less engagement with academic activities, and fewer achievement-related behaviors—than their white counterparts. This effect will be consistently exaggerated for black students who have a higher proportion of same-race close friends.
3. Black students in schools with higher concentrations of white students will report more oppositional attitudes toward schooling than their counterparts in less white schools.
4. Disproportionately strong oppositional attitudes among black students in schools with higher concentrations of white students will contribute to achievement disparities between those black and white students.

## Participants

We test these four hypotheses using student survey data from the Assessment of Secondary School Student Culture (ASSSC), which was collected from 101 secondary schools across 10 states during the 2000–2001 school year in an effort to help participating schools and districts understand their racial achievement gaps (Ferguson 2002). The surveys were administered by classroom teachers and school administrators, and then compiled by independent researchers.

No identifying information was collected from students, to ensure their anonymity in the process. The complete data represent survey responses from more than 36,000 students in 7th to 11th grade, of whom approximately 20 percent were black and 48 percent were white.<sup>2</sup> This analysis uses the subset of black and white students, who number 7,208 and 17,659, respectively, and a total of 24,867 participants. As with national trends, home conditions and resources in these data tended to favor white students: 75 percent of white students reported living with both parents, whereas only 34 percent of black students did, and 53 percent of white students reported having more than 250 books in their home, while this figure for black students was only 18 percent. As is also common in the literature, the white students in this sample reported higher achievement outcomes than their black counterparts: the average black student GPA in the sample was 2.61, while for whites it was 3.30. Course placement trends were similar: only 14 percent of black 11th graders in this sample reported having taken AP English, compared to 22 percent of whites. Also, while only 10 percent of black respondents at any grade level reported having ever been in a gifted and talented program in secondary school, that figure for white students was 18 percent.<sup>3</sup>

At the school level, the student populations on average were 59 percent white, although a reasonable range of racial compositions were represented. Only 17 percent of schools in the study were more than 75 percent white, and black students in the sample attended schools that were on average slightly more non-white than white (51 percent non-white). Thus, the data utilized here have dual advantages. First, they have a strong representation of students from the context hypothesized to be most fertile for occurrences of oppositional culture and acting white—that is, mostly white schools where white students are both numerically and socioeconomically dominant (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Goldsmith 2004; Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder 2001; Tyson 2011). Second, these data include substantial representation from a wide range of school racial contexts, including largely non-white schools.

## Measures

The measures used in this study were taken from items on the ASSSC survey and are described below. Indicators of academic orientation were included in this study contingent on their being both representative of relevant theory and significantly related to student achievement in these data ( $p < .05$ ). Descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables can be seen in table 1.

### Academic achievement

Academic achievement was captured through students' self-reported GPA from the previous academic term, as measured by an 11-point Likert scale ranging from "A" to "D-/F." Grade reports have been checked for validity using race-by-gender data from student transcripts, and comparisons revealed only moderate levels of inflation, with no significant differences in GPA rankings across race and gender groups (Ferguson 2002).



**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Independent and Dependent Variables and Covariates (n = 24,867)**

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Aspirations: What is the highest level that you would like to go in school? Postgraduate degree" (yes = 1, no = 0)	0.338	0.473	0	1
Affect toward school: Degree of agreement with the following statement: "I am happy to be at this school" (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 4 = "Strongly agree")	3.015	0.713	1	4
Positive peer pressure: Degree of agreement with the following statement: "My friends want me to study harder than I do" (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 4 = "Strongly agree")	2.150	0.728	1	4
Positive peer pressure: How important do your friends think it is to continue their education past high school? (1 = "Not important at all" to 4 = "Very important")	3.612	0.638	1	4
Academic behaviors: On weekdays after school, how many hours per day on average are you studying and doing homework? (1 = "No time" to 7 = "8+ hours")	3.618	1.200	1	7
Academic behaviors: How often do you really pay attention in class? (1 = "Never" to 6 = "Always")	4.538	1.036	1	6
Negative peer pressure: Think of times you did not study for a test or did not complete homework during the last year. Which of the following reasons were most important? ("My friends wanted me to do something else") (yes = 1, no = 0)	0.115	0.319	0	1
Racial composition of friend group: Are any of your six closest friends of a different race/ethnicity than yourself?				
Most (yes = 1, no = 0)	.135	.342	0	1
None (yes = 1, no = 0)	.209	.407	0	1
What was your grade point average last term? (0.5 = D-/F to 4 = A)	3.107	0.816	0.5	4
School percentage white	58.893	16.337	0	100
Black (1 = black, 0 = white)	0.290	0.454	0	1
Male (1 = male, 0 = female)	0.496	0.500	0	1

*(Continued)*

Table 1. *continued*

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Has taken remedial math at some point since 6th grade (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.220	0.415	0	1
Has taken remedial English at some point since 6th grade (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.199	0.399	0	1
Has been in special education at some point since 6th grade (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.056	0.229	0	1
Has been in gifted education at some point since 6th grade (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.158	0.365	0	1
Few books (under 25 books in the home) (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.110	0.312	0	1
Many books (over 100 books in the home) (1 = yes, 0 = no) <sup>a</sup>	0.678	0.467	0	1
One or no parents in the home (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.253	0.435	0	1
One parent and stepparent (1 = yes, 0 = no) <sup>b</sup>	0.092	0.290	0	1
Parents have a high school education or less (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.137	0.290	0	1
Parents' highest education level is at least some postsecondary education (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.111	0.247	0	1
Parents have at least some postgraduate education (1 = yes, 0 = no) <sup>c</sup>	0.298	0.391	0	1
No computer in the home (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.086	0.281	0	1
More than one computer in the home (1 = yes, 0 = no) <sup>d</sup>	0.484	0.500	0	1
Few siblings (has 0 or 1 siblings in the home) (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.650	0.477	0	1
Many siblings (has more than 3 siblings in the home) (1 = yes, 0 = no) <sup>e</sup>	0.170	0.376	0	1
In high school (student is in high school) (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.599	0.490	0	1

**Note:** Omitted categories:

<sup>a</sup>between 26 and 99 books

<sup>b</sup>two natural parents in home

<sup>c</sup>parents' highest education is a college degree

<sup>d</sup>one computer in the home

<sup>e</sup>two siblings

**Academic behaviors**

Academic behaviors were assessed on two indicators. The first was a question that asked, “On weekdays after school, how many hours per day on average are you studying and doing homework?” The response options were on a 7-point scale that ranged from “No time” to “8+ hours.” The second was a question that asked, “How often do you really pay attention in class?” and the responses were on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Never” to “Always.”

**Negative peer pressure**

Negative peer pressure was captured by a dichotomous indicator that asked whether one of the most important reasons the student didn’t complete school assignments or studies over the past year was because the student’s friends wanted him or her to “do some something else.”

**Positive peer pressure**

Positive peer pressure was represented by two indicators. The first was an item that asked for the student’s level of agreement with the statement “My friends want me to study harder than I do,” with potential responses ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree” on a 4-point Likert scale. The second indicator was a question that asked how important the student’s friends think it is to “continue their education past high school,” which was also measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Not important at all” to “Very important.”

**Affect toward school**

Affect toward school was captured using the student’s level of agreement with the statement “I am happy to be at this school,” on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.”

**Academic aspirations**

Aspirations were measured by a dichotomous item that asked students whether the highest level they would like to go to in school was in the postgraduate range. This particular level was used because it was highly predictive of student GPA.

**School racial composition**

School racial composition was measured using the percentage of a given school’s student population that reported their race as white, which is consistent with extant literature on the impact the percentage of white students in a school has on black students’ attitudes toward achievement (Fryer and Torelli 2010; Goldsmith 2004; Wildhagen 2011b).

**Friend group racial composition**

Friend group racial composition was captured by two dichotomous items indicating whether “most” or “none” of the students’ closest friends were of other races.

## Demographic controls

Demographic controls included students' race, gender, whether they were in high school or middle school, and several proxies for socioeconomic background, including parents' highest level of education, number of parents in the home, number of siblings in the home, number of books in the home, and indicators of home possessions.

## Academic tracks

For models predicting GPA, controls for a student's academic track experiences were accounted for, including whether or not the student had been in special education, remedial education, or gifted education courses since the 6th grade. These items were chosen because of their applicability across all included grade levels.

## Procedures

This study employed multilevel hierarchical regression analyses to estimate the relationships between academic orientation indicators and achievement, as well as the associations between race and academic orientations among black and white students across secondary schools with a range of racial compositions. These analyses were then used to estimate the impact of academic orientations on potential black-white differences in GPA. The modeling building sequence first considered the effects the question predictors alone had on outcome variables. We then incorporated the relevant demographic control variables into a second set of models with the question predictors, and next included theoretically relevant interaction terms in a third set of comparative models. Finally, to assess whether the racial composition of black students' friend groups contributed to their academic orientations, we ran a fourth set of separate models for black students specifically. Missing data were addressed using multiple imputation and stochastic regression techniques.

## Results

### *Academic Orientations, Race, and GPA*

The first task of this analysis was to demonstrate the magnitude and relationship between academic orientation indicators and academic performance. The results shown in table 2 display regression coefficients for the effect of these academic orientations on GPA when controlling for both social background characteristics and academic track experiences. The results indicate that seven indicators of pro- and anti-academic orientations were significantly associated with GPA. Six of these seven effects occurred in expected ways: five pro-academic indicators in the categories of aspirations, study habits, and positive peer pressure were positively associated with GPA, and the lone negative orientation indicator—negative peer pressure against studying—was associated with lower GPAs among students who reported experiencing it. In one potentially

**Table 2. Unstandardized Black-White Differences in the Relationship between Academic Orientations and Grade Point Average ( $n = 24,867$ )**

Variable	Main effect	Black interaction term	Black effect differential
Aspire to postsecondary education	.229***	-.001	-
Happy to be at this school	.159***	-.050***	-31.45%
At times I didn't because my friends wanted me to do something else	-.268***	.143***	-53.36%
How important do your friends think it is to continue their education past high school?	.132***	-.086***	-65.15%
How many hours per day do you study?	.126***	-.028***	-22.22%
How often do you really pay attention in class?	.144***	-.012	-
My friends want me to study harder than I do	-.227***	.122***	-53.74%

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

counterintuitive finding, however, agreement with the statement “My friends want me to study harder than I do” was actually associated with lower GPAs for the respondents. This finding is sensible, though; it is likely that students with lower GPAs are under more pressure from their friends regarding studying because their friends are concerned about those students’ performance. Intra-class correlations across models suggested that between 14 and 15 percent of the variance in GPA was attributable to school-level variation; however, school racial composition was not a significant predictor of GPA, nor did it moderate the way race predicted GPA in these models. Thus, this finding suggests that factors outside school racial composition explain school-level variance in students’ grade point averages.

Also, previous research has established a directionality of the relationship between academic orientation indicators and achievement; while there may be some reciprocity across school subjects, on average it is attitudes that predict achievement, rather than the reverse (Kush, Watkins, and Brookhart 2005; Graham, Berninger, and Fan 2007; Ma and Kishor 1997; Schibeci and Riley 1986). Overall, then, given that the current findings show that more positive academic orientations were in fact associated with improved academic performance among participants in this study, we reasonably conclude that more positive attitudes can be expected to yield improved academic outcomes among these black and white youth in integrated schools. Across the six items, one-unit changes in the indicators were associated with differences in students’ grades ranging from approximately .13 to .27 GPA units. In relative terms, a one-standard-deviation difference in any single academic orientation is associated with a one-tenth to two-tenths difference in GPA units. Generally, then, controlling for social background characteristics, across school racial contexts students expressing more

pro-academic orientations and/or less oppositional culture attitudes and behaviors are performing better in school.

After confirming that these indicators were in fact related to academic achievement, we then considered whether the relationships between academic orientations and GPA were the same for black and white students in these integrated schools, independent of the effects of socioeconomic background characteristics. The results are also presented in table 2. Our findings show that in five of seven cases, the relationships between both pro- and anti-academic orientation indicators and GPA were substantially diminished for black students. Each of these five interactions was statistically significant, and these attenuations for black students ranged from approximately 22 percent smaller for the effect of hours studying on GPA, to approximately 65 percent smaller for the effect of friends wanting to continue their education past high school. Only the effects on GPA of aspiration toward postgraduate education and the frequency of paying attention in class were not significantly influenced by race. These findings on diminished returns for pro-school attitudes and behaviors are consistent with Goldsmith's (2004) study of attitudes and school context. Findings here may also relate to Wildhagen's (2011b) findings that test scores and other qualifications underpredict AP course enrollment for black students. Overall, then, while these academic orientation indicators are significant predictors of academic outcomes for black and white students, in most cases the relationships are substantially smaller for black students. As we will explore later, the fact that these orientations are less robust predictors for black students limits the degree to which differences in academic orientations can be expected to make a meaningful contribution to black-white achievement disparities.

### ***Racial Differences in Academic Orientations***

After determining that academic orientations do in fact have important consequences for academic performance, we sought to determine whether there were differences between black and white students in the academic orientation indicators. Given the tenets of established and emerging oppositional culture theory, in each phase of the process we addressed two key considerations: (1) the degree to which any racial differences in orientation toward academics were explained by individual students' socioeconomic background characteristics; and (2) whether the racial composition of schools and friend groups was influential. The results for each orientation domain are presented below.

#### **Educational aspirations**

We tested the proposition that there are racial differences in educational aspirations (Ogbu 1978, 2003) by comparing the degree to which black and white students aspired to earn postgraduate degrees, an outcome that was the most robust predictor of secondary school GPA among our indicators. The results of this analysis are shown in table 3. As seen in model 1, when considering only race, it does appear that black students are in fact less inclined to aspire to postgraduate education than their white peers in integrated secondary schools.

**Table 3. Logistic Regression Coefficients for the Relationship between Race and Postgraduate Aspirations (overall  $n = 24,867$ ; black students model  $n = 7,208$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Black students
Black	-0.429***	0.179***	0.236 <sup>+</sup>	-
Male		-0.359***	-0.358***	-0.772***
Few books in the home		-0.265***	-0.265***	-0.274***
Many books in the home		0.365***	0.365***	0.299***
One parent in the home		-0.049	-0.049	-0.115 <sup>+</sup>
One parent and stepparent		-0.045	-0.045	0.014
Parents have a high school education or less		-0.088	-0.088	-0.096
Parents have some postsecondary education		0.263***	0.263***	0.294*
Parents have at least some postgraduate education		1.258***	1.259***	0.942***
No computer in the home		-0.216**	-0.215**	-0.280***
More than one computer in the home		0.234***	0.235***	0.148*
Few siblings in the home		0.047	0.047	0.127 <sup>+</sup>
Many siblings in the home		0.006	0.006	-0.101
In high school		0.022	0.022	0.123 <sup>+</sup>
School percent white		-0.002	-0.002	-0.003
Black $\times$ percent white			-0.001	-
Most friends of other races				0.138 <sup>+</sup>
No friends of other races				-0.248***
Intra-class correlation	.017	.003	.004	.005

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$  <sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$

This difference, however, disappears and actually reverses once we control for students' socioeconomic background. The findings presented in model 2 suggest that once parental education and family economic indicators are introduced to the model, black students are slightly more likely (odds are 1.2 to 1 favoring black students) to have higher postgraduate aspirations than their white counterparts from comparable socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, the interaction effect in model 3 between blacks and school percentage white is not significant. Thus, school racial composition was not a factor in these results.

Model 4 shows the within-race comparison of black students who have friend groups of varying racial compositions. Results suggest that, when controlling for socioeconomic background characteristics, having friends mostly of other races has no aspirational benefit to black students. However, black students with no friends of other races are slightly less likely to aspire to a postgraduate

education at the same rate as their black peers with racially integrated friend groups (odds are approximately 1.3 to 1 favoring black students with integrated friend groups). Still, given that 77 percent of black students have friends of other races, this finding is both slight and relevant only for a somewhat small portion of black secondary school students. Overall, our findings show that black students are in general more likely than their white counterparts to have the highest possible educational aspirations, and that differences favoring whites are largely a product of disparities in socioeconomic status. It is also worth noting that, while many achievement gaps persist between blacks and whites from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Ferguson 2007; Jencks and Phillips 1998; Wildhagen 2011a), several studies suggest that blacks are able to convert comparable economic resources into higher levels of high school and college completion than their white counterparts (Mangino 2010, 2012; Mason 1997; Maxwell 1994). Thus, while our earlier findings suggest that black students experience some attenuated returns to their higher aspirations, there is evidence that these aspirations, as Mangino (2010) notes, are not simply “abstract optimism” (166).

### Academic behaviors

Oppositional culture scholarship has also suggested that black students lag behind their white peers in integrated suburban schools because of low effort and academic disengagement (Obgu 2003). We have tested these assumptions with two indicators that are positively associated with academic achievement: hours students spend studying per day, and how frequently students pay attention during class. Results are shown in tables 4 and 5.

As with aspirations, we see here that, when considering only race (table 4, model 1), black students do in fact report studying less than their white counterparts on a nightly basis. However, with the introduction of socioeconomic background characteristics in model 2, we can see that this black-white difference again largely disappears and the modest remaining difference favors black students. Differences in the schools’ racial composition are not significantly related to racial differences in study habits. Also, as with aspirations, model 4 shows that black students with no friends of other races spend less time studying on average than black students with more friends of other races. Moreover, having most of one’s friends be of other races was positively related to time spent on homework, independent of socioeconomic background. It is possible, however, that these friend group effects are related to well-known racial disparities in course placements, which would suggest that black students with no friends of other races are in lower course tracks than their peers with more friends of other races. In a post-hoc analysis, we tested this possibility by controlling for whether students had been in gifted and talented programming since the 6th grade, and the friend group effect was indeed no longer significant. Thus, it is likely that course track has more influence on racial differences in time spent doing homework than do racial peer dynamics.

Findings for paying attention in class are similar in terms of the main effects of race, but they do not support any friend group racial composition effect (table 5).



**Table 4. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for the Relationship between Race and Hours Studying Per Night (overall  $n = 24,867$ ; black students model  $n = 7,208$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 1	Model 3	Black students
Black	-0.191***	0.102***	0.097	-
Male		-0.462***	-0.462***	-0.409***
Few books in the home		-0.202***	-0.202***	-0.223***
Many books in the home		0.181***	0.181***	0.191***
One parent in the home		-0.169***	-0.169***	-0.133***
One parent and stepparent		-0.113***	-0.113***	-0.107*
Parents have a high school education or less		-0.210***	-0.210***	-0.122**
Parents have some postsecondary education		0.014	0.014	0.128*
Parents have at least some postgraduate education		0.188***	0.188***	0.193***
No computer in the home		-0.138***	-0.138***	-0.150***
More than one computer in the home		0.033*	0.033*	0.018
Few siblings in the home		0.054**	0.054**	0.070*
Many siblings in the home		0.013	0.013	-0.016
In high school		0.046	0.046	0.039
School percent white		0.000	0.000	0.000
Black $\times$ percent white			0.000	-
Most friends of other races				0.099*
No friends of other races				-0.129**
Intra-class correlation	.22	.20	.20	.20

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$

Results show that, while there are no significant differences between black and white students when considering race alone, model 2 indicates that some slight advantages emerge for black students after controlling for socioeconomic background. We also see in model 3 that the interaction between blacks and school racial composition is significant but miniscule. In practical terms, a 10 percent increase in school percentage white is associated with a .02-standard-deviation decrease in paying attention for black students, a finding that has no practical significance. Overall, then, when considered along with the previous results for time spent studying, these findings on academic behaviors suggest that, across school contexts, observed black-white differences in academic behaviors that favor white students are generally a function of class background, not culture. School racial composition was a non-factor here, and while friend group racial composition was a factor, it was not a factor for students with more similar course-taking experiences.

**Table 5. Unstandardized Coefficients for the Relationship between Race and Really Paying Attention (overall  $n = 24,867$ ; black students model  $n = 7,208$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 1	Model 3	Black students
Black	-0.006	0.134***	0.252***	-
Male		-0.228***	-0.227***	-0.193***
Few books in the home		-0.161***	-0.161***	-0.108**
Many books in the home		0.113***	0.114***	0.081**
One parent in the home		-0.126***	-0.125***	-0.108***
One parent and stepparent		-0.136***	-0.136**	-0.078
Parents have a high school education or less		-0.083**	-0.082	-0.068
Parents have some postsecondary education		-0.035	-0.037	-0.033
Parents have at least some postgraduate education		0.019	0.019	0.027
No computer in the home		0.015	0.017	0.024
More than one computer in the home		-0.004	-0.003	-0.010
Few siblings in the home		0.017	0.017	0.000
Many siblings in the home		-0.023	-0.023	-0.049
In high school		-0.143***	-0.145***	-0.051
School percent white		-.002*	-0.001	-0.003**
Black $\times$ percent white			-0.002*	-
Most friends of other races				0.032
No friends of other races				-0.045
Intra-class correlation	.10	.08	.07	.08

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$

### Affect toward school

Affect toward school is captured here by students' reported happiness at their particular school, which as noted above is positively related to GPA. The results here differ from those in the previous analyses; as seen in table 6, even after controlling for socioeconomic background, black students are still slightly less happy at their schools than their white counterparts. The school racial composition interaction term is also significant and directionally similar to results for paying attention in class, but again the relationship has negligible practical impact. In terms of the racial composition of students' friend groups, we see that, as with aspirations and time spent studying, black students with friends who are mostly of other races are happier at their schools than black students with some or no friends of other races. Moreover, post-hoc analyses demonstrated that this finding was robust to controls for accelerated coursework experiences. This finding is sensible, though, given that black students are less happy

**Table 6. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for the Relationship between Race and Being Happy at This School (overall  $n = 24,867$ ; black students model  $n = 7,208$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 1	Model 3	Black students
Black	-0.179***	-0.110***	0.016	-
Male		-0.034***	-0.034***	0.082***
Few books in the home		-0.035*	-0.034*	-0.025
Many books in the home		0.038**	0.039**	0.022
One parent in the home		-0.095***	-0.094***	-0.078***
One parent and stepparent		-0.073***	-0.073***	-0.056+
Parents have a high school education or less		-0.069***	-0.069***	-0.011
Parents have some postsecondary education		-0.015	-0.016	0.046
Parents have at least some postgraduate education		0.007	0.007	0.049
No computer in the home		-0.015	-0.013	-0.013
More than one computer in the home		-0.021*	-0.020*	-0.034
Few siblings in the home		-0.002	-0.002	-0.014
Many siblings in the home		-0.007	-0.007	-0.053*
In high school		0.029	0.028	-0.040
School percent white		0.001	0.002+	-0.002+
Black $\times$ percent white			-0.002**	-
Most friends of other races				0.059*
No friends of other races				-0.092***
Intra-class correlation	.20	.20	.20	.17

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$  +  $p < .10$

at these integrated schools overall. It follows that having more black friends could magnify that main effect. Overall, it seems that black students are less happy than their white peers about being in mostly integrated schools, particularly those blacks who have fewer friends of other races.

### Negative peer pressure

To examine potential racial differences in negative peer pressure, we assessed the influence of peers on distracting students from studies during out-of-school time. As seen in table 7, model 1, the findings show that being black is associated with fewer reports of having been distracted from studies by peers, regardless of socioeconomic background. Moreover, once socioeconomic background is controlled for in model 2, we find that white students are notably more likely (1.7 to 1) to report that alternate activities offered by their friends have taken their attention away from their studies at any time over the past year. Here, neither

**Table 7. Logistic Regression Coefficients for the Relationship between Race and Having Been Distracted from Work by Friends at Some Point in the Last Year (overall  $n = 24,867$ ; black students model  $n = 7,208$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 1	Model 3	Black students
Black	-0.212***	-0.510***	-0.386*	–
Male		0.294***	0.294***	0.367***
Few books in the home		0.368***	0.369***	0.289**
Many books in the home		-0.140**	-0.139**	-0.016
One parent in the home		0.122*	0.123*	0.097
One parent and stepparent		0.237**	0.237**	0.185
Parents have a high school education or less		0.162*	0.163*	-0.321*
Parents have some postsecondary education		-0.096	-0.096	-0.391*
Parents have at least some postgraduate education		-0.194**	-0.194**	0.026
No computer in the home		0.072	0.074	0.112
More than one computer in the home		-0.005	-0.004	-0.024
Few siblings in the home		-0.085	-0.085	-0.133
Many siblings in the home		0.108	0.108	0.196 <sup>+</sup>
In high school		0.152*	0.150*	-0.051
School percent white		0.003	0.004	0.003
Black $\times$ percent white			-0.002	–
Most friends of other races				-0.121
No friends of other races				-0.020
Intra-class correlation	.03	.02	.02	.01

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$  <sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$

the racial composition of students' schools nor that of their friend groups is a significant contributor to these findings. Thus, we do not find support for systematic reports of negative peer pressure from black students as a function of either dimension of school social environment measured here. We also see clearly that even in the unconditional race-only model, black students reported having fewer such pressures than their white counterparts.

### Positive peer pressure

Under the oppositional culture and acting white arguments, we would expect that black students receive less positive peer support for academic achievement than whites. Here, we examine positive peer pressure effects via two indicators that are associated with GPA: whether students' friends think it is "important to

continue their education past high school,” and whether their friends want them to study harder than they do.

The results for whether students’ friends think it is important to continue their education past high school are consistent with previous academic orientation indicators. Findings in table 8 demonstrate that, when considering only race, black students report having peers who give slightly less importance to continuing their education past high school than do the peers of their white counterparts. As with most previous indicators, this effect is also attributable to socioeconomic background. When controlling for background factors, the effect is almost fully reversed, with black students reporting that their peers give slightly higher levels of importance to postsecondary education. Also, as seen in the interaction terms in models 3 and 4, neither school racial composition nor friend group racial composition were significant factors in this analysis.

**Table 8. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for the Relationship between Race and Importance of Continuing Education Past High School (overall  $n = 24,867$ ; black students model  $n = 7,208$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 1	Model 3	Black students
Black	-0.068***	0.043***	0.099**	-
Male		-0.212***	-0.212***	-0.214***
Few books in the home		-0.099***	-0.099***	-0.059**
Many books in the home		0.055***	0.055***	0.004
One parent in the home		-0.065***	-0.064***	-0.052**
One parent and stepparent		-0.062***	-0.062***	-0.050+
Parents have a high school education or less		-0.127***	-0.127***	-0.030
Parents have some postsecondary education		-0.023	-0.024	0.023
Parents have at least some postgraduate education		0.044***	0.044***	-0.005
No computer in the home		-0.028+	-0.027+	-0.006
More than one computer in the home		0.022*	0.023*	0.020
Few siblings in the home		0.014	0.014	0.009
Many siblings in the home		-0.026+	-0.025+	-0.019
In high school		0.050**	0.049**	0.045*
School percent white		-0.001**	-0.001+	-0.002**
Black $\times$ percent white			-0.001+	-
Most friends of other races				0.029
No friends of other races				-0.038+
Intra-class correlation	.14	.10	.10	.07

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$  +  $p < .10$

Recall that our second positive peer pressure indicator, the degree to which students' friends want them to study harder than they do, is associated with lower GPA in the general population. Given the achievement differences between the aggregate black and white student populations in these schools (0.69 GPA difference), to assess whether this phenomenon has racial undertones independent of academic performance, we conducted an analysis of the main and interaction effects, controlling for both socioeconomic factors and student GPA (table 9). The results of that analysis show that, under those control conditions, black students still agree more strongly with the statement that their friends want them to work harder independent of academic performance, thus suggesting that black students experience higher levels of positive peer pressure across performance levels than whites. There was no

**Table 9. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients for the Relationship between Race and Friends Wanting Student to Study Harder (overall  $n = 24,867$ ; black students model  $n = 7,208$ )**

Variable	Model 1	Model 1	Model 3	Black students
Black	0.379***	0.190***	0.182***	–
GPA		-0.190***	-0.190***	-0.131***
Male		-0.002	-0.002	-0.011
Few books in the home		0.032 <sup>+</sup>	0.032 <sup>+</sup>	0.048 <sup>+</sup>
Many books in the home		-0.026*	-0.026*	-0.034
One parent in the home		0.028*	0.028*	0.001
One parent and stepparent		0.045**	0.045**	0.072*
Parents have a high school education or less		0.016	0.016	-0.037
Parents have some postsecondary education		0.019	0.019	-0.031
Parents have at least some postgraduate education		-0.033*	-0.033*	0.006
No computer in the home		0.070***	0.070***	0.081**
More than one computer in the home		0.008	0.008	0.013
Few siblings in the home		-0.026*	-0.026*	-0.051*
Many siblings in the home		-0.039*	-0.039*	-0.025
In high school		0.042**	0.042**	0.035
School percent white		-0.001*	-0.001 <sup>+</sup>	-0.001
Black × percent white			0.000	–
Most friends of other races				0.026
No friends of other races				-0.014
Intra-class correlation	.08	.05	.05	.04

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$  +  $p < .10$

difference in this outcome as a function of either school or friend group racial composition.

In sum, two clear patterns emerge across nearly all seven academic orientation indicators. First, although when considering race alone there appears to be some scattered evidence of oppositional culture among black students, once we account for measures of socioeconomic background, a more decisive and reversed pattern emerges whereby black students express more positive academic orientations across nearly all indicators. None of these findings were affected by school racial composition in any meaningful way. Additionally, findings here suggest that while friend group racial composition has no bearing on negative or positive peer pressure experiences, or paying attention in class, black students with fewer friends of other races do exhibit slightly lower aspirations, report fewer hours studying, and are less satisfied with their schools. The first two effects are likely reflective of course-taking patterns that tend to disfavor blacks, and the effect of friend racial composition on happiness likely results from the general pattern among black students of being less happy in these integrated school settings. These larger racial trends in course-taking and school happiness certainly merit continued investigation. With regards to potential racial friend group effects on differences in academic performance, however, given the main effects favoring black students and also the relatively low proportion of the black students with no friends of other races, these partial friend group effects are generally of no practical significance for achievement disparities.

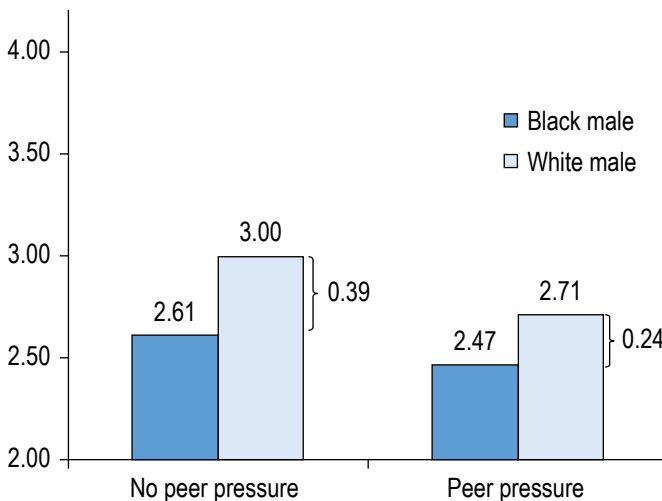
### ***The Effects of Racial Differences in Academic Orientations on GPA***

Given these findings on racial differences favoring blacks across school settings, an important and underexplored question in the literature is the degree to which racial differences in academic orientations actually impact existing racial differences in students' academic performance. The results here show that in nearly all cases, the effects of black-white differences in academic orientations are actually too small to make substantial contributions to existing racial disparities in academic performance beyond what is already attributable to socioeconomic background. For example, the analysis here shows that across race, students who aspire to postgraduate education have GPAs that average 0.23 points higher than their counterparts from comparable backgrounds who do not have postgraduate aspirations.<sup>4</sup> Although black students are somewhat more likely to have this aspiration than their white counterparts when holding socioeconomic background factors constant (about 33 percent for blacks and 25 percent for whites), the actual proportional difference in students with this aspiration is still not wide enough for the associated GPA effect to create more than a modest difference in the performance gap. Consequently, because of the slightness of the underlying proportional difference, the black advantage in the frequency of this high aspiration amounts to a narrowing of the racial achievement disparity by only approximately 0.02 GPA points. The effects are similar for nearly all of these indicators, with black-white differences in academic

orientations accounting for 0.01 to 0.02 points of the 0.47-point GPA gap among black and white students with similar social backgrounds. Thus, when accounting for socioeconomic background factors, our estimates suggest that racial differences in any single achievement-related behavior or attitude tested here are associated with at most a 4 percent difference, and on average a 2 percent difference, of the racial achievement disparities in GPA. These findings are similar to Goldsmith's (2004) results showing that across contexts, differences in attitudes toward achievement narrowed gaps in reading scores by at best just under a single point on a scale with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. Wildhagen (2011a) also found no system of relationships where racial differences in social sanctions related to subsequent differences in achievement outcomes. Thus, these three studies offer mounting evidence that racial differences in academic orientations are, at most, negligibly related to actual achievement disparities. This lack of impact is true even under control conditions where, as shown here, academic orientations generally favor blacks and potentially work to narrow gaps.

Still, while racial differences in academic orientations make only minor contributions to achievement disparities, the variation in how these qualities relate to achievement may have some important consequences for academic resiliency. In particular, as noted above, the negative peer pressure indicator of whether the competing priorities of friends had recently distracted students from their work is itself a moderate predictor of GPA differences. Notably, this negative peer pressure has less impact on black student achievement than on that of whites, and this interaction effect is demonstrated in figure 1, where the first set of columns demonstrates the GPA difference between black and white males controlling for social class background. Here, the disparity in GPA is approximately 0.39 points, favoring white students. The second set

**Figure 1. Black-white differences in GPA by negative peer pressure experience ( $n = 24,867$ )**





of columns shows the decrease in GPA for students who have experienced negative peer pressure; however, notice here that the black-white GPA disparity narrows to 0.24 points. This finding may suggest that black students in this case are slightly more resilient in the face of negative peer pressure. The effect reverses, however, when considering the attenuated effects that aspirations have on GPA for similar reasons, and while the other indicators have more modest effects on achievement and thus less influence here, the racial differences in the impact of these academic orientations still may merit further consideration.

## Limitations

There are a few threats to the validity of the findings presented here. The first and most important is the potential for students to respond to these surveys in socially desirable ways (Dillman 2007), given that they were administered by school personnel. However, these threats are minimized in large part by the fact that we are conducting a comparative analysis, so for social desirability to substantially bias the comparative results, we would need to believe that a racial pattern exists in such responses and is consistent across a wide set of measures. We do not believe that to be a reasonable assumption here, since validity checks on self-reported grades found no significant differences in GPA rankings across racial groups in these anonymous response surveys (Ferguson 2002). Also, as Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) note, to say a particular group is exhibiting such bias is to privilege one group's potential positivity bias over another's potential negativity bias. Such a notion is difficult to support in either direction, particularly since the orientations considered here do still predict actual achievement for both groups, unlike those in Mickelson's (1990) discussion of abstract versus concrete attitudes. Instead, what is more likely is that a number of potential uncaptured but theoretically tenable moderators are attenuating the relationship between academic orientations and actual performance for blacks specifically, some of which are discussed below.

It is also important to note that these data are from districts that participated in the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), a consortium of school districts with an expressed interest in working to reduce the racial achievement gap in educational outcomes. Because of this shared pro-equity interest, there is potential downward bias regarding the existence of a racialized oppositional culture in these schools. However, because MSAN had begun its work only a short time before the survey was administered, it is unlikely that there were any shared interventions or cultural shifts unique to or common across these schools at the time of data collection, beyond a demonstrated interest in equity. Also, districts are drawn from every region of the country and include integrated schools with precisely the characteristics that previous studies suggest are fertile ground for the development of oppositional culture. Thus, these data represent a large slice of the student experience in America's integrated public schools, and the findings are generally consistent with previous studies drawing from nationally representative samples.

## Discussion

This inquiry set out to test the oppositional culture argument in integrated schools, and whether emerging theory around school and friend group racial composition contributed to racial differences in academic orientations. The findings presented above confirm that when controlling for socioeconomic covariates, black students in these integrated schools outperformed their white counterparts on nearly all of the academic orientation indicators. Our findings also show, however, that these differences are generally modest, and that these indicators also relate to achievement differently for blacks and whites. Thus, differences in orientations contribute only negligibly to disparities in racial achievement. Still, the lack of impact that academic orientations actually have on racial disparities has been obscured in much of the previous research because their effect is often assumed but rarely empirically tested. Thus, this integrated analysis concludes that independent of social background, differences in education-related attitudes and behaviors are of little consequence to actual racial disparities in academic achievement.

In considering contributors to the attenuated returns on academic orientations for black students reported here, these findings are inconsistent with thought-action gap hypotheses (Mickelson 1990), largely because estimates here, as consistent with a few other studies, suggest that variation in academic orientations is in fact associated with consequential variation in student GPA (Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian 2009; Harris 2011). Furthermore, the findings here are not limited to attitudes and aspirations. In both our study and previous work (Ferguson 2002), black students' positive educational goals were backed up by their reported educational efforts, and in these inquiries the academic efforts were comparable among black and white students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and/or in similar academic courses.

We believe, then, that there are two more plausible explanations for these diminished returns on attitudinal and behavioral investments of black students. The first is that black students are more likely to be met with limited opportunity structures in integrated schools (Carter 2005; O'Connor et al. 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). More specifically, black students with pro-school attitudes and behaviors may still see their achievement affected by limited access to courses with higher levels of rigor and educational quality.

Another probable explanation is that racial differences in academic opportunities in the elementary years are a critical determinant of the degree to which academic orientations can even impact student performance later (Harris 2011; Harris and Robinson 2007). Harris and Robinson have in fact demonstrated that prior skills explain 50–75 percent of the relative differences in black and white achievement in secondary schools, and that once prior skills are accounted for, the effect of behaviors on achievement declines dramatically. Ferguson (2002) showed similarly that, while black and white secondary school students in similar classes actually spend about the same amount of time on homework, black students reported understanding less of their homework

and turning in less of it. In the current study, we see that where friend group racial composition predicted time spent studying, the effect disappeared when accounting for taking high-level courses. Thus, this study adds to the mounting evidence that early skills development and later educational opportunities are much more important than any oppositional culture in predicting black student achievement.

Additionally, we also sought to examine the implications of integrated school contexts for students' educational orientations. As it turned out, despite a reasonable range of school-level variance across outcomes, the racial composition of the schools was not related to students' academic orientations in this study in any meaningful way. The results here differ from Goldsmith (2004) regarding attitudes toward achievement, and from Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder's (2001) specific findings regarding affect toward school. The school racial composition measurements in those studies, however, were very different than the one employed here. Both studies included measures of teacher race in their considerations of school racial composition, and Goldsmith's study employed three nominal variables rather than a continuous measure of student racial composition. Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) also considered percentages of the students' own ethnicity rather than percent white. Even then, Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder's examination of behaviors related to academic engagement found no racial composition effects, as is the case here. The approach taken here has instead been more akin to those taken by Fryer and Torelli (2010) and Wildhagen (2011b). Yet, these studies assessed fairly specific and distinct constructs, with the former finding an effect on popularity based on racial composition alone, and the latter finding no such effect of racial composition on social sanctions. The study presented here expands on these findings by conducting a more comprehensive test of oppositional culture domains in a more diverse sample of schools than those in either previous study, and ultimately the results lend comprehensive support to Wildhagen's (2011b) and Tyson, Darity, and Castellino's (2005) suggestion that any racialized oppositionality, where it does exist, is likely a function of nuanced racial climate and opportunity factors, and not racial composition alone.

Moreover, the impact of the racial dynamics of black students' friend groups was mixed at most, with academic orientations more often than not being unrelated to this friend group factor. When the friend group effect was significant, it was not related to direct peer pressure, but rather to more autonomous indicators of hours spent studying, educational aspirations, and happiness at school that favored black students who had more friends of other races. As noted, the first two are likely functions of within-school racial stratification by academic course class levels. Moreover, only 23 percent of black students report having no friends of other races, and thus the vast majority of black students do not experience these peer effects. In all, the findings here lend quantitative support to the notion that where racialized differences in academic orientations among black students may exist, it is rare (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005) and altogether inconsequential in any practical sense (Wildhagen 2011a).

## Conclusion

Our work adds to the growing body of evidence suggesting that despite the continued attention that cultural attributions of achievement disparities receive in popular media, we may be “barking up the wrong tree” in our desire to blame oppositional culture for the black-white differences in educational outcomes in integrated schools (Diamond, Lewis, and Gordon 2007). In addition to providing additional support to the underacknowledged idea that racial differences in pro-schooling attitudes are a function of social advantage, these findings also suggest that the emerging concepts of the importance of school and friend group racial compositions also have very limited explanatory power. In the end, this study confirms the notion that the pursuit of race-based differences in academic orientations as a substantial contributor to black-white achievement disparities may be for naught, since existing differences matter so little in terms of racial disparities in actual achievement.

Overall, these findings support growing sentiment that efforts to understand black-white achievement disparities are best served by exploring the impact of students’ elementary school experiences, their economic backgrounds, and their opportunities in secondary school, including their access to high-level courses. We believe that our findings and those in other recent studies should propel the field beyond analyses that seek the causes of racial achievement gaps in black students’ beliefs, values, and affects.

## Notes

1. We recognize that the oppositional culture argument is but one part of Ogbu’s cultural-ecological framework. For a discussion of how the oppositional culture component of the framework fits into Ogbu’s larger intellectual project and how it overlaps with but is distinct from his work with Signithia Fordham and her independent work, please see Ogbu (2008). Some text in this paper also appears in Diamond, Lewis, and Gordon (2007); Diamond and Huguley (2011).
2. Because of the relatively small samples of 6th and 12th graders in the ASSSC data, we have focused on the subset of 7th through 11th graders for our analysis.
3. *T*-tests were used to establish that each of these racial differences was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).
4. This comparison employed a prototypical socioeconomic background found in the sample of having two parents at home with on average a college education, and near the median for home resource indicators.

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