Rejection or Confirmation of Racial Identity: A Dilemma for High-Achieving Blacks?

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The problems of underachievement or poor achievement among Black students has received much attention in the scholarly and professional literature. Many theories and explanations have been proposed to explain the achievement problems of Black students in general, and high-achieving Black students in particular. In this article we present an overview of that literature, giving special attention to research on peer pressure and its impact on achievement. Specifically, the phenomenon of "acting white" or "raceless" is discussed in an attempt to understand such poor achievement. Recommendations are offered for educators, parents, community leaders, and others who seek to reverse the problem of underachievement among Black students, thus ensuring their educational success.

Les problèmes reliés à la sous-performance ou à la piètre performance parmi les étudiants de race noire a été l'objet d'une grande attention dans les écrits académiques et dans la littérature professionnelle. Plusieurs théories et de nombreuses explications ont été proposées pour expliquer, d'une part le problème du rendement chez les étudiants de race noire en général et, d'autre part, la question du haut rendement chez d'autres étudiants de race noire en particulier. Dans cet article, nous présentons une revue de cette littérature, en tenant particulièrement compte de la recherche sur la pression sociale des pairs et de son influence sur le rendement. Plus spécifiquement, nous discutons du phénomène "acting white" ou "raceless" en vue de comprendre le problème du faible rendement. Des recommendations sont ici proposées à l'endroit des

éducateurs, des parents, des responsables communautaires, et de ceux qui veulent renverser le problème du pauvre rendement chez les étudiants de race noire afin d'assurer leur réussite scolaire.

In a compelling article entitled "Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Pyrrhic Victory?" published in the *Harvard Educational Review* (1988) Signithia Fordham argued that Black students must don a facade of "racelessness" if they want to succeed — that is, achieve vertical mobility. The phenomenon of racelessness is familiar enough, but it takes on a different hue when used in the context Fordham presents. Briefly, she asserts that Blacks must reject their own cultural heritage; they must identify with and, in effect, take on characteristics of the dominant culture in the process of "makin' it." Individuals who have "made it" might include professionals such as attorneys, doctors, corporate executives, professors, and those in other professions that place one in the middle to upper socio-economic strata. Fordham asserts that raceless individuals lack identification with, or a strong relationship to, the Black community. They have a strong, unequivocal commitment to the dominant ideology of the American social system, which is analogous to equality of opportunity for all, irrespective of race, color, creed, or national origin. This racelessness then becomes an escalator to middle-classdom (Hare, 1965).

The notion of racelessness or acting white is not new; as will be discussed later, many others have used terms similar to racelessness when describing the "hellish confusion" (McClain, 1983) — the price some Blacks pay for vertical mobility, which is the epitome of success for many Americans. As defined herein, acting white or race rejection involves the process of denying one's indigenous culture and all of its components as one seeks to adopt another. This process can be especially harmful to Blacks when the indigenous culture and the one being considered for adoption are at odds with one another. While an assessment of Fordham's interpretations of "racelessness" is presented, it is acknowledged that her main thesis is certainly apropos: For many Blacks, race rejection, however one defines it, is often a pyrrhic victory.

The primary purpose of this article is to present a sustained critique of Fordham's argument about "racelessness." In the present article, we begin with a brief discussion of the significance of group affiliation among many Blacks. We then review literature that addresses the myriad concepts of race rejection. Next, we examine theories of racial identity development, which is followed by an overview of race rejection relative to academic achievement. Fourth, we discuss certain inadequacies in the term racelessness as it applies to Fordham's sample; her interview interpretations are discussed to shed further, perhaps even new, light on the concept of race rejection or denial among Black youth. Finally, we draw implications for educators and others concerned about the many issues that threaten the education and success of Blacks.

The Significance of Group Affiliation Among Blacks

> If one wishes to understand the term "holy water," one should not study the properties of the water, but rather the assumptions and beliefs of the people who use it. (Szasz, as cited in Hilliard, 1979, p. 47)

The study of culture is vital to our understanding of those factors that can adversely affect the achievement and psychological well-being of culturally and racially diverse groups. For example, Blacks live in and must simultaneously negotiate a multiplicity of socializing agents. They must cope with the demands of both their own culture and the dominant white culture. Few educators would disagree that people are inextricably bound to their culture. Banks (1988) referred to this relationship as "cultural identification," defined as associations and attachments centering on regional, religious, social class, ethnic, and racial groups. Because the process of cultural identification is primarily ascriptive, group identification results in strong physical attachments, primordial affiliations, and a sense of peoplehood or togetherness (often a "we-they" or an "us-them" orientation) that is mainly emotional, unconscious, and unreflecting. Bank's idea of cultural identification resembles the idea of "fictive kinship," defined by Fordham (1988) as a cultural symbol of collective identity that implies a particular mind-set and world view unique to Blacks. Earlier, Fordham (1982) used the term "cultural inversion" whereby group

solidarity, advancement, and identity take precedence over individual achievement and upward mobility. Boykin (1986) alluded to the idea of communalism, defined as a receptivity to interdependence and the belief that group concerns transcend individual striving.

Maslow (1962) was perhaps the first to highlight the significance of peoplehood and belonging when he suggested that the sense of belonging is essential for mental health. Peoplehood, which is based on more than just skin color, represents a cultural symbol of collective identity, ethnic consolidation (Green, 1981), and mutual interdependence among Blacks. The terms describe the particular mind-set or world view of those persons who are considered to be "Black," and is used to denote the moral judgment the group makes on its members (Brain, 1972, p. 137). Smith (1989), for example, argued that race serves to create a common referent of peoplehood such that individuals tend to define themselves in terms of membership in a particular group. He also stated that history and genetics set forth an indissoluble and intimate identity with one's racial group rather than with the larger society. In other words, the collective identity, which manifests itself in the form of peoplehood, represents the sense of ethnic belonging that is important psychologically for people, in general, but may be most important for Blacks.

This sense of peoplehood is challenged primarily in school, when school and community compete for the Black child's loyalty. As stated by Weis (1985), Chimezie (1985), and MacLeod (1987), for some Black students, the mere act of attending school is evidence of a semiconscious — or even conscious — rejection of the Black culture. School is seen by some Blacks as a symbol of the dominant culture, which communicates both directly and indirectly that Blacks must become "un-Black" or "invisible" to succeed.

However, some Blacks are not willing to assimilate, to buy into the values ascribed to by the majority culture. Thus, to reinforce the belief that they are still "legitimate" members of the Black community, Black youth may sabotage any chance they have of succeeding outside of the Black community. With this "anti-achievement ethic" (Granat, Hathaway, Saleton, & Sansing, 1986), Black students may drop out, underachieve, and

otherwise fail to achieve to their academic potential in school. MacLeod (1987) has contended that some Blacks do not value academic achievement highly and seek non-academic activities to massage their self-esteem and temper the negative onslaughts of academic failure. This underachievement may be especially evident when Black youth attend predominantly white schools. During this time, they may become even more confused about which culture to support because of the different values and beliefs espoused.

An unhealthy sense of belonging — whereby people reject or deny their race — works in opposition to the sense of peoplehood. As the following sections indicate, race rejection manifests itself in many ways; but regardless of which pattern it assumes, the Black culture (characterized by fictive kinship, peoplehood, or parakinship) is endangered when Blacks reject their race and otherwise negate their affiliation with the Black community.

Race Rejection: A Historical Perspective

> Two kinds of forces have always been at work in the Black community: (1) centripetal forces — elements that draw members of a minority toward their group; and (2) centrifugal forces — those elements that magnetize minority group members in the direction of the dominant group's cultural values, societal norms, and institutional arrangements. (Blackwell, 1975, p. 282)

Chimezie (1985) contended that poor identity development is the result of several influences — some social, some economic, some psychological. This poor identity may result in race rejection, denial, or "acting white." Hare (1965) argued that "acting white" or the "Black Anglo-Saxon" mentality originated during the times of slavery when the half-caste children of white slave masters received such preferential treatment as education or freedom. This treatment precipitated color-based discrimination among Blacks themselves. Hare (1965) defined "Black Anglo-Saxons" as people who shed the stifling blanket of social insignificance and, denouncing their own history and mores, shoulder those of the dominant culture. *The Washington Afro-American* defined a Black

Anglo-Saxon as "an animal who can shuffle his feet and keep his eyes on the ground when he's talking to white people, and stand up before colored [Black] people and demand immediate equality" (Hare, 1965, p. 18).

Race rejection may explain the tendency of some Blacks to express embarrassment at the "uncouth" or "un-white" behavior (for example, shouting in the presence of whites, speaking non-standard English) of other Blacks. In these instances, such Blacks accuse other Blacks of "making it hard for the rest of us." For example, John Fisher, former editor of *Harper's Magazine*, quoted an anonymous Black author as saying that Blacks are an embarrassment and an abomination (Hare, 1965). Further, Black students in two studies cited by Fordham stated that they try hard not to be identified with other Blacks:

> I'm trying very hard to get away from Black people .... I live in an all [Black] area, but I don't even talk to anybody who lives near me. I've tried to maintain an image of myself in the school — getting away from those people. (Petroni & Hirsch, 1971, pp. 12, 20)

Another Black student stated,

> I dealt with my insecurities by wearing a veil of superiority. Except around my family and neighbors, I played the role — un-Black .... To whites, I tried to appear perfect — I earned good grades and spoke impeccable English, was well-mannered and well-groomed. I behaved, hoping that no one would associate me with them. (Gray, 1985, pp. E1, E5)

These individuals aspire to identify with the dominant culture, want to become part of it, and accept the behaviors of the dominant culture as paradigms to be imitated. Almost a century ago, Cooley (1902) held that Blacks acquire a looking-glass self, an image they must keep grooming to become white figuratively. This is hardly surprising, Hare (1965) went on to say, considering that Black children enter a world in which whites come first and Blacks come last. To some Blacks, therefore, being Black is undesirable because it is a liability (Edwards, 1987) and one of the most onerous obstacles in the lives of some Blacks. Stated another way, Blacks in America may take on the prejudices of that society — including the

prejudice against Black people (Rose, 1949). This battle between rejecting and confirming one's cultural identity appears often in the works of DuBois (1965) who spoke of Blacks as harboring "two warring souls," as

> a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world .... One ever feels his two-ness, his unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (pp. 16-17)

The war rages on. The picture DuBois starkly painted illustrates the psychological ramifications, the onus, and the confusion of being Black or culturally different. Blacks must digest, live by, and synchronize the beliefs and values of both their Black culture and, just as significantly, those of the dominant white culture. Unfortunately, Blacks may encounter cultural conflict, "hellish confusion" (McClain, 1983), "psychological schism" (Edwards, 1987), a "triple quandary" (Boykin, 1986), and stress exerted by the duality of socialization or the struggle for assimilation into or acceptance by the dominant culture. All of the aforementioned terms describe the struggle over the demands of being Black and yet acting white to mitigate the harsh treatment and severe limitations that face Blacks in the opportunity structure. This conflict, meanwhile, is doubly stressful when the two cultures are antithetical. Leanita McClain, the first Black female elected to the Editorial Board of the *Chicago Tribune* in its 137-year history, represents the epitome of the struggle that some high-achieving Blacks confront. McClain also won the Peter Lisagor Award from the Headline Club, the 1983 Kizzy Award for Outstanding Black Women Role Models, and honors from the Chicago Association of Black Journalists for commentary. Subsequently, McClain was perceived by many as acting white. McClain once wrote, "I have had it with being patted on the head by white hands and slapped in the face by Black hands" (Campbell, 1984).

For some Blacks, the dilemma becomes most acute when focused on advanced formal education. Who are Black children to emulate? Which belief system should they incorporate? Black children who cannot resolve these tensions may pay both emotionally and psychologically. Many

successful Black women, for instance, show signs of hair loss, nervous exhaustion, chronic stomach pains, insomnia, depression, psychosomatic pains, and alcohol and substance abuse — stressors that lead to hypertension, diabetes, and strokes, which are the primary killers of Black women (Campbell, 1984). Perhaps the most illustrative case of such suffering was voiced by McClain (1983) who said that whites who reject her blackness frustrate her.

> I am burdened daily with showing whites that Blacks are people. I am, in the old vernacular, a credit to my race ... my brothers' keeper, and my sisters', though many have abandoned me because they think I have abandoned them .... I assuage white guilt. I disprove Black inadequacy and prove to my parents' generation that their patience was indeed a virtue. (p. C3)

In short, Blacks oftentimes experience overload, which results in a negative racial identity development. This "hypersensitivity" is a cultural orientation that many Blacks share and find difficulty shedding; it is a tendency to be preoccupied with race and racism (Campbell, 1984, p. 69). Moreover, if Blacks truly relinquish their cultural or racial identity, they are unable to function in the old world. They learn to wear a mask. McClain once asked, "I have made it, but where?" — a question many high-achieving Blacks may be unable to answer. Eventually, McClain committed suicide.

Theories of Racial Identity Development

Nigrescence or racial identity development is a nondiaphanous concept (Cross, 1989). Cross has proposed that an understanding of the term lends itself well to how the process that binds people together can also tear them apart. Further, knowledge of nigrescence is akin to personality development. Smith (1989) asserted that racial identity development is a process of coming to terms with one's racial group membership as a salient reference group. Rotheram and Phinney (1987) defined self-identification as the "accurate and consistent use of an ethnic label, based on the perception and conception of themselves as belonging to an ethnic group" (p. 17). Just as important, Nobles (1989) has contended that the

fundamental and only substantive justification for the study of Black psychology is that Blacks are culturally, philosophically, and spiritually distinct from other sociocultural groups.

Clearly, as contended by Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990), race and ethnicity affect psychological health. Therefore, the complexity of racial identity formation may increase as a function of color and physical features. The issue of color may be more salient for Blacks than any other minority group, and white youth are less likely to experience the chronic stress and problems associated with racial identity. Comer (1990) maintained that many Blacks lack a strong, constructive racial identity and mask their discomfort with being Black with a "big Black front" (p. 38) in which they make no effort to demonstrate excellence in academics, for example.

Two decades ago, Thomas (1970) generated a theory of racial identity development in which he described the transformational process by which Blacks become "Black." He submitted that before this transformation could occur, Blacks had to triumph over confusion of dependency on the white culture for self-validation, referred to as "Negromacy." Thomas hypothesized that during this process, Blacks progress through five stages in overcoming negromacy: 1) withdrawal, 2) testifying, 3) information processing, 4) activity, and 5) transcendental.

1) *Withdrawal*: Blacks withdraw into themselves rather than arbitrate relationships with whites or other racial and cultural groups. Malcolm X's statement that "there can be no Black-White unity until there is first Black unity" is oftentimes used to describe this stage.

2) *Testifying*: Blacks testify to all the anguish they have suffered by denying their blackness and expressing anxieties about being Black. This stage appears to reflect race rejection or denial, and may manifest itself in behaviors associated with acting white.

3) *Information Processing*: Blacks process all the information they have gathered relative to cultural heritage and Black history as they attempt to achieve a stronger sense of racial identity.

4) *Activity*: After processing the information gathered in the third stage, Blacks work through a particular group to find a connection with the larger Black experience. Such groups are readily apparent in the Black community (e.g., churches, Urban League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Professional Association of Black Business Alliance).

5) *Transcendental*: Blacks lose their concerns relative to race, social class, etc. and, thereby, view themselves as part of "humanity" (Thomas, 1970, p. 78). Such individuals, for example, may consider themselves as not just a "Black" person, but as an "American."

A year later, Cross (1971) described a theory of the "Negro-to-Black" conversion to explain as well the essence of racial identity for Blacks. Nigrescence was also characterized as a five-stage process: 1) pre-encounter, 2) encounter, 3) immersion-emersion; 4) internalization, and 5) internalization-commitment. The stages are described below and briefly applied to gifted or high-achieving Black students.

1) *Pre-encounter*: During this initial stage of identity development, Blacks view the world from a white frame of reference such that they think and behave in ways that negate their blackness.

As will be discussed later, Black youth who are perceived as acting white by virtue of supporting the American achievement ideology and taking on characteristics of the majority culture (e.g., wearing blue contact lenses, bleaching skin, straightening hair) might be placed in the pre-encounter stage or Thomas's (1970) testifying stage. Butler (1975) concluded that preencounter individuals suffer from poor self-concept, apathy, confusion, self-deprecation, and detachment from the Black community.

2) *Encounter*: During this second stage, Blacks want to be viewed as "human beings" rather than associated with any particular racial group. Within this stage of development, Blacks also experience an event that is inconsistent with their frame of reference. In the face of conflicting and startling information from an encounter, Blacks reevaluate their self-image, thereby becoming vulnerable and otherwise uncertain about their identity. After experiencing the encounter, individuals begin to reinterpret the world and to test or validate the new perceptions. Encounter entails two phases.

During the early phase, Blacks may be especially desirous of being perceived as a human being rather than as a "Black person," or they may prefer to be viewed as a "good student" rather than a "good Black student." Black students in predominantly white schools who are rejected by white peers because of skin color are likely to enter the encounter stage. This subsequent realization and awareness pushes them to consciously develop a Black identity. Out of a sense of confusion, guilt, anxiety, and betrayal, such Black students develop a stronger sense of blackness (Parham, 1989), which places them in the next stage of racial identity development.

3) *Immersion-Emersion*: Seemingly, this third stage is the antithesis of the preencounter stage. During this period of transition, individuals actually adopt a new frame of reference. In immersion, they struggle to rid themselves of an "invisible" identity and cling to all elements of blackness. In essence, all that is black is cherished and glorified. Hence, Black students might wear all-black colored clothes and support all-Black events to prove, so to speak, that they are indeed Black. During emersion, Blacks develop positive feelings about themselves, including Black pride. However, some Blacks experience euphoria, rage, effrontery, and high risk-taking; they may even become destructive. Likewise, they may underachieve or adopt an anti-achievement attitude to avoid the perception of "selling out."

4) *Internalization*: At this stage, Blacks may become more bicultural, pluralistic, and non-racist (Cross, 1978); tension, emotionality, and defensiveness are replaced by a calm, secure demeanor (Cross, 1980).

Because internalized Blacks are generally self-accepting and regard themselves positively, they learn to achieve academically without taking on characteristics of the dominant culture or rejecting the Black culture.

5) *Internalization-Commitment*: This final stage of racial identity development is distinguishable from the fourth stage because the individual becomes more active politically to bring about change for other Blacks. This is analogous to Thomas's (1970) fourth stage of development (i.e., activity). Activism is the mainstay through such instrumentalities as sit-ins and demonstrations that are becoming a familiar picture on college campuses.

Although Cross and Thomas's theories have been criticized for being too simplistic (Parham & Helms, 1985; Parham, 1989), they attempt to explain some of the psychological and social dilemmas confronting Black students as they struggle with achieving a strong sense of self in both the majority culture and their indigenous culture. Seemingly, increased acceptance of one's racial identity is achieved as one progresses through the stages of racial identity development just described.

Race Rejection and Academic Achievement

In the history of economic thought, education has consistently been a favored means of social improvement, especially for the poor (Ribich, 1968, p. 2). Too many Blacks are of low socio-economic status. In response to the civil rights movement, the decade of the 1960s heralded a flood of major efforts to address social injustices imposed on Blacks and education was proclaimed the primary solution to the problems of racial and social inequality.

Some of our most famous educators (e.g., Dewey, 1916) maintained that education is a social process and that schools are those forms of community life that are or should be most effective in bringing children's potentials to fruition. However, more contemporary data suggest that education is the road less traveled for some Blacks because it is *not*

necessarily the road to success. For some of them, the road is the same, irrespective of their level of education. Now, many dreams held by Blacks have been deferred; some dreams have been shattered, if one looks at data regarding dropout rates among Black students, for example. Schools have historically perpetuated racelessness through, for instance, the exclusive appreciation and teaching of white culture. As Hare (1965) observed, from kindergarten through college and beyond, cultural education consists of the inculcation of Anglo-Saxon myths and social, moral, and material values (p. 8). This statement may begin to explain why some Blacks, especially males, are found disproportionately among underachievers and drop outs — they do not necessarily support the American achievement ideology relative to efficacy of schooling (Ford, 1992). By abandoning their indigenous culture or rejecting their race, Blacks may be perceived by other Blacks as selling out or emptying their culture into America's melting pot. This process of assimilation represents progressive loss of cultural traits because it poses threats to the survival of the Black community. Poor racial identity development occurs when Blacks accommodate institutions that promote or transmit non-Black cultural elements that are antithetical to or not in harmony with the Black culture. In brief, such persons believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the lessening of a stereotype automatically ensures vertical mobility. But one can find more reasons for assuming a raceless persona. Namely, blackness is a barrier that limits and inhibits vertical mobility in the larger American society (Fordham, 1988, p. 81).

Equally important, the educational process largely ignores the contributions of Blacks to world civilization and is full of negative perceptions of Blacks and their culture; some Blacks may reject aspects of the Black culture. Some Blacks reject or deny their race to blunt the harsh treatment and severe limitations in the opportunity structure, believing that the doors of opportunity will swing open if they act white (Hare, 1965). In *Ain't No Makin' It*, MacLeod (1987) cogently demonstrated how beliefs affect the lives and thoughts of Black youth. The "Brothers" unconditionally buy into the American achievement ideology (equal opportunity, the efficacy of educational attainment, hard work, obedience, and attentiveness). Consider a statement by Derek, one of the Brothers:

> I know I want a good job when I get out [of school]. I know that I have to work hard in school. I mean, I want a good future. I don't wanna be doing nothing for the rest of my life. (p. 98)

Derek's statement is illustrative of those expressed by all the Brothers. They accept the norms and standards of school, and conform to its rule, believing that those who do not "make it" (p. 101) have only themselves to blame. Craig, another Brother, sums up the prevailing philosophy of the group: "If you work hard, it'll pay off in the end" (p. 98).

MacLeod (1987) proposed that the Brothers have failed to realize that dominant social groups determine what is valued in the educational system. The Brothers are unaware of processes that may hinder their progress and they consciously or unconsciously imitate middle-class values and endeavor to embody such values. Seemingly, the Brothers do not believe that prejudice and discrimination adequately explain why some Blacks do not succeed. That is to say, they are exemplars of how some Blacks may deny the existence of racial barriers to success. MacLeod suggested that the Brothers are indeed acting white to "make it" in school and, ultimately, the larger milieu. A statement made by Chris, a Brother, reinforces Hare's point of view regarding acting: "Watch when I go for a job in the city or something; I'll get it. They'll say, 'Minority — you got the job'" (p. 133). Essentially, acting white is one key to employment and all the security that tends to accompany it; employment is a source of security for many persons, irrespective of race.

Hare (1965) stated that others reject their race because of their obsessive belief that to break down discrimination, Blacks must impress whites by acting white, which has the advantage of permitting some Blacks to feel safe or neutral. In the process, they reveal a Black self when whites are not present and don a white self in the presence of whites. Ossie Davis, a famous Black playwright, apparently had this in mind when he wrote that some of the best acting in the world takes place in front of whites (Hare, 1965). In her article Campbell (1984) quoted a Harvard MBA working for an Atlanta-based telecommunications corporation as saying: "The choice to enter the corporation is a choice to conform. Loudness, street talking, afros, flashy cars — that's not what white folks

buy into. I've given up some self-expression" (p. 70). The Brothers illustrate, as well, how some Blacks may relinquish values and behaviors espoused by their indigenous culture to fit or assimilate into the larger society.

Given the aforementioned theories, definitions, and perspectives of race rejection, one is left to wonder whether Fordham (1988) has captured the essence of this phenomenon. The section that follows addresses some of the shortcomings inherent in the concept of racelessness as Fordham describes it.

Some Criticisms of Fordham's Interpretations of "Racelessness"

On the surface, Fordham's racelessness concept provides a compelling explanation for the academic success and upward mobility of some Blacks. As one probes beneath the surface, however, the explanations weaken and are at the very least open to question and further interpretation. First, Fordham's underlying assumption, stated both directly and indirectly, is that Blacks cannot be high achievers unless they take on characteristics of the dominant culture and alienate those who value the Black culture. But Banks (1979), Exum and Colangelo (1981), and others have demonstrated that Blacks can indeed become bicultural, defined as the ability to function in cultures that may be distinctly different. Bicultural individuals "code switch"; that is to say, they modify their behavior, style of dress, speaking, etc., depending upon the situation. Rather than lose their blackness, they seek to maintain cultural bonds. Campbell (1984) cited one successful Black person who stated: "Two company cars have been stolen from my driveway. But if we don't live in the Black community, there will be no role models for inner-city kids" (p. 70).

Second, Fordham appears to have misinterpreted some statements she presented as raceless. One vivid example is her interpretation of comments made by a Black disc jockey in Washington, DC: "I hate for people to say I sound white. I don't. It's a matter of speaking properly, and anyone can do that" (Gaines-Carter, 1984, p. 6). Fordham used this example to

illustrate how Blacks can become raceless through manner of speaking to circumvent the stigma attached to being Black.

Fordham also contended that several high-achieving Black students in her study (Monroe, Wendell, and Rita) are raceless. Yet, Monroe said he was pleased to show the potential of Blacks. Monroe maintained that he could not accept attending a private school when everything he cared about, including his family, was still living in a housing project. Similarly, although Wendell states that Blacks are ignorant as a group, Fordham acknowledged that he has fought to minimize the stereotypes frequently attributed to Blacks, including laziness, unproductiveness, and academic underachievement. His strategy to thwart such myths include doing well in school, thereby making a political statement against stereotypes.

These examples and those that follow lead one to ponder how an individual can be compelled to break myths about Blacks and be raceless at the same time. An alternative interpretation might be that Monroe, for example, epitomizes what Cross (1971) called internalization-commitment, since he has chosen to actively bring about change by demystifying myths. Fordham goes on to describe Rita, a confused and troubled high achiever who became "flabbergasted" when people asked her if she views herself as a White person (p. 67). Rita is cited as saying:

> Some — a lot of times I have people ask me that — "Do you think you are a white person?"! But I don't know, maybe it's me. Maybe I don't carry myself like a Black person. I don't know. *But I'm Black* [italics added]. And I can't go painting myself white or some other color, it's something I have to live with .... And it's not like herpes or something — it's not *bad*. Everybody's equal. (p. 68)

When one considers how Rita reiterates that she is indeed Black and that all people are equal, it becomes difficult to believe that she perceives herself as raceless. Even more disturbing, Fordham negates Rita's assertions that she is indeed Black. Based on her disparagement of those activities typically associated with Blacks, Rita appears to be searching for meaning, while maintaining her racial origins. For example, she enjoys Stevie Wonder because his music has meaning, yet dislikes Black music in

general. Given that Rita appears certain of, and comfortable with, being Black, Fordham may have interpreted individual differences, self-expression, and so forth as raceless. A final comment relative to Fordham's interpretation of racelessness in Rita concerns the student's dismay at attending a Black club. Rita states:

> this college ... said, "We have a Third World Club" — a place for Blacks! .... To even think that I would go to a college that has a club for Blacks! ... like, "Do they exist?" .... I mean it's like — "well, we put them aside in some other place ...." I don't appreciate it. (p. 69)

Albeit somewhat incoherently, Rita appears rather appalled and indignant about the fact that a *separate*, segregated club exists for Blacks. This indignation and anger are expressed by many Blacks who disdain segregation — by individuals who are not raceless. Martin Luther King Jr. frequently expressed such disdain. Another student, Katrina, expressed a similar dislike for Black music. Fordham's interpretation in both instances was that Rita's and Katrina's eschew of Black music illustrates their raceless personae. Again, there must be some room for individual differences. A person's not liking Black music has little correlation with his or her not liking blackness in general (or his or her own blackness in particular). Cross's (1971) theory of racial identity development, discussed earlier, suggests that individuals such as Rita may be in the *encounter* stage of racial identity development, characterized by a rather weak sense of racial identity development. Encounter individuals are not necessarily raceless, rather they are confused. The most illustrative example of misinterpretation by Fordham centers on comments made by McClain as a teenager:

> Why is there so much hate and contempt among people? I have never been blocked from anything because of my color, and *I'm not ashamed* [italics added] of it either .... Why can't people just be people and live in peace and harmony? Maybe I'm in search of the perfect world .... I love all people. Even pink polka-dotted ones with olive ears. (Klose, 1984, p. C3)

Although Fordham has cited McClain via Klose, she uses this passage as an example of race rejection. An alternative hypothesis or interpretation is that McClain, even as a teenager, was preoccupied with race, yet desirous of equality and equity, peace, and harmony. As an adult McClain cogently expressed her dislike of being isolated by and from Blacks. For example, in "How Chicago Taught Me to Hate Whites," published in *The Washington Post*, McClain (1983) lashed out against whites who ridiculed Blacks: "It would make me feel like gunning down every white face on the bus," she lamented (Campbell, 1984). Whether others perceive McClain as acting white is an entirely different issue because we clearly are not always what others think of us. McClain and others may appear to be raceless or un-Black — but to whom? In the final analysis, even though these students use language that may be interpreted as acting white or rejecting their race on the surface, the behaviors and comments of these students were not necessarily symptomatic of race rejection or denial.

To repeat, the statements from many of Fordham's subjects indicate that they readily acknowledge and accept their blackness. To state the obvious, such people may not necessarily reject their race. Thus, as one searches for bits of evidence to tease out the phenomenon of race rejection, one can appreciate the perennial observation that "life is not only choice, but also interpretation." Hence, the two crucial questions are, What did Fordham really find? and How accurate are her interpretations?

One must also consider the age of these students. It is quite possible that these adolescents are in the process of developing their own identities. They appear to ally themselves with their indigenous group in some instances, while on the other issues they demand individuality. In addition, Fordham may have delineated too sharply the significance of individual versus group goals or identity. For her, the idea of fictive kinship appears to preclude both individual and group allegiance. The passages cited earlier, however, suggest that Carter, McClain, and several interviewees in Fordham's sample have achieved as individuals and, just as important, they have achieved for the Black community.

Finally, unanswered by Fordham is how Black students in predominantly Black, urban school districts perceive the concept of racelessness. In discussing a recent study of underachievement among Black students in fifth and sixth grades, Ford (1991) contended that previous studies seeking to understand the phenomenon of "acting white" took place in racially integrated settings where the concept of acting white generates more immediacy to responses. The school district in which Ford conducted her study was almost 100 percent Black. As part of a larger study examining the perceptions Black students hold regarding social, cultural, and psychological determinants of underachievement, Ford found that Black youth (gifted and non-gifted) residing in an all-Black urban school district did not necessarily equate acting white with achievement, success in life, or even behavior unique to white students. In fact, the students sampled held neither negative nor derogatory connotations for the term, believing instead that acting white was a function of one's behavioral characteristics (speech, walk, dress) rather than academic characteristics.

Thus, unlike the findings of Fordham (1988), where students attended classes with whites, the concept of acting white was either unfamiliar to the majority of the 148 Black fifth and sixth graders interviewed by Ford (1991), or it did not have particularly negative, aversive connotations. For instance, one student commented, "When I make good grades, someone has said I act white .... When they look at TV, they only see white people making good grades." However, the majority of students did not agree with the statement or idea that when they make good grades, others say they are acting white. In short, the study, which was conducted in an all-Black urban school district in Ohio, did not ratify the fear of racelessness contributing significantly to underachievement or lack of achievement motivation. The findings indicated that the Black students sampled did not seem particularly aversive to the phenomenon of "acting white." This finding was explained by two factors: their infrequent personal contact with whites, and the magnitude of their support of the achievement ideology. On this last note, the subjects sampled by Ford (1991) supported so strongly the American dream — the efficacy of schooling, hard work, and effort — that racial issues were of little concern to them. As such, the concept of race rejection may be less pressing and less academically and

psychologically deleterious to early adolescent Black students in predominantly or all-Black school districts. For the most part, Blacks subscribe to the achievement ideology. Works by McCord, Howard, Friedberg, and Harwook (1969) showed that Blacks want to be not just average or good, but better than members of the dominant culture. In effect, they want to be neither raceless nor white.

In the final analysis, no one can say for certain whether racelessness or race rejection represents a pyrrhic victory or a pragmatic strategy for Black students. The question is larger than the answer. It does seem safe to assume that for some Blacks, acting white or race rejection is a pragmatic strategy; for others, it is a pyrrhic victory.

Where Do We Go From Here?

There is little doubt that Blacks can dissociate from their culture and be perceived as "raceless" (Fordham, 1988) or rejecting of their race in the process. That is, some Blacks who want success (e.g., college education, good grades, high test scores, respectable jobs, middle and upper socio-economic status) may seek social distance from the culture with which they identify racially; rather than maintain their affiliation with the indigenous culture, they weaken their attachments to the Black community. Regardless of whether race rejection follows a conscious or unconscious agenda, such an individual seeks to eradicate the blemish of "blackness" and, in effect, becomes "un-Black." Such a person may select a pattern, a walk, and manner of dress carefully, taking great pains to emulate the characteristics of the dominant culture, which may be rejecting those of the Black culture. Blacks who take on such characteristics have an identity marked by a "nothingness," which is to say, they have no real roots in either the Black or the white culture (Hare, 1965).

> The fundamental dilemma of the Black Anglo-Saxon is that, while rejecting the despicable thing called "Negro" [Black], he must at the same time accept the place designed for "his kind." He is pressured, in many subtle ways, to be as much like whites as possible ... and to accept their society, mores, and whims. (p. 122)

Banks (1979) and Ford and Harris (1992) stated that Black students, for example, experience cultural conflict relative to supporting the beliefs, values, and norms of the dominant culture as opposed to their parent culture. Because they tend to be confused about who they are and feel pained by their dissimilarities, some gifted or high-achieving Black students may feel guilty, alienated, and unsure of where — and if — they fit in. Herr and Watanabe (1979) found that a sense of social isolation leaves some gifted Black children with an identity crisis — a confusion about who they are and who they should become. Consequently, they show ambivalence about their abilities and consider them as envied by others — yet personally undesirable.

DeVos and Romanucci-Ross (1982) have also studied how Black children often confront conflicting values from which they must choose when forming a racial identity. Exum and Colangelo (1981) and Ford, Harris and Schuerger (1993) focused on the ramifications of racial issues to the detriment of achievement among gifted Black students. They stated that gifted Black students are especially vulnerable to problems because they are (or feel) less accepted by peers. These students will become more sensitive to and preoccupied with racial problems than other Black youth (Jenkins, 1950).

Parham (1989) cogently delineated issues with which Blacks might need assistance while addressing psychological dilemmas: *self-differentiation versus preoccupation with assimilation* in which the individual strives to become comfortable with the recognition that he or she is a worthwhile human being, irrespective of valuation and validation from whites; and *ego-transcendence versus self-absorption*, whereby the individual strives to become secure with himself or herself to develop personal ego strength.

Hence, it is incumbent upon educators to teach Black students how to cope effectively with feeling different, inferior, and otherwise isolated from both cultures — feelings expressed by many successful Blacks, including McClain (1983) who once reported being "uncomfortably middle class" (Campbell, 1984, p. 70). Exploring feelings of isolation may be especially important during the pre-encounter, encounter, and immersion-emersion

stages of racial identity development. Just as important, educators are advised to speak openly with Blacks about racial issues. For example, Kochman (1981) stated that Blacks prefer to speak openly about issues of racism and discrimination rather than to ignore or avoid such discussions. Specifically, he contended that Blacks find the danger of violence greater when people do not communicate. Atkinson et al.'s (1990) more recent work supports this statement and suggests that educators who are culturally sensitive build open and trusting relationships with their Black students. A positive identity or enhanced self-concept is critical for academic, social, and personal success so that Black students will reach the final stages of racial identity development (internalization and internalization-commitment) as set forth by Cross (1971), Thomas (1970), and others.

Summary and Closing Thoughts

Several variables complicate the racial identity and personality development of Black students. The preponderance of value conflicts between cultures carry negative ramifications for healthy psychological development among Black students, including the gifted or high-achievers. Educators must become culturally aware themselves and take advantage of all opportunities to learn effective ways of working with racial minorities. Such opportunities are readily available in cross-cultural programs, workshops, and conferences. Being culturally sensitive requires an understanding that Black students, as well as other people of color, experience similar yet more complex social-cultural and psychological difficulties now widely documented as affecting students from the dominant culture.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the myriad problems confronting Blacks in general, or gifted or high-achieving Black students in particular. Achieving a measure of success in society is, by and large, a far more difficult task for Blacks than it is for other Americans. All of society — educators, parents, and community leaders — have a role to play in enhancing the racial identity and achievement of Black youth. A positive racial identity may result when Black students are freed from the racial stereotypes others impose upon them. No time is better than now for

Blacks to develop a positive racial identity, an identity that is personified by the Black child who can say:

> I am an individual, an African American with a tradition of sacrifice, struggle and excellence; and it is my job to restore and carry on the tradition for my own sake, for the good of the African-American community, and for the good of America. (Comer, 1990, p. 38)

Despite the historical lack of attention given to racial identity development among high-achieving Blacks, Ford (1991), Fordham (1988), and Harris and Ford (1991) have begun to cast light on this most important issue of racial identity and mental health among high-achieving or gifted Black students. Perhaps other educators and helping professionals will follow in this stellar endeavor so that we can move closer to understanding and addressing the psychological, social, and cultural needs of Black students in general and high-achieving Black students in particular.

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