Mixed-race Youth, "Acting Out," and the Test-Score Gap: Evidence from a National Survey of American Youth

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The rise of the eugenics movement in the early 20th century revived discussions about the offspring of interracial unions that had lain dormant for more than half a century. By the end of the first third of the century, sociologists Robert Park (1928, 1931) and E. V. Stonequist (1937) had developed the so-called marginal man hypothesis. Their hypothesis sprang from the premise that mixed-race individuals were anomalous and subject to a number of developmental pathologies. They were believed to be irrational, moody, temperamental and more prone to mental disorders and social deviancy than monoracial individuals because they were always racial outsiders. Although Park believed that some individuals might thrive by bridging the racial divide, most were thought to remain alienated on the margin of the two cultures.

Following the US Supreme Court's striking down of state antimiscegenation laws in 1960, interracial marriages, though still in the distinct minority, are on the rise. And with interracial unions come mixed-race offspring. The result has been a renewed interest in the identity development of mixed-race children and youth (Root 1996; Daniel 1996; Tizard and Phoenix 2002), their academic achievement (Harris and Thomas 2002; Herman 2002), and their sexual and other behaviors (Doyle undated).

In many ways the new portrayal of mixed-race individuals stands in stark contrast to the "marginal man" of 1930s sociology. Social psychologists no longer believe that mixed-race individuals are marginal in the sense of experiencing nearly pathological ambivalence, divided loyalties, and hypersensitivity about choosing between black and white cultures (Daniel 1996, p. 135). Mixed-race individuals must certainly navigate strains, conflicts and ambiguities that monoracial individuals do not, but there is evidence that mixed-race youth also develop healthy self images and identities.

The emergent modern scholarly literature on the children of mixed parentage generally accords with the more optimistic modern interpretation. Most biracial youth have as positive a self image as monoracial youth. But modern biracial youth may face a powerful cultural force not imagined by the early sociologists, namely, being accused of "acting white." According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), academic underachievement by minority youth is an adaptive oppositional response to limited social and economic opportunities in adult life. Some minorities regard certain behaviors and activities as inappropriate for them because those behaviors and activities are characteristic of white America. Instead, these groups emphasize oppositional behaviors and activities that are not part of white America's way of life. To adopt mainstream behaviors, such as pursuing academic achievement, is to "act white" and to invite negative sanctions from members of the minority group.[2] Although the "acting white" hypothesis remains controversial and goes unproved, Tizard and Phoenix (2002) discovered that mixed-race youth were repeatedly subjected to racial "hazing." Biracial youth are repeatedly asked to prove

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[2] Steele's (1998) theory of "stereotype threat" provides an alternative explanation for relative academic underachievement by minority students that is not dependent on oppositional culture.

themselves as authentic blacks. Similarly, Williams (1996) reports that mixed-race youth were "forced to prove their authenticity in stereotypical ways in order not to be excluded." Root (1997) reports similar behaviors and the distaste for them among mixed-race youth.

In this paper we offer a test of a variant of the "acting white" hypothesis that we label the "acting out" hypothesis by comparing the academic grade point averages and risky or deviant behaviors of non-Hispanic white, black, and black-white biracial youth. Austin-Smith and Fryer (2003) and Fryer and Levitt (2003) develop signaling models to explain acting white. Studious blacks are socially punished because studying hard is interpreted as signaling a desire to exit the community. For mixed-race youth, studious behavior may also be interpreted by some blacks as desire to exit the race. Such youth will be subject to taunts, threats, and preemptive rejection by blacks when they expect their studious mixed-race peers to abandon them.[3]

But as Cook and Ludwig (1998) note, the typical "acting white" model (Austen-Smith and Fryer excepted) considers only the costs of acting white—the taunts, threats and rejection—without accounting for the perceived benefits of academic engagement. While high achievers may suffer taunts from blacks adopting an oppositional culture, it is not clear that the taunts discourage achievement. Such taunts may, in fact, hasten the very racial exit they are designed to discourage.

In order to test whether mixed race individuals "act out", we use data from the In-School portion of the National Survey of Adolescent Health (AddHealth). The In-School Questionnaire, a self-administered questionnaire, was administered to more than 90,000 students in grades 7 through 12 between September 1994 and April 1995. There was no "make-up" day for absent students. Parents were informed in advance of the date of the questionnaire and could direct that their children not participate. The questionnaire asked students about their social and demographic characteristics, the education and occupation of their parents, the structure of their household, any risky behaviors they engaged in, their expectations for the future, information about their friendships and extracurricular activities during the school year. Self-reported measures of health and self-esteem are also included.

These data are well-suited to our investigation because respondents were allowed to categorize themselves into more than one racial category as well as identify themselves as Hispanic. Given the established theory on "acting white" we limit our sample to those respondents who identify themselves as white, black or both black and white. Our empirical strategy is straightforward. We estimate OLS regression models where GPA (measured on a 4 point scale) is a function of a variety of covariates as well as race. We then test the "acting out" hypothesis by adding in controls for various risky behaviors and interacting those with race.

We must recognize that our results cannot be taken to hold for mixed-race youths in general, but rather for those mixed race youths that choose to identify themselves as such. This may in fact be the reason that we find these individuals choosing to "act white" rather than maintain an oppositional identity.

Our preliminary results from the Add Health in-school survey show that mixed-race youth do "act out" in traditionally white, not black fashion. In terms of risky

[3] W. E. B. DuBois also feared the consequences of racial exit. He exhorted the Talented Tenth to work toward racial uplift.

behaviors (smoking cigarettes, drinking), we see in table 1 which presents unadjusted means, that these activities are more common among whites than blacks, and they are more common even among mixed-race youth than whites.

We also find in probit models (see table 2) that even after adjusting for a variety of control variables, mixed race youth are uniformly more likely to engage in these behaviors than black youths, and in most cases more likely to engage in them than white youths.

Despite their engaging in risky or deviant behaviors, we see from OLS regressions of GPA controlling for a variety of socioeconomic and demographic factors that the grade point averages of mixed-race youth are largely indistinguishable from whites and significantly higher than those of blacks (Table 3). We interpret these results to imply, consistent with Austin-Smith and Fryer, that mixed-race youth are sending a clear signal to blacks that they intend to "racially exit." We further test this by including an interaction between our racial controls and these risky behaviors in our GPA models. In their use of alcohol, mixed-race individuals continue be similar to white youths. We find that smoking and drinking have a greater effect on black GPAs than on white and multirace GPAs. However, once we allow for the smoking/mixed race interaction we see that mixed race youth (male and female) have significantly higher GPAs than whites. However, results differ for alcohol. We intend to fully explore these differences in our research.

We stress that these results are preliminary and must be viewed cautiously. The next step in this research is to address the endogeneity of these risky behaviors in a GPA gap model. Our hypothesis is that these youth are acting out because they have higher GPAs which indicates that these risky behaviors are endogenous in a GPA model. Specifically, we will look for instrumental variables among state policies related to smoking and/or alcohol use are predictive of the risky behaviors under analysis but are unrelated to GPA. Naturally, this approach is not without its flaws—most notably states may pass these laws in response to substance use among the adolescent population. Our analysis will carefully explore the validity of our instruments.

We also plan to incorporate more detailed data from the in-home portion of the adolescent health survey. The drawback to this portion is that far fewer students were interviewed and there are only about 150 youth who report being both black and white.

Table 1. Means of Risky Behavior Variables from the In-School Portion of the Adolescent Health Data

	White	Black	Black/White
Smoked cigarettes during past year	0.4233	0.3348	0.4191
Smoked cigarettes weekly during past year	0.0705	0.0303	0.0518
Been drunk in past 12 months	0.3760	0.3255	0.4196
Been drunk weekly during past 12 months	0.0553	0.0319	0.0474
Drank alcohol during past 12 months	0.5913	0.5615	0.6491
Drank alcohol weekly during past 12 months	0.0973	0.0605	0.0924
GPA	2.885	2.546	2.670

Table 2: Predictors of Adolescent Risky Behavior by Sex.

Dependent variable is …	=1 if been drunk in last 12 months		=1 if drank alcohol in last 12 months		=1 if smoked cigs in last 12 months	
	Female	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**
Black/white	0.1056	0.1265	0.0880	0.1231	0.1108	0.0889
	(0.0241)**	(0.0281)**	(0.0228)**	(0.0210)**	(0.0253)**	(0.0261)**
Black	-0.1023	-0.0513	-0.0598	-0.0438	-0.1717	-0.0636
	(0.0145)**	(0.0186)**	(0.0152)**	(0.0154)**	(0.0152)**	(0.0159)**

Dependent variable is …	=1 if been drunk weekly in last 12 months		=1 if smoked weekly in last 12 months		=1 if drank alcohol weekly in last 12 months	
	Female	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**
Black/white	0.0281	0.0137	0.0225	0.0614	0.0296	0.0666
	(0.0111)*	(0.0139)	(0.0175)	(0.0205)**	(0.0146)*	(0.0235)**
Black	-0.0167	-0.0242	-0.0449	-0.0263	-0.0293	-0.0365
	(0.0030)**	(0.0038)**	(0.0027)**	(0.0036)**	(0.0050)**	(0.0055)**

Notes: All models also control for parental education and occupation, whether the adolescent lives with both parents, their current grade in school, their age, whether they are new at the school, whether or not they were born in the U.S., whether their parents were born in the U.S. and whether or not they were adopted.

Table 3: Estimates of the GPA gap.

	Dependent Variable=GPA on a four point scale							
Black/White	0.0330	0.0919	0.0800	0.0953	0.0380	0.0481	0.1241	0.1656
	(0.0388)	(0.0503)+	(0.0434)+	(0.0574)+	(0.0501)	(0.0759)	(0.0419)**	(0.0533)**
Black	-0.2106	-0.2137	-0.2831	-0.3029	-0.3085	-0.3075	-0.3294	-0.3142
	(0.0259)**	(0.0292)**	(0.0281)**	(0.0279)**	(0.0265)**	(0.0275)**	(0.0293)**	(0.0275)**
Drunk*Black/White			-0.0953	0.0101				
			(0.0783)	(0.0893)				
Cigarettes*Black/White							-0.2051	-0.1390
							(0.0667)**	(0.0931)
Cigarettes*Black							0.2082	0.2190
							(0.0291)**	(0.0312)**
Cigarettes							-0.3505	-0.3036
							(0.0166)**	(0.0162)**
Alcohol*Black/White					0.0107	0.0814		
					(0.0693)	(0.0910)		
Alcohol*Black					0.1542	0.1456		
					(0.0241)**	(0.0264)**		
Alcohol					-0.2787	-0.2370		
					(0.0141)**	(0.0144)**		
Drunk*Black			0.1560	0.2127				
			(0.0267)**	(0.0297)**				
Drunk			-0.2882	-0.2615				
			(0.0161)**	(0.0140)**				
Observations	39236	38070	39186	38014	39217	38055	39217	38055
R-squared	0.14	0.12	0.16	0.14	0.16	0.14	0.18	0.15

Robust standard errors in parentheses
+ significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

Notes: All models also control for parental education and occupation, whether the adolescent lives with both parents, their current grade in school, their age, whether they are new at the school, whether or not they were born in the U.S., whether their parents were born in the U.S. and whether or not they were adopted.