



# Different preferences or different opportunities? Explaining race differentials in the academic achievement of friends

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## ABSTRACT

A popular explanation for race and ethnic disparities in academic achievement is that minorities are exposed to different peers and have different opportunities to make friends with high-achievers. Although we know that adolescents from different race and ethnic groups attend different schools and that they choose different friends, we do not know how these different opportunities affect the friends they make. This paper fills this gap by studying how the opportunities within adolescents' schools affect race and ethnic differences in the academic characteristics of friends. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and the conditional logit and opportunities framework, I account for adolescents' different opportunities to make friends both within and across schools. Ignoring their different opportunities, Black and Latino adolescents' nominated friends have significantly lower levels of achievement than white adolescents. After accounting for their different opportunities to make friends within and between schools, race and ethnic differences in the achievement characteristics of friends disappear. If Black and Latino adolescents' opportunity structures were identical to white adolescents', their probabilities of nominating high-achieving friends would not differ.

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## 1. Introduction

Achievement gaps exist across race and ethnicity in the United States (Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Kao and Thompson, 2003). Although these gaps declined in the last 30 years, significant disparities remain unexplained even after accounting for differences in socioeconomic status and family background (Gamoran, 2001). A popular explanation for racial/ethnic disparities in achievement is that Black, White, and Latino adolescents are exposed to different peers and make different friends. If friends affect academic achievement, the lower overall levels of achievement among minority adolescents' friends disadvantages minority populations compared to Whites and helps to maintain and exacerbate achievement disparities.

Recent research shows that, indeed, the achievement characteristics of adolescents' friends differ by race and ethnicity. High-achieving Black and Latino students are less likely to be nominated as friends by their same-race peers and Black and Latino students' friends have lower levels of academic achievement on average compared to White students (Fryer and Torelli, 2010). The question this article seeks to answer is: Why?

Friendships result from a combination of opportunities and preferences. Who individuals' friends are is constrained by the social environments in their schools, neighborhoods, churches, and workplaces (Blau, 1977). In adolescence, schools play a central role in social life, structuring friendships and identities (Coleman, 1961). However, minority adolescents attend different schools than White adolescents. On average, the schools minorities attend have more minority students and tend to have lower levels of overall achievement. As a result, minorities' opportunities to be friends with high-achieving adolescents are constrained. To what extent are the lower academic achievement characteristics of Black and Latino adolescents' friends

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the result of the *opportunity structures* in the schools attended by Black and Latino students, and to what extent are these patterns driven by *preferences* for lower-achieving friends?

This article studies the race and ethnic differences in the achievement profiles of adolescents' nominated friends. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), I show, consistent with previous literature, that Black and Latino students have friends with significantly lower levels of academic achievement compared to White adolescents. However, this result confounds opportunities and preferences. To what extent are differences the result of different opportunities that Black and Latino students have to nominate high-achieving friends compared to White students, and to what extent are differences the result of different preferences? Using a discrete choice analysis, I model adolescents' combined race and achievement preferences for friends, accounting for adolescents' different opportunities between and within schools to nominate high and lower-achieving friends. I show that the negative relationship between high achievement and friendship nomination among Black and Latino students is driven largely by adolescents' friend opportunities rather than their preferences. Although Black and Latino students nominate friends with lower levels of achievement on average, this analysis shows that these differences result almost entirely from differences in opportunities rather than different preferences. If Black and Latino adolescents' opportunity structures were identical to White adolescents', their probabilities of nominating high-achieving friends would not differ.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Friends and academic achievement

Sociologists have argued for decades that friends play an important role in the lives of children, particularly with respect to educational achievement and attainment (Sewell et al., 1969; Sewell and Hauser, 1975). They generate norms and provide important support and resources, not received elsewhere (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Frank et al. (2008), for example, show that adolescents are responsive to the norms of their local school environments, and these norms affect course-taking behaviors. Similar research shows that high achieving friends protect against failure, pull low achieving students up, and encourage more advanced course taking (Altermatt and Pomerantz, 2005; Crosnoe et al., 2003; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2006; Frank et al., 2006). If access to high-achieving peers differs by race and ethnicity, the benefits gained by White students through their friends may be lost to minority students.

Others suggest that the friends and peers of minorities affect race and ethnic achievement differentials by creating negative, oppositional norms (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978). These authors argue that minority groups take on an anti-education stance as a result of the perception that schooling will not pay off in the future. Minority groups classified as "involuntary migrants", who came to the United States through slavery, colonization, or conquest, compare their opportunities and their groups' outcomes to those of the white majority population. Seeing a distinct difference in outcomes, perhaps as a result of persistent discrimination and their negative history, minority adolescents reject the pro-school norms of the dominant culture and embrace an anti-education oppositional culture.

In contrast to theories of positive influence, oppositional culture theory has implications for both the way friends influence one another and *how* friendships develop. According to Downey, "schooling is espoused by and controlled by the dominant group, and so to pursue success via schooling is considered to be acting white. As a result, academically successful Blacks are sanctioned by Black peers for selling out to whites" (2008, p. 110). The implication is that minority adolescents will avoid friendships and associations with academically successful peers. In other words, oppositional culture theory predicts that "involuntary migrant" minority groups will prefer same-race friends with lower levels of achievement compared to White adolescents.

There is, of course, the further question: Which minority groups qualify as "involuntary migrants" and should be subject to an oppositional culture? Black adolescents have traditionally been the focus of this theory (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978) and a large amount of research attempts to establish the existence of an oppositional culture among this population. Most work provides little evidence in support for this theory (see for example, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Cook and Ludwig, 1998; Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Harris, 2006; Harris and Robinson, 2007; Horvat and Lewis, 2003; Tyson et al., 2005). Black and White adolescents do not differ with respect to achievement gains once early achievement is controlled (Harris and Robinson, 2007). Nor do high-achieving Black and White adolescents differ on self-reported popularity or attachment to school (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Cook and Ludwig, 1998). Black and White adolescents have similar educational expectations once sociodemographic differences are controlled (Kao and Tienda, 1998), and high-achieving Blacks feel well accepted among their peers (Harris, 2006; Horvat and Lewis, 2003).

However, a recent study shows that high-achieving Black students are less popular (based on friendship nominations) among their same-race peers compared to high-achieving White students and lower-achieving Black students (Fryer and Torelli, 2010). Regressing students' academic achievement and race on their same-race popularity,<sup>1</sup> they show that the relationship between the number of friendship nominations received and academic achievement is different for different

<sup>1</sup> Fryer and Torelli (2010) study same-race popularity as opposed to general popularity in order to get at Black disparagement of high-achieving Blacks. General popularity conflates popularity among White students and popularity among Black students. A high-achieving Black student could be both popular among White students and unpopular among Black students. Depending on the characteristics of the school, high-achieving Black students could appear generally popular while being unpopular among other Black students, masking patterns consistent with oppositional culture.

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