

Isolation: An Alternative to the “Acting White” Hypothesis in Explaining Black Under-Enrollment in Advanced Courses

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Abstract

In this paper we propose a model for understanding the under-enrollment of black students in advanced courses that demonstrates how group differences in educational investment decisions can arise even in the absence of any group-level differences in underlying incentives or behavioral propensities. In our model, students gain peer group acceptance by spending time with other peer group members. This can occur during both leisure time and class time, provided enough members of their relevant peer group also take the same academic courses. This produces a scenario in which taking advanced courses is a complement to peer group acceptance for some students (those who have enough peer group members taking advanced courses) and a trade-off for other students (those who do not have enough peer group members in advanced courses). Structural and historical forces, such as racialized tracking, that contribute to an initial condition of fewer black students in advanced courses can create an environment where black students are more likely to be isolated from other members of their racial group, relative to white students. Our model is distinct from theories like the "acting white" hypothesis that assume a cultural or non-cognitive skill deficit on the part of black students. The results from this model arise not because black students respond to incentives differently, but because they face a different set of initial conditions, most likely as the result of institutional barriers. Keywords: demand for schooling; human capital; racial achievement gap; advanced placement. JEL Codes: D91, I24, J10, J15, Z13

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1. Introduction

There can be large and persistent racial disparities in Advanced Placement (AP) course taking, even after controlling for prior preparation (Conger et al., 2009). Data from the U. S. Department of Education indicate that in the 2013/2014 school-year (the most recent data available), black and Hispanic students made up 16% and 25% of the high school student population (respectively) but only 9% and 20% of AP course takers. Compare this against white and Asian students who made up 50% and 5% of the high school student population but 57% and 11% of AP course takers respectively. Black and Hispanic students are even more underrepresented in AP math and science courses.¹

What explains this underrepresentation? Researchers seeking to answer this question have paralleled the literature on explanations for the persistent black-white test score gap where some have advanced structural arguments and others have advanced cultural arguments. Structural arguments include differences in prior preparation (Conger et al., 2009), the differential likelihood of teachers and academic counselors to encourage similarly qualified black versus white high school students to take advanced coursework and prepare for college (Archbald et al., 2009; Darity and Jolla, 2009; Gershenson et al., 2016; Oakes, 2005; Yonezawa et al., 2002); racial wealth disparities that lead to differences in access to resources that make AP courses less intimidating such as outside tutoring (Lewis and Diamond, 2015); and lack of access to social circles where students and parents trade knowledge on the best courses to take (Coleman, 1988; Hale, 2001; Yonezawa et al., 2002).

¹ www.nces.ed.gov and www.ocrdata.ed.gov

In contrast, those who make cultural arguments theorize that black students have less motivation or less of an academic orientation in part because they fear being accused of “acting white” by their black peers (Austen-Smith and Fryer, 2005; Klopfenstein, 2004; Fryer and Torelli, 2010). This argument is typically undergirded by Ogbu's Oppositional Culture Theory (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2008), which posits that black students, as involuntary minorities in the U.S., perceive structural barriers in society such as employment and wage discrimination as inhibiting their chances for successful life outcomes.² As a coping mechanism, black students then adopt an oppositional cultural stance, devaluing attitudes and behaviors that typify the dominant culture such as studying hard, speaking properly, and dressing in a preppy manner. Although many researchers have since tested and failed to find support for this theory (Cook and Ludwig, 1998; Harris, 2006; Noguera, 2009), it continues to resurface as an explanation for differences in black and white academic outcomes.³

The competing views on the causes of the racial differences in advanced course participation are not trivial from a policy perspective. Those who hold the culturalist point of view tend to advocate for policy solutions that include mentoring and personal responsibility programs targeted at black youth (Loury, 2019). Those who take the structuralist perspective contend that even highly motivated black students face discriminatory institutional barriers and unless these barriers are addressed, the participation gap will persist. More nuanced conceptualizations of the causes of the

² Ogbu distinguishes between voluntary minorities who choose to come to the U.S. because that choice is better than their alternatives and involuntary minorities who were either historically enslaved (African Americans) or occupied (American Indians)

³ See Andrews and Swinton (2014) for a brief survey of studies that test the “acting white” hypothesis.

advanced course participation gap will lead to different empirical hypotheses to test and different prescriptions for policymakers to consider.

Within the economics literature, explanations for the underrepresentation of black students in advanced courses are under-theorized. The most rigorous theoretical treatment comes from Austen-Smith and Fryer (2005). They use a two-audience signaling model in which educational investment produces a signal that can result in high wages on the one hand but peer group rejection on the other. Educational investment can take the form of studying hard to get good grades or taking advanced courses for a more enriched educational experience. An equilibrium result of their model is that some students will underinvest in education in order to be accepted by other peer group members. As the authors themselves point out in their concluding remarks, there is nothing in their model that supports the notion that black students are any more susceptible to this educational underinvestment than other groups.

However, a large portion of the manuscript is devoted to describing anecdotes that ascribe the “acting white” phenomenon to black students in particular. It is not surprising then that researchers have cited the Austen-Smith and Fryer model as well as subsequent empirical work by Fryer and co-authors (Fryer and Levitt, 2004; Fryer and Torelli, 2010) as a valid explanation for differences in black and white student achievement and advanced course participation even though there is nothing in the model that would produce different results for black students compared to white students.⁴ A differential result only occurs if one assumes *a priori* that black students are more predisposed to peer pressure

⁴ See for example Klopfenstein(2004), Bisin and Verdier (2011), Grogger (2011), and Johnson and Kaiser (2013).

than white students. The substantial literature debunking that predisposition on empirical grounds pushes us in search of an alternative theory (Andrews and Swinton, 2014; Cook and Ludwig, 1998; Harris, 2006; Tyson, 2011; Tyson et al., 2005).

In this paper we propose a model that demonstrates how group differences in educational investment decisions (i.e. the decision to take and advanced course) can arise even in the absence of any group-level differences in underlying incentives or behavioral propensities. In our model, students gain peer group acceptance by spending time with other peer group members. This can occur during both leisure time and class time, provided enough members of their relevant peer group also take the same academic courses. This produces a scenario in which taking advanced courses is a complement to peer group acceptance for some students (those who have enough peer group members taking advanced courses) and a trade-off for other students (those who do not have enough peer group members in advanced courses). Structural and historical forces, such as racialized tracking and decades of underinvestment in schools attended by black students, that contribute to an historical underrepresentation of black students in advanced courses can create an environment where black students in advanced courses are more likely to be isolated from other members of their racial peer group, relative to white students. Our model is distinct from theories like the "acting white" hypothesis that assume a cultural or non-cognitive skill deficit on the part of black students.

2. Background and Previous Research

Much of the racial disparity in advanced course taking can be explained by differential prior preparation, which can lead to differential eligibility to enroll in advanced courses. For example, Conger et al. (2009) find that the racial disparity in course taking is

eliminated among two cohorts of Florida public students after controlling for eighth grade test scores. Research conducted using data collected during and immediately following the de-tracking movement of the 1980s and 1990s provide some evidence that disparate participation in advanced courses by black students is insignificant when controlling for socioeconomic status and prior preparation (Gamoran, 2010).⁵ However, in a study relying on more recent data, Klopfenstein (2004) demonstrates that a black-white gap in AP course taking remains even after accounting for prior preparation. This implies that even academically eligible black students may be less likely to take AP courses than their white and Asian peers.

Why do Advanced Placement courses matter? Researchers have demonstrated numerous benefits to students taking advanced courses with high achieving peers including improved academic performance, increased likelihood of graduating and attending a four year college, increased access to beneficial social networks, and increased access to more highly-effective teachers (Darity and Jolla, 2009; Graham, 2008; Long et al., 2012; Oakes, 2005; Smith et al., 2017; Vigdor and Nechyba, 2007). Given these potential benefits, it is important to understand why black students are often underrepresented in AP courses.

Two qualitative studies provide insights into the underlying mechanisms at play in the differential enrollment in AP courses by race. Sociologist Karolyn Tyson and co-authors

⁵ The de-tracking movement refers to reforms in high schools and middle schools in the U.S. during the late 1980s and 1990s aimed at eliminating formal track structures that placed students in a coordinated system of classes based on ability. Tracks were often labeled, “Honors” or “College Prep” or “Vocational” and students could not typically take classes outside of their assigned track. After the de-tracking movement many schools maintained separate classes based on ability, but simply allowed students more flexibility and choice in which classes they chose to take (Oakes, 2005).

interviewed and observed dozens of high achieving black high school students in North Carolina high schools (Tyson et al., 2005; Tyson, 2011). They found that black students are more likely to point to a fear of failure than a fear of peer rejection as a reason for not taking advanced courses.⁶ They also found that many white students were equally as likely as black students to say they faced peer rejection as a result of their academic achievements. Finally, they found the “acting white” slur is only salient in school settings where the student composition is racially diverse and there is a clear historical pattern of racialized tracking. If the “acting white” phenomenon occurs, it is most likely to happen where a stark racial contrast can be observed with black students occupying general education courses and white (and Asian) students dominating advanced courses. When these two conditions are not met (in predominately black schools and in diverse schools with proportional racial representation in advanced courses), students do not report feeling any peer pressure to avoid taking advanced courses to deflect the “acting white” charge. Thus, Tyson hypothesizes that negative cultural pressures arise only when adverse structural conditions are present in schools.

Yonezawa et al. (2002) investigated the extent to which black students in schools that were actively undergoing de-tracking reforms in the early 1990s truly experienced more freedom of choice in the course selection process. They interviewed students in ten geographically and demographically diverse schools during the period when their schools

⁶ Gonzalez (2017) finds strong evidence in support of this argument. Using detailed student-level data from Oakland, CA high school students, she demonstrates through a regression discontinuity framework that students who received a positive signal from their PSAT score report that they have “AP Potential” were more likely to enroll in an AP course than peers who had similar academic records but were just on the other side of the PSAT score cutoff for receiving the “AP Potential” signal.

were eliminating formal tracking systems. Their results indicate that in most cases, tracking reforms represented a fallacy of choice. Many black students continued to face institutional barriers in the form of hidden prerequisites for courses and selective flexibility on the part of school counselors who relaxed prerequisites for white students more often than for black students. Similar to Tyson, they also found that many black students self-selected into lower-track classes because they doubted their ability to perform well in advanced courses and were either discouraged from enrolling or not actively encouraged to enroll.⁷ Finally, they found that black students who did take advanced courses found them to be socially isolating because they were the only black students in the classroom.

Developmental psychology research has demonstrated the importance of peer group acceptance for increasing self-worth and self-esteem among children (Hymel et al., 1990). Peer groups, however, tend to segregate along racial and ethnic lines starting in middle school (Aboud et al., 2003; Graham et al., 2009). This is especially true in racially diverse schools (Rock et al., 2011). Many of the students in Yonezawa's study, for example, had grown to rely on their racially segregated peer groups for social support. Black students in advanced courses could attempt to cross racial lines to integrate into classmates' peer groups, however those who attempt this integration are often unsuccessful and continue to face social isolation (Tyson et al., 2005; Yonezawa et al., 2002).

⁷ Yonezawa et al. (2002) also found that some black students rejected AP courses in favor of more culturally affirming ethnic studies electives. This represents another dimension of choice and agency that is significant, though not expressly incorporated into our illustrative model.

Given this evidence, in what follows we propose a simple illustrative model that demonstrates how group differences in educational investments – in this case, the decision to take an Advanced Placement course – can arise even when there are no underlying differences between groups in their incentive structures and behavioral propensities. Instead, differences arise because for some students, advanced courses represent socially isolating spaces and therefore involve a tradeoff between educational investment and peer group support, while for other students, advanced courses provide *both* peer group support and superior educational investments.

3. A Simple Model

Assume a rational, utility maximizing student has to decide between taking an Advanced Placement (AP) course or a standard level course. We denote this choice by the set $\alpha \in \{AP, NOT\}$. Students are classified as being endowed with either a high level or low level of resources denoted by $\theta \in \{\underline{\theta}, \bar{\theta}\}$. We purposely refrain from calling θ a student's "type" because the word "type" tends to denote natural ability. Instead, we think of θ as encompassing any resources available to students that help them succeed academically by completing coursework more efficiently. This might include "natural ability", but it also can include other resources like parents' ability to pay for tutors or other academic aids. Thus a student with average intelligence but highly-resourced parents can have an endowment equivalent to that of a student with high intelligence and less-resourced parents. For simplicity, we restrict this model to two endowment levels but it is straightforward to imagine an extension of the model with a continuous distribution of θ .

A student gets a payoff $v(\alpha)$ based on their educational investment choice. We can think of this payoff in terms of the previously mentioned long-term benefits that are associated with advanced course taking. We assume that for both high- and low-endowed students $v(AP) > v(NOT)$ - the payoff from taking an AP course is greater than the payoff from not taking an AP course. The difference between students of different endowment levels enters through the costs associated with each educational investment choice. We express the cost of an educational choice for each student endowment level as a function $\tau(\alpha, \theta)$ which maps choice-endowment combinations to a unit of time which we can normalize to range from 0 to 1. We assume $\tau_\alpha > 0$ - passing an AP course takes more time than passing a non-AP course, regardless of student endowment. We also assume $\tau_\theta < 0$ - highly-resourced students can complete any given amount of coursework in less time than less-resourced students in both AP and non-AP classes.⁸ Finally, we assume the net benefit of taking an AP course is greater than the net benefit of not taking an AP course for a highly-resourced student: $v(AP) - \tau(AP, \bar{\theta}) > v(NOT) - \tau(NOT, \bar{\theta})$.

The final component of student utility in this model is peer group acceptance. We assume that students gain positive utility from peer acceptance, and we model the probability of peer group acceptance as an increasing function of the total time the student spends with members of their peer group.⁹ We denote this as $g(\Gamma)$ where total time (Γ) is a

⁸ Here, we are careful not to conflate being highly resourced with being a high-performer. One could successfully argue that some high-performing students spend *more* time on coursework than low-performing students. However, by our definition, highly resourced individuals are those who have access to resources that enable them to be successful academically at lower time cost – i.e. greater “natural ability” or access to tutors or other study aids that help them complete coursework more efficiently than lower-resourced students.

⁹ Here, we also assume that members within a peer group are interchangeable – i.e. no one peer group member impacts peer group acceptance more than the others.

combination of both class time and leisure time and $g'(\cdot) > 0$. A student gets credit for leisure time spent with peer group members for all of his available leisure hours, but only gets credit for class time spent with peer group members if there are a sufficient number of his peer group members in his chosen class. We activate this with equation (1):

$$\Gamma = \lambda I_\alpha \tau(\alpha, \theta) + (1 - \lambda)(1 - I_\alpha) \tau(\alpha, \theta) + (1 - \tau(\alpha, \theta)) \quad (1)$$

The third term in this equation represents leisure time $(1 - \tau(\alpha, \theta))$. The first two terms represent class time. We denote λ as an indicator variable equal to one if there is a sufficient share of the student's peer group members taking the AP course for them to get social credit for spending class time with the peer group. Otherwise it is equal to zero. Also, I_α is an indicator variable equal to one if the student chooses to take the AP course and zero otherwise. Thus, a student will receive class time credit with his peer group if both I_α and λ equal one meaning the student chooses to take the AP course and there is a sufficient share of their peer group who also take the AP course, or if both I_α and λ equal zero meaning the student chooses not to take the AP course and most of their peers also choose not to take the AP course. Those students who choose to take a class that does not contain a sufficient share of their peer group will not get class time credit for time spent with peers. Combining the three utility components, we can express a student's utility as:

$$u(\alpha, \theta, \lambda) = v(\alpha) - \tau(\alpha, \theta) + g(\Gamma) \quad (2)$$

2.1. The Role of λ

Consider a student endowed with ample resources ($\bar{\theta}$). Compare her utility functions for choosing an AP course and not choosing an AP course.

Utility from Choosing AP Course:

$$u(AP, \bar{\theta}, \lambda) = v(AP) - \tau(AP, \bar{\theta}) + g(1 + (\lambda - 1)\tau(AP, \bar{\theta}))$$

Utility from Not Choosing AP Course:

$$u(NOT, \bar{\theta}, \lambda) = v(NOT) - \tau(NOT, \bar{\theta}) + g(1 - \lambda\tau(NOT, \bar{\theta}))$$

If there is a sufficient share of her peer group who are also in the AP class ($\lambda = 1$), then she should always choose to take the AP course. To see this, recall that we assumed the net benefit of taking AP is higher than the net benefit of not taking AP for highly-resourced students ($v(AP) - \tau(AP, \bar{\theta}) > v(NOT) - \tau(NOT, \bar{\theta})$). If $\lambda = 1$, the third term is $g(1)$ for choosing the AP course and $g(1 - \tau(NOT, \bar{\theta})) < g(1)$ for not choosing the AP course. A highly-resourced student whose peers are also in the AP course will gain more from taking the AP course in part because she will receive credit from her peer group for class time spent with them which will increase her likelihood of being accepted by them. If, however, there is not a sufficient share of her peer group in the AP class ($\lambda = 0$), her decision is not as clear. In that case, she only should take the AP course if:

$$NetPayoff_{AP} - NetPayoff_{NOT} > 1 - g(1 - \tau(AP, \bar{\theta}))$$

The exact value of this inequality is not important. The important point here is that a scenario exists in which a rational, highly-resourced student will choose not to take the AP course if there are not enough of her peer group members who also take the AP course.

3. Discussion

Relating the model back to the specific case of black students' propensity to take AP courses, we have presented a scenario in which equally-resourced black and white students can be identical in their desire to be accepted by their peer groups (i.e., there are no behavioral differences in that regard) but can be differentially likely to take AP courses because there is an insufficient share of black students in AP courses in the school.

Why might there be fewer black students in AP courses in the first place? First, schools with an obvious racial divide in course taking may have had an historical legacy of racialized tracking. Even in schools where policies that previously resulted in racially tracked classes have been eliminated, *de facto* within-school segregation can prevail for a long time afterward (Clotfelter, 2011; Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Yonezawa et al., 2002). Second, when teachers and counselors have the authority to recommend who takes AP courses and who does not, implicit or explicit bias on their part can result in black students being denied or discouraged from entry into advanced courses (Darity and Jolla, 2009; Francis et al., 2019; Oakes, 2005; Yonezawa et al., 2002). Third, black students are more likely to arrive at high school from feeder schools with fewer resources and less effective teachers, leaving them less prepared for advanced coursework (Card and Rothstein, 2007; Conger et al., 2009). Finally, the model prediction is limited to highly-resourced students. We would expect that more highly-resourced students are more likely to take AP courses because the costs are lower for them. There is no reason to believe that black students and white students have an underlying difference in the distribution of natural ability or intelligence (Scarr et al., 1977), but there is substantial evidence that black students have less access to resources that would lower the personal cost of taking AP courses such as

private tutoring and home computers (Lewis and Diamond, 2015). Thus, if black students' racial peers are more likely to be found in the lower-resource group due to wealth and income inequality, then any individual black student will be less likely than an equally-resourced white student to take AP courses, *ceteris paribus*.

These structural forces that contribute to an initial condition of fewer black students in advanced courses can create an environment where the likelihood of being isolated from other members of their racial group may affect black students differentially, relative to white students. For black students, taking advanced coursework involves a trade-off since there are few other black peers in those classes with them. They must then choose between taking advanced courses and facing isolation or declining to take advanced courses to avoid that isolation. This theory is distinct from theories like the "acting white" hypothesis that assume a cultural or non-cognitive skill deficit on the part of black students. The results from this model arise not because black students respond to incentives differently, but because they face a different set of initial conditions, most likely as the result of institutional barriers such as racialized tracking and segregated schooling.

From a policy perspective, remedies aimed at reducing racial gaps in advanced course participation that focus solely on perceived cultural deficiencies in black youth may miss the mark. Institutional barriers and the specter of social isolation may still preclude even highly motivated, high achieving black students from enrollment in advanced courses. Instead, schools should actively work to dismantle structures that limit educational investment choices for black students such as hidden prerequisites, bias among school counselors, differential access to high-quality elementary and middle schools that affect preparation prior to high school, and information dissemination networks that exclude

low-income and minority students. If reducing structural barriers to advanced course enrollment makes those courses more racially diverse, our model predicts that there will be an added benefit of reduced social isolation for black students who opt to take them.

Conflict of Interest Statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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