Puerto Rican High Achievers: An Example of Ethnic and Academic Identity Compatibility

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Although research finds that members of some involuntary minority ethnic groups tend to develop oppositional identities, Puerto Rican students studied in this research project at an urban high school did not associate school success with "whiteness." These students were academically successful while still maintaining their ethnic identity. They were not accused of acting white, did not mask their academic accomplishments, and did not assume raceless personas. Different conceptualizations of ethnicity, sociohistorical context, and class may account for their maintenance of ethnic identity while achieving success in school.

Some studies attribute low academic achievement among African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans to an oppositional stance that they develop toward schooling (Fordham 1988; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Ogbu 1978; Suárez-Orozco 1989). They argue that involuntary minorities, or groups who were forcefully incorporated into the United States, tend to experience difficulty maintaining ethnic identity and academic success simultaneously because academic success is perceived by them as a characteristically "white" behavior (Fordham 1988; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). According to certain researchers, the academic success of involuntary minorities implies their adoption of "whiteness" and thus their forsaking of their ethnic identity.

Some studies show that academic success is often viewed as a "white" thing because the behaviors required from schools compete with the values of minority students (Labov 1982; Villejas 1988). Examples of "white" school behaviors include participating in class discussions, carrying books to class, asking the teacher for help in front of peers, working hard to do well in school, getting good grades, spending a lot of time in the library studying, and being on time (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Matute-Bianchi 1986). According to some researchers, because these behaviors are identified with white Americans, minorities are reluctant to adopt them because they consider them inappropriate for their groups. If these behaviors are "white," then opposite behaviors are proper for "nonwhite" students.

These studies also suggest that to engage in school-sanctioned behavior connotes giving up one's ethnic identity and adopting a white cultural frame of reference (Fordham 1988; McLaren 1994). For instance,

McLaren (1994) refers to ethnic minorities' success in school as cultural or racial suicide because, to succeed, students must reject their culture in favor of "white" culture. Other studies add that minority students who behave as "whites" pay a high price (Fine 1991; Fordham 1988; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Fordham (1988) found that they face opposition from peers who interpret the behavior as "trying to join the enemy" and, as a result, they feel like traitors to their races or ethnic groups. She adds that fear of censure and physical harm from peers leads African American high achievers to mask their accomplishments by portraying themselves as low achievers or to assume raceless personas by not identifying themselves with African American culture. Furthermore, Fine (1991) found that high achievers tend to be more depressed, less politically aware, less assertive, and more conformist than low achievers. These studies focus on African American students in conventional school settings.

Recent research (Foley 1991; Hemmings 1996; Mehan et al. 1994), however, finds that academic success does not come at the expense of ethnic identity for all groups. Focusing on students of varied ethnic and class backgrounds, these studies show that involuntary minorities do not have to choose between performing well in school or maintaining their ethnic identities; they can be "ethnic" and "model" students simultaneously. These studies also show that involuntary minorities do not necessarily associate school success with "whiteness," nor are they subjected to peer pressure that leads to not doing well in school. Rather, they suggest that many involuntary minorities view school success as a "middle-class" trait, and because they are or aspire to be middle class, achieving in school is appropriate behavior for them. This association may be a function of both their own culturally patterned beliefs and values and the environment in which they are educated.

In this article, I suggest that there does not seem to be a pattern in how involuntary minorities approach academic success. While some involuntary minorities may avoid succeeding in school because they associate it with "whiteness," others, like the Puerto Rican students in this study, have no qualms about succeeding because, for them, success is not exclusively "white." Here I show that, for a group of high-achieving Puerto Rican students, school success did not translate to the loss of their Puerto Rican ethnicity and the adoption of a "white" ethnic identity. The high achievers in this study remained and defined themselves as Puerto Ricans while excelling in school.

Ethnic Identity and Academic Achievement: Are They Necessarily Incompatible?

While some studies above argue that involuntary minorities develop an oppositional stance toward schooling that hinders their academic success (Fine 1991; Fordham 1988; Fordham and Ogbu 1986), others (Foley 1991; Hemmings 1996; Mehan et al. 1994) paint a more complicated picture. Researchers agree that generally involuntary minorities

experience difficulty making it through school but that they do not necessarily form oppositional identities as Fordham (1988) describes. Researchers suggest that school success or failure may have more to do with the structural conditions, such as poverty, confronted by most involuntary minorities and how those conditions shape the definition and expression of ethnicity in school.

For instance, Matute-Bianchi (1986) found that the academic performance of Mexican-descent students varies according to their minority status, their perception of their ethnic identity, and their perceived opportunities for the future. While Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that a single definition of "blackness" was shared by the African American students in their study, Matute-Bianchi did not find a single definition of "Mexicanness" among the Mexican-descent students she studied. Rather, she identifies five Mexican-descent identities ranging from the newly arrived to the third- or subsequent-generation Mexican-descent student: recent Mexican immigrant, Mexican oriented, Mexican American, Chicano, and Cholo. According to Matute-Bianchi, students embracing the first three identities saw no contradiction between their ethnicity and academic success. They were immigrants, or the children of immigrants, who held a more positive perception of their chances in the future. For them, school was a means to becoming successful adults. By contrast, Chicanos and Cholos, those who were of second and subsequent generations, did not see a connection between school success and success as adults. Rather, they perceived academic success as being white or "rich honkie" and thus incompatible with the Chicano or Cholo identity. Although Matute-Bianchi does not elaborate on the effect of peer pressure on academic performance, it could be expected to be different for each Mexican-descent group. They did not share a definition of what it is to behave "Mexican"; rather, each group had its own definition of what being ethnic means and how to behave accordingly.

Another study suggests that social class may have an effect on the relationship between academic success and ethnic identity among involuntary minorities (Foley 1991). For instance, middle-class Mexican Americans in a small town in Texas were not ambivalent about their ethnic identity and school success. According to Foley, middle-class Mexican students did not find ethnicity incompatible with school success; instead, they "felt good about being ethnic and were succeeding in school" (1991:80). Furthermore, these students were not using "racelessness" as a strategy to get ahead in school. What set these students apart from other Mexican students was that while they participated in the oppositional culture, they had learned mainstream communicative competencies. They were, in Foley's words, "a new bicultural generation" (1991:80).

A recent study by Hemmings (1996) argues that the school sociocultural context also affects the relationship between academic excellence and ethnic identity among involuntary minorities. Hemmings found that

black high achievers were not opposing whites but simply responding to the student culture at their school. While a definite notion of the "model" student seemed to hold across class, race, ethnicity, and setting, an image of what it means to be "black" did not. According to Hemmings, black high achievers in different school contexts have different definitions of "blackness." In comparing black high achievers in two high schools, Hemmings found that the way they reconciled being a "model student" and "being black" differed. Black high achievers in a predominantly middle-class high school experienced pressure to act middle class, with no distinction being made between white and black middle-class behavior. It was easier for them to achieve academically because they did not experience conflict between "being black" and being a "model student." They did not seem to equate academic success with "being white" but, rather, with "being middle class," something they already were or hoped to become. By contrast, Hemmings found that black high achievers in a working-class school experienced pressure to conform to peer images of "blackness," which involved rejection of "whiteness." Because peer pressure to be "black" was strong, many black high achievers had to pursue academic success the "black way." That is, they could be "model students" as long as they continued "acting black," "being bad," "joining cheating networks," and distancing themselves from whites. Hemmings's findings point to the significance of school context and social class in shaping high-achieving involuntary minority approaches to academic success.

These studies, along with the work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), point to the diversity of responses to academic success among involuntary minority students. The interaction of factors such as minority status, social class, sociocultural context of the school, and ethnic identities influences how involuntary minorities reconcile academic success and ethnic identity. These factors influence how they conceptualize race and choose strategies to succeed in school. However, it is apparent that the construction of their ethnic identity varies according to school context, social class, and ethnic group. It is the way in which involuntary minorities construct their ethnic identities that affects their performance in school.

Description of the Study

In the research reported here, I investigated why and how Puerto Rican high achievers reconciled ethnicity and academic success in one urban high school. The study is based on year-long ethnographic fieldwork at a high school in Chicago, which I name Hernández High School. The school had 2,600 students, of which 55 percent were Puerto Rican. The rest of the student body was ethnically diverse, with 12 percent African American, a few Asian students, and the rest Latino of various nationalities, mostly Mexicans. Hernández High School was typical of inner-city high schools. Most students came from low-income families, and the majority qualified for the free lunch program. Like other

inner-city schools, it was large and overcrowded. The students did not fare well academically; they did poorly on college entrance examinations and other standardized tests. The school's graduation rate was very low, about 35 percent (Flores-González 1995).

I conducted ethnographic observation in the school during the 1992–93 academic year. I went to Hernández High School daily and spent the whole day there because I wanted to assess the climate of the school and the participants' daily life there. Thus, I was present at the school observing class changes, student interaction, fights, and teacher conversations. I talked to anyone who was willing to talk to me. In addition to observing and participating in daily life at school, I attended local school council meetings and most activities and events held at the school. These activities included lectures, student assemblies, the pep rally, the homecoming game, talent shows, performances, sporting events, parties at the gym and lobby, annual banquets for honor students and athletes, graduation, and open houses, among other events.

I also conducted intensive in-depth life history interviews with 33 students and former students. Some participants were chosen randomly (mostly those who were enrolled in school) while others were selected through snowball sampling (mostly the dropouts). Most interviews were spread throughout the school year; thus, I ended up with an average of three or four interviews per participant. The number of interviews varied from two to over ten in some cases. The advantage of focusing on a small number of participants lies in the detail and richness of the data gathered in constructing their life histories. Although the small sample size may limit generalization of the results, the findings are consistent with those of related recent research on school success and ethnic identity cited earlier in this article. Most interviews took place in a small room at the school, and informal discussions and conversations took place in restaurants, lunchrooms, hallways, students' homes, or during athletic events. Most interviews were tape recorded, except for those with five participants who requested not to be recorded. School records, students' transcripts, school reports, yearbooks, the students and parents' handbook, newsletters, and other school documents complemented the observations and interviews.

Given my daily presence at the school and constant interaction with the participants, I established good rapport with them. They enjoyed the opportunity to talk about themselves and to have my undivided attention during the interviews. They often invited me to sit with them and their friends, to visit them at home, or to see them in a school game or performance. I had the opportunity to observe and interact with most participants in different settings and under diverse circumstances, which only enriched the information I acquired. Being Puerto Rican and a native Spanish speaker also helped me gain their confidence as the participants accepted me and often spoke to me in Spanish, particularly when talking about their lives at home.

High Achievers at Hernández High School

The focus of this article is on the experiences of 11 high achievers who were seniors at Hernández High School, supplemented by data from other high achievers as well as the experience of the 22 low achievers in the study. By "high achievers" I mean students who were in good academic standing with at least a B grade point average, graduated in four years, and never dropped out of school (with one exception). I also include in this analysis the experiences of the remaining 22 participants for comparison. These participants were low achievers. "Low achievers" are students with a grade point average of C or less, who graduated in four years or more, and may have dropped out temporarily or permanently. Three of the 22 low achievers never dropped out of school; two were special education students and the other was a bilingual student. An additional nine were dropouts who later returned to school, and ten were dropouts who had not returned to school by the time the study ended. The high achievers were not a homogeneous group but, rather, constituted small peer groups, the most visible being the scholars, the athletes, and the "church boys and girls." Of these, the scholars formed the core of the high achievers because they were the most associated with academic excellence. Although I generally use the term *high achievers* throughout the article, I also use the categories of scholars, athletes, and " church boys and girls" when these distinctions are necessary. The Scholars' Program was the advanced placement program at Hernández. All "scholars," as the students were called, were high achievers who were at the top of their class. Because the scholars took most of their classes together (English, science, mathematics, and social studies) and participated in activities associated with the program (i.e., college visits, scholars' banquet), they formed a tight-knit group recognizable in the school. I often would find the scholars walking together in the hallways and sitting together in school activities and in the lunchroom.

While the scholars formed the academic elite of the school, the athletes were the most visible subgroup among the high achievers. They stood out from other peer groups because they wore their jerseys regularly and hung around with teammates and other athletes. During the football season, Luis wore his football jersey almost daily, whereas Miguel wore his baseball cap during baseball season. The athletes also claimed particular areas of the school such as a table in the lunchroom, a study hall, a computer room, and athletic equipment off-limits to nonathletes.

More difficult to discern, but nevertheless identifiable, were the "church boys and girls." These were students who identified themselves as Christians, most of them Pentecostal. They usually carried Bibles and religious books with them, wore pendant crosses, or dressed conservatively. For some, religiosity was hardly noticeable unless one paid close attention. For instance, I once found Roberto reading a Christian book during his study hall, and until then I had not noticed that he was very religious. Pentecostal girls usually stood out because they always wore

long dresses or skirts, had long hair, and wore no makeup. However, they were not always obvious, for it was also fashionable for young women to wear long skirts, boots, and hats.

No Accusations of "Acting White"

The concept of "acting white," and the development of oppositional identities reported by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) as common among African Americans, did not seem to be part of the Puerto Rican experience at Hernández High School. Doing well in school did not connote "being white" among Puerto Rican high achievers and low achievers. Neither high achievers nor low achievers associated academic success with a particular race or ethnic group. None of the 22 low achievers I interviewed said that low academic performance had anything to do with a reluctance to "act white." Nor did any of them view high achievers as less Puerto Rican or as "acting white." The high achievers did not report being accused of being "un–Puerto Rican" or "acting white" for getting good grades. Even those who belonged to the Scholars' Program were not viewed as less Puerto Rican than students in the general education program. Quite the contrary, many said that the scholars, along with the athletes, occupied the top level of the peer social hierarchy. Yet perceptions of race and ethnicity had little to do with the high status of scholars and athletes. Rather, it was their disproportionate participation in extracurricular activities that made them popular and well known among their peers. Vanessa, a scholar and high achiever, explained,

> Like, all the scholars are known. Like, I'm in scholars, they know that I'm in scholars. Like my girlfriend, she is in all the athletics. They know who she is because she is in the athletics. . . . The most popular people are the people who are in activities, extracurricular activities. Because if you are in extracurricular activities you have a bigger chance of people knowing you.

Although animosity pervaded Hernández High School, hostility was not directed toward the high achievers as a group. They were not singled out for harassment because of their academic accomplishments. They were not labeled, ostracized, or physically assaulted for doing well in school as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) report occurs among African Americans. There were student categories at Hernández High School, and the high achievers were sometimes referred to as "nerds" but more often as "scholars." Being labeled a "nerd," or "scholar," however, did not elicit negative images of a "sellout," nor did I observe it eliciting negative reactions in others. The high achievers were simply seen as another group among many peer groups in school, one that kept to itself and was left alone by others. When asked about different groups in school, Elizabeth, a scholar, said, "You could say they call us the 'nerds' because we are in Scholars. They separate us. You're into cutting classes, you are like the bad people, you go over there. You are the sports people or you are the gang people or whatever, you go like that." None of the

high achievers recalled instances of harassment against them as a group, nor did the low achievers report harassing them simply because they were high achievers.

Some of the high achievers related personal stories of conflict with peers, but these were not attributed by them to their high-achiever status. High achievers and low achievers alike experienced confrontations with peer groups. Usually, the high achievers did not initiate the conflict. They were the targets of the hostility and did what they could to avoid confrontation, even to the extent of changing schools. Most such incidents involved gang members approaching young men for recruitment. Miguel told of running into trouble his freshman year: "They [gangs] were picking on me freshman year, so I decided to transfer. But in the other school it was worse. There I got beat up by a black gang. It was worse there because there were racial problems. See, there are few Latinos and many black, and gangs are racial."

At Hernández High School, there was a high level of hostility. Anybody could be the target of harassment and violence, even for the most trivial reasons. Ana, an athlete and high achiever, described this atmosphere as follows:

> I haven't had problems, but you can't look at anyone because immediately they say, "Oh, look at her. She thinks she's tough." And I don't like that. Because when I walk I don't look at anybody, and when I look at someone I look and, you know, with just looking and immediately "What are you looking at?" and I keep walking because if I stay there maybe two or three of them come and jump me.

The high achievers, however, seemed to be particularly "immune" to peer hostility. In particular, the Puerto Rican high achievers established a status in school that somehow "immunized" them from peer hostility. They became what I call "schoolboys and -girls" and were recognized as such by others.

Being a "schoolboy or -girl" conveys compliance with school norms. Once students become "schoolboys and -girls," they are left alone but for an occasional "test" by peers. Students become "schoolboys and -girls" when they see themselves, and are seen by others, as students who are "into" school. Because oppositional behaviors are inappropriate for "schoolboys and -girls," they are not expected or pressured to engage in them. Thus, high achievers were usually left alone by others, and I observed that they were ignored by their less accomplished peers. The ethnographic observations and interviews convey a general feeling of indifference toward the high achievers among low achievers. The "schoolboy/girl" identity seemed to spare the high achievers from peer pressure to behave in opposition to school norms and shielded them from peer hostility.

Publicizing One's Academic Accomplishments

Although the African American high achievers interviewed by Ford-ham and Ogbu (1986) downplayed or hid their academic accomplishments, the Puerto Rican high achievers I studied publicized them. They looked for relationships and activities that made visible, confirmed, and strengthened their "schoolboy/girl" image at school. They sought and received recognition as "schoolboys and -girls" by becoming "scholars," hanging around school-oriented peers, and participating in extracurricular activities. An example of disclosure of high academic accomplishment is membership in the Scholars' Program, a rather limited but nevertheless advanced placement program. It provided a niche that separated the scholars physically and socially from the rest of the school. The scholars were physically segregated in honors and advanced placement courses in English, social studies, sciences, and mathematics. These classes were restricted to scholars and the few "honor" students who were allowed to take them. Because of their physical and social segregation, the scholars were distinguished by their peers as the academic elite of the school.

The scholars enjoyed high social and academic ranking as well as benefits because of the special attention they received from the staff. Other high achievers, like Ana, who were not in the Scholars' Program, were sometimes bothered by the attention the scholars received, which only emphasized the staff's neglect of students in the general education program. As Ana said,

> See, in this school they give more attention to the scholars. The rest they pay no attention to. To the scholars they give pre-ACT [pre–American College Testing]; they give them everything. But they don't say anything to us. You know, and they get scholarships. They give them this, they give them that, but to us—that we're doing well and are not in scholars—they tell us, "Oh, well, we can't give you scholarships." And I don't like that.

Students sometimes hesitated to become scholars, not because of fear of peer retaliation but because they feared not being able to make it through the program or that it would be too demanding. Ana, an athlete and high achiever, debated getting into the Scholars' Program and ultimately opted not to join: "They [friends] tell me to get in Scholars, but it is too late now. I don't want to 'cause then it'll be harder for me. They'd give me classes from first [period] to ten and I don't want that." Others, like Marta, debated for some time but ultimately decided to join after teachers and counselors insisted:

> My freshman year I was doing real good, and my division teacher was like, "You've got to get into honor classes. That's really good for you." I was like, "No, 'cause I'm going to mess up." So sophomore year, my other division teacher was like, "You gotta get in." So when I went to pick my classes for junior year my counselor was like, "You wanna get in?" I'm like, "Man,

everybody is telling me about it, but I don't want to 'cause I know I'm going to mess up." And she said, "No, with your brain, and your intelligence, and your accurateness, and everything, you're not gonna mess up if you put your head set on it." So she got me in, and that's how it started.

To join the Scholars' Program, students had to be invited or sponsored by a teacher or a counselor, as Marta's narrative illustrates. Membership was limited to those who excelled academically, and merely taking honor courses did not make one a scholar. Some students, like Alma, Lydia, and Iván, were automatically enrolled as scholars in the ninth grade based on their elementary school grades. Others, like Marta, were invited to join later because of their good grades. Although counselors ultimately decided who became a scholar, students could petition to be allowed in the program, but few did so. Some scholars, like Elizabeth, joined the program because they were already taking honor classes and their friends were scholars:

[I became a scholar] now in my senior year, but since sophomore year I have been always taking honor classes and I was always with them [scholars]. From there I started taking more honor classes and they were there. . . . So I talked to [the scholars' counselor], and I would always go to the scholars' meetings. And then I went and signed [the papers] and became a scholar.

An exceptional experience for the scholars was the annual Scholars' Banquet. The purpose of the banquet was twofold. First, the banquet honored scholars who were seniors. During the banquet they received medals that distinguished them as scholars during the graduation exercises. Also, their college plans, as well as any scholarships they received, were publicly announced. Second, the banquet served to honor individual scholars with the highest grade point average in each grade level. Thus, the top senior, junior, and sophomore scholars received trophies. Awards were given also for special effort and contribution to the program. Marta recalled getting a trophy:

Last year I got a trophy for keeping up 'cause Ms. Benton was worried about me since I kept saying, "Oh, I know I'm gonna flunk everything." A big trophy in a banquet. It was beautiful. I had so much fun. For keeping up the good work and not letting [down] just because it was honors and high classes.

Like the scholars, the athletes were also honored for their academic accomplishments. Each year, during the Athletes' Banquet, an award was given to the most academically accomplished athlete, and certificates were distributed to athletes in good academic standing. Miguel, for example, reported, "They gave me a certificate, a paper saying congratulations for being an athlete and having real good grades. They gave it to a lot of athletes. It's, like, to motivate you." Miguel aspired to win the most academically accomplished athlete award, but he was not selected for it. Also at the banquet, and for the first time ever, a small scholarship was

given to an athlete to help pay the cost of college. Ana, the high achiever quoted above, was awarded that scholarship.

Another way by which the Puerto Rican high achievers, scholars and nonscholars alike, publicized their academic accomplishments was by selecting "schoolboys and -girls" as friends. Many high achievers, like Roberto, said that they hung out with those who had interests, aspirations, and attitudes toward school similar to their own: "I have my friends, I have classes with them, I hang out with them. But they are not involved in gangs or anything like that. They're just like me." Because the high achievers' friends were also "high achievers" and "into" school, they reaffirmed the students' commitment to school and encouraged ways of behaving that embodied the student role. In Elizabeth's words, "Regular students, you've got the honor students, and usually scholars I see hang out with those that have the same aspirations as your own. They associate with other people, don't get me wrong, but I think that they hang around people that have the same aspirations."

Puerto Rican high achievers also reaffirmed their status as "schoolboys and -girls" by participating in the school's extracurricular programs. They each participated in at least one activity, and most of them participated in three or more activities for more than one school year. Although their participation in the extracurricular covered the complete range of activities at the school (e.g., athletics, academic clubs, social clubs, professional clubs), most Puerto Rican high achievers concentrated on the intellectual extracurricular activities. These included the academic and social clubs that required excellent academic standing or membership in the Scholars' Program. None of the high achievers reported hesitating to participate in intellectual extracurricular activities because this would announce her or his academic accomplishments to others.

Although some studies find no relationship between extracurricular participation and grades (Hanks and Eckland 1976; Melnick et al. 1992), at Hernández High School sports often translated into good academic standing. While not necessarily academically outstanding, athletes had to maintain good academic standing in order to participate in sports. Athletes whose academic performance deteriorated below a C grade point average were expelled from the teams. Indeed, some of the low achievers I interviewed had been expelled and denied participation in sports because of their low academic performance. Jerry, for example, reported, "I used to play basketball, actually I played for two years. I played baseball, but I got cut because [of] my grades. That's about the only two sports I was playing." While most of the low achievers in this study were not interested in participating in extracurricular activities, those who were interested, like Diana, did not qualify because they simply did not have the grade point average required for participation: "I don't like to participate in anything here. . . . I wanted to be in the Pom Pons team, but since I had Fs, you can't be in no [extracurricular] program

unless you have a C average or better. And since I had two Fs I couldn't try out. That's the only thing I would be interested in."

Although most athletes did not rank among the top 10 percent of their classes, they were still high achievers. Among the athletes I interviewed, only Vanessa, a scholar, graduated within the top 10 percent of her class. The rest of the athletes, who seemed to be most representative of athletes at Hernández, graduated within the top 35 percent of their class. Overall, the athletes were not academically outstanding students, but they maintained good grades, with grade point averages ranging from 2.62 to 3.20.

The high achievers did not deny or downplay their academic status. On the contrary, they engaged in activities that would let others know that they were "schoolboys and -girls." For them, high achievement conferred high status and benefits in school. Becoming a scholar, hanging out with "schoolboys and -girls," and participating in extracurricular activities produced visible tokens of one's efforts and membership: social recognition and popularity. These in turn established and confirmed their status as "schoolboys and -girls" in front of their peers.

School Achievement and "Puerto Ricanness"

In Fordham's (1988) study, it appears problematic for African American high achievers to reconcile their ethnic identity with a generic "American" or "white" identity. For them, one is either black or "unblack," but there is no "in-between" category. Because of this dichotomy and the perception of "blackness" as opposite to "whiteness," African American students must choose between either maintaining their ethnic identity and becoming underachievers or giving up their ethnic identity and becoming high achievers. Thus, African American high achievers often become "unblack" by downplaying African American culture and reinforcing an identity as "Americans."

By contrast, Puerto Rican high achievers and low achievers at Hernández High School did not seem to encounter conflict between being Puerto Rican and American. Although different, these identities were not in opposition or mutually exclusive. The presence of one did not imply the absence of the other, mainly because of the way the students defined and gave value to these identities. They maintained their ethnic identity as Puerto Ricans along with a secondary and less prominent American identity based solely on citizenship. The Puerto Rican identity predominated in most aspects of the high achievers' lives. It was expressed in their use of the Spanish language, the food they ate, how they celebrated holidays, and even in their choice of friends. The high achievers preferred to "hang around" Puerto Ricans more than with people from other ethnic groups. As Elizabeth put it,

I find that people go after their own race. The Mexicans mix with other Mexicans, the Puerto Ricans with the Puerto Ricans. Mainly everybody is friends.

But there are groups divided into their own *raza* ["race"]. It's not that they don't get along. They do get along. But you know, you feel more comfortable with your own ethnic group. . . . But they understand each other better [when they are] from the same raza.

Although they emphasized their "Puerto Ricanness," they also recognized an American identity based on being a U.S. citizen. As Alma told me,

I feel I am a Puerto Rican American. I mean, when they have those parades [for Puerto Ricans, I say,] "Mira Boricua" [slang for Puerto Rican]. I think I am more American. . . . I consider myself half Puerto Rican and half American. And you know, people say, "Oh, yeah. You're still a minority or Hispanic or whatever." I'm a Chicagoan. Puerto Rico is my homeland. Puerto Rico is part of the U.S., so it's pretty [much] the same thing, but patriotism and citizenship is U.S.

Being American was for them a matter of citizenship and not of nationality. It simply happened because of the political status of Puerto Rico, whereby all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens regardless of place of birth, their political views, or their feelings toward Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States. It was also spatial, for most Puerto Rican students at Hernández were born in the mainland or brought in at a young age and saw Chicago as their home but not their homeland. What was particular about their U.S. identity was that it was usually devoid of emotion or at the very least did not evoke the same kind of emotion that their Puerto Rican identity did. Although American, they did not feel fully American. As Roberto, a high achiever, said, "American American, no. Well, the United States has helped Puerto Rico a lot. But me feeling American or Yankee, no. I always consider myself Puerto Rican. I was born there [Puerto Rico]. I hope I die there."

For the Puerto Rican students, high achievers and low achievers alike, being Puerto Rican was the essence of who they were. It was their ethnicity. I observed many displays of emotion toward Puerto Rico and anything Puerto Rican among the Puerto Rican students at Hernández. Their statements about Puerto Rico or being Puerto Rican, the emotional reactions to Puerto Rican cultural activities at school, the unspoken almost immediate trust toward me after discovering I am Puerto Rican, and the frequent display of Puerto Rican symbols on shirts and pendants conveyed the significance that being Puerto Rican had for these students. Most striking was the way they talked about the island. Their narratives were nostalgic and conveyed a longing for the island, even when they had never visited it. They liked to talk about Puerto Rico and tell stories their parents had told them of life there. For example, Luis described to me the area where his family is from. He talked about the mountains, the humidity, and the town where his parents were born even though he had not been there in years.

The Puerto Rican students in this study maintained a connection with the island, even if it was only emotional. They also identified with the

United States—but not as deeply as they did with Puerto Rico. And while being Puerto Rican was different from being American, these identities were not opposite because the students did not phrase their "Americanness" in ethnic terms. They identified as Americans because they were U.S. citizens and lived in the United States, but ethnically they were Puerto Ricans. Therefore, they did not have to choose between either maintaining their ethnic identity and becoming underachievers or giving up their ethnic identity and becoming high achievers.

The Achievement Ethic

Like the African American high achievers in Fordham's (1988) study, Puerto Rican high achievers subscribed to the achievement ethic. Hard work, first in school and later at work, was their key to the American dream of becoming middle class. They believed that fate is self-determined and that each person is responsible for his or her success or failure. After all, they reasoned, if they could succeed, others could too. They were convinced that if one puts forth more effort, success is a sure thing. Clearly, their perceptions of success and their belief in the work ethic contributed to their academic success. Elizabeth, a scholar, said, "The ones that stay in school are those who know that they have to work to have a plate of food on the table. That life is not easy if there is nobody there to help you." Lack of success was due, according to the high achievers, to lack of motivation and drive; as Roberto told me, "[My brother] is kind of lazy, too. He always wanted, since he was in school here, he always wanted to have fun and never wanted to work. That's why he is like he is now [a dropout]."

Low achievers often shared the high achievers' views on hard work and motivation as necessary for success. They believed that when people are determined to work hard and succeed, nothing can stop them. Sylvia, a low achiever, said, "If one really wants to make a difference in one's own life and wants to go to classes and wants to succeed, gangs and everything is not gonna stop you. It's not gonna stop you because one has the goal that 'I want to graduate. I am going to get out if this school.' " Although the low achievers believed in the work ethic, they did not practice it. They generally did just enough to get by in school. Their attendance and grade records show their lack of effort in schoolwork. For instance, the cumulative grade point average of the dropouts ranged from .10 to 1.24, and that for those who returned to school varied from .91 to 1.93.

The high achievers at Hernández looked down on some members of their ethnic group, as the high achievers in Fordham's (1988) study did. They used others as scapegoats if only to highlight their own accomplishments. They made marked distinctions in attitudes and behavior between themselves and "others." People who were on welfare, unemployed, in gangs, using drugs, or homeless were called "lowlifes." Elizabeth defined the term for me, "Lowlife, that one who is in the street depending

on other people [and] does nothing to rise above all by himself. I call that a 'lowlife.' Sometimes they have someone that they know will always be there for them." However, the high achievers did not generalize the be-havior of the so-called lowlife to include all Puerto Ricans or members of other ethnic groups. Ethnicity never entered the conversation because what they were describing was people they believed are found in all so-cial groups. By contrast, the African American high achievers in Ford-ham's (1988) study described such behaviors as black.

Images of the "lowlife" were not held only by the high achievers. Many Puerto Rican low achievers shared similar views about "lowlifes," plus the added fear of becoming "lowlifes" themselves, especially those who had dropped out of school. They were afraid that the dropout iden-tity would become a self-fulfilling prophecy and they would end up be-coming "lowlifes." Sheer fear of ending up a "lowlife," with nothing to do, pushed many dropouts to return to school. As Jenny said, "After a while you get sick if being home, and I was like, 'Man, what am I gonna do with myself? I can't always be at home.' " Dropouts who returned to school pointed to those who remained out of school as "lowlifes." Low achiever Diana commented about her boyfriend, "He dropped out his sophomore year. He needs to get a GED [General Equivalency Diplo-ma]. He needs to get a life if you ask me. He's 20. He just bums around 'cause there's nothing else to do when he should just get a job. I always tell him."

According to high achievers, working hard and striving to achieve were necessary if one was to prevent becoming a "lowlife" or even to re-main working class. And most high achievers aspired to become middle class and wanted to avoid the factory work that their parents did. Scholar Elizabeth said, "It's in me, I guess. I don't want to stay in a fac-tory. I have to advance. I don't want to stay in there on the side." High achievers believed that only by getting a university education could they avoid factory work. Lydia, another scholar, commented,

> People have graduated with a diploma of high school and haven't gotten any farther. Like my mom says, "With a high school diploma you can't do any-thing." You get regular blue-collar jobs. You don't get a good job in an office or something. You get a regular, janitor or something. They even ask for diplo-mas to clean toilets.

The Puerto Rican high achievers in this study, like the African Ameri-can students in Fordham's (1988) study, bought into the achievement ideology. They fervently believed that the secret of success lay in the mo-tivation and willingness of people to work hard. Those who failed had only themselves to blame because if they had worked harder they would have succeeded. At no point during our conversations did the high achievers acknowledge the presence of factors that may impede success. They did not recognize that motivation and hard work are only part of

the equation and that there are structural conditions, such as poverty, that make it harder and even prevent people from succeeding.

Discussion

This study shows that there does not seem to be a pattern in how involuntary minorities in general deal with academic success. Members of some involuntary ethnic minority groups approach school success very cautiously, whereas others do not hesitate to excel academically. For the former, school success comes at the expense of their ethnic identity. Because they perceive it as a "white" characteristic, those who succeed are suspected of denying their ethnicity by adopting a "white" identity. For the latter, school success has little to bear on their perception of ethnicity. Doing well in school is not defined as a "white" behavior, therefore it does not pose a threat to ethnic identity. How involuntary minorities approach academic success may be determined by social history, ethnicity, class, school opportunity structure, and role identity.

The Puerto Rican students in this study did not seem to form an ethnic identity in opposition to "whites," yet they recognized that their ethnicity was distinctively different from U.S. culture. Because they did not define their ethnicity as opposite to that of whites, behaviors such as academic success were not tied to a particular ethnic group. That Puerto Rican students did not define their ethnic identity as opposite to "whites" may be because of the sociohistorical context in which the Puerto Rican identity was formed. Although Puerto Rico was forcefully incorporated into the United States in 1898 and its people have been subjected to continuous attempts to assimilate them, Puerto Ricans see themselves as a distinct people. While there has been resistance by Puerto Ricans to Americanization, an oppositional culture does not seem to have developed perhaps because Puerto Ricans have a homeland, a language, and a sense of nationhood that define them as one people, regardless of race. According to Rodríguez, "Ethnic identity on the island is based on culture, a sense of shared nationality," and although racial distinctions are made, they are made "without excluding any person from being considered a member of the Puerto Rican nation" (1997:255). Because everyone is considered Puerto Rican regardless of race, behavior such as good school performance is not necessarily tied to race.

Although the sociohistorical basis of ethnicity may help explain differences in attitudes toward school success along ethnic lines, recent studies show that it alone does not account for the different responses to school success found within ethnic groups or the similar responses found between groups. Ethnic explanations assume that all members of an ethnic group share a definition of ethnicity. This assumption denies the diversity that exists within the group and ignores racial, class, and gender differences within the ethnic group and how these differences shape attitudes toward schooling. Matute-Bianchi's (1986) study shows that there is not a single Mexican identity but, rather, five distinct Mexican-descent

identities, and each group has distinct views on academic success. Perhaps the most striking example of variation in attitudes toward academic success is found in the research of Fordham (1988) and Hemmings (1996). A comparison of these studies suggests that class affects the way in which African Americans conceptualize school success. While the low-income African Americans in both studies equated academic success to "acting white," the middle-class African Americans studied by Hemmings viewed doing well as a "middle-class" behavior not a "white" behavior. It will, then, be more appropriate to say that students with similar ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds share a similar concept of school success. The Puerto Rican high achievers I interviewed seemed to associate academic success with middle-class behavior and not with a racial group. However, the absence of sharp socioeconomic differences among students at Hernández High School did not permit an analysis of the effects of class on school success.

In addition to class differences, the racial and ethnic composition of the school may also affect attitudes toward school success. In urban schools with high rates of segregation and with predominantly low-income student populations, like the school studied by Fordham (1988) and one of the schools studied by Hemmings (1996), behaviors required for academic success appear to be associated with "whites." By contrast, in more racially and economically integrated urban schools, like the second school studied by Hemmings (1996), behaviors needed to do well in school are not perceived as "white" but as middle class. It is possible that students in more segregated and low-income urban schools come to define academic success as incompatible with preservation of ethnic identity, while those in racially and economically diverse schools may not necessarily equate academic success with the loss of ethnicity.

Another factor largely neglected by previous research is the role that schools play in shaping students' attitudes toward schooling. Schools structure students' opportunities in formal and informal ways by providing different experiences to students through academic and extracurricular programs. At Hernández High School, high achievement was encouraged, recognized, and celebrated, but these opportunities were offered to a limited number of students. For instance, the Scholars' Program was highly selective and limited to about one hundred students. Besides creating a separate space for the students in advanced and honor classes, the school invested more resources in the program and culminated the year with a recognition dinner. Another example of encouragement, recognition, and celebration of high achievement is the extracurricular programs. However, only 25 percent of the students at Hernández participated in any extracurricular programs (Flores-González 1995; Quiroz et al. 1996). In fact, one of the most striking differences between high achievers and low achievers was extracurricular participation. While the high achievers participated in one or more extracurricular activities, the low achievers participated in none. The

structure of opportunities at Hernández was designed to exclude most students from participating while it encouraged a small number of students to participate in all aspects of school life.

An alternative explanation, tied to ethnicity, class, and the structuring of opportunities at school, is the role-identity theory, which points to the inability of groups of students to form strong student identities (see Flores-González 1995). As this article shows, I did not find an oppositional identity among Puerto Rican students, high achievers and low achievers alike. What I found was the overwhelming presence of conflicting identities among the low achievers and the absence of them among the high achievers. By conflicting identities I mean identities that clash or compete with the student identity. Most low achievers struggled with conflicting identities, such as those caused by gang membership and teen parenthood, which impinged on their role as students, whereas the high achievers experienced little or no competition among their identities. Rather, their other identities supported and often overlapped with the student identity. The realities of living in a low-income community, added to the structuring and distribution of resources at school, conflate to make it very difficult for Puerto Rican students to sustain a strong student identity.

The school performance of involuntary minorities may have more to do with the structural conditions that poverty and minority status cast and their negative effect on the formation and maintenance of the student role than with ethnicity. Students who live in poverty, and in the inner city particularly, encounter more obstacles in their educational paths than students from more affluent areas. For instance, the Puerto Rican students in this study had to deal with hostility in school and the neighborhood, gangs, and a high incidence of health problems in the family, among other issues. The reality of life in poverty makes being a student much more complicated as low-income students continuously face problems that clash with their roles as students. How they perform in school is a reflection of their status in society, their perceptions of themselves, and how schools structure opportunities, not necessarily their development of an oppositional student identity.

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