

When Doing Right Means Acting White: Does Valuing School and Educational  
Achievement Sell Out the Future of the Latino Community?

Alma Kristina Rodriguez

University of Delaware

McNair Mentors: Professors Juan Villamarin & Benigno Aguirre

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First advanced by John Ogbu, the theory of oppositional culture, which attempts to explain the academic achievement disparity between whites and minorities, is a premise that contends minorities develop an “oppositional social identity” or resistance to the dominant culture (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). Consequently, minorities label specific behaviors and events, such as performing well in school and pursuing higher education, as “acting white” or “selling out.” It is then purported that academically-oriented minorities are denounced by their peer-groups. This peer condemnation allegedly promotes academic “disengagement” by the high-achieving minority student, and academic failure follows. This investigation seeks to examine if oppositional culture exists among young Latino peer-groups and to explore its impact on academic success and educational achievement for Latino youth. The analysis is based on a combination of survey and qualitative data collected from a series of individual and group interviews conducted with a mixed sample of 15 low and middle-income Latino youths, ages 13-18, from Wilmington, Delaware.

General research category: Social Science