

'Nerd Penalty': Social Costs of School Success Are Highest for African Americans, Study Shows

ScienceDaily (Nov. 22, 2010) — African American and Native American teens who do well in school suffer from a higher "nerd penalty" than white, Asian, and Hispanic youth, according to a new analysis.

"The negative social consequences of getting good grades were particularly pronounced for black and Native American students in high-achieving schools with small proportions of students similar to themselves," said University of Michigan developmental psychologist Thomas Fuller-Rowell, the lead author of the study.

The analysis of a nationally representative sample of more than 13,000 U.S. adolescents from more than 100 schools across the nation was published in the current (November/December 2010) issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Child Development*. The study was funded primarily by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, part of the National Institutes of Health.

Fuller-Rowell and co-author Stacey Doan of Boston University controlled for differences in family and school socioeconomic status, family structure, school-level achievement, and school safety, type and size.

To assess social acceptance, they asked students in grades seven through 12 how strongly they agreed or disagreed that they felt socially accepted by other students; how often in the past week other students had been unfriendly to them; how often they felt that other students disliked them; and how often they felt lonely.

As an indicator of academic success, they used student grade-point averages, comparing the relationship of GPA and social acceptance over the course of a year.

They found considerable differences among ethnic groups in the social consequences of academic achievement. For whites, the link between GPA and social acceptance was strongly positive over time -- the better their GPA, the more likely that students were to feel accepted, and the less likely to report feeling lonely, feeling that others had been unfriendly, or that others disliked them.

For black students and for Native Americans, the relationship between GPA and social acceptance was reversed: the higher their GPA, the lonelier they were likely to report feeling, and the more they were likely to report that others had been unfriendly or disliked them.

While Hispanics overall displayed a pattern similar to whites and Asians, the researchers found significant differences between students of Mexican descent and those of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Central and South American heritage.

The Mexican students showed patterns similar to blacks, particularly when they were a small proportion of the population in high-achieving schools.

"This analysis did not identify reasons for racial and ethnic differences in the relation between school achievement and a sense of social acceptance," said Fuller-Rowell. "But it does strongly suggest that racial dynamics within schools are having an important influence on students' lives and should not be ignored. In fact, these dynamics are likely to be an important mechanism behind racial/ethnic gaps in achievement."

The analysis found no differences in the relationship of GPA and social acceptance based on gender and immigration status.

Fuller-Rowell is a postdoctoral fellow in the Achievement Research Lab at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR).

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1. Thomas E. Fuller-Rowell, Stacey N. Doan. **The Social Costs of Academic Success Across Ethnic Groups**. *Child Development*, 2010; 81 (6): 1696 DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01504.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01504.x)

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