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Discrimination and Assimilation at School*

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Abstract

I present a theory of assimilation among students of two different backgrounds with unequal status. Students with a disadvantaged background face an incentive to assimilate into the more advantaged group. The advantaged group chooses the cost of assimilation strategically to screen those who seek to assimilate. In equilibrium, only the most skilled disadvantaged students assimilate. This theory provides a novel explanation of the "acting white" problem. "Acting white" refers to a social phenomenon in which students from disadvantaged ethnicities suffer social sanctions if they obtain good grades. These sanctions raise the cost of acquiring the skills that make it easier to assimilate. Disadvantaged students with low ability impose these sanctions in order to induce their more able co-ethnics to stay in the disadvantaged group.

JEL Codes: J15, D71, Z13, D62, I24.

Keywords: Discrimination. Assimilation. Acting White. Peer effects.

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