

**UCLA**

**InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies**

**Title**

Review: *Keepin' it Real: School Success beyond Black and White* by Prudence L. Carter

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1sd9k34z>

**Journal**

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 2(2)

**ISSN**

1548-3320

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**Publication Date**

2006-06-14

**DOI**

10.5070/D422000567

Peer reviewed

**Keepin' it Real: School Success beyond Black and White** by Prudence L. Carter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 219 pp. ISBN 0-19-516862-3

Educational researchers and social scientists interested in the education of minority youth, the ways in which racial and ethnic identities shape their experiences, and achievement patterns will find Prudence Carter's *Keepin' it Real: School Success beyond Black and White* a most relevant book. Clearly and insightfully written, this book is a necessary addition to the literature on cultural explanations of the achievement gap. Although a more nuanced account could have been afforded through the use of additional methodological techniques, the book is nonetheless a must read for anyone interested in the intersections between cultural identity and education.

Explanations of school success or failure have preoccupied social scientists for many decades. A particular interest has focused on the achievement gap between supposedly bounded racial or ethnic groups, namely white and Asian students, compared to historically disadvantaged minorities such as African Americans and Latinos. Attempting to understand the reasons for the underachievement and disengagement of minority youth, the late John Ogbu and his colleagues theorized a cultural explanation for the disaffiliation and disengagement of minority youth. In their conception of minority students' negative perceptions of education and subsequent alienation from school, Ogbu and his colleagues theorized that U.S. born disadvantaged minorities see assimilation as a subtractive process in which they lose their identity (Ogbu, 1978; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu and Simmons, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). It was argued that involuntary minorities bear the burden of "acting white" should they present themselves as good students in a school system that devalues their racial or ethnic identity (Fordham, 1996). Although this line of thought provides a much needed critique of the structural organization of schools, as well as providing a suitable explanatory alternative to past deficit theories that *blamed the victims*, there is much about these assertions that falls short of fully and more accurately explaining the achievement gap.

This is the point of entry for Carter as she attempts to complicate the identities of minority youth and their subsequent reactions to school in her text. Based upon her extensive study of sixty-eight low income African American and Latino students, who ranged in age from thirteen to twenty, Carter argues that the notion of "acting white" has not as much to do with academic achievement as it does with students' cultural identity and sense of group belonging, despite their grade point averages. As she explains, for many African American students "resistance to 'acting white' is about maintaining cultural identity, not about embracing or rejecting the dominant standards of achievement" (p. 53). In other

words, it is possible, Carter contends, that minority students achieve success in school while escaping ostracism from co-ethnics through a tacit means of “keepin’ it real” and rejecting “acting white.”

Given this more complex reality of achievers and non-achievers within previously assumed bounded and homogeneous groups, Carter sets out to explore the tremendous variation *within* groups, writing that “even those who share an identity—perhaps an ethnic identity—show variation in beliefs, behaviors, practices, and attitudes precisely because of all the other identities that may influence us” (p. 112). In order to further flesh out how variation in racial and ethnic identity plays out amongst students Carter develops three ideological profiles. The first of these profiles is that of “cultural mainstreamers” who rely on traditional assimilationist values and their approach is to “fit” into the system. “Noncompliant believers” on the other hand do not act in accordance with the dominant values and norms even though they often subscribe to the functional aspects of a good education. Finally, “cultural straddlers” can strategically and effectively move across the different cultural spheres, enabling them to achieve academically by playing the game, all the while maintaining their sense of racial or ethnic identity. Thus, Carter’s main thesis is that students’ individual differences based on variations in their racial ideologies determined the different approaches they took to education.

It is clear from this book that the ideal ideological profile is that of the “cultural straddler” who can keep it real but also act appropriately in given contexts, thus shifting identities as dictated by time and place. These are the students who value and draw upon not only the dominant but also the non-dominant cultural capital. Thus, Carter argues that the non-dominant cultural capital minority youth utilize needs to be validated in order to realize a stronger form of multiculturalism in schooling. Yet, she also realizes that achievement necessitates an ability to access dominant forms of cultural capital as well. In the end, Carter calls for “multicultural navigators” who can assist students’ negotiation between the dissonance of their own cultural capital and the organizational habitus which regulates schools.

Although I was extremely pleased that Carter argued against monolithic racial and ethnic categories offering cultural explanations of school success or failure, her methodological approach and subsequent analysis could have taken a more nuanced form. Given that Carter was in the field for an extended period of time, the potential for a more in-depth examination of the youth she studied was left undeveloped. Specifically, I was interested in hearing about the observed interactions between students more than merely what they had to say. How did the cultural mainstreamers act around the noncompliant believers or the cultural straddlers? Did students’ behaviors reinforce the typology developed by Carter or do these categories need to be further scrutinized because of observed

contradictions between what students *said* and what they *did*? It is now commonly agreed upon that triangulation, namely the use of multiple data collection techniques and sources, strengthens researchers' assertions and this book would have been much improved if the daily interactions between these youth were recorded and reported. For example, if cultural straddlers reported being accepted by both school personnel *and* co-ethnics, an exploration of the lived interactions between cultural straddlers and co-ethnics would serve to verify that this in fact is true rather than an empty hope on the part of these students. Also, these observations might have included more detailed descriptive information about the students in these different typologies to assist the reader in visualizing these students' dress and language styles, for instance. Carter could have presented these observed interactions in the form of vignettes in order to provide her readers further evidence of her typological argument. In all fairness, Carter does not purport to present a full ethnographic account of the social setting in which she studied. It is clear in her introduction that the data was gathered primarily through interviews and surveys. Nonetheless, such a powerful book could have been enriched further by not only presenting the voices of the students, but also presenting the interactional happenings that give life and meaning to these voices.

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### Reviewer

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