



You Sound White: The Emotional Impact of the Acting White Accusation

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Adolescence is often defined as a developmental stage between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. This critical period in development is also when many youth are subjected to the close scrutiny of peers and hold the opinions of peers in high regard (Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings & Stadulis, 2012; Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray & Demmings, 2010). As such, negative evaluations by peers can be disconcerting for adolescents and negatively impact their well-being (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). During adolescence, it is not uncommon for youth to be subjected to name-calling and referred to as a “teacher’s pet” or “nerd” or “weird” (Murray et al., 2012). While teasing crosses many cultural borders, educators and psychologists have become increasingly aware of an accusation particularly relevant to Black youth—the acting White accusation (AWA; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Bolton & Moniz, 1993; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Ogbu, 2004).

Research has indicated that the AWA is one of the most negative accusations one Black adolescent can hurl at another (Kunjufo, 1988; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Steele, 1992;

Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992; Ward, 1990). The accusation has been documented as early as elementary school and is most salient and first likely to occur during early adolescence (Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Tyson, 2002). Whereas the accusation is most closely associated with Blacks, nascent research and numerous personal accounts have documented its existence for other racial groups including Hispanic/Latin Americans (Fryer Jr. & Torelli, 2010) and Asian Americans (Lew, 2006). However, the current chapter focuses exclusively on the experiences of Black male and female adolescents as a collective group.

Definition

The acting White accusation (AWA) arises when a Black adolescent’s racial identity is perceived as being not Black enough by another Black adolescent or group of Black adolescents (Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). Neal-Barnett et al. (2010) posit that the AWA has nothing to do with actually wanting to be White and everything to do with what it means to be a Black adolescent. Thus, the AWA is embedded in ethnic/racial identity (ERI). Ethnic/racial identity is defined as “a multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes that individuals have about their ethnic/racial group membership,

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as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time” (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, p. 23).

Given the psychological literature on ERI and the complexity of measuring it (Cokley, 2007; Helms, 1996; Phinney, 1990; Waters, 2000), what criteria do Black adolescents use to determine that a peer’s ERI is not Black enough? Neal-Barnett et al. (2010) utilized a series of mixed method studies to identify six themes often involved in individuals making the acting White accusation—academic achievement, dress, economics, music preferences, speech, and values and standards. Murray et al. (2012) offered an example of the interplay between these variables; “a Black adolescent who earns a 4.0 GPA, dresses preppy, speaks proper English, and has friends of various ethnicities, may be accused of acting White.” Similarly, Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) interviewed 64 Black adolescent students to understand what it means to be Black from their perspective. Content analysis revealed five dimensions that resulted from responses: academic/scholastic, aesthetic/stylistic, behavioral, dispositional, and impressionistic. These studies suggest that Black adolescents determine ERI based on behaviors and characteristics and certain attributes are simply not seen as Black. For example, some adolescents might consider listening to hip hop, wearing “urban” clothing, and speaking “slang” to be behaviors that define what it means to be Black, whereas others might believe their Blackness is not contingent upon stereotypical behaviors and attributes. Conflict arises when one’s definition of what it means to be Black is discrepant from another’s definition, which often leads to the AWA.

It is important to note that the AWA may be experienced in one or both ways, directly, “you are acting White,” or indirectly, “you talk like a White boy.” The indirect accusation is a subtler form of the AWA that circumvents explicitly stating someone acts White yet accuses her/him of possessing characteristics that are not Black. Regardless of whether it is direct or indirect, most accused adolescents recognize the AWA as an attack on their ethnic/racial identity (Neal-Barnett,

2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). As Wynter, a student in an early study by Neal-Barnett (2001), eloquently phrased it, “When someone accuses you of acting White, it is a judgment against the core of who you are” (p. 79).

Prevalence

The existing research suggests the prevalence of the acting White accusation among Black youth is relatively high. Murray et al. (2012) found that 97 of 110 participants between the ages of 14 and 18 years old reported being accused of acting White. Fifty-two participants reported experiencing the accusation directly, while the other 45 experienced it indirectly. In a similar study, Davis, Stadulis, and Neal-Barnett (2018) investigated the AWA in a sample of girls aged 10–18 years old and found that all 31 participants had been accused of acting White either directly, indirectly, or both. Bergin and Cooks (2002) found that among 17 11th grade, 12th grade, and college freshmen, 10 students reported being accused of acting White, most of whom described being “bothered” by the accusation. Goff, Martin, and Thomas (2007) assessed the AWA among a sample of Black adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16 years old who attended an alternative middle school that had special education services for students at risk for school failure or who had already dropped out. The authors found that five out of six Black adolescents sampled experienced the accusation prior to enrollment. Durkee and Williams (2013) found among 145 Black college students between 18 and 23 years old, who were in a developmental period directly linked to adolescence—emerging adulthood—74% of the sample had received the AWA.

Response to the Accusation

Research indicates that an adolescent’s initial reaction to the AWA attack involves a unique construct called bother and can spark identity exploration. In the next sections, we examine these two constructs in-depth.

Bother

When researchers ask Black adolescents how receiving the AWA makes them feel, the overwhelming response is “it bothered me.” When prompted to elaborate, Black adolescents have difficulty operationally defining the term. They are clear that bother is *not* anxiety, or sadness, or anger. However, bother may be a general state of psychological discomfort (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010).

The literature is clear that bother or the extent to which one is bothered by the AWA is a critical component to understanding its impact on Black adolescents (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). Those who are more bothered by the accusation appear to have a stronger and negative reaction to the accusation than others. Those who receive the AWA in both the direct and indirect form are more likely to experience bother than those who solely receive the AWA indirectly. This most likely occurs because indirect accusations are subtle and attack the adolescent’s behavior, while direct accusations target their identity as Black individuals (Murray et al., 2012).

Few Black adolescents report not being bothered at all by the AWA. These teens often indicate that the accusation is “silly or doesn’t mean anything, cuz how can you act a color” (Ideastream, 2007). A distinct possibility exists they are underreporting level of bother. Evidence for underreporting is found in the interview study conducted by Bergin and Cooks (2002). One of their original interviewees was a high school senior named Samuel. Samuel reported that he did not like being accused of acting White, but the accusation did not bother him. One year later, a follow-up interview was conducted with Samuel who was now a college freshman at a major university. During the follow-up, the researchers read his earlier statements regarding not being bothered by the accusation. Samuel laughed and replied, “of course the accusations had bothered him” (Bergin & Cooks, 2002, p. 126). Perhaps some adolescents underreport their experiences of bother with the AWA because they desire accep-

tance into their peer groups. Speaking negatively about their peers could create unwanted controversy that these adolescents are trying to avoid. This could explain why Samuel was reluctant to disclose his feelings of bother surrounding the accusation until he distanced himself from an environment where he continuously received the AWA. Future research should further explore self-reports of bother and compare individual responses over time similar to the Bergin and Cooks (2002) study to determine if responses change when a Black adolescent is removed from their peers.

Bother can also go underreported because a Black adolescent may not want to be viewed as a victim. The AWA is considered to be a form of bullying, so it can be used to victimize other individuals. Bullying is most likely underreported in the Black community because there is a stigma attached to being a victim (Sawyer, Bradshaw, & O’Brennan, 2008). This stigma allows Black adolescents to perceive their experiences with the AWA as normal and underreport their bother intensity in order to decrease their chances of appearing like a victim.

Identity Exploration and the Acting White Trap

At the same time adolescents are experiencing bother, many find themselves grappling with the question “What does it mean to be Black?” For some adolescents, the answer is simple; for others, the answer is more complex, and they find themselves exploring their ethnic/racial identity (ERI). As part of the exploration, adolescents may take on a different persona; they may change the way they dress or the way they speak. Wynter, the student previously quoted in this chapter described the trap in the following way, “At first I was defensive. I became militant Black but it was displaced... I realized I did belong, I became more involved and interested in school...I wore what I wanted to wear” (Neal-Barnett, 2001, p. 79).

Qualitative studies and personal narratives reveal that most adolescents accused of acting

White undergo a similar journey (Bergin & Cooks, 2008; Davis et al., 2018; Kunjufu, 1988; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). From an ERI perspective, the AWA leads to an identity crisis (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980, 1986) that results in the accused entering into a period of ERI exploration (Phinney & Ong, 2007) or what may be akin to a moratorium identity status (Marcia, 1980, 1986). Psychologically, moratorium is defined as the state where adolescents are in the midst of an identity crisis but have not made a clear commitment to an identity (Marcia, 1980, 1986). In the lay literature, moratorium is known as the acting White trap.

Spending time in the acting White trap is a healthy thing because individuals are able to “try on” various identities in order to find one that is suitable for their needs. The difficulty arises when some adolescents remain in the trap, failing to make a decision or adopting a racial persona that may not be in line with their true values and beliefs. Psychologically, the latter would reflect a foreclosed ERI status, which occurs when individuals have taken on values and beliefs about their ethnic identity that they have been exposed to by those around them. In response to an appearance in 2007 on CNN about the AWA, Neal-Barnett received multiple emails from Black adults detailing their experiences with the accusation as adolescents. One woman highlights the acting White trap and this foreclosed ERI status in her letter. She was ridiculed in school for being Black and intelligent and talking “like a White girl,” which ultimately led to her academic decline and speaking in “Ebonics” just to fit in with her peers. The woman also says that she began losing her self-esteem and identity, all of which was “a rough time and psychologically damaging” during this time in her life (E. Edwards-Bryant, personal communication, February 27, 2007).

The existing literature suggests that ERI serves as a buffer against psychological distress for adolescents and adults (Carter, 1991; Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009; Settles et al., 2010; Utsey, Hook, Fischer, & Belvet, 2008; Williams, Chapman, Wong, & Turkheimer, 2012; Yasui, Dorham, &

Dishion, 2004). ERI appears to moderate depression, anxiety, and overall well-being. Middle school boys with higher levels of ERI experienced less depressive symptoms (Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009). The authors also found a moderately negative correlation between anxiety and racial identity among Black middle school girls (Mandara et al., 2009). Among Black adult women, Settles and colleagues (Settles, et al., 2010) found those who reported higher race centrality, public regard, and private regard had lower rates of depression.

Conversely, lower levels of ERI have been linked to negative outcomes (Carter, 1991; Utsey et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2012; Yasui et al., 2004). Yasui et al. (2004) found that Black adolescents who endorsed negative attitudes about ethnicity were more likely to experience internalizing problems (withdrawnness, somatic complaints, anxiety, and depression) and externalizing behaviors (delinquent and aggressive behavior). In an adult study (Williams et al., 2012), results indicated that Blacks with lower levels of ethnic identity experienced greater amounts of both anxiety and depression. Using the 50-item Racial Identity Attitude Scale that assesses the attitudes in Cross’s Negro-to-Black conversion model (Cross, 1978) on a 5-point Likert scale, Carter (1991) found that pre-encounter attitudes, which are present when the individual has yet to explore his or her Blackness and develop a sense of identity within the Black community, were positively related to anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, and global psychological distress.

In addition to psychological well-being, higher levels of ERI appear to serve as a protective factor against the deleterious effects of racial and ethnic discrimination which, in turn, affects well-being (Neblett et al., 2012). Recent research, however, suggests the relation between ERI and discrimination may be more complex (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) suggest that while ERI may serve as a protective factor, one might also expect that an individual reporting discrimination based on an important and central part of their identity would report increased negative affect. This finding has

implications for the interaction between the AWA, ERI, and the development and manifestation of psychopathology. As indicated earlier, a key construct in the AWA is bother. One might hypothesize that adolescents and emerging adults with higher levels of ERI would be less bothered by the accusation. The distinct possibility exists, however, that the opposite is true. Given that the AWA is embedded in ERI, those individuals with higher levels may be more bothered by the attack on their identity. This higher level of bother may place them at higher risk for clinical symptomatology. Indeed, research with emerging adults (Durkee & Williams, 2013) provides partial support for this hypothesis. Among college students, those with high levels of ERI were more bothered by the AWA; however for this sample, it was lower levels of ERI that were associated with psychological difficulties (Durkee & Williams, 2013). In this next section, we take a closer look at the AWA and mental health among Black adolescents and emerging adults.

AWA and Clinical Symptomatology

Over the past two decades, a limited amount of research has emerged on the impact of the AWA on clinical symptomatology. Both qualitative and quantitative in nature, the bulk of this research focuses on anxiety, depression, and the accusation as a form of bullying.

Anxiety Anxiety has long been associated with the AWA (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Arroyo & Ziglar, 1995; Murray et al., 2012). Qualitative research conducted by Fordham (1996) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that Black adolescents who employ racelessness (defined as behaviors and attitudes that distance them from their culture of origin) and are accused of acting White may experience internalizing symptoms such as feelings of anxiety. Quantitative research by Arroyo and Ziglar (1995) revealed a significant positive correlation between racelessness and psychological distress, including anxiety. More definitively, Murray et al. (2012) found that

accused adolescents who reported higher levels of bother associated with the AWA also reported higher levels of anxiety. The authors suggest that it is possible that the content of the bother may not be anxiety, but a third factor (e.g., anxiety sensitivity) which could impact both anxiety and bother that leads to adolescents experiencing more anxiety (Murray et al., 2012).

Building on Murray's work (2012), Davis et al. (2018) found that AWA accusation was significantly associated with social anxiety symptoms; higher levels of bother were associated with higher levels of social anxiety symptoms. Intuitively, a link between social anxiety and AWA makes sense. Social anxiety is defined as a marked fear of one or more social situations, because it has social consequences that make it an impetus for social evaluation concerns (Detweiler, Comer, Crum, & Albano, 2014). The AWA is an evaluative judgment made by one's Black peers (Bergin & Cooks, 2008; Davis et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010).

Bullying Bullying has been linked to social anxiety because it has social consequences that make it a driving force for social evaluation concerns (Detweiler et al., 2014; LaGreca & Harrison, 2005). During adolescence, friendship and peer relations play essential roles in the development of social skills and feelings of efficacy that are crucial to adult functioning (LaGreca & Lopez, 1998). Bullying victimization is associated with increased anxiety, shyness, withdrawnness, low self-esteem, and poor social skills (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Haynie et al., 2001). La Greca and Harrison (2005) found even non-violent, indirect harassment could result in social anxiety if accompanied by a poor quality of friendship with a best friend, which is likely for youth who experience peer rejection and neglect.

Black adults who report receiving the AWA during adolescence consider the accusation a bullying experience (Harris, 2012; Ideastream, 2007). While a majority of the literature focuses on the AWA in adolescents and young adults, it can continue to be burdensome in adulthood. In

2013, professional National Football League (NFL) player Jonathan Martin left the Miami Dolphins' team facilities mid-season to receive psychological treatment at a nearby hospital. It was later revealed in an investigative report by Paul et al. (2014) that Martin was routinely accused of not being "Black enough" by two Black teammates, John Jerry and Mike Pouncey. He even reported having depressive episodes and contemplating suicide. Given the amount of distress Martin endured during his time with the Miami Dolphins, it is justifiable to include the AWA in the realm of bullying.

Fox and Stallworth (2004) define bullying as an umbrella concept describing various examples of ill treatment and hostile behavior toward people. They assert that such behavior ranges from the most subtle, even unconscious incivilities to the most blatant, intentional emotional abuse and includes single incidents and escalating patterns of behavior. Griffin and Gross (2004) differentiate between two forms of bullying: (1) the overt or direct form, which includes physical aggression and physical or verbal threat, and (2) the covert or indirect (or relational) format, which relates to exclusion, social rejection, and spreading rumors. Fox and Stallworth (2004) further make the distinction between "general bullying," which involves the aforementioned ill treatment and hostile behaviors enacted against anyone regardless of race or ethnicity, and "racial/ethnic bullying," which relates to attacks targeting a person explicitly based on race or ethnicity.

Paul et al. (2014) point out assertions in the relevant bullying literature that bullies usually select victims who are different from them, who have low self-esteem, or who lack the necessary coping skills to deal with conflict. The fact that bullying victims are usually selected due to differences between the victim and the victimizer aligns well with Neal-Barnett et al.' (2010) assertion that adolescents are often accused of acting White based on perceived differences in six major areas (academic achievement, dress, economics, music preferences, speech, and values and standards).

Academic achievement is one area of concern when discussing the AWA because many gifted and high-achieving Black students are bullied by their Black peers for engaging in activities that separate them from other Black adolescents (Grantham & Biddle, 2014). Often, Black students use terms like "being too smart," "doing well in school," and "taking advanced or honors courses" to define acting White (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). While the literature regarding gifted Black students and bullying is scant, several studies have found that name-calling is the most commonly cited bullying experience among academically gifted and Black students (Fleschler-Peskin et al., 2006; Peterson & Ray, 2006). Accusing a Black adolescent of acting White can be considered a form of name-calling and race-based bullying and can lead to clinical symptomatology that impairs a gifted student's ability to perform well in demanding advanced level courses (Grantham & Biddle, 2014).

A typical victim, according to the Wells Report (Paul et al., 2014), is a person who is not likely to retaliate when victimized. Studies indicate that bullying negatively impacts the target's physical and mental health—it has been shown to lead to depression, stress, anxiety, mood swings, and suicide (Bogart et al., 2014; Paul et al., 2014). Davis et al. (2018) found the level of bother experienced in response to the AWA was positively associated with bullying victimization. This finding coupled with the existing qualitative data suggests the AWA may play a role in the development of social anxiety for Black adolescents and these teens may internalize the accusation as a bullying experience.

Acculturative Stress Acculturative stress is the stress experienced by individuals as they move from their culture of origin toward another culture (Anderson, 1991; Joiner & Walker, 2002). Research with Black college students at a predominantly White institution (PWI) found significant correlations between pressure to maintain the ethnic group's culture, accusations of acting White from family members, and higher levels of acculturative stress (Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo & Hurst, 2010). Simply stated,

for Blacks at PWI, the AWA contributes to acculturative stress.

Among Blacks, acculturative stress is associated with depression, anxiety, and possibly suicide (Joiner & Walker, 2002; Thompson et al., 2010). Thus, the finding that the AWA is a component/contributor is an important one. Whereas our search of the literature did not reveal studies directly focused on depression and the AWA, research does exist on ERI status and depression (Yasui et al., 2004; Murray et al., 2012; Parham & Helms, 1985). This research suggests that adolescents with higher levels of ERI experience lower levels of depressive symptomatology (Yasui, et al., 2004). Conversely, those with an uncommitted ERI status may be at highest risk for depression (Murray et al., 2012; Parham & Helms, 1985).

Acculturative stress and ERI moderate suicidal ideation (Hovey & King, 1996; Walker, 2007). The AWA is embedded in ERI, and for emerging adults in a PWI, it can be a contributing factor/component of acculturative stress. Earlier, we discussed retired NFL player Jonathon Martin and the role racial bullying played in his suicidal ideation. The research coupled with anecdotal data illustrate the need for a closer examination of the AWA role in depression and suicidal ideation among Black youth.

Thus far, the focus has been on internalizing symptoms that are impacted by the AWA. This next section focuses on externalizing behaviors.

Summary and Key Points

Our review of the literature reveals no evidence that suggests the AWA is linked to attention deficit hyperactivity or oppositional defiant behaviors. The AWA, however, may play an indirect role in delinquent behaviors, specifically for those individuals who first manifest these behaviors during adolescence. As adolescents who receive the accusation enter the acting White trap and explore what it means to be Black, they often find themselves engaging in behaviors that are perceived by themselves and others as “stereotypical” Black.

For some it is changing the way they dress or speak; for others it may be changing their behavior or attitude toward school. Still, for others it is engaging in delinquent behaviors to prove they are Black. In an op-ed published in 2014 by *PennLive*, Troy David, an inmate at a Pennsylvania correctional facility, suggests that Black adolescent males who engage in behaviors labeled as acting White are at odds with the code of the street. The streets, David argues, are no place to act White. In *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, author Victor Rios gives examples of the conundrum faced by Black and Latino adolescent males who choose not to engage in delinquent acts. Peers and others often view these young men as acting White when they are in fact “acting lawful.” Rios research suggests that many Black boys are successful in resisting the taunting, but some are not and begin to engage in delinquent behavior. Although Rios does not specifically talk about bother or ERI, one cannot help but wonder what role these factors play among adolescents who continue to act lawful and those who do not.

Caldwell et al. (2004) found that for adolescent and emerging adult Black males, racial discrimination was the strongest risk factor for violent behavior. ERI, however, served as a protective factor. Specifically, for Black adolescent and young adult males, the extent to which they base their identity on race (centrality) was negatively correlated with engagement in violent behaviors when members of these groups experienced racial discrimination (Caldwell et al., 2004). While qualitative and quantitative data support the AWA as racial bullying, currently it is unknown whether recipients of the accusation view it as racial discrimination. What is known is that the AWA and racial discrimination are attacks on ERI (Davis et al., 2018; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2012; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Studies that examine whether the AWA is viewed as intra-racial discrimination may shed light on the accusations role in externalizing behaviors.

This chapter has provided the reader with an in-depth look at the mental health implications of the AWA. The AWA is embedded in ERI, an

important component of Black youth's identity development. Based on the existing literature, it appears that the AWA negatively impacts internalizing symptoms. However, it is not simply hearing the accusation but the level of bother experienced in receiving the accusation that plays a critical role. Emerging research suggests that the AWA is a form of racial bullying that can lead to deleterious effects including social anxiety. Given these facts, clinicians, therapists, and counselors who work with Black youth are urged to assess the AWA experiences of their adolescent clients. The existing research is just a beginning. Researchers should further explore the accusation and its clinical implications and develop interventions designed to help adolescents and those who work with Black adolescents better understand, intervene, and cope with these direct and indirect attacks against their ERI.

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