

Assessing the Effects of the Acting White Accusation Among Black Girls: Social Anxiety and Bullying Victimization

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Abstract: One of the most harmful accusations one Black adolescent can hurl at another is the acting White accusation (AWA). The AWA is an attack against an individual's ethnic/racial identity and many have described it as a bullying experience. Those who experience the AWA frequently and are bothered by it might perceive the accusation as bullying for these reasons, and peer victimization has been associated with several negative outcomes including social anxiety. The present study examines the relationship between the acting White accusation, bullying victimization, and social anxiety. Thirty-one Black females between the ages of 10 and 18 years served as participants in the study. The findings indicated that all participants reported receiving the accusation at least once in their lifetime. The results also indicated that bother experienced when receiving the accusation was positively associated with social anxiety, while both bother and frequency of the accusation were positively associated with bullying victimization. These findings suggest that adolescents interpret the accusation as a negative evaluation. Additionally, the more an adolescent experiences the accusation and the more bothered he or she is by it, the more victimized they feel.

Keywords: Black ■ African American ■ Acting white accusation ■ Adolescents ■ Social anxiety ■ Bullying

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INTRODUCTION

Previous research has found that one source of anxiety most pertinent to Black adolescents is the accusation of acting White.^{1–3} The acting White accusation (AWA) arises when a Black adolescent's ethnic/racial identity (ERI) is perceived as being not Black enough by another Black adolescent or group of adolescents.² The accusation may be experienced directly, “you are acting White,” or indirectly, “you talk like a White boy.” The indirect accusation is a more subtle form of the acting White accusation that circumvents explicitly stating someone acts White, yet accuses him or her of possessing characteristics similar to White individuals with statements such as “you dress like a White girl.” Regardless of whether it is direct or indirect, many accused adolescents experience the accusation as an attack on their ethnic/racial

identity and thus experience distress in relation to this accusation.^{2,3}

The AWA and bother

Adolescents can experience psychological discomfort or feel bothered when receiving the accusation.² Murray and colleagues examined the extent to which adolescent were bothered by the accusation and found that bother experienced after receiving the accusation was associated with anxiety.¹ Bergin and Cooks found that high achieving Black adolescents in their study did not avoid academic achievement in order to avoid the acting White accusation, although they did experience some level of bother when they were accused of acting White.⁴ These findings suggest that bother is a concept experienced by many adolescents when accused of being a non-authentic member of their ethnic/racial group. Because bother experienced from the accusation is linked to psychological distress, it becomes a central component in understanding the impact of the acting White accusation.

The AWA, bullying victimization and social anxiety

Bullying is defined as a form of aggression that is intended to harm or cause distress in the victim.⁵ Griffin and Gross 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 form which relates to exclusion, social rejection and rumor spreading.⁶ Black adults accused of acting White recall the accusation as a bullying experience.⁷ Janelle Bouie, the chief political correspondent for *Slate*, reported having been accused of acting White during adolescence and stated the accusation was reserved for Black kids, academically successful or otherwise, who did not fit in with the main crowd.⁸ Thus the accusation can be considered a more covert form of bullying among adolescents.

Bullying also has implications for the development of social anxiety, which 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.⁹ Bullying victimization has been associated with increased anxiety, shyness, withdrawnness, low self-

esteem, and poor social skills.^{10,11} Detweiler and colleagues cited a study conducted by La Greca and Harrison that 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.^{9,12} Given the potential for adolescents to experience the AWA as a bullying experience or an attack against their identity, social anxiety could be an outcome for those who experience the accusation as peer victimization.

Ethnic/racial identity

Ethnic/racial identity (ERI) refers to one's attitudes and behaviors that define the significance and meaning of ethnicity and race.¹³ The AWA is embedded in ERI given that it is implied that one is "not Black enough," and is an attack against an individual's ethnic/racial self-conception. Previous research indicates high ERI serves as a protective factor against psychological distress, suggesting that it could buffer the effects of the accusation. However, because the accusation is a threat to one's identity, ERI may not serve the same function when receiving the accusation. Numerous studies suggest that high ERI serve as a buffer for psychopathology and academic difficulties.^{14–16} Mandara et al. found that racial identity was negatively correlated with anxiety in girls. In a similar study, results indicated that Blacks with lower levels of ethnic identity experienced greater amounts of both anxiety and depression.^{14,17} This is consistent with research that suggests higher levels of ethnic identity are associated with fewer symptoms of internalizing disorders.^{17–20}

The present study

The current study seeks to examine the relationship between the acting White accusation, bullying victimization, social anxiety, and ethnic/racial identity. A review of the literature suggests there has been no study that examines the relationship between these variables using a quantitative approach. Thus, this study is unique in its contribution to the literature. We predict the acting White accusation will be positively associated with social anxiety. The more bothered an adolescent feels when receiving the accusation, the more social anxiety they experience. Moreover, many individuals describe the accusation as a bullying experience when it has occurred during a critical time in adolescence. We also predict the acting White accusation will be positively associated with bullying victimization, in that the more bothered an adolescent experiences the more bullying victimization they will experience. Lastly, research suggests high ethnic/racial identity serves as a protective factor against psychopathology. Given the accusation is embedded in ethnic/racial identity, we predict that the

degree to which an individual defines him or herself with regards to race (Racial Centrality) and an individual's evaluative judgments of his or her race (Private Regard) will be negatively associated with the accusation. Higher levels of ERI will be associated with lower levels of bother.

METHODS

Participants

Thirty-one (31) adolescent girls completed surveys for this study. All participants (100%) identified as African American/Black. The participants ranged in age from 10 to 18 years old ($M = 14$, $SD = 2.1$) and grade levels ranged from 5th-12th ($mode = 8th$). All participants were recruited through a school-based summer program for Black adolescent girls who were from single-parent, low-income (\$15,000-\$25,000/year) households. Volunteer participants were selected to be a part of the study only if they self-identified as African American \ Black. Individuals from other ethnic/racial groups were excluded. The treatment of all participants met guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) standards. This study received prior approval from the Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Procedure

Participants completed several paper questionnaires on their own with a supervising research assistant available to answer questions that arose. The adolescents were told that they would be completing surveys relating to their experience of being a Black, adolescent girl. Parental and adolescent consent was required for participation in the study. The participants had 30 min to complete the measures, but most finished in less than 30 min. Once each participant completed their surveys they received a \$10 gift card to Subway. IRB approval from Kent State University was obtained prior to any data collection.

Measures

*The Acting White Experiences Questionnaire (AWEQ).*² The AWEQ assesses the degree to which adolescents experience different aspects of the acting White accusation. The AWEQ assesses the frequency of indirect forms of the accusation such as "The kids around me say I talk proper" and the direct form "Have you ever been accused of acting White?" Participants respond to each item using a six-point Likert-type scale with responses that range from 1 "Never" to 6 "Almost all of the time." The AWEQ also assesses the degree to which an individual is bothered by the accusation with the statement, "How bothered were you by this?" Responses can be indicated by five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 "Didn't bother me at

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