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Abstract

A majority of the research on the accusation of acting white focuses on whether it is responsible for creating the wide achievement gap between white and Black people in America (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). However, there is little research that has looked into the potentially damaging effects that this accusation can have on the selves and identities of Black students. Through the analysis of classical and contemporary sociological theories and studies, it is determined that African Americans’ selves and identities are negatively impacted when they are accused of “acting white.” The suggested impacts are negative social reflection and the necessity to manage conflicting identities. Additionally, the creation of double consciousnesses, a shift in salience hierarchy, and impression management difficulties can also result.

Keywords

acting white, African Americans, stereotypes, self and identity, race

Disciplines

African American Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology

Comments

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African Americans Accused of “Acting White”: The Impacts on their Selves and Identities

Brett Anderson

Introduction

For decades, African Americans have been degrading other African Americans for excelling in academics. They do this by accusing the academically focused Black students of “acting white.” A majority of the research on the accusation of acting white focuses on whether it is responsible for creating the wide achievement gap between white and Black people in America (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). However, there is little research that has looked into the potentially damaging effects that this accusation can have on the selves and identities of Black students. It is critical that the impacts on a Black individual’s self and identities be given more focus in American society due to the extent to which it can damage them. Specifically, in response to the accusation of acting white, their selves and identities can undergo negative social reflection and the necessity to manage conflicting identities. In addition, they face the creation of double consciousnesses, a shift in their salience hierarchy, and impression management difficulties. Further knowledge surrounding how the accusation can hurt Black individuals might grant additional insight into how these harmful impacts can be mitigated or extinguished. To provide holistic information on the subject, I will begin by introducing the history of the accusation of acting white, how the self and identity are defined, and why this phenomenon occurs. In this paper, through the analysis of classical and contemporary sociological theories and studies, I suggest the possible repercussions that stem from the accusation of acting white on Black students’ selves and identities.

Background

Historical Background of “Acting White”

An accusation of acting white is an insult used by African Americans and aimed at African Americans who are focused on academics. It is widely suggested that the accusation of

African Americans acting white by other members of their race emerged with the desegregation of American schools (Buck 2010; Tyson 2011). The first reported accusations of an African American acting white occurred during the era of slavery by white Americans. The accusation was in response to Black slaves who tried to move ahead in society by means of educating themselves (Buck 2010). The accusation is not often made by white Americans today but rather African Americans. It is especially prevalent when an African American taking advanced academics is not surrounded by other members of their race (Tyson 2011).

Despite its overall progressive and beneficial nature, desegregation damaged many African American communities across the country (Buck 2011). Black schools were destroyed, Black principals lost their jobs, and Black students were placed in an environment where they were consistently disrespected by their peers and authority figures (Buck 2011). School essentially became a place where successful Black students were thought to be seeking the approval of white people (Buck 2011). Decades later, this accusation towards others and the negative attitude towards academics would be viewed through a theoretical lens.

Theoretical Background of “Acting White”

The theoretical narrative surrounding the idea of acting white has shifted and evolved since its conception in 1985. Theorists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1985) sought to understand why there was a considerable achievement gap between white and Black people in the United States. An example of this is how the average Black seventeen-year-old reads at the level of the average white thirteen-year-old in America (Fryer and Torelli 2010). Fordham and Ogbu (1985) began the conversation by suggesting that the achievement gap is due to the stigmatization of academics by African Americans. They argue that African Americans are discouraged from taking school seriously due to fear that they will be accused of acting white.

Since the idea was introduced theoretically by Fordham and Ogbu (1985), it has dominated the discussion of the American Black and white achievement gap (Mocombe and Tomlin 2013). The idea that African Americans are less inclined to excel academically if they are accused of acting white has become a commonly considered idea in American society, especially amongst educators (Harris 2011). However, modern studies suggest that the accusation of acting white is not the main factor in the achievement gap, if even a factor at all (Tyson et al. 2005; Harris 2011; Andrews and Swinton 2014; Lundy 2003). What causes the achievement gap is still widely disputed by scholars; however, this is not the focus of my research. This paper focuses on how a Black individual's self and identities are affected by the accusation of acting white. Black individuals today are still accused of acting white, which can significantly impact their self and identity.

In addition, it is disputed today that whether the stigma surrounding academically excelling students is unique to racial groups (Tyson et al. 2005). Some argue that Fordham and Ogbu's theory oversimplifies Black students' experiences, while others believe that their interpretation of their experiences is correct (Stinson 2011; Buck 2011). The commonality of how often the accusation is made is not entirely clear, but nonetheless, the theory is still extensively discussed today (Harris 2011).

The Self and Identity

What constitutes or defines the self is a widely debated subject amongst sociologists, which is evident by the number of sociological theories and concepts surrounding it. In this paper, the self is defined as a process that can influence an individual's thoughts and behaviors (Cooley 2002; Steele and Aronson 1995). The self is also regarded as consisting of multiple different identities (Stryker and Burke 2002). These identities might correlate to particular roles,

such as that of a brother or a teammate. With each separate identity, an individual is often expected to behave or engage in a unique manner. One might be expected to behave differently as a brother as opposed to that of a teammate. In addition, to manage how one appears to others when expressing an identity, they use impression management (Goffman 2002). Concrete definitions of the self and identities are critical for the comprehension of this paper.

Why Are African Americans Accused of “Acting White?”

Standing Out

To understand how the accusation of acting white impacts Black individuals' selves and identities, it is essential to decipher why it is still happening today. As mentioned previously, the insult arose from America's poorly executed desegregation of the school system. This happened decades ago, so why are African Americans still being accused of acting white today? To start, American schools remain profoundly segregated today as there has been very little integration since the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (Reardon and Owens 2014). This suggests a school is more likely to consist of a student population with either a Black or white majority rather than an integrated population. In a mostly white student-populated school, Black students might feel uncomfortable when isolated from their Black peers in advanced classes, which could deter academic advancement (Tyson et al. 2005). This also potentially allows the academically excelling Black students to be called acting white by their Black peers for taking a class consisting mostly of members in their racial out-group (Tyson et al. 2005; Buck 2011). One of the reasons why the academically focused Black students stand out is because they are *pattern breaching*.

Pattern Breaching

African Americans are victimized by the stereotype that they are less educated individuals. This idea is so infiltrated in American society because Black students are less likely than white students to have access to the appropriate resources to succeed (Harper 2006). The prevalence of this stereotype has thus been cemented in the minds of the American people through the documentary style of interpretation. This style of interpretation was at the focus of theorist Harold Garfinkel's work (Heritage 2002). The documentary style of interpretation suggests that individuals create patterns based on the consistencies in their lives to understand reality better. Applying this theory, Americans, who are influenced by the stereotype of academically underperforming Black people, create a pattern surrounding this idea. Americans then become somewhat reliant upon this pattern to understand and interact with Black people; the pattern becomes naturalized for them. Garfinkel recognized that individuals react negatively when these patterns are breached by, for example, a high achieving African American. In fact, Garfinkel reported that it is not uncommon for individuals to respond with hostility in reaction to a breached pattern (Heritage 2002). I believe that Garfinkel's ideas of pattern breaching can be easily applied to the accusation of acting white. Black individuals' pattern of Black people as academically suppressed is breached when a Black person succeeds academically. In reaction, Black individuals are hostile to academically successful Black people, accusing them of acting white. This can even be applied to the origins of the accusation in the era of slavery. When white people saw a Black person trying to elevate their status above a slave, it would break their pattern that all Black people are no better than slaves, and therefore would say that the Black person was "trying to act white" (Buck 2011; Heritage 2002). Society opposes those who break social norms, which is therefore another reason why the accusation of acting white still exists today. In addition, societal stereotypes can strongly affect those that it victimizes.

Internalized Stereotypes and Racism

In 1995, theorists Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson argued that one reason why African Americans underperform academically is that they conform to the racial stereotype surrounding academics, that Black people do not perform as well as white people. Steele and Aronson (1995) refer to this theory as *stereotype threat*. In their study, when Black participants were told that the test they take would reflect their cognitive abilities, they began to internalize the stereotypes and feared that they would conform to them. Another set of Black participants were given the same test and told that it did not reflect their cognitive abilities. These participants performed better on the test than those who were told it would reflect their abilities. The theorists concluded that those who performed worse had undergone stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995). If a Black individual accuses someone of acting white, they might be vocalizing their fears and conformity to the stereotype against their race. If one is to be consistently reminded that they are not conforming to their racial stereotypes, this could negatively affect their self through socialization (Cooley 2002). With stereotype threat, the individual is stripped of their individuality and reminded of the oppression their social group faces (Steele and Aronson 1995).

Stereotype threat is not the only vulnerability of Black students. If a Black student is accused of acting white by another student, they are more likely to experience anxiety than if they were not (Murray et al. 2012). In addition to this, one study found that individuals accused of being Black had lower racial/ethnic identity after the accusation was made than before (Durkee and Williams 2013). It has been suggested that the accusation of acting white partially stems from internalized racism (Harper 2006). The self is, in part, developed through the process of socialization and social forces (Cooley 2002; Mannhiem 2002). The social force of racism has

caused inequality for African Americans since the conception of the United States. This is evident from national statistics of over-policing Black people. Although African Americans make up 13.4% of the United States population, they also make up 38.4% of all United States inmates (United States Census Bureau 2019; Federal Bureau of Prisons 2020). If one is to apply theorist Karl Mannheim's (2002) ideas that social forces strongly influence the development of one's self, then it can be argued that the racist society that African Americans live in develops internalized racism (Pyke 2010). To expand on this thought, if a Black individual develops their self with racist peers, it could breed internalized racism (Cooley 2002; Pyke 2010). Now that the reasons why one makes the accusation of acting white are clear, it is essential to analyze its dangerous impacts.

How Does the Accusation of “Acting White” Impact Selves and Identities?

Negative Social Reflection

One of the ways in which the accusation of acting white can impact an individual's self is through the internalization of the insult. To begin, Cooley's (2002) theory of “the looking glass self” suggests that individuals base their sense of self on how they believe others perceive them. To illustrate this theory, if an African American student believed that his teacher perceived him as stupid or lacking potential, the student might internalize this belief and incorporate it into his self. Therefore, if a Black person accused an academically successful Black student of acting white, the student may begin to believe that they are someone who acts like a white person (Cooley 2002). If a Black student believes that they have stereotypically white qualities, this could create inner turmoil. An individual's race is often part of their identity, and to be told that one does not fit in with their racial in-group could be concerning.

The accusation of acting white might partially exist because of the idea that there is a “correct” way of being Black when in reality, there is none (Harris 2011; Peterson-Lewis and Bratton 2004). This concept likely stems from stereotypes and how the media portrays Black people. Even though only a small percentage of African Americans become drug dealers, they receive disproportionate attention compared to other African Americans in the media (Harris 2011). Relating this to the looking glass self, if Americans perceive all Black people as stereotypical drug dealing caricatures, then the selves of Black people may be at risk. According to the looking glass self theory, individuals base their selves on what they believe others think of them. A conveyed negative perception of Black people might harm a Black person’s self-esteem (Cooley 2002). A look into the modern perception of African Americans might suggest that the media is part of the problem.

Melissa A. Milkie’s (1999) study on how an individual’s self can be affected by the media emphasizes its power over American society. In her study, Milkie (1999) asks participants, who are all teenage girls, if they perceive female models in magazines as a realistic standard for beauty. An overwhelming portion of the participants reported that the female models represented an unrealistic beauty standard. Despite their answers, many participants believed that other individuals see female models as a realistic standard for beauty (Milkie 1999). Therefore, the self-esteem of the participants was *indirectly* affected by the media’s portrayals of beauty. Even if they did not believe in the standard that the media presented, the participants still found the portrayals to be important because of their belief that others did. Could the unrealistic portrayals of Black people in the media have the same effect on Black people? Even though a Black person might recognize Black people’s media portrayals as inaccurate or unrealistic, it might indirectly affect them similarly. They might believe that other Americans see the media’s portrayal of a

Black person as the standard, indirectly decreasing their own self-esteem (Milkie 1999). The belief that there is a correct way of being a Black person might encourage Black individuals to compare themselves and other members of their race to this standard. If Black individuals do not meet this media-backed standard, they are accused of acting out of place, or rather acting white. A Black person accused of acting white might then curb their academic success in favor of meeting the standards set for them by the media (Milkie 1999). Another issue that African Americans are presented with is the management of warring identities.

Managing Conflicting Identities

An African American student focused on academic achievement might have to manage two conflicting identities, being Black and being an academic. To effectively manage these two identities, individuals may be forced to adjust their Black cultural identity to align with their academic goals (Burrell, Winston, and Freeman 2013). While it might be difficult to imagine, Black students often have severe pressure to constantly maintain two identities (Burrell et al. 2013). In Fordham and Ogbu's (1985) study, one Black student claims that in high school, when he was with his friends, he presented a "crazy" identity to be liked by them. This is contrasted by his identity inside the classroom, in which he was incredibly serious and considered a smart student. However, the most startling aspect is that when he told his friends that he was a smart student, they did not believe him. He also states that if he told his classmates that he acts crazy outside of class, they would not believe him. This identity dilemma would be less of an issue if the accusation of acting white were not something that Black students had to fear. The student felt as though he had to hide his intelligence from his friends, and when he gathered the courage to tell them about his academic skills, they did not believe him (Fordham and Ogbu 1985). It is possible this scenario does not necessarily reflect his race and could just be a common issue for

students (Tyson et al. 2005). However, it is important to note that academic achievement is more stigmatized in the African American community than others; therefore, a Black student might have to manage these identities to a greater extent so that there is no overlap. The management of conflicting identities is not a new idea but can be traced back to an early twentieth-century American theorist.

The Creation of Double Consciousnesses

Sociologist, theorist, and civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois (1903) argued that all African Americans live their lives forever in a state of *double consciousness*. DuBois defined his term of double consciousness as the idea that African Americans have to see themselves through their own eyes and the eyes of white people. Expanding upon this idea, DuBois (1903:55) states, “One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” I believe that DuBois’s description of two warring identities can be applied to the dilemma that Black students often face when they are accused of acting white. They must see the world through dueling perspectives. One scholar and analyst of DuBois’s work, Marc Black (2007), suggests that double consciousness can actually be beneficial when adopted by oppressors in addition to the oppressed. If the white people in DuBois’s time had used double consciousness to see their reality through a Black person’s eyes, a progressive dialogue between the two groups might have been occurred (Black 2007). Similarly, if educators and African Americans were to view each other’s perspectives, this could open beneficial dialogue. If such dialogue were to occur, it could relieve the sense of twoness felt by Black students. In addition, the conflicting identities of African Americans pose the threat of a shift in identity salience.

A Shift in Salience Hierarchy

Theorists Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke (2000) argue that an individual's self can have multiple different identities. These identities are organized within what they refer to as a *salience hierarchy*. The higher an identity is in the hierarchy related to the self's other identities, the greater an individual's commitment to that identity. In addition, the higher the identity is, the more likely it will influence an individual's behavior (Stryker and Burke 2000). So, for example, if an individual's identity as a son is more salient than their identity as an athlete, they might skip soccer practice for the family game night. This can be applied to Black students who are accused of acting white. They may begin to question their salience towards their identity as a Black person or their identity as an academic. If a Black student is accused of acting white, they may begin to see their academic identity as something they have to trade for their racial identity. In one study, a Black female participant explains her experience of being teased for taking challenging classes. The researchers state, "She recalled being called 'white girl' and 'Oreo' by fellow blacks in middle school after she had been placed in an accelerated class with only whites. She described that period as 'hell'" (Tyson et al. 2005:594). The students that teased the participant likely did not recognize the possibility that Black identity and academic identity can both be salient, that the student did not have to choose one over the other. The two identities will likely always be at war with one another, but this does not mean that one has to abandon an identity to succeed as a Black person or as an academic (Dubois 1903; Burrell et al. 2013). While managing the salience of identities is troublesome, so is managing the presentation of them.

Impression Management Difficulties

Managing separate identities requires different behaviors and presentations from an individual. Theorist Erving Goffman (2002) argues that all individuals perform or present themselves in the manner that they desire to be perceived, which he refers to as the act of

engaging in *impression management*. For example, if a mother wanted to be perceived by others as a motherly figure, she might exaggerate nurturing behaviors in public or dress her child in a shirt that reads “My Mom Rocks!” (Collett 2005; Goffman 2002). If a Black person feels they have to change how they present themselves to accommodate their conflicting identities (racial and academic), this could be distressing to their self. A Black individual could quickly need to switch from presenting one identity to another, which could present challenges. One might have to leave their house “looking Black” but then change their outfit to something formal to match a white person’s idea of how a scholarly individual presents themselves. This would be considered as acting “white enough” to match some social situations while acting “Black enough” in others (Willie 2003). Others expect specific characteristics and behaviors of an individual’s identity, and if these expectations are not met, the individual may receive an adverse reaction (Heritage 2002). So, when a Black student is accused of acting white, this could suggest to them that they have failed to manage their impressions, as their presentation did not emit the reaction they had hoped for. This might be one explanation for why Black individuals accused of acting white report higher levels of anxiety (Murray et al. 2012). An individual accused of acting white is also more likely to be ignored by their peers (Saunders 2015). This can be explained using Goffman’s (2002) theory of impression management. Black students may not want to be seen with or hang around the Black individual that acts white, as this could damage how others perceive them. Therefore, one might avoid an individual to manage their impressions just as they might change their hairstyle or demeanor to fit into a social situation.

Recommendations for Future Research

One potential route for further research is studying the effects of intersectionality with the accusation of acting white. Intersectionality examines how different identities intersect with one

another, such as race and gender (Crenshaw 1991). For example, one could research whether Black women and Black men are impacted similarly by the accusation. Are women less vulnerable to the harmful effects of being accused of acting white because they already experience the impacts of gender inequality? Another potential area for research could focus on whether white people are accused of “acting Black.” White people could also be stigmatized for displaying stereotypical characteristics attributed to Black people. If they are accused of acting Black, how are their selves and identities impacted, if at all? How do these results compare to Black individuals accused of acting white? In addition to continuing the research on the impacts of accusing an individual of acting white, further research is needed to understand America’s Black and white achievement gap. As I noted, the accusation of acting white has been mostly ruled out by scholars as a primary factor in this issue (Andrews and Swinton 2014; Lundy 2003). Even though it is not relevant to the theory surrounding acting white, it is still an important and critical issue. Continuation of this research and knowledge of racial divides and their impacts could positively advance American society.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of classical and contemporary sociological theories and studies, it is determined that African Americans’ selves and identities are negatively impacted when they are accused of “acting white.” The impacts discussed are negative social reflection and the necessity to manage conflicting identities. Additionally, the creation of double consciousnesses, a shift in salience hierarchy, and impression management difficulties can be impacts. Both the self and the accusation of acting white have a long history, which provides a necessary backdrop for the analysis. It is also critical to understand why Black individuals accuse others of acting white in order to understand its harmful impacts. The theoretical research on acting white has and is

continuing to evolve. I recommend that the research on the subject going forward focuses on how the selves and identities are impacted, as previous research attempts to attribute it to the Black and white achievement gap.

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