THE INFLUENCE OF THE "ACTING WHITE" PHENOMENON IN THE

ACHIEVEMENT EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN

AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

WINFRED HARRIS BIDDLE

(Under the Direction of Tarek Grantham)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the "acting White" phenomenon (e.g., Carter, 2006; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008b; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), as it pertains to Black college students. Through an interview study, I gathered questionnaire based data relevant to this issue for 40 university students. From these 40 questionnaires, I chose twelve interview participants. In one hour interviews and follow up correspondence, I gathered the perspectives of these eight students on the topic of "acting White" (Ford et al., 2008b; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Using data derived from these focused interviews and questionnaires, I have explored the findings and relate them to the current literature relevant to gifted Black students and the "acting White" phenomenon.

INDEX WORDS: Acting White, African American, Gifted Students, Bullying,
                Interview Study

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to God and Jesus Christ. I would also like to appreciatively acknowledge the support of my parents, Printice and Linda Harris, and my husband, Michael Biddle. Thank you all for making this happen. I love you very much.

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I would like to thank all involved in the completion of this document, from my first year professors and other students, to the participants in this study. I am especially indebted to the committee members who assisted directly with the creation of this dissertation. They shared your advice and time, and I will not forget this.

My appreciation for my major professor, Dr. Tarek Grantham, cannot be expressed in words. From my initial campus visit until the more recent months which marked the end of this process, he has generously devoted his time and expertise to ensuring my professional growth. Moreover, I consider he and his family to be dear friends. I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Dr. Thomas Hébert, and Dr. Kecia Thomas. It was a privilege to learn from you all.

Dr. Bonnie Cramond has provided invaluable support as I moved through the doctoral program. I appreciate all of her work to provide professional opportunities for me, as well as occasionally "oiling the machine," whenever I had questions or need of a signature to simply continue along the path. Thank you.

The individuals who participated in this study gave their time, insights, and occasionally their tears. I appreciate them, and pray that their contributions will extend beyond the pages of this dissertation, in order to lessen the sting of the "acting White" accusation as future students move through their own educational journeys.

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Note to the Reader:

This work will use the word "Black" interchangeably with the phrase "African American," and capitalize the terms when so directed by the original manuscript, adhering to the model demonstrated in the literature

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

A Short Story of Success in Failure

Mrs. Brown, a sweet young White teacher in her early 20s, is delighted by Jamal's love of reading. According to standardized test results, this precocious young fifth grader was reading far above his grade level, and was quickly becoming the strongest reader in the school. As she prepared to create the end of the quarter report cards, Mrs. Brown excitedly shared with another teacher that she was recommending that Jamal be tested for the gifted program. In her excitement, she had not noticed that one of Jamal's classmates, Tyrone, was standing within hearing distance. Looking up, she saw him listening to their conversation.

"Oh well," she thought, "Jamal is a shoe in, so there's no worry about him getting teased if he doesn't make it. Tyrone will be proud of his friend, anyway."

Tyrone and Jamal had never known life without one another; they were cousins. They both had always known that Jamal was "the smart one" – his mama had always made sure there were lots of books around, his family took trips every summer, and his daddy had even gone to college before coming back to town to eventually open his own landscaping company. In contrast, Tyrone was raised soley by his mother and he didn't know who his father was – although a time or two, he heard his mother and grandmother mention his name and that he might be living in another town a few miles away.

Tragically, Jamal's daddy had been killed in a car accident the year before. This event had only drawn the boys closer. Tyrone became especially protective of his cousin, and they looked out for one another more than ever. After hearing the conversation, Tyrone worried about losing his best friend once they got to middle school. There

weren't a lot of Black kids in that gifted program, and the ones who were in there weren't right. Tyrone had always heard that they acted White and looked down on Black kids like him. They called them "ghetto" and "ratched." Jamal was smart and might fit in, but what would those kids think of Tyrone? Would Tyrone start calling Jamal "ratched," too?

Tyrone was a happy kid -- but he was secretly scared about what he had heard about the middle school. The big kids picked on younger kids, and he knew it was safer to have lots of friends to look out for each other. He also knew that no one really liked – or more importantly, *respected* – geeks.

Later that afternoon, Tyrone let Jamal know all of this. He warned Jamal that if he didn't clean up his act and lose his geeky ways, he was risking getting his butt kicked and probably losing him as a friend, too. "You gotta grow up, man. We ain't got time for that baby stuff anymore. If you so smart, it's time you started *actin'* it."

The next week, Jamal was scheduled to take the test to get into gifted education. His mother and grandmother were so proud of him at church, they looked like they were about to pop. They had told *everyone* how smart he was, and that he was going to become an engineer or a doctor. "*Dr.* Jamal Franklin," they emphasized, smiling so widely that Jamal wondered if their faces would break open.

Jamal knew better. Oh, he wasn't worried about the test. He'd never had any trouble with *those*. And he knew that this test would be no different. He planned on acing it – just not in the way his teacher, mamma, and nana had planned. He rolled right into the testing room, listened respectfully to all of the instructions, laid out the material carefully, and . . .blew it. That's right. He blew it.

He even went back over his work to make sure there were enough *wrong* answers to keep him from making it into that gifted program with all of those White kids. After the test, he caught up with Tyrone. And with a smile rivaling his mama's the day before at church, he gave his cousin a solid high five, telling him, "We together, man!" Tyrone knew that meant that Jamal had intentionally blown the test. Both of them swelled with happiness, talking about all of the fun things that they were going to do in middle school. Together.

Connection Between Fiction and Fact

The short tale of Tyrone and Jamal tells a story of the types of decisions made by young people all over the United States to prioritize social acceptance at the expense of future academic opportunities. The two boys portrayed in this fictional work loved one another, and no animosity motivated Tyrone to discourage Jamal from participating in their school's gifted program. Unfortunately, however, many more kids verbally and physically attack children who do not conform to traditional behaviors and attitudes of African Americans. Specifically, African American children are too often expected to underestimate their own academic potential. Furthermore, the sometimes complex lives of these children can hinder their academic lives. This work explores these factors.

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Overview of Dissertation

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At the 2004 Democratic National convention, then Senator Barack Obama challenged us to reverse the destructive idea that a Black young person aspiring for success is "acting White." He reminded us that "children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a Black youth with a book is acting White" (Fryer, 2006). Indeed, we must all work

together to eradicate this slander, and to support the brave young people who simply want to develop their God-given intelligence with the same freedom as their White peers, without having to fear social censure from within their own communities. Currently, the underrepresentation of African American students in the nation's advanced level programs translated into the perpetuation of segregated education. This weakness perpetuates a society which normalizes the intellectual abilities of Whites and degrades that of African Americans in the workplace (e.g., Johnson- Bailey & Cervero, 2008). In order to strengthen our nation, we must make every effort to support gifted African American students who have the potential to inspire their peers. Only then can we reverse the age-old prejudices which place Black students at the bottom of an intellectual hierarchy. This study gives voice to the experiences and perspectives of high achieving African American students regarding the "acting White" phenomenon.

My dissertation will consist of three article manuscripts. As a result of this format, the reader will note that some of the content in each article is repeated. This repetition is expected, since the overarching theme of "acting White" is consistent throughout the dissertation. The first chapter will provide:

1. A description of my own interest in this topic

2. A literature review of the "acting White" phenomenon which will introduce the reader to some of the academic controversies surrounding this issue

3. A proposed conceptual history of the phenomenon

4. A summary of how the phenomenon relates to bullying research

5. A description of the research methodology

The first article in chapter two, entitled "The 'Acting White" Phenomenon from the Perspective of Academically Successful African-American University Students," concentrates on selected profiles of participants. This work relates the personal insights and experiences of these individuals to the relevant literature on the "acting White" phenomenon. I plan to submit this manuscript to *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*.

The second article, entitled "The 'Acting White' Phenomenon: Racially Specific Bullying?" extends the discussion surrounding this issue to that of bullying. Currently, no literature linking these issues exists. The stories of participants from this study whose experiences mirror those of the victims of bullies are highlighted. This manuscript will be submitted to *Urban Education.*

The third article is entitled "Educators Supporting Academically Talented African-American Students Facing the 'Acting White' Phenomenon" introduces research concerning this topic to educational professionals. It also proposes recommendations regarding how to apply this research in our schools. This manuscript will be submitted to *Roeper Review.*

The final chapter provides a summary of the dissertation's findings. I briefly share about my graduate school experience and research experiences, and propose areas for future research.

Background Influences

A Natiional Crisis in Black Student Underrepresentation

I have chosen this research topic because of my personal interest in supporting the achievement of gifted African Americans. In undertaking this study, two things are clear to me:

1. As a nation, we are witnessing an enormous tragedy. Bright young African Americans choose not to take advantage of educational opportunities which would improve their lives, but instead choose self-destructive paths in order to fit into tightly prescribed roles which have been historically defined by those indeed seeking to repress the potential of African Americans.

2. This same tragedy is also an opportunity for our nation to step up to the task of supporting the achievement of our gifted Black students, in order that we will have more effective leaders and role models for coming generations.

Of course, the underlying reasons for these two phenomena are no simpler than they are easy to remedy with a "quick fix." Our nation has a unique and complex history with regards to race relations. On the one hand, we have produced leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., who have inspired others around the world to seek freedom through peaceful methods. On the other hand, young men who look the most like Dr. King are much more likely to populate our country's prisons than to raise their hands in our classrooms (Butler, 2010; Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996; Smith & Hattery, 2010). As citizens, many people – Black, White, and people of other backgrounds -- work daily to better understand and unscramble the modern challenges our history present us.

Mother's Teaching Professional Experience. My mother, a history teacher for almost 40 years, spent the last decade of her career focused specifically on serving African American gifted students. She began her teaching career in a quiet, predominantly White Atlanta suburb which slowly morphed into a very diverse, much more urbanized community. Although many other White teachers dealt with these changes by choosing to leave the school system, she stayed. The system very publically struggled not only to

keep up with demographic changes, but also a changing curriculum which better served the new faces in the classroom.

Despite these changes, my mother often emphasized that, "The students have not changed. They may look different, but they are still children looking to learn and to be loved." As a result of her beliefs and commitment, she found the same acceptance from her African American students which she had enjoyed from the White students of her early career. During a class discussion which touched upon racial relations, she laughed with them as they found themselves in a situation in which one frustrated student vented, "White people just don't *get* it!" Another student pointed at my mother, clearly a 60-something White woman and said, "What about Mrs. Harris? Mrs. Harris is White!" The other student laughed and said, "No, Mrs. Harris is *not* 'White'"! She's one of us."

My mother's commitment to and affection for her students remained unchanged despite these demographic changes. She was also very aware that her African American students had needs and backgrounds which were often more complex than those of the White students of her earlier career. In order to better support these needs, she worked to assess and attend to the areas where they needed help. For example, she realized that many of her bright students were having difficulty getting scores on the Advanced Placement American History exam commiserate with their intelligence. Therefore, she began teaching before and after school study sessions which strengthened their understanding and confidence with the material.

Personal Background: Mike's Story, A Favorite Student. In my first year of university teaching, a young black man named "Mike" quickly became one of my favorite students during a summer course. Therefore, I was thrilled to discover that he

had signed up for another course and I looked forward to it. Mike, however, was like a totally different person in this second class. I was baffled by his lack of motivation and inattention. I had no idea what to think about his mixed performance and naturally questioned my own teaching competence.

Later, after having studied the "acting White" phenomenon and having reflected on the circumstantial differences between the two courses, I realized that this young man may have been wrestling with identity issues. In the first class, Mike was the only Black student. Nevertheless, he had quickly and enthusiastically become part of a peer group which included other, high performing students. Like the other members of his peer/study group, Mike was "into" the class – readily answering questions and well-prepared for class. The "first Mike" I had known in the first class had little in common with the "second Mike" I saw in the second class. He went from being an active learner who regularly contributed to the class discussions and scored well on quizzes and tests, to a silent young man who generally appeared to have his mind elsewhere.

The only real difference that I could see was that, in the second class, Mike was not the only Black male. Another young Black man, "Chinua," sat beside Mike on the front row. Even though he and Chinua truly appeared to like one another, they rarely spoke to one another. Having observed Mike joking around and laughing with the students in the first class, I marveled at the difference.

I will never learn the "rest of the story" for the behavioral changes in Mike. In fact, several factors may have been the cause of Mike's personality shift. To name just a few, he may have been undergoing a personal crisis, the different class material may have alienated him, my teaching techniques may not have engaged him, and even the unique

dynamic of the new group of students contained in the second class may have been the source of his decreased engagement. Through this research, however, I *can* learn about how the "acting White" phenomenon typically affects academically successful Black college students. By giving voice to these students, I may learn and share this knowledge in order to increase my competence as a teaching professional.

Connecting the Dots Which Frame My Research. As a former gifted student and a teacher interested in advancing racial equality, I felt that building on my experiences and those of my mother logically made sense. My mother both realized that all of her high school students deserved and generally wished for good lives, no matter their skin color, yet she appreciated that students from some backgrounds required more support than students from other backgrounds. From her example and my own experience, I learned that these facts might also extend to college students. It is clear that an effective way for me to encourage achievement across racial lines is to support the efforts of the best and the brightest African-American gifted students to develop their own potential.

As a White researcher and educator, I have been astonished to learn that in addition to the challenges of racism and poverty which still plague many young African Americans, there is a less visible enemy to African American achievement which is generally unknown to the White community. Several studies indicate that "acting white is one of the most negative accusations one African American adolescent can hurl at another" (p. 103, Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray, & Demmings, 2010). Like many White people, I was completely unaware of the phenomenon and its implications. Most teachers are White people like me who may not understand the significance of this phenomenon on the achievement of African American students, whereas the students in

the majority of the nation's cities are minorities (Laughter, 2011; Prendergast, 2003, p. 105). In light of this reality, I choose to work to advance the dissemination of this knowledge to other education professionals.

The "Acting White" Phenomenon's Relationship to Gifted Education

According to Banks (2006), African Americans comprise 15.6 % of the student population, but make up only 8.6% of the gifted student population. Thus, these students are under-represented by 55% nationally. Due to the lack of knowledge within the White community concerning the "acting White" phenomenon, some White educators translate the underachievement of their Black students into deficit orientations, or simply underestimate the intelligence of their Black students (Ford & Grantham, 2003; also Ford Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002). Additionally, some Black students work to mask their intelligence and to fit into the narrow definition of what it means to be "Black" (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Unfortunately, being "Black," to some students, can mean underachieving and generally being disrespectful of the educational system and its representatives (Ford et al., 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Teachers unaware of the "acting White" phenomenon prematurely dismiss this underachievement as "typical" and completely within the realm of what is to be expected (i.e., succumb to a deficit orientation, Ford & Grantham, 2003; also Ford et al., 2002).

Review of the Literature

Underachievement and Underrepresentation of African American Students in Advanced Level Programming

Numerous reasons contribute to the underachievement of African American students. To name a few, Henfield, Owens, and Moore (2008) list poverty: the school funding gap,

negative teacher perceptions, standardized testing, racial identity development, stereotype threat, peer influences, child-rearing practices, and parent expectations. Similarly, Henfield, Moore and Wood (2008) cite the lack of access, dropping out, choosing not to participate in challenging coursework, low teacher expectations, the fear of separation from one's social or peer group, the perceptions that gifted education is simply not for African Americans as contributors to the low representation of Black students in gifted programs. Furthermore, once in a program, many of these students do not do well, drop out, or simply underachieve.

Of all of these factors, however, Ford (1993) states that psychological factors, such as peer pressures, contributed the most to underachievement. Henfield, Moore, and Wood (2008) support this belief, pointing out that gifted students generally hesitate to embrace their gifted identity for fear of being ridiculed by "non accepting peers" (p. 445). Clarifying this point, the researchers postulate that

> Clearly, if nongifted African American peers perceive that African American students who participate in gifted education programs are 'not Black enough' or act White simply because of their enrollment in such programs, the social and psychological impact on these students can be devastating. (p. 445)

Based on over two decades of research, one could easily argue that the scarcity of African American students in gifted education programs may produce significant psychological distress. Part and parcel of this psychological success is the fear, and often the reality, that these difficulties will be faced alone (Frye & Vogt, 2010). The fact of the underrepresentation of African American students in upper level classes greatly increases the odds that those who *do* choose to pursue these courses are often one of very few

students who look like them in the classes. This fact alone discourages some intelligent students from participating in advanced level programming (Frye & Vogt, 2010).

Historically, gifted education has not equitably served non-majority students (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Morris, 2002; Williams, 2000). Because so many more White children participate in gifted and advanced level academic programming than Black children, many people – from African American kindergarten students to White classroom teachers – are deluded into believing that Black children should not be expected to achieve at the same levels as their White peers (e.g., Ford & Grantham, 2003; also Ford et al., 2002). Current understanding acknowledges that since White children generally are more likely to participate in gifted and advanced level programs than their Black peers (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford & Harris, 1999; Morris, 2002; Williams, 2000), these White children generally emerge from their public education experiences with better educations than their Black peers.

As educators, we must support not only the academic needs of African American students, but the common psychological and socials needs they have while pursuing their own potential. The fear and reality of facing this accusation inspires many African American students to suppress demonstrations of their own achievement potential. In an effort to maintain their association with their African American peers, these students can intentionally can create identities which distance them from behaviors and attitudes which are thought to be "White." Bergin and Cooks (2002) share that

> Educators are interested in the fear of acting white because of its potential
> influence on academic achievement. If avoiding acting white means not listening
> to heavy metal music and not wearing khakis, educators see no problem. If

avoiding acting white means not trying hard in school or avoiding good grades in

school, educators see a major problem. (p. 114)

The power of this fear is enormous for some students. Suskind (1998) related one

example in which students in a DC school were offered $100 for each quarter they

received good grades. Every quarter, fewer and fewer kids showed up for the public

awards ceremony. Apparently, even the promise of $400 not enough money to

compensate these lower income students for the daily hazing and social alienation that

they would face from their peers if they worked hard to do well in school.

Defining "Acting White"

What does it mean to "act White"?

Some may wonder how one might "act" a color. Yet, according to some people, not

only is this possible, but there even exists a rich taxonomy which defines exactly what it

means to "act White" versus acting "Black." Based on a study of inner-city Washington,

D.C. African American students, Fordham and Ogbu (1986; summarized in Table 1.1)

listed behaviors associated with "acting White" as listening to White music, studying,

working hard for good grades, getting good grades, going to a Rolling Stones concert,

putting on "airs," and speaking standard English. A more recent study by Ford,

Grantham, and Whiting (2008; summarized in Table 1.1) solicited definitions of "acting

White" from a number of Black students in grades 5-12, and found results similar to

those of Fordham and Ogbu (1986). According to these young people,

[R]egardless of the issue being focused on (grades vs. friendships), the student who is

accused of acting White is viewed as someone who has betrayed his or her racial

group, has given up his or her racial or cultural ties, and has adopted the values,

attitudes, and behaviors of the oppressor or enemy. This type of peer pressure

(charges of acting White) seems to be effective at hindering too many Black students

from taking full advantage of certain academic opportunities available to them. (p.

222)

The salience of this phenomenon to the achievement of Black gifted students can not be

overstated. According to Ford, Grantham, & Whiting (2008), "both high-achieving and

underachieving gifted Black students are familiar with this concept and . . . some gifted

Black students will deliberately perform poorly in school when accused of acting White"

(p. 223). Accusations of "acting" a color are a reality for many young Black students. For

this reason, it is important to understand more about this phenomenon.

Table 1.1

Summary of Themes and Sample Terms Based on Gifted Black Students' Stereotypes of

Acting White

Attitudes

Selling out
Stuck up/uppity
Not acting your race
Acting like "typical" White person
Boogy/boogie/snobbish/snooty
Sucking up
Not embracing Black culture

Regarding Intelligence

Smart/Being too smart
Does work/does homework
Doing well in school/Gets good grades
Uptight about school/Private school uptight
Taking advance/honors courses
Would rather study than chill

Regarding Clothes/dress

Dressing preppy/not wearing urban gear
Dressing different
Dressing White

Regarding Speech Patterns

Not using slang
Using "the King's English"
Speaking "properly"

Note: Adapted from a synthesis of Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a and Fordham & Ogbu, 1986.

Fordham and Ogbu Begin the Academic Discussion. In 1986, researchers Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu produced a seminal work, which still inspires new analysis and critique (e.g., Carter, 2006; Harper, 2006; Ogbu, 2004). In their work with urban high school students, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) discussed that some Black youth viewed ". . . academic success as the prerogative of White Americans. This orientation embodies both social pressures against striving for academic success and fear of striving for academic success" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177). As a result, they suggested "*one major reason* Black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success"

(Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177) because

> . . . White Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that Black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because Black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as White people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating White people in academic striving. (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177)

In other words, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) submitted that these Black community members not only resented academic achievement which they categorized as a marker of "selling out" the Black community values and culture for the sake of White community values and culture. They also warned that by "selling out" by pursuing academic excellence and becoming experts in their fields, the White community would never grant them job opportunities, social status, and recognition which were commiserate with their achievements (p. 179).

According to the "acting White" phenomenon, gifted young Black students who inherit this heavy baggage often find that their Black peers discourage them from associating with the "White practices" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183) which can lead to good grades and recognition for intellectual excellence. The gifted young Blacks themselves "may not want to behave in a manner they themselves define as 'acting White,'" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183), and therefore may themselves sacrifice achievement for social, and/or even *self*-acceptance. This study examines the insights of high achieving Black students regarding their own experiences with charges of "selling out," and re-examines how this charge compares with their self-analysis.

Building on Fordham and Ogbu. A number of scholars have followed up the discussion of the "acting White" phenomenon first initiated by Fordham and Ogbu. From studies which flip the premise of "acting White" around and explore what it means to "act Black" (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004) to studies which attempt to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon as it pertains to other minorities (Lew, 2006; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001), to the exploration of the phenomenon in specific subpopulations within the Black community (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004), and even studies challenging the theory's applicability to modern students (Harper, 2006), the discussion concerning this phenomenon is far from resolved.

In fact, a review of the literature reveals no clear consensus regarding the phenomenon. Indeed, some researchers (Carter, 2006; Harper, 2006) who had data which does not neatly support the "acting White" phenomenon have proposed that their research weakens its basic assertions. In fact, conflicting research may simply mark the confounding nature of the phenomenon.

One example of the confounding nature of the phenomenon is that while some students clearly have lived with its very real effects (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ford et al., 2008; Suskind, 1998), other students report not feeling the sting of the "acting White" accusation. Specifically, two of the studies which most directly challenge the "acting White" phenomenon, Carter (2006) and Harper (2006) inspired deeper analysis of the theory. Carter's (2006) study of lower-class, Black teenage high school students in Yonkers, New York revealed that there is a great deal of diversity within the Black community regarding views toward achievement, proper use of English, socially valued styles of music and attire, and school behavior. Generally, she advised that the "acting White" phenomenon overly generalizes about the Black community (p. 304), and "Black and Latino students' academic, cultural, psychological, and social experiences are *heterogeneous.*"

Harper (2006) also challenged the phenomenon in his study of Black college students. His interviews revealed that instead of feeling held back by their Black peers, these Black young men felt *supported* by other Black college students. The widespread discussion of the "acting White" phenomenon, both with its supporters *and* critics (Carter, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2006) inspires three questions which influence the research interests of the current study:

(1) Have the times changed in the 20 years between Fordham and Ogbu's 1986 study at Capital High and Carter's 2006 study in Yonkers, New York to such an extent that Carter would have results which significantly differed from those of Fordham and Ogbu?

(2) Following Carter's advice to respect the existence of "heterogenous" attitudes within the Black community regarding factors relevant to the "acting White" phenomenon (e. g., dress style, music preferences, attitudes toward school), are there common factors which link Black students with their views besides race (e.g., socioeconomic class, community cultural climate, local cultural history)?

(3) Would the college students interviewed by Harper (2006) have a markedly different social and cultural milieu than that of the younger students in the study conducted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986)? In other words, what role does the age of an individual play in their experience of this phenomenon?

The "acting White" phenomenon is built upon the complex racial history in a nation with a diverse Black community. These factors require that more research and time be devoted to fully understanding the nuances of the phenomenon before drawing any quick conclusions. This study gathered not only the insights and experiences of gifted African American students regarding the "acting White" phenomenon. It also gathered biographical details concerning the attitudes toward education of parents and grandparents, family educational aspirations and achievements, and professional positions of parents, in order to build a database from which to monitor patterns which may exist.

The current study focuses on the experiences and insights of African American college students regarding this phenomenon in order that, as adults, they have had the time to mature and reflect upon their experiences. Furthermore, they may be better able to express their retrospectives, both because of their maturity and also the time which has passed since the events.

"Acting White" Accusations and African American Academic Achievement

In the United States, White middle-class citizens have historically defined the "norm" for all members of society, often at the expense of minorities whose social, historical, economic, and other experiences do not mirror those of this majority group. Spence, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001) offered that the "[S]chooling and identity formation processes of African American children tend to be treated in terms of one reductionism or another, with experiences of Whites and middle-income people serving as the norm from which non-majority children are seen as deviating" (p. 21). In many cases, this ascription of "deviation" inspires not only a negative characterization from the White community, but a defensive response from the Black student who may actively choose to highlight those characteristics he or she has identified as "Black," while avoiding those he or she has identified as "White" (Ford et al., 2008b; Smith, 2002, p. 30). Black students may choose to reject educational opportunities, even at their own expense, in order to maintain allegiance to their racial group (Suskind, 1998). This study explores these questions which delve specifically into the academic choices the students made which may have been influenced by the "acting White" phenomenon.

Socio-historical Origins of the "Acting White" Phenomenon

It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish with any level of certainty, the beginning of the "acting White" phenomenon. There have been attempts to do so, however. For example, political strategist Ron Christie (2010) clearly stated that ". . . I believe the genesis of the acting white racial slur hails from the namesake found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (p. 26). According to Christie, the cringe-worthy demeanor of Uncle Tom toward his White "owners" established a vocabulary for expressing disdain for Black

men who likewise cower before White oppressors at the expense of their own people. In this tradition, Black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Barack Obama have found their accomplishments dismissed as the result of their efforts to please White people (Christie, 2010) .

Christie's analysis of the "acting White" phenomenon certainly provides historical insight into its connections with prior slurs Blacks have used against other Blacks. Because of the fictional nature of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, one wonders if the introduction of "Uncle Tom" into the cultural lexicon is truly the genesis of this stereotype. After all, the "Uncle Tom" stereotype was based on real people, and the animosity expressed toward the title character likely stemmed from anger which pre-existed the publication of this work.

Regardless of one's acceptance or rejection of his theory, Christie's link between the modern "acting White" phenomenon and ideas which are over 150 years old effectively points to the fact that the attitudes which underlie this phenomenon are no more modern than they are simple. For this discussion, the factors which are most often cited for their connection to intellectual development will be discussed. Specifically, the "color complex" and "house slaves" versus "field slaves" are old concepts with very contemporary applications to this research study.

"House slaves," Field slaves," and the "Acting White" Phenomenon. The tensions surrounding the "acting White" phenomenon dates back two centuries, to the time of slavery in United States history. Russell et al. (1992) shared that:

> Before the Civil War, dark-skinned slaves watched from the fields as their owners repeatedly picked mulattoes for the coveted indoor assignments.

Masters tended to select lighter-skinned slaves for this more responsible work because they believed that an infusion of White blood helped overcome Negroes' basic inferiority. No scientific proof ever existed that people of mixed White and Black ancestry were more capable or intelligent than those were pure Black, but the slave owners believed this was so. The 'mulatto hypothesis' served to explain to them why certain Negroes, mostly educated mulattoes, could excel in science and literature when Negroes as a race were supposed to be ineducable. (pp. 126-7)

Even after slavery had been long abolished, lighter-skinned Blacks attained more job and education opportunities because Whites generally trusted them more (p. 127).

The fact most salient to this discussion is the fact that "house slaves" generally had much easier access to educational opportunities than those in the field. Partially as a result of this circumstance, Blacks who pursued educational opportunities and were rewarded within the mainstream White system were treated with enormous suspicion by other Blacks, and generally classified as traitors to their race. Our society now struggles to support the academic achievement of its African American young people who must work against this weighty history. This research works to advance the understanding the "acting White" phenomenon in order to better support our African American children to harness their own potential.

"Color complex"

According to Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992), the individuals with the Whitest features have been the most successful in a society ruled by a majority White mainstream (pp. 34-5). As a result, there exists "a leadership pool of light-skinned Blacks with both

money and education." Citing information concerning salaries, these researchers argued

that in the case of "light-skinned Blacks it simply remains easier to get ahead" (p. 37).

Although this phenomenon, here referred to as the "color complex," is well-known within

the Black community "[M]any Whites in positions of authority remain ignorant and

insensitive to the role of color in the lives of African Americans" (p. 166). The focus of

this research remains how the "color concept" affects the "acting White" phenomenon.

Resentment toward those who look whiter than their peers can be translated into

social censure. Russell et al. (1992) stated that

> In some urban areas, Black children who do well in school are accused by
>
> their peers of 'acting White." Those who also happen to look White,
>
> because of lighter skin color, are also targeted for ridicule. To maintain
>
> their popularity, some of these children start failing on purpose, behavior
>
> that in turn contributes to high dropout rates, unemployment, poverty, and,
>
> ultimately, violence. (p. 165)

On the one hand, lighter-skinned Blacks may enjoy higher status and more prosperity in

the mainstream White world. On the other hand, these same individuals often also face

criticism and resentment from within the Black community for the same features and

behaviors which have gained them advantages.

"Acting White" as Race Bullying

      Jealousy. Some attribute accusations of "acting White" to "within group envy,"

which,

> [A]s we know from psychoanalytic theory . . . is a painful emotion that arouses
>
> destructive impulses, causing one to wish to get rid of the object of envy, to avoid

painful feelings. This is a simplified version of a difficult phenomenon when it

takes hold in a large group. (*New York Times*, 2005, p. 22)

This view regarding the "acting White" phenomenon proposes that, essentially, some less

successful Blacks become jealous of more successful Blacks. To cope with this powerful

emotion, less successful Blacks accuse the more successful Blacks of "acting White."

Through the use of this technique, less successful Blacks can rationalize that lower levels

of effort in school act as evidence of their racial pride and adherence to the loyalties of

"fictive kinship" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Individuals who cite their own racial loyalty

as the reason for their choice to stay disengaged from school may attempt to socially and

psychologically punish those who make the opposite choice by accusing them of "acting

White."

  Legacy of tension between "house slaves" and "field slaves." This attitude likely

goes all the way back to the "house slave" and the "field slave" (Russell, Wilson, & Hall,

1990). During that era, it was not uncommon for the "house slave" to lord their preferred

status over their brothers and sisters in the field (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1990). In what

may be an unfortunate case of the victim becoming the abuser, it is now more common

for those who choose to avoid all association with the mainstream White community to

reject those who in any way relate to Whites, accusing them of "acting White."

Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo and Hurst (2010) classified such behaviors of "intragroup

marginalization," which

  is defined as the perceived distancing by members of a heritage culture when an

  individual displays cultural characteristics of the dominant group. The construct

  of intragroup marginalization is predicated on social research theory. Ethnic

groups have their own distinct cultural identity and as a group member's behavior
begins to move away from the maintenance of that cultural identity and begins to
approximate that of the dominant culture, the acculturating member may perceive
that other group members are imposing social sanctions against them, thus
marginalizing them from the group. When a member of said group is observed
displaying behaviors or attitudes outside of the group norm, other members may
perceive this behavior as a threat to the group's distinct identity . . . Interpersonal
distancing ranges from questioning of loyalty to the ethnic group to social
ostracism. (p. 147)

These "social sanctions" can work to psychologically punish the marginalized individual.
Ford (1993) indicates that the most devastating factors to the achievement of African
American gifted students are not necessarily the obvious – poverty and social
marginalization – but just these types of social/psychological factors.

Bullying and "Acting White." According to bullying scholar Juvonen (2001),
"[B]ullying is defined as repeated maltreatment of a peer, where there is an imbalance of
a power between the perpetrator and the victim. Most typical bullying incidents entail
psychological intimidation" (p. 2). Regardless of whether individuals cite intragroup
loyalty, jealousy, or another cause, accusations of "acting White" effectively function to
suppress the academic potential of many young African American students. As a result,
many such students intentionally choose behaviors at odds with the pursuit of the
opportunities and possibilities created by more positive choices, ultimately consigning
themselves to a life less lived. Currently, very little literature exists on the subject of
bullying and gifted children (Sunde-Petersen and Ray, 2006). None at all discusses the

specific situation of African American gifted children. This research study makes specific connections between the African American gifted student's experience and the research on bullying.

"Acting White" and the Current Study

As it relates to my own research, I have drawn the following from the "acting White" phenomenon literature: "acting White" is a term for a complex phenomenon which has been studied for decades, and yet no unifying conclusions have been drawn. Perceptions of the "acting White" phenomenon vary from individual to individual, confounding attempts to create simple definitions which include all African Americans. These perceptions are influenced by that individual's unique experiences and background. After two decades of academic discussion concerning this phenomenon, little consensus has been reached (e. g., Ogbu, 2006; Carter, 2006) One reason for this fact is that the public and researchers have too often tried to fit the entire Black community as a whole into a box much too small to contain the diverse experiences and perspectives of *all* its members (Carter, 2006). Furthermore, the "acting White" phenomenon is not only affected by race, but also by gender, socioeconomic status, gender and social milieu (Lew, 2006). To cope with the complex nature of this phenomenon, and to learn more about how it is defined and perceived by Black gifted youth, this dissertation derives as much *specific* data as possible through the means of a general qualitative study. Because of the complex nature of this phenomenon, this research does not claim to provide the last word on the subject. Instead, this work is a stepping stone along the path to understanding.

This inquiry took place on a large, predominantly White university campus

which generally attract students with a commitment to and proven track record of academic success. The literature provides both support for the influence of the "acting White" phenomenon for Black university students (Pluviose, 2006), and a warning against overly emphasizing its importance Harper (2006). In his study, Harper shared findings concerning 32 African American undergraduate men which explored "internalized racism and Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) Acting White Hypothesis" (p. 337). This researcher reported that

> [F]indings from individual interviews contradict the hypothesis and reveal ways through which peer support for leadership and achievement were negotiated with African American peer groups on the six campuses . . . the participants attributed much of their college success to the support offered by their same-race peers. (p. 337)

According to the students in this study, the very fact that Black students, especially Black male students, were so underrepresented on the college campus "seemingly worked to their advantage in terms of garnering peer recognition for their leadership efforts and academic achievement" (p. 347.) One student, "Bryant," stated:

> [T]hey know how it is to be the only African American student in all of your classes and they know that most Black organizations on campus are led by African American women, not the brothas'. So, when they see a brotha' who is involved and stepping up to be a leader in class or outside of the classroom, they are especially proud and supportive. (p. 347)

Based on these contradictory findings, the salience of the "acting White" phenomenon (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) is a topic which is open for discussion, and about

which we are still learning. The varying opinions and findings which have been explored in the literature indicate that a number of contributing factors, in addition to race, define the academic experience for Black gifted students. For example, Harper (2006) details the perspectives of students who have moved into environments which primarily focus upon and reward academic achievement, colleges and universities. Therefore, the experiences of his participants might logically be quite different from those of the participants in Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) Capital High. The Black university students in Harper's study might even have been confronted with accusations of "acting White" at an earlier stage in their academic careers, during the time when they were living in an environment less focused on the university learning experience. The "acting White" phenomenon inspires many questions regarding contemporary Black college students.

Methodology

Research Questions

This research has been driven by the following questions:

1. What role do background contextual issues (e.g., location of upbringing, observations regarding school, age level, gender) play in a gifted Black student's ability to cope with the "acting White" accusation?

2. How do successful African American college students perceive "acting White"?

3. How has the "acting White" phenomenon impacted African American students' K-16 schooling experiences? among peers? among classmates? within their communities?

4. In the opinions of the participants, are some Black gifted university students successful at navigating through the threat of the "acting White" phenomenon while some students are not?

Research Strategy

In pursuit of the above questions, the present inquiry directly explored the role of context in the observations and experiences of gifted Black university students regarding the "acting White" phenomenon. Since a "monolithic" Black community does not exist (Carter, 2006; Grantham, 1997), it is wise to assume that the community of Black university students hosts a variety of views and experiences concerning this phenomenon. Even if they may share similar experiences to one another, different issues relevant to their personal biographical settings (e.g., location, observations regarding school, age level, gender, family educational values) will influence their observation of and experiences relative to this phenomenon. For these reasons, this general qualitative study has utilized interview and questionnaire techniques.

Description of the Research Context

This study took place on a college campus in the southeastern part of the United States. Of the 4,725 first year students in the 2009-2010 school year, 7.6% were African American. The median grade point average for all students was 3.68 – 4.0, and the median Scholastic Aptitude Test score ranged from 1160 to 1360 ("University of the Southeast", 2009). The total enrollment for all students was about 25,000 undergraduate students. Of all of the incoming students in the 2009-2010 academic year, "some 95 percent enrolled in College Board Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate

classes while in high school" and "54 percent were in the top 10 percent of their class" ("University of the Southeast", 2009).

Participant Selection

All participants in this dissertation study are linked by their race and enrollment at the university. The unit of analysis for this study (Patton, 2002; Yin, 1994) was the individual gifted Black student, focusing on his/her observations and experiences. I recruited forty questionnaire participants. From this questionnaire pool, I selected eleven interview participants to participate in one hour interviews which focused on their observations and experiences of the "acting White" phenomenon.

Rationale for participant selection. The studies regarding the "acting White" phenomenon have focused on a number of different age groups. For example, the seminal study by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) focused on the experiences of high school students. Other studies have explored the insights of Black high school students regarding their "acting White" experiences, as well (e.g., Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006). Harper (2006) focused on the experiences of high achieving Black engineering students in college. His work concentrated on the *college* experiences of the "acting White" phenomenon, however, with little exploration into the issue of whether the participants had previous experience with these accusations. The current study purposefully elicited the insights of older students regarding their general "acting White" experiences in order that the research might benefit from their mature and thoughtful reflection regarding their encounters.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place in two stages. During the first stage, I distributed and collected biographical questionnaires via the internet application Google documents (Appendix C). The purpose of these questionnaires was to gather data regarding the geographical and biographical contexts from which these students arrived at the university and their basic attitudes toward the "acting White" phenomenon. These questionnaires were also useful for data triangulation, as their questionnaire responses helped to guide the customization of the interview protocols for each participant (Appendix A). The second stage of the data collection focused on one hour interviews of each student who were chosen from the original forty questionnaire participants.

Organization of Data Analysis. The analysis of the data included three levels of analysis. Level I (content analysis) noted and coded themes present in the data (Patton, 2002). Level II was the grouping analysis, which transitioned the coded themes into clusters. Level III took these clusters and noted links and patterns relevant to the observation of the "acting White" phenomenon and the experiences of the students. In some instances, such as the data relevant to the connections between bullying and "acting White," this analysis included a inquiry into the literature *after* the data collection, in order to better understand the participant responses.

Triangulation. Two types of triangulation establish credible research: methods triangulation and analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002, p.556). Methods triangulation refers to the "consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods" (Patton, 2002, p. 556). The methods that I have used were the questionnaires and interviews. Analyst triangulation refers to "using multiple analysts to review findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 556). The three groups of analysts who reviewed the data were the primary researcher,

the doctoral committee, and interview participants who expressed an interest in reviewing the transcripts and study analysis.

Inquiry Database. I utilized computer software that helped "facilitate data storage, coding, retrieval, comparing, and linking" (Patton, 2002, p. 442). The primary qualitative data used Folio VIEWS information data management software. Microsoft Word software application was also used to record and store transcriptions in computer files, which I have manually coded. Finally, in addition to these software applications, I also maintained hard copies of written notes and other relevant information regarding the participants in individual files, labeled with their chosen pseudonyms.

Researcher Subjectivities

In undertaking this study, I have maintained an awareness of some of the perils in cross cultural research. White researchers exploring Black achievement issues must be especially sensitive to their own "humanness" (Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2008a), and its influence on their subjectivities. As the person who harvests participant data, the researcher is responsible for its interpretation (Lim, 2001). This can be a dangerous endeavor, for research inherently contains researcher inferences (Yin, 1994). The heart of this study seeks to learn from the experiences of the minority student participants, and so logically the focus is on those people.

I have entered into a field which is still developing, and relative to other topics, has received very little attention (Ford & Harris, 1999; Grantham, 1997; Morris, 2002; Obiakor, Utufy, Smith, & Harris-Obiakor, 2002; Williams, 2000). It is therefore especially important that I proceed carefully and with sensitivity to my own subjectivity and level of cultural competence. As with all studies, qualitative research possesses the

danger of a researcher misrepresenting or misunderstanding the participant voices, and thus corrupting data analysis. Therefore, before, during and after the data collection, I have conscientiously explored my own cultural background, attitudes, and perspective thoroughly (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002; Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2008a; Lim, 2001; Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998).

Summary

This dissertation study presents a discussion of the "acting White" phenomenon from three different angles. Beginning with the first article in chapter two, the data findings are presented in the forms of selected profiles of participants who have experienced the realities of the phenomenon are introduced and analyzed. While not a n ecessary component in understanding and appreciating the other chapters, chapter two introduces the reader of this dissertation to some of the most compelling people and themes from this research. In chapter three, new connections are drawn between the phenomenon and that of bullying. The bullying findings mark a new area of investigation within the field. Chapter four presents both the relevant "acting White" literature and the bullying literature in a way suitable to education practitioners, focusing specifically on recommendations from the literature in addressing these issues.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE "ACTING WHITE" PHENOMENON FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF

ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN-AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

STUDENTS[1]

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the "acting White" phenomenon. Of 40 African American university students who participated in completing questionnaires, 11 were chosen to share their experiences with "acting White" in one to one and a half hour interviews. Six participants have been featured in this work, three males and three females, ages ranging from 20-50+. The study participants came from diverse Black backgrounds, including one of Jamaican descent, two of Nigerian ancestry, and three African Americans whose childhood homes ranged from Georgia to Utah. The participants also came from homes with parents and grandparents who had achieved various levels of education. Although family members had attained degree levels from high school to graduate schools, all participants asserted that the significance of education was promoted while growing up. The participants' attitudes toward education were similarly positive. All participants cited a source of support which encouraged them to persevere when faced with accusations of "acting White." The unique backgrounds from which the participants came (e.g., cultural heritage and the educational attainment of parents and grandparents) influenced each individual's experience of the "acting White" phenomenon.

Introduction

The academic debate concerning the "acting White" phenomenon began over 25 years ago, with Fordham and Ogbu's 1986 study of inner city Washington, D.C. high school students. Scholarship since Fordham and Ogbu has reached divergent conclusions concerning the phenomenon. There is a need to better understand the nuanced differences within the Black community. This qualitative interview study sought to learn more concerning the differences and similarities among those who have faced these accusations. It also sought a better understanding of the factors which contribute to the sustained success of African American gifted students who have been accused of "acting White" and yet have still been able to achieve.

Statement of the Problem

Although Brown v. Board of Education marked the end of legally endorsed racial segregation in American schools, the educational inequities between Whites and African Americans have not significantly improved over the last sixty years (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002; Harmon, 2002). According to Banks (2006), African Americans comprise 15.6 % of the student population, but make up only 8.6% of the gifted student population. Thus, these students are under-represented by 55% nationally. One of the most significant contributors to the achievement gap between Black and White students is the "acting White" phenomenon. As salient a factor as this phenomenon remains in the persistent presence of educational disparities between the mainstream White community and the minority African American community, few Whites know of the phenomenon. Since over 80% of all teachers are identified White (Laughter, 2011),

more effort must be made by White education professionals to understand this phenomenon.

As educators, we must support not only the academic needs of African American students, but the common psychological and socials needs they have while pursuing their own potential. The fear and reality of facing the accusation of "acting White" inspires many African American students to suppress demonstrations of their own achievement. In an effort to maintain their association with their African American peers, these students intentionally can create identities which distance them from behaviors and attitudes which are thought to be "White." Bergin and Cooks (2002) share that

> Educators are interested in fear of acting white because of its potential influence
>
> on academic achievement. If avoiding acting white means not listening to heavy
>
> metal music and not wearing khakis, educators see no problem. If avoiding acting
>
> white means not trying hard in school or avoiding good grades in school,
>
> educators see a major problem. (p. 114)

The power of this fear is enormous for some students. Suskind (1998) related one example in which students in a D.C. school were offered $100 for each quarter they received good grades. Every quarter, fewer and fewer kids showed up for the public awards ceremony. Apparently, the promise of up to $400 a school year was simply not enough money to compensate these urban lower class kids for facing daily hazing and social alienation.

Research evidence has indicated that some Black students work to mask their intelligence in order to fit into the narrow definition of what it means to be "Black" (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a; 2008b, Table 2.1). Unfortunately, being "Black," to

these kids, can mean underachieving academically. It can also mean being disrespectful of the educational system and its representatives (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008b; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Educator attitudes can exacerbate this situation. Teachers unaware of the "acting White" phenomenon prematurely dismiss this underachievement as "typical" and completely within the realm of what is to be expected (i.e., succumb to a deficit orientation, Ford & Grantham, 2003; also Ford et al., 2002). Due to the lack of knowledge within the White community concerning the "acting White" phenomenon, some White educators view the underachievement of their Black students through the lens of these deficit orientations, underestimating the potential of their Black students (Ford & Grantham, 2003; also Ford Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002).

Table 2.1

Synthesis of Stereotypical Terms Associated with "Acting White"

Attitudes

Selling out
Stuck up/uppity
Not acting your race
Acting like "typical" White person
Boogy/boogie/snobbish/snooty
Sucking up
Not embracing Black culture

Intelligence

Smart/Being too smart
Does work/does homework
Doing well in school/Gets good grades
Uptight about school/Private school uptight
Taking advance/honors courses
Would rather study than chill

Style of Dress

Dressing preppy/not wearing urban gear
Dressing different
Dressing White

Speech Patterns

Not using slang
Using "the King's English"
Speaking "properly"

Note: Adapted from a synthesis of Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a and Fordham & Ogbu, 1986.

The Current Study

This work presents the perspectives and experiences of high achieving African-American students regarding the "acting White" phenomenon. Using the general qualitative research techniques of questionnaires and interviews, the participants in this study have contributed to the knowledge of this much discussed yet little understood phenomenon. The purpose of this work is to gain a better understanding into the complex array of factors which influence an African American gifted student's choice to succeed in spite of the pressures to fail. The work concludes with research-based implications for educators.

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Literature Review

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Fordham and Ogbu Begin Research on the "Acting White" Phenomenon

In 1986, researchers Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu produced a seminal work, which still inspires new analysis and critique (Carter, 2006; Harper, 2006; Ogbu, 2004). In their work with urban high school students, they discussed their finding that some Black youth viewed ". . . academic success as the prerogative of White Americans. This orientation embodies both social pressures against striving for academic success and fear of striving for academic success" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177). As a result, they suggest, "*one major reason* Black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177) because these students felt that

> . . . White Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that Black Americans
> are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because Black Americans
> subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define

academic success as White people's prerogative, and began to discourage their

peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating White people in academic striving.

(Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177)

Furthermore, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) submit that these Black students not only

resented academic achievement, which they categorized as a marker of "selling out" the

Black community values and culture for the sake of White community values and culture.

They also warn that by "selling out," and becoming professional experts in their chosen

fields, the White community would never grant them job opportunities, social status, or

recognition commiserate with their achievements (p. 179).

According to the assumptions which underlie the "acting White" phenomenon,

gifted young Black students who inherit this heavy baggage can find that their Black

peers discourage them from associating with the "White practices" which can lead to

good grades and recognition for intellectual excellence (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183).

Gifted young Blacks who do not want to face these accusations may sacrifice

achievement for social, and/or even *self*-acceptance.

Modern Views of "Acting White"

Building on the ideas of Fordham and Ogbu, a number of scholars have

followed up this discussion. Flipping the premise of "acting White" around and exploring

what it means to "act Black" (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004), these studies attempt to

cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon as it pertains to other

minorities (Lew, 2006; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001), to the exploration of

the phenomenon in specific subpopulations within the Black community (Peterson-Lewis

& Bratton, 2004), and even studies challenging the theory's applicability to modern students (Harper, 2006), the discussion concerning this phenomenon is far from resolved.

In fact, a review of the literature reveals no clear consensus regarding the phenomenon. Indeed, some researchers (Carter, 2006; Harper, 2006) who had data which did not neatly support the "acting White" phenomenon proposed that their research weakens its basic assertions. In truth, conflicting research may simply mark the confounding nature of the phenomenon. The "acting White" phenomenon is built upon the complex racial history in a nation with a diverse Black community. These factors require that more research and time be devoted to fully understanding the nuances of the phenomenon before drawing any quick conclusions. This study gathers not only the insights and experiences of gifted African American students regarding the "acting White" phenomenon. It also gathers biographical details concerning the attitudes toward education of parents and grandparents, family educational aspirations and achievements, and professional positions of parents, in order to build a database from which to monitor patterns which may exist.

One example of the confounding nature of the discussion concerning this phenomenon is that while some students clearly have lived with its very real effects (Ford et al., 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Suskind, 1998), other students report not feeling the sting of the "acting White" accusation (Carter, 2006; Harper, 2006). Carter's (2006) study of lower-class, Black teenage high school students in Yonkers, New York revealed that there is a great deal of diversity within the Black community regarding views toward achievement, proper use of English, socially valued styles of music and attire, and school behavior. Generally, she advised that the "acting White" phenomenon overly generalizes

about the Black community (p. 304), and "Black and Latino students' academic, cultural, psychological, and social experiences are *heterogeneous.*" Harper (2006) also challenged the phenomenon in his study of Black college students. His interviews revealed that instead of feeling held back by their Black peers, these Black young men felt *supported* by other Black college students.

Implications for This Study

The widespread discussion of the "acting White" phenomenon, both with its supporters *and* critics (Carter, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper, 2006) inspires three questions which influence the research interests of the current study:

(4) Have the times changed in the 20 years between Fordham and Ogbu's 1986 study at Capital High and Carter's 2006 study in Yonkers, New York to such an extent that Carter would have results which significantly differed from those of Fordham and Ogbu?

(5) Following Carter's advice to respect the existence of "heterogenous" attitudes within the Black community regarding factors relevant to the "acting White" phenomenon (e. g., dress style, music preferences, attitudes toward school), are there common factors which link the views of subgroups of Black students which are deeper than simply their race (e.g., hometown community cultural climate, local cultural history; family educational values, etc.)?

(6) Would the college students interviewed by Harper (2006) have a markedly different social and cultural milieu than that of the younger students in the study conducted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986)? In other words, what role does the age of an individual play in their experience of the "acting White" phenomenon?

The current study focuses on the experiences and insights of African American college students regarding this phenomenon. As adults, they will have had the time to mature and reflect upon their experiences. Furthermore, they may be better able to express their insights, both because of their maturity and also the time which has passed since the events.

Methodology

Research Questions

This research has been driven by the following questions:

1. What role do background contextual issues (e.g., location of upbringing, observations regarding school, age level, gender) play in a gifted Black student's ability to cope with the "acting White" accusation?

2. How do successful African American college students perceive "acting White"?

3. How has the "acting White" phenomenon impacted African American students' K-16 schooling experiences? among peers? among classmates? within their communities?

4. In the opinions of the participants, are some Black gifted university students

5. while some students are not?

Research Strategy

In pursuit of the above questions, the present inquiry directly explored the role of context in the observations and experiences of gifted Black university students regarding the "acting White" phenomenon. Since a "monolithic" Black community does not exist (Carter, 2006; Grantham, 1997), it is wise to assume that the community of gifted Black university students hosts a variety of views and experiences concerning this phenomenon.

Even if they share experiences similar to one another, differences stemming from their individual biographical settings (e.g., location, observations regarding school, age level, gender, family educational values) will influence their observation of and experiences relative to this phenomenon. For these reasons, this general qualitative study has utilized interview and questionnaire techniques. Table 2.2 provides a summary of demographic information concerning the overall student body.

Table 2.2

University Demographic Enrollment Data

Males	Number	Percentage
Full-time Black male undergraduates	541	
Total Full-time male undergraduates	10,898	5%
Total male undergraduates	25,709	2%
Black male graduate and prof. students		149
Total male graduate and prof. students	3616	4%
Total graduate and prof. students	8730	2%
Females	Number	Percentage
Full-time Black female undergraduates	1134	
Total Full-time female undergraduates	14787	8%
Total undergraduates	25709	4%
Black female graduate and prof. students	331	
Total female graduate and prof. students	5089	7%
Total graduate and prof. students	8730	4%
Male and Females	Number	Percentage
Black male students	722	2%
Black female students	1512	4%
All students	34677	

Note: According to these numbers, 2% of the university students are Black and male

Description of the Research Context

This study took place on a college campus in the southeastern part of the United States. Of the 4,725 first year students in the 2009-2010 school year, 7.6% were African American. The median grade point average for all students was 3.68 – 4.0, and the median Scholastic Aptitude Test score ranged from 1160 to 1360 ("University of the Southeast," 2009). The total enrollment for all students was about 25,000 undergraduate students. Of all of the incoming students in the 2009-2010 academic year, "some 95 percent enrolled in College Board Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes while in high school" and "54 percent were in the top 10 percent of their class" ("University of the Southeast," 2009)

Participant Selection

All participants in this study are linked by their race and enrollment at the university. The unit of analysis for this study (Patton, 2002; Yin, 1994) was the individual gifted Black student, focusing on his/her observations and experiences. I recruited forty questionnaire participants. From this questionnaire pool, I selected 11 interview participants to participate in one hour interviews which focused on their observations and experiences of the "acting White" phenomenon. From these 11 students, I have highlighted six in this work. Table 2.3 provides a brief summary of the participant profiles.

Table 2.3
General Biographical Profiles of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education Level	Racial Heritage
Dominique	32	F	Graduate	African American
KDHoya	45	M	Graduate	African American
Young Reezy	28	M	Graduate	African American
Tom Rivera	23	M	Graduate	African American
Rebecca	20	F	3rd y. undergrad	Nigerian American
Daughter	50+	F	Graduate	Caribbean

Rationale for participant selection. The studies regarding the "acting White" phenomenon have focused on a number of different age groups. For example, the seminal study by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) focused on the experiences of high school students. Other studies have explored the insights of Black high school students regarding their "acting White" experiences, as well (e.g., Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006). Harper (2006) focused on the experiences of high achieving Black engineering students in college. His work concentrated on the *college* experiences of the "acting White" phenomenon, however, with little exploration into the issue of whether the participants had previous experience with these accusations. The current study purposefully elicited the insights of older students regarding their general "acting White" experiences in order that the research might benefit from their mature and thoughtful reflection regarding their encounters.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place in two stages. During the first stage, I distributed and collected biographical questionnaires via the internet application Google documents (Appendix C). The purpose of these questionnaires was to gather data regarding the geographical and biographical contexts from which these students arrived at the university and their basic attitudes toward the "acting White" phenomenon. These questionnaires were also useful for data triangulation, as their questionnaire responses helped to guide the customization of the interview protocols for each participant (Appendix A). The second stage of the data collection focused on one hour interviews of each student who were chosen from the original forty questionnaire participants.

Organization of Data Analysis. The analysis of the data included three levels of analysis. Level I (content analysis) noted and coded themes present in the data (Patton, 2002). Level II was the grouping analysis, which transitioned the coded themes into clusters. Level III took these clusters and noted links and patterns relevant to the observation of the "acting White" phenomenon and the experiences of the students.

Triangulation. Two types of triangulation establish credible research: methods triangulation and analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002, p.556). Methods triangulation refers to the "consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods" (Patton, 2002, p. 556). The methods that I have used were questionnaires and interviews. Analyst triangulation refers to "using multiple analysts to review findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 556). The three groups of analysts who reviewed the data were the primary researcher, the doctoral committee, and interview participants who expressed an interest in reviewing the transcripts and study analysis.

Inquiry Database. I utilized computer software that helped "facilitate data storage, coding, retrieval, comparing, and linking" (Patton, 2002, p. 442). The primary qualitative data used Folio VIEWS information data management software. I also used Microsoft Word software application to record and store transcriptions in computer files, which I have manually coded. Finally, in addition to these software applications, I also maintained hard copies of written notes and other relevant information regarding the participants in individual files, labeled with their chosen pseudonyms.

Researcher Subjectivities

In undertaking this study, I have maintained an awareness of some of the perils in cross cultural research. White researchers exploring Black achievement issues must be

especially sensitive to their own "humanness" (Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2008a), and its influence on their subjectivities. As the person who harvests participant data, the researcher is responsible for its interpretation (Lim, 2001). This can be a dangerous endeavor, for research inherently contains researcher inferences (Yin, 1994). The heart of this study seeks to learn from the experiences of the minority student participants, and so logically the focus is on those people.

I have entered into a field which is still developing, and relative to other topics, has received very little attention (Ford & Harris, 1999; Grantham, 1997; Morris, 2002; Obiakor, Utufy, Smith, & Harris-Obiakor, 2002; Williams, 2000), and it is therefore especially important that I proceed carefully and with sensitivity to my own subjectivity and level of cultural competence. As with all studies, qualitative research possesses the danger of a researcher misrepresenting or misunderstanding the participant voices, and thus corrupting data analysis. Therefore, before, during and after the data collection, I have conscientiously explored my own cultural background, attitudes, and perspective thoroughly (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002; Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2008a; Lim, 2001; Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998).

I have chosen the pursuit of these issues because of my own interest in contributing to the reversing the underrepresentation of African American students in advanced level programming, including at the post-secondary level. I plan to use the data I have collected to this end, and to also share these stories with others. Eight out of 10 educators are White (Laughter, 2011). In order to advance the cultural competence of other educators like myself, many of whom are blind to the "acting White" phenomenon, we

must learn to see the insidious influence of phenomena such as "acting White" accusations.

Participant Findings

The diversity of the following selected profiles reifies the diversity of experiences within the Black community concerning the "acting White" experience. The reader will note that more than one participant discussed his or her experiences with pain still evident well into adulthood. Participants from different geographical and cultural backgrounds clearly own unique protective factors which have led to their success despite the dual pressures of academic success and the complex identity formation of an African American gifted student. These factors are summarized in the following accounts.

Dominique

Dominique had extensive experience with the "acting White" phenomenon. She had encountered this slur in her academic life, her personal life, and was currently witnessing its effect in the lives of her two sons. The pain of the accusations spread throughout her childhood, following her into adulthood, despite her achievements. She related that:

> You know, my state paper wrote about my achievements and they told all the readers that I received a full ride to go to the University of the Southeast, and that I was receiving a fellowship. I remember hearing somebody said, 'Well, you know, she always 'acting White.' And well, what does that have to do (laughter) with what I just did? You know? Here I am, 30 – 33, and I'm sitting here crying on the phone with you, talking about what somebody said about me. And I pride myself in really not

giving a crap what people think about me or what people say about me.

But there are certain things that, that really hit you, like out of all the

things you could. . . .

Dominique and "acting White." Dominique's story exemplifies how much these accusations can hurt, not only at the time that they are made, but over the course of a lifetime. They affect a person's sense of their identity. In her interview, she continued, describing how her relationships to the people making these accusations gave even more power to their words and their power to hurt her. Because she identified so closely with her accusers, she would question herself and her own integrity when they faulted her for "acting White":

I think that just hearing that people that I love or care for, just people in

my race that I thought that I was cool with, still portray me as someone

who only achieves what they achieved by somehow not being themselves?

It's hurtful. Because I mean, what are they saying about your character?

Are they saying that you're a dishonest person? And that you're basically

a chameleon? You'll become whoever you have to be, in order to make it?

And that's so against the fiber of who I am and how I was raised.

In her situation, this sting did not prohibit her from doing well in school. Dominique came from a loving and supportive family which provided consistently positive messages concerning the value of her achievements, as well as helping her to put the "acting White" accusations into perspective. Dominique specifically credited her parents as supportive of her success. She felt that they understood her predicament, and that their strong endorsement protected her from the potentially devastating social pressures she

faced outside of her home. For a young person in a different set of circumstances, however, it is not difficult to understand why one might want to mask one's potential, rather than continually be faced with these troublng situations.

KDHoya

KDHoya was the participant who was perhaps the most focused on his schooling experience. The son of an elementary school teacher, he had an extraordinary number of prestigious academic accomplishments. As a child, these achievements were exceptional among his peers, and gained him recognition not only from teachers, other parents, and even the local press. On the flip side, his neighborhood Black male peers were decidedly *not* supportive of his school accomplishments and occasionally expressed their displeasure with their fists. Socially, he was treated as a pariah by the other African American boys, whom he believed resented the attention that he gained for his good grades and the resultant pressure placed upon these other boys by their own parents to perform likewise. Fortunately, this negative situation was mitigated by the presence of a military base adjacent to his hometown which housed children from all over, with goals more akin to his own. Additionally, his family was stable and supportive of his achievement. Eventually, he was able to escape his hometown to attend Georgetown University.

KDHoya and the "acting White" phenomenon. KDHoya clearly attributed his ability to overcome the persistent accusations of "acting White" to the support of his parents. His parents were locally known and respected for their positive contributions to the Black community. Perhaps most important to his success, however, was their ability

to create within him a strong sense of self which transcended the negative forces which descended upon him as soon as he left the confines of his home. He related that

> I was very much aware of my ethnicity and very much aware of my culture, you know. Because even though I was only one of a few, I still identified with being African American and with being entrenched in my culture. I think my parents were involved in that.

The positive protective supports which KDHoya enjoyed in the face of the fierce disapproval his peers voiced emphasizes the vital importance of a support network for gifted African American achievement.

Young Reezy

Young Reezy's childhood education experience was evenly split between a predominantly African American school system in Detroit, Michigan, and a predominantly White school system outside of Orlando, Florida. A tall, well-well-built young man in his middle 20s, Young Reezy had already attained a Master's degree and had a year of teaching experience under his belt. He shared that he had been a football player both in high school and in college, and made an effort to maintain athleticism as a way of life, in order to stay healthy. He believed that he was able to largely get by with getting good grades and having achievement standards higher than those typically accepted for African American males without facing social ostracism by his Black peers because of his sense of humor and athletic ability. Regarding his *motivation* to do well, he clearly credited his grandmother, the family matriarch who had pushed and encouraged him to ignore any negative influences in lieu of staying focused on the rewards of education.

Young Reezy and the "acting White" phenomenon. Without a doubt, Young
Reezy was an accomplished young man. The road to his achievement, however, had been
influenced by the "acting White" phenomenon. He repeatedly referred to the importance
of his grandmother's influence as he struggled to stay positive while in college. As a
child, he was presented with a choice to which most White kids in his class would not
have even considered: whether to continue in the school's predominantly White gifted
program, or to "throw the test," and stay in general classes with kids who looked like
him. He chose the latter, without regret, pointing out that he has done quite well despite
his lack of committed participation in gifted programs beyond that level.

When he *did* choose to do well in class, his experience among his peers was
unique. He knew, as a young person, that doing well in school was reason for ridicule,
and yet he personally avoided being labeled. When asked about whether this was the
reason *why* he chose sports, he responded:

> Young Reezy: No, I did sports because I liked them. I didn't think about it
> at the time. But I knew a lot of people who I would hang out with who
> acted like me, or spoke like me, they would get picked on and they didn't
> play sports, so . . .
>
> Interviewer: Okay. Did you know that the time? I mean, were you aware
> of it?
>
> Young Reezy: I was aware of it. I wasn't stupid. I knew it (laughter). If
> they played basketball or something, they wouldn't got picked on. But I
> feel like, another reason was, I had a good sense of humor. I would be out
> there cracking jokes and stuff, so that was another way to mask (laughter).

So if you were popular or you got girls or if you had a sense of humor and you played sports (you were okay).

Interviewer: Did they know you were good at school? . . . the people you played sports with?

Young Reezy: I guess. They figured I was good at school, and they didn't really care. They just wanted to know that I would get ten tackles or yards (laughter). I mean, they didn't really care if I got an A on my test. They didn't ask, "Hey what did you get on your test today?" They were thinking, they knew I was in the classes I was in but it wasn't something we brought up a lot. It probably would have been something if that was the only thing I had going for myself was school, that was one thing I could talk about. But since I had other activities going on, I was focused on, I guess that helped.

Interviewer: So basically if you could do everything you would be fine?

Young Reezy: Right. If you could do everything well (laughter), you would be fine.

Young Reezy's experience reveals that the "acting White" experience is complex. Even when the accusations are present in a social milieu, as Young Reezy revealed when he described watching *other* students get teased, not every kid falls prey to harsh accusations. There are mitigating circumstances, such as athletic ability and a relatable personality, which can buffer the effects. This fact opens up another question: Beyond all of the rich social history and psychology behind this slur, is it also essentially an issue of one student telling another student that he is not relatable as a Black person? Is the

accuser complaining that he does not know how to relate to the accused, because the accused is just too different, too outside of what the accuser has come to expect from an African American?

Tom Rivera

Tom Rivera was a recent honor's graduate of the University in his 20s who had grown up in the Atlanta area. He had just begun as a Ph. D student at a Midwestern university, which he enthusiastically shared had one of the best programs in the nation in his chosen field. As a young high school student, however, not even Tom would have predicted his academic success. After a one month suspension in school, whatever remnant of interest he had in his education all but died, only to be resurrected a year later after a series of dramatic changes in his life and attitude.

Tom's story of disengagement and near academic suicide actually had begun a few years previous. While a high school freshman, he had undertaken an assignment researching colleges. At that time, he was very interested in attending Duke University, which had gotten his attention due to its spectacular reputation in basketball. Tom's knowledge about colleges essentially revolved around the schools with teams that made sports headlines. During the course of this assignment, however, he was required to dig deeper into the school's profile. Having learned more about the school, he reasoned that his grades were nowhere good enough to plan on gaining acceptance into this elite institution. Discouraged, he gave up not only his college plans, but his enthusiasm for school altogether. School, he decided, was for other people. For a young Black man like himself, who did not have stellar grades and substantial financial resources, it was a waste of time.

This attitude led to a series of decisions which contributed to his disinterest in school by the time he was a junior in high school (for the first time). Drifting, he found himself repeating the eleventh grade, suspended, and with no clear idea of where he was headed. Tom credits finding faith in Jesus Christ for his academic resurrection. Due to this influence and the choices it inspired, he was able to turn his situation around. At this point, he realized that other more attainable schools existed. His enthusiasm for school returned with gusto. By the time he graduated from college, he had fully adopted a scholar identity and gained a positive sense of purpose in his life. Tom was a happy and optimistic young man, who was enthusiastic his future.

Tom Rivera and the "acting White" phenomenon. Tom's experience of the "acting White" phenomenon differs from that of Dominique, KDHoya, and Young Reezy, in that he did not deal with the experience of it as a child or in high school. In fact, he was in college the first time he faced the accusation. He described the situation:

> Tom: My ex-girlfriend would accuse me of "acting White," or coming off as White, just because I was – again, you know, spoke, I articulated well, very smart, and was admitted to one of the top graduate schools in the nation. She would say that I'm a White person in a Black body.
>
> Interviewer: Did you ever change any of your behaviors?
>
> Tom: Change my behaviors in front of her? Nah, because I'm secure in who I am. I mean, I'm comfortable with who I am. I'm alright with who I am and I believe – and I don't see myself as trying to fit into this mold, you know, of "acting White" or of being White or whatever it may be. I'm just being myself. And you know if that comes off as "acting White," then

that's what it is, that's what it is. But that's other people's perceptions and that's not my own. I'm just you know, I don't change my tone, I don't feel – in front of different people. Well, I take that back. You know, I grew up in Biddle, GA and the hip-hop influence I had growing up has affected me. And I know how to fit in, I guess, with my Black friends who are knowledgeable of that culture. But at the same time, for the most part, who I am is a result of, you know, my education and just being mature, really (laughter).

Unlike Dominique and KDHoya, Tom expressed no lasting pain from being accused of "acting White." By the time he first heard this, even from a girlfriend, he was established enough in his own identity to feel strong in who he was.

Like Young Reezy, however, he did express that he owned qualities which helped him to relate to other African Americans. Specifically, he believed that his knowledge of hip-hop helped him to bridge the gap which may have otherwise been created by his focus on academics. Interestingly, the next profiled participant, Rebecca, *struggled* to demonstrate knowledge about hip hop as she failed to relate to other African Americans.

Rebecca

Rebecca was a 20-year-old third-year Arts and Sciences student. In speaking with her, various tensions emerged: the tension between her African American and Nigerian identities, the tension between academic apathy and success, and the tension between her abilities to express both sharp insights and vague doubts regarding her situation. On the one hand, Rebecca proudly characterized herself as a "nerd" who would be ashamed if her "nerdy friends" learned of her low academic standards while in middle school. On the

other hand, Rebecca did not yet believe that she had harvested her own potential. She disclosed that she felt that she was disgracing her Nigerian family of doctors, pharmacists and engineers with her own relatively low achievement.

Rebecca's heritage had an enormous influence on her life, both past and present. Both of her parents were Nigerian immigrants who held graduate degrees. In fact, her parents moved to the United States from Nigeria in order for her father to complete his education as a doctor of internal medicine. After finishing his education and practicing in the New York area for a number of years, the family then moved to the deep South in order for him to accept another position.

During her interview, Rebecca shared a great deal regarding her identity struggle to understand herself as a Black person of African descent in America. Specifically, middle-school peers in the private school she had attended in Long Island had picked on her for having a distinctly African name which set her apart from everyone else in her class. She was mercilessly teased for her African ancestry, and regularly asked if she had killed wild animals. Memories of this teasing still clearly bothered her. Just as the other African American students had not related to her, she also struggled to relate to them. Despite studied efforts to learn more about African American culture, and specifically about hip hop music, she knew that her attempts came across as stilted and artificial. The harder she tried to share knowledge about the music of her peers, the more her difference seemed to set her apart, as she did not know how to pronounce the names of the artists.

While citing it as a stumbling block when sorting out her middle-school identity, Rebecca also cites her heritage as one of the main driving factors in her success. The conflicts that she expressed regarding the African American community revealed her

attitudes toward African American versus African attitudes toward the value of education. In her view, African Americans simply do not value education at the same level as Nigerians. She shared her own experiences as an example. In her early teen years, Rebecca worked hard to identify with African Americans, and consequently underachieved in school. Among her African American peer group, it was "cool" to get low grades. Only when she shifted her identity to that of "African" from "Black American" did she raise her own personal achievement standards.

Rebecca and the "acting White" phenomenon. Because Rebecca related so much about how the accusations affected her while she was in middle school, I asked her to share more about how the age of a person affects the power of the accusation. In her words:

Rebecca: I think the younger you are, the more influence it has on you. Like nowadays, I am pretty sure if someone called me an Oreo, told me I don't act Black, I would just laugh in their face. When I was a kid, that was so deflating, for someone to accuse me of "acting White," or being accused of not acting Black enough. Like I would just cringe and be so ashamed. Yeah, it's just an age thing. At my age, you just don't care anymore, but when you're a kid, it really affects their self-esteem. They make you feel like there's something wrong with you if you don't like rap or you want to do well in school. And those things are not acting Black.

Interviewer: What were you ashamed of when someone would tell you that?

> Rebecca: It was like there was something wrong with me. Like I wasn't being true to my heritage. Like I – I can't even explain it. Like you know, someone accused me of "acting White" in front of the whole class and everyone laughed at me, that would make me want to curl up and die. It was so embarrassing to me.

Rebecca, just like Dominique, specifically stated that she had felt *shame* when others would tell her that she "acted White." This is an extremely important point, especially in a society in which White people not uncommonly tell an African American that he/she is like a "White person in a Black body." In the event that a teacher or other adult would say this to an African American child, especially in front of *other* African Americans, that adult may have quite unintentionally laid the groundwork for social, emotional, and psychological conflict regarding the child's still forming identity. This conflict may have a negative effect on the child's achievement.

Daughter

Daughter was a 50-something graduate student of Jamaican descent who had worked extensively with African American teenagers as a social worker. Speaking in a rich Jamaican accent, Daughter expressed a comfortable pride in her heritage and accomplishments. At the same time, she often expressed concern regarding the differences which she perceived between Jamaicans and African Americans. This concern emanated not from a competitive patriotism, but instead from an almost maternal concern. Daughter's age and experience, both personal and professional, granted her a rich understanding and insight. Daughter felt that her heritage had galvanized her achievement. She has been able to translate her heritage and beliefs into a confidence

about herself and her own ability. By the time she had arrived in the United States as a college student, her identity and sense of purpose were strong. Daughter repeatedly emphasized that her immediate circle of family and friends shared her same educational values. Whenever she encountered a more negative view she "completely ignored it because you know, you just have to do what you have to do." Her heritage and a strong, stable family provided her with the inner means to easily move past these negative influences.

   Daughter and the "acting White" phenomenon. Daughter repeatedly expressed disbelief and frustration with African Americans who were not supportive of other African Americans who were trying to advance themselves. She related a specific episode in which she had witnessed a young, ambitious African American woman passing out résumés at a social function. The other young, African American people were markedly hostile to the young woman's actions. They repeatedly vocalized their belief that her actions were inappropriate and not becoming to her race – that, in fact, she was "acting White." In her words, she shared:

> You know, we are told that the American dream says you need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and be a productive citizen and do what you need to do to get along. And this person is in this environment is networking with folks, handing out résumés. . . they are saying, 'What's wrong with her?' I mean, 'Why's she going on like this?' and 'That's just not how *we* do it. She's 'acting White.'"

Daughter voiced her own opinion that she felt that the judgments of the peers of this young lady were unfair. She believed that the accusers were critical because they

themselves did not hold the same ambitions as the young lady who had chosen to use the opportunity for networking. As an individual and as a social worker working with adolescent African Americans, she supported proactive behaviors which advanced one's personal potential.

Discussion of Key Findings

"Acting White" and Age

One of the guiding research questions concerned the role of an individual's age in their experience of the "acting White" phenomenon. Harper (2006) found that his college student-aged participants had actually supported each other's success instead of discouraging it. Responses from these participants consistently indicated that the age one encounters the bulk of "acting White" accusations dramatically influences the intensity with which one experiences these accusations. Participants like Dominique and KDHoya experienced these accusations from a young age, and for the entire span of their childhoods. As a result, they still reacted emotionally to reflections on the topic. On the other hand, Tom Rivera and Daughter first encountered these accusations in their late adolescent years. They both felt that the accusations were trivial compared to the rewards of their pursuit of academic success. Neither participant reacted emotionally to the telling of incidents which described being accused of being "White." Daughter, in particular, shared that other Black students had been very supportive of her own ambitions while in college. These findings indicate that Harper's 2006 results were very likely influenced by the age of his participants.

"Acting White" and Difference

The notion of being "different" appears to have affected these participants'
relationships to the "acting White" phenomenon in three primary ways:

1. Dominique, KDHoya and Rebecca related that simply facing an accusation of
   "acting White" made them feel as though they did not "fit in." They felt
   uncomfortable with being "different."

2. Young Reezy related his opinions that children sometimes relate to differences by
   labeling them. For example, if another child were to dress in a way that did not
   adhere to the expected norm, that child's difference would often be absorbed
   negatively by his peers.

3. Daughter's observation of the young women networking at a social function
   related a story of a Black person who behaved in a manner different than that
   expected by her peers. Those peers, as a result, labeled her "White." Daughter
   vehemently objected to this label.

"Acting White" and Success Motivation

The participants in this study had faced accusations of "acting White," yet
persisted in their drive to succeed. An overwhelming majority of these participants had
come to the conclusion that, in order to achieve their own personal goals, they needed to
maintain a sense of self independent from the perceptions of others. Therefore, although
the accusations of "acting White" may or may not hurt, they would not ultimately affect
their choices.

Summary

This study began with a few objectives:

1. To learn the insights regarding the "acting White" phenomenon, based on the experiences of academically successful African American students.

2. To disaggregate the responses of these students in order to move away from assuming a monolithic "Black" community (Carter, 2006; Grantham, 1997), and to better understand not *whether* African Americans dealt with the "acting White" phenomenon, but *how* they faced these accusations.

While analyzing the participant interviews, it became clear that each academically successful African American individual who faced these accusations did so with the backing of some type of supporter. For Dominique, KDHoya, Young Reezy, Rebecca, and Daughter, this support came in the form of family members who were able to provide alternate perspectives on the value of education in their lives. For Tom Rivera, the intervention of a concerned teacher and a spiritual transformation provided strong sources of support during a pivotal time. Rebecca and Daughter also discussed the role of their cultures in their abilities to distance themselves from what they perceived as negative values, without feeling that they had also distanced themselves from a valuable part of their identities. The fact that *all* of the participants cited *some* source of support signifies that no matter the specific source, having a person, spiritual foundation, or alternative cultural base can provide balance which translates into a basis for continuing achievement, even in the face of adversity. Another clear finding dealt with the age of the participants when they faced the accusations and the length of time which they were faced. Dominique, KDHoya, and Rebecca faced the accusations on an ongoing basis

during their delicate formative years in their childhood and young adolescence. For Dominique and KDHoya, as they returned to their hometowns occasionally, the accusations were ongoing. Likewise, the pain associated with the constant attacks on their "Black" identity was unresolved although they admitted that it had improved with age. For Tom Rivera and Daughter, the fact that they first faced the accusations after they had established their identities helped them to brush aside the power of the accusations. Young Reezy, like Rebecca, actively grappled with whether he was going to more closely identify with the White community in the gifted program or the Black community in other courses when he was in middle school. He generally felt that he had been able to avoid the worst consequences of the accusations and had been able to maintain a strong social life, enjoying the full benefits of the status of an athlete without being burdened with the label "geek."

Limitations of the Study

This study's results reflect the insights of the participants toward their own experiences. Although it is quite likely that other academically successful African American students will relate to the experiences, the relatively small number of participants ensures that the results are not generalizable. Additionally, all participants of this study had agreed to share their stories voluntarily.

During the recruitment process, all African American students who had been made available by a list from the university registrar's office were contacted. From over 500 potential participants, 40 responded that they would be willing to take part in the study. Of these, all but two reported having been directly affected by the "acting White" phenomenon. One would assume that it would be logical that people most interested in

sharing their stories were those who had been most moved by their encounters as a victim of accusations of "acting White," although not proven or suggested here. It would be extremely interesting to learn and compare the perspectives of the individuals who had lobbed the accusations at others, in order to learn their motivations and points of view.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study makes a small contribution to the effort to gain a better understanding of the diverse experiences of the "acting White" phenomenon within the African community. One area which remains unexplored the exploration of the motivations and backgrounds of African American students responsible for making these accusations. Eight out of 10 education professionals are White (Laughter, 2011). It is unclear whether the White community is as well-versed in the "acting White" phenomenon and its potential to thwart African American achievement, as the Black community. Future research into the level of awareness concerning this phenomenon among White educators concerning its influence on the achievement of their African American students would be an excellent step in addressing African American underachievement. Implementing training programs which include education concerning the phenomenon for education professionals and students would be beneficial.

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CHAPTER THREE

MANUSCRIPT TWO

CHAPTER THREE: "ACTING WHITE" AS RACIALLY SPECIFIC BULLYING[2]

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[2] Biddle, W. H. Submitted to *Urban Education*, 7/22/2011.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the "acting White" phenomenon in light of the larger crisis of student bullying. Because of the lack of previous research into this link, the work includes a brief summary of the literature concerning both topics. Subsequent to this literature review, the details of the study findings are shared. Of 40 African American university students who participated in completing questionnaires, 11 were chosen to share their "acting White" experiences in one to one and a half hour interviews. Three of these interview participants have been featured in this work, one male and two females. Their ages ranged from 19-42. The study participants came from diverse cultural backgrounds: one of Nigerian ancestry, one African American grew up in Alabama and Utah, and one African American who had grown up in South Carolina. All participants came from homes with parents who had attained graduate degrees. Their backgrounds had direct bearing on the participants' attitudes toward education. All participants cited their family as a source of support which encouraged them to persevere when faced with accusations of "acting White." All participants discussed how their "differences" from the accepted norms within the African American community had been the source of social strife. Specifically, their Black peers had accused them of trying to "act White." This work concludes with suggestions for how the findings may be applied, cautions concerning the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and conclusions which may be drawn from the research findings.

Introduction

In 2003, bullying experts Espelage and Swearer suggested that future research should examine the dynamics of how race influences the content of bullying. This current work links the "acting White" slur against African American students who choose to fulfill their potential with the acts of those who try, often successfully, to bully those students into their socially prescribed ideas of what it means to be "Black." According to bullying scholar Juvonen (2001), "[B]ullying is defined as repeated maltreatment of a peer, where there is an imbalance of a power between the perpetrator and the victim. Most typical bullying incidents entail psychological intimidation" (p. 2). Accusations of "acting White" function to bully bright young African Americans into suppressing their academic potential so that they will instead maintain behaviors and attitudes more consistent with norms expected by both their peers and mainstream society. As a result, many such students intentionally choose behaviors at odds with the pursuit of the opportunities and possibilities created by more positive choices, ultimately consigning themselves to a life less lived. Currently, very little literature exists on the more general subject of bullying and gifted children (Sunde-Petersen & Ray, 2006). None at all discusses the specific situation of African American gifted children. Interestingly, these connections are natural once one examines the data available on the "acting White" phenomenon with that on the topic of bullying.

This research study makes clear the specific connections between the African American gifted student's experience and the research on bullying. First, the work presents a review of the literature regarding the "acting White" phenomenon and gifted students. Second, the methods used to conduct this study are presented. Third, the reader

will learn of the experiences of academically gifted African American students who have faced accusations of "acting White." Finally, the article presentation includes research findings, implications, and suggestions for future research.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

The "Acting White" Phenomenon

According to Banks (2006), African Americans comprise 15.6 % of the student population, but make up only 8.6% of the gifted student population. Thus, these students are under-represented by 55% nationally. By the end of the twentieth century, the educational inequities between Whites and African Americans had not significantly improved in the fifty years since the legal end of segregation (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002; Harmon, 2002). This k-12 segregation translates into work place segregation, as it is normalized that Whites occupy positions of intellectual authority and Blacks service sector positions (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008). One significant reason which contributes to this segregation is the "acting White" phenomenon.

Due to the lack of knowledge within the White community concerning the "acting White" phenomenon, some White educators translate the underachievement of their Black students into deficit orientations, or simply underestimate the intelligence of their Black students (e.g., Ford & Grantham, 2003; also Ford Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002). Additionally, some Black students work to mask their intelligence and to fit into the narrow definition of what it means to be "Black" (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a; 2008b, Table 3.1). Unfortunately, being "Black" to some students can mean underachieving and generally being disrespectful of the educational system and its representatives (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008b; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Teachers

unaware of the "acting White" phenomenon may tragically and prematurely dismiss this underachievement as "typical" and completely within the realm of what is to be expected (i.e., succumb to a deficit orientation, Ford & Grantham, 2003; also Ford et al., 2002).

Ironically, the knowledge that many White teachers do have can also be unhelpful in assisting the promotion of African American intellect. Ford, Grantham, and Milner (2004) suggested that

> stereotypical beliefs may force teachers to perceive, make curricular decisions, and teach culturally diverse students through deficit models, consciously or unconsciously . . . Because teachers may rely on stereotypical beliefs or overly simplistic notions of difference where diverse students are concerned, it may be difficult for them to "see the genius" that culturally diverse or other marginalized students, and particularly African American students, bring into the learning environments. (p. 18)

Since more than eight out of 10 teachers are White (Laughter, 2011), it is very important that White educators learn more about the devastating effects of the "acting White" phenomenon.

Table 3.1

Synthesis of Stereotypical Terms Associated with "Acting White"

General Accusation Phrasing	Accusations Regarding Intelligence
Selling out	Smart/Being too smart
Stuck up/uppity	Does work/does homework
Not acting your race	Doing well in school/Gets good grades
Acting like "typical" White person	Uptight about school/Private school uptight
Boogy/boogie/snobbish/snooty	Taking advanced/honors courses
Sucking up	Would rather study than chill
	Not embracing Black culture

Markers Regarding Clothes/dress	Markers Regarding Speech Patterns
Dressing preppy/not wearing urban gear	Not using slang
	Speaking "properly"

Note: Adapted from Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a

Socio-historical Origins of "Acting White"

It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish with any level of certainty the beginning of the "acting White" phenomenon. There have been attempts to do so, however. Political strategist Ron Christie (2010) clearly states that ". . . I believe the genesis of the acting white racial slur hails from the namesake found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (p. 26). According to Christie, the cringe-worthy demeanor of Uncle Tom toward his White "owners" established a vocabulary for expressing disdain for Black men who likewise cower before White oppressors at the expense of their own people. In this tradition, Black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Barack Obama have found their accomplishments dismissed as the result of their efforts to please White people (Christie, 2010) .

Christie's analysis of the "acting White" phenomenon certainly provides historical insight into its connections with prior slurs Blacks use against Blacks. Because of the fictional nature of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, one wonders if the introduction of "Uncle Tom" into the cultural lexicon is truly the genesis of this stereotype. After all, the "Uncle Tom" stereotype was based on real people and the animosity expressed toward the title character likely stemmed from anger which pre-existed the publication of this work.

Regardless of one's acceptance or rejection of his theory, Christie's link between the modern "acting White" phenomenon and ideas which are over 150 years old effectively points to the fact that the attitudes which underlie this phenomenon are no more modern than they are simple. For this discussion, the factors which are most often cited for their connection to intellectual development will be discussed. Specifically, the

"house slaves" versus "field slaves," and the "color complex" are old ideas with very contemporary applications to this research study.

      "House slaves," Field slaves," and the "Acting White" Phenomenon. The tensions surrounding the "acting White" phenomenon dates back two centuries, to the time of slavery in United States history. Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) shared that:

> Before the Civil War, dark-skinned slaves watched from the fields as their owners repeatedly picked mulattoes for the coveted indoor assignments. Masters tended to select lighter-skinned slaves for this more responsible work because they believed that an infusion of White blood helped overcome Negroes' basic inferiority. No scientific proof ever existed that people of mixed White and Black ancestry were more capable or intelligent than those were pure Black, but the slave owners believed this was so. (pp. 126-7)

Even after slavery had been long abolished, lighter-skinned Blacks attained more job and education opportunities because Whites generally trusted them more (p. 127).

> The fact most salient to this discussion is the fact that "house slaves" generally had much easier access to educational opportunities than those in the field. Partially as a result of this circumstance, Blacks who pursued educational opportunities and were rewarded within the mainstream White system were treated with enormous suspicion by other Blacks, and generally classified as traitors to their race.

In contemporary society, the effects of this history are clearly felt in the "acting White" phenomenon. Russell et al. (1992, p. 127) postulated that: "[O]ur society now struggles to

support the academic achievement of its African American young people who must work against this weighty history."

"Color complex." According to Russell et al. (1992), in a society ruled by a White mainstream, individuals with the Whitest features have been the most successful (pp. 34-5). As a result, there exists "a leadership pool of light-skinned Blacks with both money and education." Citing information concerning salaries, these researchers argued that in the case of "light-skinned Blacks it simply remains easier to get ahead" (p. 37). Although this phenomenon, here referred to as the "color complex," is well-known within the Black community "[M]any Whites in positions of authority remain ignorant and insensitive to the role of color in the lives of African Americans" (p. 166). The focus of this research remains how the "color concept" affects the "acting White" phenomenon.

Resentment toward those who look whiter than their peers can be translated into social censure. Russell et al. (1992) stated that:

> In some urban areas, Black children who do well in school are accused by their peers of 'acting White." Those who also happen to look White, because of lighter skin color, are also targeted for ridicule. To maintain their popularity, some of these children start failing on purpose, behavior that in turn contributes to high dropout rates, unemployment, poverty, and, ultimately, violence. (p. 165)

On the one hand, lighter-skinned Blacks may enjoy higher status and more prosperity in the mainstream White world. On the other hand, these same individuals often also face criticism and resentment from within the Black community for the same features and behaviors which have gained them advantages.

"Acting White" as Race Bullying

Jealousy

> Some attribute accusations of "acting White" to "within group envy," which,
>
> [A]s we know from psychoanalytic theory . . . is a painful emotion that arouses
>
> destructive impulses, causing one to wish to get rid of the object of envy, to avoid
>
> painful feelings. This is a simplified version of a difficult phenomenon when it
>
> takes hold in a large group. (*New York Times*, 2005, p. 22)

This view regarding the "acting White" phenomenon proposes that, essentially, some less successful Blacks become jealous of more successful Blacks. To cope with this powerful emotion, the less successful Blacks accuse the more successful Blacks of "acting White." Through the use of this technique, less successful Blacks can rationalize that lower levels of effort in school act as evidence of their racial pride and adherence to the loyalties of "fictive kinship" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Individuals who cite their own racial loyalty as the reason for their choice to stay disengaged from school may attempt to socially and psychologically punish those who make the opposite choice by accusing them of "acting White."

Legacy of tension between "house slaves" and "field slaves"

This attitude likely goes all the way back to the "house slave" and the "field slave" (Russell et al., 1990). During that era, it was not uncommon for the "house slave" to lord their preferred status over their brothers and sisters in the field (Russell et al., 1990). In what may be an unfortunate case of the victim becoming the abuser, it is now more common for those who choose to avoid association with the mainstream White community to reject those who in any way relate to Whites, accusing them of "acting

White." Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo and Hurst (2010) classify such behaviors of "intragroup marginalization", which

> is defined as the perceived distancing by members of a heritage culture when an individual displays cultural characteristics of the dominant group. The construct of intragroup marginalization is predicated on social research theory. Ethnic groups have their own distinct cultural identity and as a group member's behavior begins to move away from the maintenance of that cultural identity and begins to approximate that of the dominant culture, the acculturating member may perceive that other group members are imposing social sanctions against them, thus marginalizing them from the group. When a member of said group is observed displaying behaviors or attitudes outside of the group norm, other members may perceive this behavior as a threat to the group's distinct identity . . . Interpersonal distancing ranges from questioning of loyalty to the ethnic group to social ostracism. (p. 147)

These "social sanctions" can work to psychologically punish the marginalized individual.

"Acting White" and African American Bullying

Currently, only one article exists in the literature which links bullying to gifted students (Sunde-Petersen & Ray, 2006). None at all focus specifically on African American gifted students, although evidence indicates that African American students are generally more likely to both participate in and suffer from bullying (Fitzpatrick, Dulin, Piko, 2009; Fleschler-Peskin, Tortolero, & Markam, 2006). Smokowski, Mann, Reynolds, and Fraser (2004) share that studies of minority youth have generally been criticized for "propogating a deficit perspective." According to these researchers, most

existing studies which deal with Blacks assume that this group has ways which are generally inferior to those of the majority Whites, and therefore these studies miss important points. Fitzpatrick et al. (2010) complained that current studies on bullying generally have focused on White, middle-class youth, although their own research found that Black students bullied more than White students. In their view, "there must be something about the social and cultural meaning attached to being Black that corresponds with this type of externalizing behavior" (p. 636). Smokowski et al. (2004) assert that culture is an important factor to take into account when studying risk and protective factors concerning bullying. Espelage and Swearer (2003) suggested "researchers should examine 'how racial dynamics influence the content of bullying.'" Clearly more effort to gather information concerning the experiences of African American gifted students facing the "acting White" phenomenon and other forms of bullying must be made.

"Acting White," African Americans, and Psychological Bullying. Bonner (2000, p. 656) related that "[G]iftedness is defined, shaped, and adjudged in a societal milieu and is not something merely inside a person's head." Young Black gifted students simultaneously negotiating their racial, social, and intellectual identities can – and often do—yield to the temptation to deemphasize their intellectual gifts in order to gain social acceptance. Research indicates that these young people have compelling reasons to participate in this "self-sabotage" (Bonner, 2000). Ford (1993) suggested that the most devastating factors to the achievement of African American gifted students are not necessarily the obvious – poverty and social marginalization – but just these types of social/psychological factors.

Bullying experts Juvoven, Graham, and Schuster (2003) found that the Black students

in their study were more likely to participate in emotional bullying, such as spreading rumors and name-calling, than other students. Indeed, Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2006) likewise discovered that the "most prevalent form of victimization was name-calling by other students" (p. 153). Compounding this issue, Juvoven, Graham, and Schuster (2003) also found that the bullies were psychologically the strongest and the most popular students among their peers (p. 1234). For a young student with a natural interest in not becoming a target for ridicule, or worse, (e.g., the extreme physical dangers Cedric Jennings faced in his urban D.C. high school, Suskind, 1998) the pressure to adhere to the social norms advocated by a bully often overwhelms their desire to achieve.

Gifted education expert Bonner (2000) complained that this practice, which he referred to as "survival conflict," can "sabotage any chance they have of succeeding" and criticized it as "a disturbing prospect." (p. 651) which "occurs at an alarming rate" (p. 652). It is not surprising, however, given that victims of bullying are often (Juvoven, Graham, & Schuster, 2003) the kids suffering from "not only emotional distress but also social marginalization" (p. 1234). Given the choice of enjoying the short term benefit of avoiding this type of pain and the often lesser understood long term benefits of academic success, it is quite understandable why many children choose to simply underachieve in order to be left alone.

"Acting White," African Americans, Popularity and Academic Achievement.

In 2010, Harvard University researchers Fryer and Torelli published an empirical study of the "acting White" phenomenon. They found that White students experienced a correlation between higher grades and popularity among other White students. Among Black and Hispanic students, however, this correlation did not hold. Black student

popularity, in particular, peaked at 3.48, and then declined as the grade point average rose. Although a student with a 4.0 clearly would have worked much harder than a student with a 2.9, these two students generally had the same popularity levels. The social rewards, therefore, that a White student might consciously or unconsciously expect to enjoy as a fruit of her academic labor, would not realistically be expected by her Black peer. Conversely, the Black student might realistically expect to suffer more bullying behaviors as a result of the attention her (or worse, *his*, which will be discussed in more detail later, in the "African American Boys" section) academic efforts than her White peer.

"Acting White," African American Bullying, Risk and Protective Factors

Clearly, there can be social costs to being different. Not all children stumble when faced with difficult situations. Many young people face these challenges and continue to achieve; some even thrive in the face of adversity. What are the factors which are protecting some young people, yet are missing in the lives of others? From the perspective of an education professional, how can we support these children?

Risk factors. Smokowski et al. (2004) found that not a lot of minority youth studies for resiliency or for teenage populations existed. In their study based on the Chicago Longitudinal Study tracking a cohort of 1539 "impoverished inner-city youth from birth to young adulthood," they were able to uncover some significant facts regarding risk and protective factors. Some previous research had set up a dichotomy between those who were able to thrive versus the ones who simply did not. In fact, Smokowski et al. (2004) found that the truth was much more nuanced, and that there was not a sense of super-heroic "invulnerability" amid dangers and difficulties, but instead a

"threshold of resilience" (p. 64). This "threshold of resilience" was influenced by how many risk factors were present in a child's life. Risk factors included a wide range of considerations such as family stability and neighborhood poverty (p. 65). Logically, the more risk factors present in a child's life, the stronger the influence they will have on that child's "threshold of resilience." Smokowski et al. (2004) found that the presence of two or more risk factors significantly increased disorders such as behavioral problems among children. These findings are *especially* powerful when considered in conjunction with those of Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2006), who discovered that "urban racial/ethnic minority youth may be more likely to experience life stressors (e.g., crime and weapon carrying)."

Protective factors. Although much more can be discussed regarding how these findings influence both the development of bullies and the choices of other children to suppress their achievement potential, for the sake of space, the current focus remains on those factors which protect an individual from these risks. These protections contribute significantly to answering the earlier questions:

1. Why do some children succeed, whereas others do not?

2. How can we help these children to foster the "internal and external resources that modify or buffer the impact of risk factors" (Smokowshi et al., 2004, p. 67)?

Smokowshi et al. (2004) divided protective factors into three broad categories: individual dispositional attributes, family milieu, and extrafamilial environment (Table 3.2). The first group, individual dispositional attributes, included "temperamental factors, social orientation and responsiveness to change, cognitive abilities, and coping skills" (p. 67). The second group, family milieu, extended logically to the characteristics of the family. In their study, they found that "a positive relationship with at least one parent or a

parental figure serves an important protective function" (p. 67). The third category, the extrafamilial social environment" essentially included everyone else. Logically, it is within this third category that education professionals and non-family members may place themselves. At this point, we will maintain our focus on learning to identify both the bullies and the victims, so that we may first simply be able to *see* the problem which may have heretofore been invisible to us.

Bullies and Victims

Bullying researchers Estell, Farmer, and Cairns (2007) established that while both bullies and victims were not socialized as "normal" among their peers, only the victims suffered from true marginalization. Although other students were often afraid of the bullies, and for this reason kept their distances, the bullies nevertheless were quite likely to be the leaders of group who were generally "popular, cool, . . . very well-known" (p. 147). These researchers unearthed that "bullies' groups may attract members through the appearance of associating with winners" (p. 147).

Many African American gifted children are struggling with the dual challenge of being not only a minority racially, but also a minority intellectually (Ford, Grantham, & Milner, 2004). Decades of research, based almost solely on White, middle-class participants has solidly established the precarious emotional and psychological position of many populations of gifted young people (e.g., Cross, 2004; Hébert, 2002; Rimm, 2002). Gifted young people are often especially sensitive to and aware of the emotional states of those around them (Schultz & Delisle, 2003). As such, gifted African American children often will readily perceive the social norms of their environment and adopt behaviors which they best believe suit them.

"Acting White" Phenomenon, Bullying and Gender.

Although both male and female participants in my study described instances of being bullied for "acting White," the majority of the participants were female. Given the demographics of the university, this is not surprising. There are over twice as many female students attending the school as there are male students (see Table 3.2). The findings of this research when viewed through the lenses of research concerning the "acting White" phenomenon combined with the literature on bullying, helps to explain why so many more African American gifted young ladies make it to college than their male peers. Just as the earlier discussion proposed that race and culture matter to a young person's experience of bullying, gender also matters.

Table 3.2

University Demographic Data

Males	Number	Percentage
Full-time Black male undergraduate	541	
Total full-time male undergraduate	10,898	5%
Total male undergraduate	25,709	2%
Black male graduate and prof. student	149	
Total male graduate and prof. student	3616	4%
Total graduate and prof. student	8730	2%

Females	Number	Percentage
Full-time Black female undergraduate	1134	
Total full-time female undergraduate	14787	8%
Total undergraduate	25709	4%
Black female graduate and prof. student	331	
Total female graduate and prof. student	5089	7%
Total graduate and prof. student	8730	4%

Male and Females	Number	Percentage
Black male students	722	2%
Black female students	1512	4%
All students	34677	

African American boys: Bully and bullied. Current literature emphasizes that African American boys both perpetuate and suffer from more bullying than their female peers (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Estell, Farmer, & Cairns, 2007). Estell, Farmer, and Cairns (2007) found that males were twice as likely to be bullies, predominantly bullying other males, compared to females. Specifically, Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2006) discovered that "[M]ales were significantly more likely than females to participate in teasing and harassing other students" (p. 8). This aspect of the bullying is especially salient in the discussion of gifted African American students, achievement, and the "acting White" phenomenon. After all, Ford (1993) has indicated that it is the psychological factors which have the most influence on the achievement of gifted African American students.

African American girls: Bully and bullied.

As suggested earlier, an African American young woman is more likely to attend the university which hosted this research than her male peer. This is by no means a coincidence. Estell et al. (2007) shared that their research indicated that that girls were much less likely to be bullies in this study than boys. On the one hand, although more African American girls are able to make it further in school, on the other hand, they by no means completely protected from the circumstance and effects of bullying. According to Fitzpatrick, Dulin, and Piko (2009) shared research that simply being Black and female increased the chance that one would express "depressive symptoms among adolescents" (p. 24). Smokowski, et al. (2004) found that, more specifically, it was the girls with the higher grades in elementary school who were more likely to be depressed in late adolescence.

Bullying and Age. Carlyle et al. (2007) shared that research indicated that "younger adolescents tend to be victimized at higher rates." These findings mirror those of other experts (Fleschler-Peskin et al., 2006). Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2006) found that the "crest" for facing negative peer pressure occurred in the ninth grade, and decreased with age as students moved toward their senior year. Some reasons attributed for this "crest" were: changing schools, greater peer interaction, trouble-making friends, and rejections (pp. 11-12). These researchers recommended that there exists a need to develop interventions to reduce the bullying, especially of males (p. 13).

Summary

When this study began, the research questions did not explicitly seek a connection between bullying and the "acting White" phenomenon. As the interviews began, however, and the participants told their stories, it became necessary to frame the "acting White" discussion in light of the insights offered in bullying literature. Questions concerning the relationship between the "acting White" phenomenon and participant communities, including their peers and families, gained new perspective in this light.

Methodology

Research Questions

This research has been driven by the following questions:

1. What role do background contextual issues (e.g., location of upbringing, observations regarding school, age level, gender) play in a gifted Black student's ability to cope with the "acting White" accusation?

2. How do successful African American college students perceive "acting White"?

3. How has the "acting White" phenomenon impacted African American students' K-16 schooling experiences? among peers? among classmates? within their communities?

4. In the opinions of the participants, are some Black gifted university students successful at navigating through the threat of the "acting White" phenomenon while some students are not?

5. In what ways do African American student "acting White" experiences reflect bullying?

Research Strategy

In pursuit of the above questions, the present inquiry directly explored the role of context in the observations and experiences of gifted Black university students regarding the "acting White" phenomenon. Since a "monolithic" Black community does not exist (Carter, 2006; Grantham, 1997), it is wise to assume that the community of gifted Black university students hosts a variety of views and experiences concerning this phenomenon. Even if they may share similar experiences to one another, different issues relevant to their personal biographical settings (e.g., location, observations regarding school, age level, gender, family educational values) will influence their observation of and experiences relative to this phenomenon. For these reasons, this general qualitative study has utilized interview and questionnaire techniques.

Description of the Research Context

This study took place on a college campus in the southeastern part of the United States. Of the 4,725 first year students in the 2009-2010 school year, 7.6% were African

American. The median grade point average for all students was 3.68 – 4.0, and the median Scholastic Aptitude Test score ranged from 1160 to 1360 ("University of the Southeast," 2009). The total enrollment for all students was about 25,000 undergraduate students. Of all of the incoming students in the 2009-2010 academic year, "some 95 percent enrolled in College Board Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes while in high school" and "54 percent were in the top 10 percent of their class" ("University of the Southeast," 2009).

Participant Selection

All participants in this dissertation study are linked by their race and enrollment at the university. The unit of analysis for this study (Patton, 2002; Yin, 1994) was the individual gifted Black student, focusing on his/her observations and experiences. I recruited forty questionnaire participants. From this questionnaire pool, I selected eleven interview participants to participate in one hour interviews which focused on their observations and experiences of the "acting White" phenomenon.

Rationale for participant selection. The studies regarding the "acting White" phenomenon have focused on a number of different age groups. For example, the seminal study by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) focused on the experiences of high school students. Other studies have explored the insights of Black high school students regarding their "acting White" experiences, as well (e.g., Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006). Harper (2006) focused on the experiences of high achieving Black engineering students in college. His work concentrated on the *college* experiences of the "acting White" phenomenon, however, with little exploration into the issue of whether the participants had previous experience with these accusations. The current study purposefully elicited

the insights of older students regarding their general "acting White" experiences in order that the research might benefit from their mature and thoughtful reflection regarding their encounters.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place in two stages. During the first stage, I distributed and collected biographical questionnaires via the internet application Google documents (Appendix C). The purpose of these questionnaires was to gather data regarding the geographical and biographical contexts from which these students arrived at the university and their basic attitudes toward the "acting White" phenomenon. These questionnaires were also useful for data triangulation, as their questionnaire responses helped to guide the customization of the interview protocols for each participant (Appendix A) . The second stage of the data collection focused on one hour interviews of each student who were chosen from the original forty questionnaire participants.

Organization of Data Analysis. The analysis of the data included three levels of analysis. Level I (content analysis) noted and coded themes present in the data (Patton, 2002). Level II was the grouping analysis, which transitioned the coded themes into clusters. Level III took these clusters and noted links and patterns relevant to the observation of the "acting White" phenomenon and the experiences of the students. Having completed these levels of analysis of the data, I then researched literature relevant to the emergent theme of bullying. I used this literature to guide my final analysis of this data.

Triangulation. Two types of triangulation establish credible research: methods triangulation and analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002, p.556). Methods triangulation refers

to the "consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods" (Patton, 2002, p. 556). The methods that I have used were the questionnaires and interviews. Analyst triangulation refers to "using multiple analysts to review findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 556). The three groups of analysts who reviewed the data were the primary researcher, the doctoral committee, and interview participants who expressed an interest in reviewing the transcripts and study analysis.

   Inquiry Database. I utilized computer software that helped "facilitate data storage, coding, retrieval, comparing, and linking" (Patton, 2002, p. 442). The primary qualitative data used Folio VIEWS information data management software. Microsoft Word was also used to record and store transcriptions in computer files which were manually coded. Hard copies of written notes and other relevant information were maintained regarding the participants, labeled with their chosen pseudonyms, in individual files.

Researcher Subjectivities

   I chose to research this topic because I am a teacher with an interest in reversing the historical reality of the underrepresentation of African Americans in advanced level programming. In undertaking this study, I have maintained an awareness of some of the perils in cross cultural research. White researchers exploring Black achievement issues must be especially sensitive to their own "humanness" (Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2008a), and its influence on their subjectivities. As the person who harvests participant data, the researcher is responsible for its interpretation (Lim, 2001). This can be a dangerous endeavor, for research inherently contains researcher inferences (Yin,

1994). The heart of this study seeks to learn from the experiences of the minority student participants, and so logically the focus is on those people.

I have entered into a field which is still developing, and relative to other topics, has received very little attention (Ford & Harris, 1999; Grantham, 1997; Morris, 2002; Obiakor, Utufy, Smith, & Harris-Obiakor, 2002; Williams, 2000), and it is therefore especially important that I proceed carefully and with sensitivity to my own subjectivity and level of cultural competence. As with all studies, qualitative research possesses the danger of a researcher misrepresenting or misunderstanding the participant voices, and thus corrupting data analysis. Therefore, before, during and after the data collection, I have conscientiously explored my own cultural background, attitudes, and perspective thoroughly (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002; Ford et al., 2008a; Lim, 2001; Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998).

Findings

"Acting White" and Bullying in the Lives of the Participants

For this study, a Georgetown University graduate and Ph.D student in his early 40s shared experiences which reflected bullying associated with "acting White" accusations. Something of a local celebrity for his academic achievements, KDHoya gained anything but admiration from the other Black boys in his neighborhood. As a child, he found that after teachers started to send home grades, his social circle whittled away to the point where

> I would go outside to play with them and they would leave. They would
>
> see me coming and they would leave. You know, I remember an incident
>
> that happened once, and it happened, they didn't want to play with me

because they kept saying that I was square and that I wasn't one of them.

You know, that I was "acting White," so to speak.

These occurrences became the norm after KDHOya and his peers reached the age where they began to receive regular grades. The situation even worsened to the point that the other boys threatened him physically because of his superior grades. He attributed their actions and attitudes to jealousy incited by the fact that the other boys were not doing as well and "their parents are doing comparisons."

Another participant, Loryn, a graduate student in her early 30s, relates that even now,

I definitely feel misunderstood. But even more than that, I feel judged. I feel as if, there's a certain way that I'm supposed to behave or act in order to be accepted as a Black or an African American person. Where in my opinion, I'm simply behaving appropriately for whatever scenario I'm in. I tend to feel a judgment about my ability to be professional and my ability to be articulate and my ability to speak intelligently, and then my lack also of a Southern accent.

Loryn continued to share that simply being different from the expected norms seemed to have marked her out for "judgment" and ridicule. In the situation of an African American who does not exhibit an attitude or a behavior which neatly fits into those prescribed by the majority community, or those expected from within their own community, including being "too smart" or placing too high a premium on academic performance, the risk for social ostracism is much greater than within the White community for the same behaviors.

Rebecca, a 20 year old undergraduate student of Nigerian ancestry, faced almost incessant ridicule in middle school not only for her African ancestry, but also because her classmates believed that she "acted White." Desperate for friends, she intentionally "worked" to "achieve" Ds rather than As and Bs, in order to fit in with the "cool kids." She related that

> for the most part the Black kids became cool by not doing well on their tests and stuff. It was cool to be like, "Oh man, I got like a 62 on that test! I got like a 63." It was cool to brag about how you didn't do homework. It was cool to, like, not respect teachers.

Additionally, she literally studied African American culture in order to have some common ground with the other students, hoping that they would stop making monkey noises whenever her richly African name was called on the roll.

Despite these efforts, Rebecca was not able to purge herself of her essential "otherness." All she had to show for her "hard work" were dismal grades and a sense of hopelessness. Because of her Nigerian home, she was not familiar with the hairstyling techniques her African American classmates assumed all "real" Black people knew from birth, and this "lack" signaled her as different. This, combined with her persistent failure to pronounce slang words correctly, or to use them inappropriately, had marked her as suspect. Day after day, she begged her parents to take her out of the school and away from the other Black children who tormented her. By the time her parents announced that they were moving the family from Long Island to a small, South Georgia town, Rebecca felt only relief to leave the school behind. So extreme was her anxiety that even changing

to a predominantly White school in a part of the world historically hostile to African Americans was a welcome change.

KDHoya, Loryn, and Rebecca's experience of "acting White" accusations were closely linked with the mistrust their peers felt toward them for being too "different," for veering further from the behaviors associated with African Americans than were socially acceptable. Even though the personal behaviors associated with "acting White," such as doing well in school, acting respectfully toward teachers, do not harm the other students, these behaviors nevertheless threatened their African peers. In their situations, making others uncomfortable inspired social ostracism.

Protective Factors

Despite the sometimes intense bullying these participants faced as young, gifted African American people, they continued to achieve. What allowed them to face daily threats to their psychological, and sometimes physical, safety? The reasons underlying their resilience relate to the first and third guiding research questions for this study. Question one explored the role of background contextual issues in the participants' ability to cope with the "acting White" accusation. Question three asked how the "acting White" phenomenon had impacted the participants' lives, specifically among their peers and within their communities. The previously discussed findings of Smokowshi et al. (2004, Table 3.3) regarding protective factors provides a useful method of organizing the reasons these participants continued to succeed, despite the pressures that they faced. The first two categories of protective factors, individual dispositional attributes and family milieu were both clearly influential in all of the lives of these participants. The third

category, which referred to extrafamilial factors such as churches and local organizations, provided a welcome relief for KDHoya.

Individual dispositional attributes

Among the qualities listed in this category (Smokowski, 2004) were: temperamental factors, social orientation and responsiveness to change, cognitive abilities, and coping skills. The participants featured in this discussion each possessed a positive orientation toward change, superior intelligence, and coped well with difficult situations. Regarding their abilities to respond well to change, KDHoya, Loryn, and Rebecca, shared personal biographies which included having lived in diverse environments. KDHoya moved from his small, Southern town to live in Washington, D.C. Loryn, a self-professed "military brat," spoke with ease of having lived outside of Salt Lake City, Utah and Alabama. Rebecca moved from a predominantly upper-middle-class African American community in Long Island to a relatively rural area of south Georgia. Despite her acknowledgement that "I wasn't real sure I wanted to go to a predominantly White school in a state where like I could count like ten confederate flags on one block. So I was a little afraid about that," Rebecca maintained an open mind about the move. KDHoya, Loryn, and Rebecca had achieved academically at a level which reified the strength of their cognitive skills. Finally, although each person expressed pain which resulted from being accused of "acting White," they were nevertheless all able to maintain a strong sense of self which supported their persistent pursuit of success. Therefore, it is clear that these three individuals possessed individual traits which Smokowski et al. (2004) suggested would aid in protecting them psychologically from the effects of the bullying which they faced.

Family and Psychological Support

Smokowski et al. (2004) found that families in which parents had relatively high educational attainment, positive relationships between children and parents, and both parents present provided more psychological support for children than families in which these families were not present. KDHoya, Loryn, and Rebecca grew up in families which possessed each of these attributes. Each of these participants cited the support of at least one parent who was aware of the pressures they faced by their peers who believed that they "acted White." KDHoya's mother , an elementary school teacher, repeatedly shared her view of his accusers. He shared that "My mother would tell me to ignore it. And she was saying, 'They're, it's just ignorance.' That 'They're saying that to you because they're insecure, they're jealous,' and that 'They want to be in your shoes.'" As a result of her reassurance, KDHoya believed that his detractors were unable to knock him off of his "gameplan" when he was younger. By the time he prepared become a young adult, he had internalized her reassurances . He revealed that

> the older I got the less it affected me. And so I just grew to know that there are going to be people out there who are going to make this charge against you. But you have to focus on what's best for you. You have to stay focused on your goals. You know education is necessary for success in America.

During the course of our "acting White" conversation, Loryn revealed that "[M]y immediate family, meaning my mom, my dad, my sister, my grandparents, when I say that, they are all very educated." In addition to their relatively high level of education, they also provided a haven of acceptance for her love of learning. When she would share

with her immediate family situations of bullying at school, her mother advised her that her negative peers were being "ignorant," and to ignore them. Likewise, Rebecca's mom advised her that "the kids in my school were dumb, and that I shouldn't listen to them when they're telling me that I'm 'acting White." The strong bonds between these participants with their families worked to support their psychological and emotional health until they were old enough to have learned rewards of valuing education for themselves.

Extended Family and Social Environment

Smokowski et al. (2004) listed a number of neighborhood and community institutions and types of individuals which helped to protect children from the worst effects of bullying. Among these were neighbors, libraries, churches, community centers, and education professionals. In the case of these three participants, all three happened to have spent a significant portion of their childhoods living near an Air Force base. These bases brought in a diverse population of people. KDHoya summed up how the presence of a base changed his childhood experience. He disclosed that

> I had friends of all different nationalities and ethnicities growing up. We lived near a major air force base and so it was pretty diverse, for a small southern town, we did have that Air Force base. I had the experience of intermingling with other people.

These bases were the only factor shared among the three participants in this category of protective factors. Loryn and Rebecca discussed no other extrafamilial aspects of their childhoods.

KDHoya was the participant whose childhood bullying experience lasted the longest. Since he was physically threatened by other African American boys in his neighborhood, his experiences were also the most intense. To counteract these menaces to his psychological and physical well-being, his mother was proactive in seeking out opportunities for him to engage with children less hostile to his unabashed intellect. She encouraged him to sing in the children's choir, get involved in church activities, and join YMCA activities.

Summary of Findings

This study set out to explore the underlying reasons for why some African American students succeed when accused of "acting White," whereas many students do not. In the pursuit of these answers, it became apparent that although these participants had faced emotional, psychological, and even physical bullying, their focus on achievement did not subside. The individual dispositional attributes that they possessed personally and were privileged to enjoy in their family circumstances and communities worked together to endow them with the resilience necessary to persevere.

Table 3.3

Protective Factors

_____

      <u>Group One: Individual Dispositional Attributes</u>

Temperamental factors

Social orientation and responsiveness to change

Cognitive abilities

Coping skills

      <u>Group Two: Family Milieu</u>

Educational attainment of parents

Positive relationship with at least one parent

Presence/absence of neglect

Presence/absence of both parents

      <u>Group Three: Extrafamilial Social Environment</u>

Neighborhood structures (e.g., community center, library)

Education professionals

Neighbors

Other extrafamilial influences (e.g., churchs, community organizations)

_____

Note: Adapted from Smokowski, Mann, Reynolds, and Fraser, 2004

Implications

Based on research, the ideal time to intervene is as early as possible (Fitzpatrick, et al., 2009, p. 88). Programs which involve not only school personnel, but also the students and their families for extended periods of time resulted in the highest level of academic achievement and decreases in behavioral issues (Fitzpatrick et al., 2009). Specifically, educating parents regarding how to guide their children's time and task orientation provided practical gains.

Since the research of Carlyle et al. (2007) suggested that younger teenagers suffer from bullying more often than their older peers, it would also be helpful to integrate this type of training into ninth grade academies. These "academies" are programs within schools which target ninth graders, as this transition year is often difficult for young people. As cited earlier, the "crest" for facing negative peer pressure generally occurs during this year and decreases as a student moves through high school (Fleschler-Peskin et al., 2006). Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2006) granted some reasons to which they attributed this "crest" were: changing schools, greater peer interaction, trouble-making friends, and rejections (pp. 11-12). Beginning of the year information sessions with faculty trained and designated to assist students facing accusations of "acting White" could increase the "threshold of resilience" cited by Smokowski et al. (2004), and thus allow marginal students to maintain their psychological balance as they work to pursue excellence.

Earlier in this work, it was suggested that the first step in aiding students affected by accusations of "acting White" was to develop the eyes with which to see this bullying as it is occurring. In a study of low-income, African American kids in grades 5-12, Fitzpatrick et al. (2010) found that

> [Y]outh are keenly aware of their environments, and the perceived dangers in the
>
> school hinder their development and impede their normal day-to-day interactions.
>
> A stronger, safer support network must be developed within the school system. In
>
> order to develop this network, input from school personnel, parents, and children
>
> should be solicited. (p. 636)

The most logical place to begin developing this "support network" would begin with

programs already in place in many schools. The findings of Fleschler-Peskin et al.

(2006) suggested a need to develop interventions to reduce the bullying, especially

among males (p. 13).

According to the National Conference of State Legislation (2011), 16 states have

passed legislation which specifically defines bullying acts, outlaws it on public school

campuses, and provides for anti-bullying training for staff and students. Increased

awareness of this phenomenon has led to increased action in preventing it, in order to

decrease the long term damage associated with it. In the state of Georgia, many school

systems have elected to use the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. This program is

based on the research of Dan Olweus, an academic psychologist who has been studying

and publishing on this topic since the early 1970s (Olweus, 1978; 1991; 1993a; 1993b;

1995; 1997; 2001; 2003). A research psychologist, Olweus was one of the first

individuals to build an expertise in an area which in more recent years has gained a great

deal of popular attention (OBPP, 2011).

This article does not suggest that Olweus' program is superior to any other product on

the market. This example is introduced simply as an example of the *type* of anti-bullying

programs which already exist in school systems. Since many of the issues salient to the

larger topic of bullying directly relate to "acting White," a racially specific brand of bullying, school officials would be able to address this topic using some of the techniques for which they have already paid.

For example, Olweus' program offers staff training that helps them develop the ability to better perceive bullying situations as they arise, and to react to the needs of victims. This program also requires that all students complete a questionnaire at the beginning of the school year in order to create a customized anti-bullying program for that school (OBPP, 2011). With the addition of a few questions directly relevant to the "acting White" phenomenon, the staff can learn not only about the general bullying climate of their school, but about the more specific situation as it pertains to the student attitudes concerning this issue. As a result of these small and inexpensive efforts, school personnel and students can begin to work together to create a climate which is more psychologically healthy for nurturing the potential of gifted African American students.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

This study's results reflect the insights of the participants toward their own experiences. Although it is quite likely that other academically successful African American students will relate to the experiences, the relatively small number of participants ensures that the results are not generalizable. Additionally, all participants of this study had agreed to share their stories voluntarily.

During the recruitment process, all African American students whose contact information had been made available by a list from the university registrar's office were contacted. From over 500 potential participants, 40 responded that they would be willing to take part in the study. Of these, all but two reported having been directly affected by

the "acting White" phenomenon. The people most interested in sharing their stories may be those who were victims of accusations of "acting White." It would be extremely interesting to learn and compare the perspectives of the individuals who had lobbed the accusations at others, in order to learn their motivations and points of view.

Conclusions

Current literature linking the "acting White" phenomenon and bullying research does not exist. Enough research regarding the reality of these accusations, especially against high achieving African American students, exists to indicate that the topic merits serious consideration as a factor in the underachievement of talented African American children. Likewise, the literature regarding bullying easily extends to include name-calling and psychological damage. My own participants have described situations from their own experiences with the "acting White" phenomenon which clearly include bullying behaviors. Therefore, further efforts into approaching this phenomenon from this perspective make sense. Specifically, including a section on this phenomenon within already existent anti-bullying programs may be a cost and time effective way in which to approach a solution to this crisis. Educating school personnel and students regarding the harm of these accusations will likely increase achievement among African American students.

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CHAPTER FOUR

MANUSCRIPT THREE

EDUCATORS SUPPORTING ACADEMICALLY TALENTED AFRICAN-

AMERICAN STUDENTS FACING THE 'ACTING WHITE' PHENOMENON[3]

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[3] Biddle, W. H. Submitted to *Roeper Review* 7/22/2011.

ABSTRACT

Education professionals are in a unique position to work with students facing racially specific bullying, such as "acting White." At the same time, many have very little knowledge of how to address the phenomenon. This work presents literature concerning the recommendations for addressing the "acting White" phenomenon as it relates to the achievement of African American students.

Introduction

In the near future and in some places currently, Whites no longer hold majority status (Constantine, 2001; 2002; Cross, 2004; Ford & Harris, 1999; Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Holliday & Holmes, 2003). Gifted education expert Tracy Cross (2004) shared that "[A]s the dominant group in our society that has been serviced directly by gifted education (Caucasian, middle-class males) grows ever smaller in the demographic equation, the more power other groups will have" (p. 139). As a result of this reality, the urgency to address the needs of minority gifted students is increasing. One of the greatest challenges that the field faces serving its minority students is the persistent underrepresentation of African American students in advanced level classrooms.

A significant factor in this underrepresentation has been the fear of some African American children of being accused of "acting White" by their peers if they choose to do well in school (Grantham & Ford, 1998; Ford, 1993; Ford, Grantham, & Milner, 2004; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Frye & Vogt, 2010; Fryer & Torelli, 2010). In the last two decades, several studies have taken place which focus on this very issue. This work shares a short summary of available literature on the "acting White" phenomenon and review of the literature which focuses on the recommendations from researchers for practitioners facing this phenomenon.

Literature Review of the "Acting White" Phenomenon

Academic literature provides some valuable data regarding how Black students define "acting White," and how this phenomenon relates to participation in advanced level courses (e. g., Table 4.1; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008b) in K-12 classrooms. Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008b) share qualities of

"acting White" which have been cited by young Black students. According to research, Black kids

> associated acting White with getting good grades, being intelligent, speaking standard behaviors. Regardless of the issue being focused on (grades vs. friendships), the student who is accused of acting White is viewed as someone who has betrayed his or her racial group, has given up his or her racial or cultural ties, and has adopted the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the oppressor or enemy. This type of peer pressure (charges of acting White) seems to be effective at hindering too many Black students from taking full advantage of certain academic opportunities available to them. (p. 222)

The salience of this phenomenon to the achievement of Black gifted students cannot be overstated. According to Ford et al. (2008a), "both high-achieving and underachieving gifted Black students are familiar with this concept and that some gifted Black students will deliberately perform poorly in school when accused of acting White" (p. 223). The stress that this conflict creates between establishing one's group loyalty and pursuing one's talent development is at the heart of the "acting White" phenomenon.

Table 4.1

Synthesis of Stereotypical Terms Associated with "Acting White"

Attitudes

Selling out
Stuck up/uppity
Not acting your race
Acting like "typical" White person
Boogy/boogie/snobbish/snooty
Sucking up
Not embracing Black culture

Regarding Intelligence

Smart/Being too smart
Does work/does homework
Doing well in school/Gets good grades
Uptight about school/Private school uptight
Taking advance/honors courses
Would rather study than chill

Regarding Clothes/dress

Dressing preppy/not wearing urban gear
Dressing different
Dressing White

Regarding Speech Patterns

Not using slang
Using "the King's English"
Speaking "properly"

Note: Adapted from a synthesis of Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a and Fordham & Ogbu, 1986.

Danger of the "Acting White" Stereotype.

African American gifted students are generally aware of the stereotype associated with one who "acts White" and would prefer to avoid the negative consequences of being negatively perceived. Empirical research by Stanford University psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson has demonstrated that simply invoking a negative stereotype may adversely affect a student's performance on an achievement test (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Steele, 1997). Gifted students in particular appear to be especially sensitive to the threat of being labeled "White." Perry et al. (2003, p. 120) shared that ". . . the most achievement-oriented students who were also the most skilled, motivated, and confident, were the most impaired by stereotype threat." The same intelligence which marks a student's potential to achieve could also lead the student to a heightened awareness of a negative stereotype which is associated with those who *do* achieve. In fact, gifted Black students aware of the negative stereotypes prevalent about their intellectual ability might even sabotage their own achievement, "protecting against stereotype threat by ceasing to care about the domain in which the stereotype applies" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 120). These students intentionally underachieve, attempting to cultivate an indifferent attitude toward academic success in order to protect themselves from being judged through a process Steele terms "disidentification" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 120). Steele imparted that "[W]hen stereotype threat affects school life, disidentification is a high price to pay for psychic comfort" (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 123). Stereotype threat certainly influences the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs, and can be invoked by fears of being called "White."

Referring to another motivation for underachievement, "survival conflict," gifted education expert Frank Bonner (2000) acknowledged that while the "possibility that Black students may sabotage any chance they have of succeeding is a disturbing prospect. . ." (p. 651) " . . . it nevertheless occurs at an alarming rate" (p. 652). "Survival conflict" melds together aspects of the "acting White" phenomenon with "stereotype threat." According to Bonner (2000, p. 652), Black students sometimes underachieve as a "reaction to surpassing the accomplishments of family and/or peers" which "can manifest itself in one or more emotional responses, including guilt, ambivalence, anxiety, and depression" (p. 652). In addition to stereotype threat and survival conflict, the simple stress associated with being a minority in racially mixed educational environments can depress achievement (Frye & Vogt, 2010; Harmon, 2002), and of course the student personally (Grantham & Ford, 2003).

Recommendations for Education Professionals

The prevalence of the "acting White" phenomenon among African American gifted students necessitates that education professionals prepare themselves to address this issue when needed. The following is a list drawn from research publications of some of the most effective techniques for supporting students who may be facing these accusations. The measures which are listed address the need to support the students through counseling, teacher education, building a scholar identity model, mentoring, bibliotherapy, and addressing the accusations by mean of anti-bullying programs.

Counseling

According to Ford et al. (2008a), African American gifted students "are likely to benefit from counseling to cope with peer pressures, stereotypes, and their poor identities

as intelligent and capable students." These counselors can help students work through their struggle with accusations of "acting White." In Grantham and Ford's 1998 study of Danisha, a young African American gifted girl, concluded that she needed counseling to "help her deal with the feelings of isolation, exclusion, powerlessness, and voicelessness." Grantham and Ford specifically recommended that a counselor might introduce Danisha to a model of racial identity. This might help her to understand herself as a gifted African American who will maintain high achievement, have pride in her racial heritage, and stay strong in the face of negative pressures. African American students struggling with their dual identities as gifted and Black may also benefit from group counseling (Grantham & Ford, 1998).

Group counseling and individual counseling must carefully maintain an interpersonal focus. Ford (1994) stated that it is much more common to provide simple vocational or career counseling for African American students without addressing "the affective and social needs of these youth." She asserted that this is important since "gifted Black students need a place to turn emotionally in order to express their concerns, fears, and difficulties." Individual and group counseling provide important outlets for gifted Black students to understand themselves, process the influences in their lives, and build their confidence as intelligent, capable young people.

Building a Scholar Identity Model

Whiting (2009) proposed an extensively considered plan to nurture a "scholar identity model" for African American males which would offer an alternative identity model to those more commonly available to this population. African American males more typically identify with musicians and athletes (Whiting, 2009) than scholars, and as

a result devalue school. More troubling, these students often do not even believe that they are *capable* of being intelligent, and that school success is the domain of Whites (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Whiting, 2009). For a gifted Black child struggling with accusations of "acting White," this identity struggle can be devastating. Whiting suggests that

> If educators (along with families and community leaders) can nurture a scholar identity within these otherwise capable students, then more Black males will achieve their potential in school and life. And more Black males will end up being recruited and retained in gifted programs.

Among his specific suggestions are the introduction of mentors, using biographies of successful African Americans, culturally responsive curriculum materials, and culturally sensitive attitude development among education professionals. These broad suggestions are detailed further in sections which follow. His general idea of nurturing the image of oneself as a learner was also seen in Ford et al. (2008). These researchers advised that school districts work to promote an atmosphere of achievement which includes "posters, symposiums, guest speakers, and mentorships" (p. 235). Specifically, Black students need inspirational people on the posters who look like them, just as they need to have Black speakers and mentors. Students who have developed a strong scholar identity will neither accuse others of "acting White" when they achieve, nor question their own achievement as inappropriate.

Multicultural Curriculum

Ford and Harris (1999) suggested a curriculum for African American students which includes the accomplishments of Black men will help to support the achievement

of Black students. The accomplishments of the Black men who have been selected should be carefully examined so that stereotypes concerning Black men are not perpetuated. In order to be able to do this effectively, Whiting (2009) suggests that education professionals must proactively "seek educational and social experiences whereby they can gain extensive preparation in becoming culturally aware, sensitive, and competent ." According to the Scholar Identity Model, Black students who see others who look like themselves in positive, competent positions will themselves become empowered.

Teacher Education and Professional Development

One of the most useful ways to gain tools and skills to support the needs of students who are facing "acting White" accusations is through teacher training and professional development. As Whiting (2006) pointed out, it takes education in order to become culturally sensitive and educated enough to enrich one's classroom with the models necessary to inspire one's students. Grantham and Ford (1998) suggested that recruiting African-American teachers into gifted classrooms would provide role models and mentors necessary to nurture achievement. These teachers may likely also possess a higher level of awareness regarding the "acting White" phenomenon, and therefore be able to support a student facing this crisis.

Classroom professionals who perceive the value of learning more about this topic *must* seek opportunities for multicultural pedagogical training (Ford et al., 2004). Professional teacher programs likewise must continue to work to develop and offer these courses. The foci of such courses should be "understanding cultural diversity, appreciating cultural differences, eliminating deficit thinking, and raising expectations for diverse students" (Ford et al., 2004, p. 27). Less formal methods include reading on these

topics, and researching the growing number of resources available via internet (see reference section for suggestions). Within the schools and districts, educators knowledgeable about the "acting White" phenomenon must work with their colleagues to help them better understand the dynamics of these accusations, and to disseminate information for how to better nurture the academic achievement of their gifted African American students.

Working with Existing Anti-Bullying Programs: Creating "Eyes That See"

"Acting White" accusations classify as a racially specific brand of bullying (Biddle, 2011). Gifted education experts Sunde-Peterson and Ray (2006) advise that education professionals be alert to bullying, in the form of "teasing about appearance and intelligence" (p. 162), and make proactive attempts to curtail it when it happens. They suggested that "given that so many aspects of bullying peaked during grade 6, it seems obvious that prevention-oriented large and small-group work should be facilitated during upper and elementary grades – certainly during grade 6" (p. 162). In the opinions of these experts, " . . . systemic interventions should aim to modify the environment, educate the students, and train teachers " and "serious conversations with parents of both victims and bullies should be part of schoolwide programs" (p. 163). The involvement of a wide range of individuals, from the students and teachers to community institutions such as churches, after-school programs, recreational centers, libraries, and community centers was reiterated by Swearer & Espelage (2003). Creating a support network that runs deeper through a student's life will not only decrease the bullying at a school, but also may provide access to other resources which will help support the achievement of a student, such as mentors and safe study spaces.

The first step in aiding students affected by accusations of "acting White" is to develop the eyes with which to see this bullying as it is occurring. In a study of low-income, African American kids in grades 5-12, Fitzpatrick, Dulin, and Piko (2010) found that

> [Y]outh are keenly aware of their environments, and the perceived dangers in the school hinder their development and impede their normal day-to-day interactions. A stronger, safer support network must be developed within the school system. In order to develop this network, input from school personnel, parents, and children should be solicited. (p. 636)

The most logical place to begin developing this "support network" would begin with programs already in place in many schools. The findings of Fleschler-Peskin, Tortolero, and Markham (2006) suggested a need to develop interventions to reduce the bullying, especially among males (p. 13).

According to the National Conference of State Legislation (2011), 16 states have passed legislation which specifically defines bullying acts, outlaws it on public school campuses, and provides for anti-bullying training for staff and students. Increased awareness of this phenomenon has led to increased action in preventing bullying, in order to decrease the long term damage associated with bullying. In the state of Georgia, many school systems have elected to use the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (2011). This program is based on the research of Dan Olweus, an academic psychologist who has been studying and publishing on this topic since the early 1970s (Olweus, 1978; 1991; 1993a; 1993b; 1995; 1997; 2001; 2003). A research psychologist, Olweus was one of the first

individuals to build an expertise in an area which in more recent years has gained a great deal of popular attention (OBPP, 2011).

This example is introduced as an example of the *type* of anti-bullying program which already exists in school systems. Since many of the issues salient to the larger topic of bullying directly relate to "acting White," a racially specific brand of bullying, school officials are able to address this topic using some of the techniques for which they have already paid. For example, Olweus' program offers staff training which is designed to help develop the ability to better perceive bullying situations as they arise, and to react to the needs of victims. This program also requires that all students complete a questionnaire at the beginning of the school year, in order to create a customized anti-bullying program for that school (OBPP, 2011). With the addition of a few questions directly relevant to the "acting White" phenomenon, the staff can learn not only about the general bullying climate of their school, but about the more specific situation as it pertains to the student attitudes concerning this issue. As a result of these small and inexpensive efforts, school personnel and students can begin to work together to create a climate which is more psychologically healthy for nurturing the potential of gifted African American students.

Mentoring

African American mentors can provide role models and mentors for African American gifted children facing "acting White" accusations (Ford, 1994; Whiting, 2009). Gifted education experts Ford et al. (2004) and Grantham (2004) suggested that working with mentors is one of the "most effective ways to help diverse students cope with negative peer pressures" (p. 29). Not only will developing a relationship with a mentor

provide immediate practical rewards in the form of life modeling, but it would also provide a fantastic opportunity for a young person to see the rewards of hard work "up close and personal." This opportunity may become a strong source of inner support when the young person is faced with the choice of pursuing positive choices with fewer short-term benefits or caving to the negative social pressures of the moment.

Bibliotherapy

Hébert (1997) asserted the power of bibliotherapy for addressing the needs of gifted children. Whiting (2009) suggested this tool for building the Scholar Identity, because "reading the biographies of Black heroes—past and present—can help inspire Black males as well as develop their sense of social justice activities designed to address the reading gap among Black adolescent males." As with developing mentoring relationships, books can offer glimpses into the personal lives of other accomplished Black men which help to support developing confidence in their own intelligence.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

</div>

African American gifted students often struggle with the "acting White" phenomenon during their k-12 experience. As they are developing their identities as Black individuals, they are also developing their intellectual identities. The emotional and psychological challenges of maintaining a positive social identity are compounded by the societal stereotypes which devalue the intelligence of African Americans. Therefore, it is important that education professionals work with these students proactively so that gifted African American students will continue to develop and reach their potential.

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Chapter Five: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief summary of the dissertation findings and my agenda for future research. I will then share details concerning my own professional development and the personal journey which has taken place during the time spent in this doctoral program. With the exception of the initial summary of the findings and agenda for future research, this chapter will be more informal than the previous chapters. The content, however, is carefully chosen to reflect the elements which have contributed to the evolution of who I am at the end of this graduate experience in relation to the person I was when I began.

The purpose of this revelatory format is simple. As a White woman with little previous exposure to the topics studied the last eight years, my own education previous to entering this program likely reflected that of many of the other White, middle-class people in our nation. As a graduate student, I have struggled to learn new ways of seeing while also being honest about the person I once was. It is my ability to connect respectfully with that person which will allow me to challenge future teachers who look like myself to reexamine their own beliefs about serving African American students. It has often been tempting to pretend that I have never personally resembled those who hold deficit orientations and other toxic beliefs. It has been tempting to act in different ways, depending on my audience. I believe, however, that succumbing to either temptation, would diminish the power of the education I have received, and the purpose which has driven the completion of this degree.

Brief Summary of Research Findings

A review of the literature concerning the "acting White" phenomenon reveals that a relatively long history of scholarship concerning the topic exists. As with any discussion with contributions by diverse sources, a number of views exist. For the most part, it is acknowledged that the phenomenon does play an integral role in the achievement of African American students.

According to my research, the fear of accusations of "acting White" is especially potent among younger students. Older students generally have identified a strong enough sense of self to be able to discount the charges and maintain their focus. This research also indicates that having a strong source of support is an integral element in being able to achieve in the face of these accusations. The source of support varies, reflecting the diverse backgrounds from which the participants have come from. Faith, family, and cultural heritage were the most commonly cited sources.

Parallels exist between those who have faced accusations of "acting White" and those who face bullying. Therefore, I propose that the "acting White" phenomenon is a *racially specific variety of bullying*. At present, this link has not been previously offered. Only one article currently exists which discusses the bullying of gifted students, in general. The well-documented intelligence and emotional sensitivities of gifted students makes this lack of discussion concerning this topic stunning. Furthermore, young gifted African American students are in an even more psychologically precarious situation than their mainstream peers. Thus, it is not surprising that so many of them choose to underachieve rather than adopt attitudes and practices which would likely make them the targets of bullies. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that education professionals

move forward to assist in the eradication of the "acting White" slur. The rich resources offered by the body of bullying literature must be taken more seriously as we tackle the challenge of the "acting White" phenomenon.

Future Research Agenda

I look forward to sharing the knowledge and insight that I have gained in future research opportunities. It is my goal to gain a position which will allow me to continue the research into the "acting White" phenomenon. I am specifically interested in one's individual's faith and faith community affects one's experience of the "acting White" accusations as a protective factor. I look forward to an opportunity to integrate the findings of research concerning the "acting White" phenomenon into existing anti-bullying programs. Working with educators and counselors in this way, I believe that the research strongly suggests that we can better support bright African American students to embrace their potential.

Professional Development

As a professional, I appreciate the training and the challenges I have faced as a student. As an intern for a year and a half, I was privileged to witness and participate in the creation of a peer-reviewed journal. This position afforded me the opportunity to attend a national conference for gifted education, and attend a number of meetings and social functions with the leaders in the field.

While a graduate student, I have witnessed a number of professors strive toward and attain tenure. Observation of this process provided an invaluable informal instruction in the life of a university professional. As the president of the graduate student association, I was likewise afforded a similar opportunity. As the student representative

on a number of committees, I spoke for the interests of other graduate students and regularly attended monthly faculty meetings.

When I first embarked on this journey, I had a strong sense of a destination, yet only a hazy idea of how I would arrive at that destination. Through the consistent leadership of the faculty, loyal support of my family, and persistent determination to stay the path regardless of the challenges which have arisen, I have finally arrived at the end of this particular trek. This dissertation reflects the last 8 years of unrelenting effort to learn as much as I possibly can in order to positively contribute to our society. In order to achieve this goal, I have been required not only to take classes and write a dissertation, but also challenged by the material read and discussed, and by the professors who have guided me to dig deeper. I have been required to acknowledge, and at times, to changed my own views. This process is by no means finished. I will continue to evolve and learn about these issues, even when teaching these lessons to future students.

I have benefited enormously from this education. As a middle-class White female who had little sustained experience with people unlike myself, I appreciate the opportunities to listen and learn from those who are different from me. My own privileged background allowed me to develop some attitudes toward school and society based on my own ignorance of realities other than my own. For example, as the product of a locally well-respected community and school system, I had inadvertently adopted an attitude which judged anyone with a less than positive attitude toward school as somehow deficient, or having a "bad attitude." Having spent some time in a much less privileged school during an internship, I now see that discouragement with school should not be so easily dismissed.

This education afforded me many opportunities to apply the "book knowledge" to the realities of living. For example, early in my graduate career, I wondered aloud to a professor, "Why aren't there more Black people in our multicultural gifted course?" He gave me a pointed look and a sigh. After a moment's thought, I realized that one of the most often repeated facts concerning advanced education at all levels was just that – there are not a lot of Black people there! Logically, if there are not Black kids in gifted and advanced courses, there will not be Black people studying *anything* at a university.

Similarly, looking back over my dissertation data, I found myself a little bit disappointed that I had recruited more African American women than men. I wondered if this would be an internal validity issue, and whether I should make some effort to make the numbers more equal. All of these years *studying* the fact that more African American girls do well in school, and thus attend college, did not come alive for me until the moment that I realized, "Of course there are more African American women! Haven't my own participants complained about that reality at this school? Haven't I *seen* that over twice as many African American women attend this college as African American men?"

These "aha moments" are not points of pride. It is difficult to imagine that someone else, someone a little quicker, would have picked up these realities more quickly. Honestly, the most painful moments have also been the best lessons. It is difficult to forget the burning shame I felt that afternoon in my professor's office after he frowned at my question concerning minority enrollment in a graduate course. I would like to pretend that I did not agonize over the disparity between the numbers of African American females versus males for two months before *finally* understanding the reason. To do so would be to deny how powerful the cultural lens through which we are trained

to see the world can distort our view of reality. And if *my* cultural lens is still so foggy after almost a decade of scrubbing through discussion, reading, and research, how must it be for a young lady in a pre-service class I hope to teach?

I hope that no one made so many allowances for my own ignorance that I was denied the opportunity to be challenged to grow. I have no intention of forcing that indignity onto my students. Only through these challenges can we grow, and these personal "aha" moments are the fuel for societal change.

Personal Journey

Beyond my formal education experience, this time has been one of enormous personal challenges. While in graduate school, I was diagnosed with a brain tumor and underwent surgery to have it removed. While this circumstance indubitably slowed my progress in this doctoral program, the fantastic blessings that the experience has bestowed ensure that I have only appreciation for the event. One obvious blessing is the entrance of the man whom I would marry into my life. These years have been rich, both educationally and personally.

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Age _____ Gender _____

Years of formal education _____

Current job/school status _____

Part I: General discussion of "acting White"

1. Some theorists believe that the "acting White" phenomenon keeps some gifted
   Black students from working as hard as they can, so that their friends and family
   won't reject them and accuse them of "acting White." What do you think about
   this?

2. Tell me about a time when you saw someone "acting White;" what were they
   doing? How did you know they were "acting White"?

3. When would an African American kid first get accused of "acting White?"

4. What factors have you observed which might make some Black students more or
   less likely to react to the threat of this accusation?

5. Some theorists believe that successful Black students have skills which allow
   them to balance their social/racial identities with their identity as a successful
   student. What do you think about this?

Part II: "Acting White" in the participant's own life

6. Tell me about how "acting White" has affected you and the people in your life;
   what did your family --mom, dad, aunts, uncles, cousins -- say when it came up?

7. Could you tell me more about your parents' background (educational values of grandparents)? *Question added after the study had begun*

8. How do you think that the age of a kid affects the power of this accusation? (think about when you were in middle and high school – how was it the same or different to hear about that accusation versus when you were just a kid in elementary school or now that you are older and have had more time to consider it?

8. Have there been times when the accusation bothered you and you held back so that you wouldn't get accused of "acting White"?

9. Have there been times when you were aware of the possibility of facing this accusation, but you intentionally did *not* hold back? (If participant answers "yes" to the previous question) What was different about those situations?

10. How does this phenomenon affect you now in college? How does it affect other Black students you know?

Part III: Other factors

11. What kinds of other factors contribute to your success or hold you back or motivate you to push harder to succeed?

12. Have you noticed any differences in the attitudes of the Black community toward achievement since the election of Obama in 2008?

13. Do you perceive/anticipate changes toward the "acting White" accusations as a result of Obama's election?

14. What questions do you think should have been part of this interview and were not (for example, what are some concerns related to the experience of the young

Black academically successful student about which you wish someone would

ask?)?

Additional thoughts, concerns, feedback:

APPENDIX B

Interview Consent Form

Role of the "Acting White" Phenomenon in the Achievement Experiences of Academically Black Successful Students

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled "*Role of the 'Acting White' Phenomenon in the Achievement Experiences of Academically Successful Students*" conducted by Winfred Harris from the Department of Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Tarek Grantham, University of Georgia. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to explore the relationship of the "acting White" phenomenon and other issues in the achievement of academically successful Black students.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:
1)   There will be a one hour interview.
2)   There will be no foreseeable risks and/or discomfort.
3)   Expected benefits could be the opportunity to reflect on one's own achievement behaviors and motivations and to contribute to existing knowledge of the topic.
4)   Interview participants will be awarded $25 cash upon completion of the interview..
5)   I will be provided with a pseuonym during the research process, and all data about me, or provided with me will be protected by this pseudonym.

The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project (404-797-1887). The investigator will provide the research findings, once the project has been completed, if I request them.

I understand that I am agreeing by my written signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I may print a copy of this consent form for my records.

Winfred Harris   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   **Signature**   **Date**
Telephone: 404-797-1887
Email: sophiae@uga.edu

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   **Signature**   **Date**

Additional questions or problems concerning your rights as a research participant should be addressed to Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 20602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; e-mail address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire and Questionnaire Consent Form
(converted into a Google Document)

*The Influence of the "Acting White" Phenomenon in the Achievement Experiences of
Academically Successful African American College Students*

My name is Winfred Harris and I am finishing up my doctoral studies under the guidance of Dr. Tarek Grantham at the University of Georgia. My dissertation topic examines how academically successful African American students experience the "Acting White" phenomenon. The insights gained from this research may have implications for how faculty, administrators, and policymakers better support learning environments for African Americans.

I am recruiting African American college students for individual interviews. Please fill out this short questionnaire to participate in this research study. Participation is completely voluntary and all of your responses will be confidential. Once you have completed this questionnaire, I will contact you to let you know if you have been selected for follow-up interviews. Please email me with any questions or concerns you have.

The questionnaire can be completed at: (insert hyperlink)

Thank you very much for your time and effort!
Winfred G. Harris
sophiae@uga.edu

Biographical Information
Name (first and last name) _____
Email Address _____
Telephone number (I will only use this information to contact you and will not share it with others)

_____
Race/Ethnicity _____
Age _____   Gender _____
Family economic status: (circle one)
        Lower/working
        Middle
        Upper
Raised by: (circle one)
        Mom
        Dad
        Both parents
        Other (please specify) _____
Birthplace _____
Hometown, if different from birthplace

_____
Number of years lived in birthplace/ hometown

_____

I would like to participate in the interview and talk about the "acting White" phenomenon. (yes/no)
I will be available to be interviewed in April and/or early May. (yes/no)

Academic Information
College attending: _____
Academic status (circle one)
1st year   2nd year   3rd year   4th year   other
Major _____
G.P.A. _____
Did you participate in formal public school gifted and/or advanced level programs? (yes/no)

_____

"Acting White" Experience
Some theorists believe that the "acting White" phenomenon keeps some gifted Black students from working to their full potential, so that that they will not face the accusation of "acting White." Do you have experience with this phenomenon? (yes/no)

_____

If you answered yes to experiencing the "acting White" phenomenon, please describe one of the most significant experiences.

Please use this space to add any additional thoughts, concerns, feedback or leave it blank.

Note: All information will be used solely for the purposes of this study and will not be shared with others uninvolved with the study. All contact information will be used solely by the primary investigator.