

Submitted: May 23, 2014

First Revision: August 1, 2014

Accepted: December 1, 2014

Acting White? Black Young Adults Devalue Same-Race Targets for Demonstrating Positive-but-Stereotypically White Traits

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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that Black Americans dislike same-race peers for "acting White," but the phenomena associated with acting White are not well-understood. This experiment tested the "acting White" hypothesis. Specifically, a general population sample of $N = 154$ Black young adults viewed one of four profiles that varied the race and interests of a fictitious target. The results indicated that participants preferred more social distance from the Black target with stereotypically White interests than they did other targets. One implication of this finding is that the acting White effect likely occurs because stereotypically out-group traits are associated with a salient out-group and are therefore perceived as "unseemly."

INTRODUCTION

A controversial if not well-understood idea is that Black students often risk being ostracized as "acting White" by other Black classmates for excelling academically or for demonstrating traits that are assumed to be associated with academic success. The notion that some Black young adults view certain traits and behaviors as acting White, and the implications that these attributions may have for peer relations and academic success, are areas that merit investigation. To date, inquiries on this subject have primarily been limited to anthropology, where ethnographies have suggested that some Black students intentionally underperform academically for fear of being characterized as acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). A relatively recent line of work in economics, moreover, revealed a weaker within-group association between GPA and popularity for Black students than for White students (Fryer & Torelli, 2010). What remains unclear, however, is whether Black students' potential fear of being labeled White is well-founded-- do Black young adults tend to dislike their same-race peers for acting White, and what specific traits or behaviors lend themselves to that type of characterization?

The present research addresses the above uncertainties in two important ways: (1) by providing a social psychological framework for the types of traits and behaviors that Black young adults will likely view as acting White; a framework that is best understood in terms of in-group dynamics, and (2) by placing the theorized dislike of Black young adults for acting White in relative terms;

in other words, who do Black young adults like or dislike more, Blacks or Whites who act in stereotypically Black or White ways? I will then report findings from a general population experiment to illustrate that Black young adults devalue fellow in-group members for demonstrating positive but stereotypically out-group (i.e., White) traits and behaviors. Before outlining the present experiment, I will review the seminal work on acting White and discuss the potentially explanatory role that in-group dynamics may play in the acting White phenomenon.

Acting White

Historically, the idea that high achievement and/or acting like out-groups is frowned upon did not begin with Black Americans, and numerous studies have described this phenomenon within a variety of other races, ethnicities, and cultures over the past sixty years (Fryer & Torelli, 2010). The subsequent focus on Black American students followed the controversial assertion that the racial academic achievement gap might in large part be explained by two phenomena: (1) an oppositional culture among Black Americans that disavows success in domains where Black Americans perceive unjust and unfavorable outcomes compared to White Americans, and (2) a resulting tendency for Black students who are poised to excel academically to avoid doing so for fear that their peers would deride them for acting White (Fordham, 1985; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Although, the cultural opposition theory has not received much support (Ferguson, 2001; Fryer & Torelli, 2010), the second proposition has rarely been examined.

The idea- at least as a topic of scholarly interest- that Black students who excel academically are resented for acting White emerged from ethnographies that identified Black students from a predominantly Black high school who underperformed relative to what their standardized test scores would predict, ostensibly to circumvent the attribution of acting White (Fordham, 1985). Although a majority of the students interviewed were either aware of the belief that academic success was frowned upon by the predominantly Black student body- or personally endorsed that belief themselves- evidence that students refrained from excelling to avoid acting White per se was scant at best.

The concern that Black students withdraw academic effort for fear of being labeled White produced three important studies with varying approaches and findings. First, the effort withdrawal hypothesis did not receive empirical support when tested among a sample of nearly 1700 Black and White students from Shaker Heights, Ohio (Ferguson, 2001); the observed race differences in GPA between Black and White students was better accounted for by skill set (e.g., the proportion of courses taken at the AP/honors level) than by effort (e.g., completion of homework, time spent on homework). Second, the argument that academic success has negative social consequences for Black students has received mixed support at best. In support of the peer backlash hypothesis, a sample of more than 90,000 students between seventh and twelfth grade found that White students' GPA was positively associated with their within-racial group popularity-- an observation that failed to hold for Black students, whose within-racial group popularity tended to decrease once their GPA reached 3.5 (Fryer & Torelli, 2010). More recent work suggests, however, that no relationship exists between academic performance and negative social sanctions (i.e., being bullied, threatened, or assaulted by one's peers) for neither Black nor White students (Wildhagen, 2011).

The correlational designs employed in the above peer backlash studies prohibited them from testing their fundamental question-- do Black students risk resentment, ostracization, or being disliked for either doing well academically or for behaving in stereotypically White ways? Since their methodological limitations do not permit causal inferences, a number of phenomena could account for the diminishing return that Black students' GPA had on their popularity. For example, academic success could increasingly alienate Black students from their same-race peers if such success leads to placement in predominantly White honors or advanced placement courses (Ferguson, 2001). And although placement in honors courses might prevent Black students from becoming more popular among their same-race peers, it could also provide them with refuge from those who might otherwise be inclined to administer the negative social sanctions that Wildhagen (2011) found no support for.

Taken together, the behaviors and characteristics associated with acting White are not well understood or agreed upon, although academic success is likely a part of the phenomenon. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, whether the fear of being perceived as acting White is a real one (i.e., because it leads to peer rejection) remains unclear. The above limitations suggest that research on acting White would benefit from an approach that offers a more precise definition of the phenomenon as well as a means for detecting when it occurs, and in-group dynamics may offer insights into both.

In-Group Dynamics

Black students might dislike other Black students for acting White because people who violate in-group norms undermine in-group members' sense of identity. Consistent with this notion, people tend to favor norm-compliant in-group members and keep negative and non-compliant ones at bay (i.e., the black sheep effect; Marques & Paez, 1994). The propensity to exalt good in-group members and expunge bad ones ostensibly helps people preserve positive social identities. Although potentially informative, the black sheep effect describes what happens when in-group members behave in ways that the in-group generally perceives as negative. However, when people complain that honors students or Barack Obama "act White," they are generally referencing behavior most would see as being normatively positive, such as intelligence, academic and professional achievement, and worldliness. In short, the acting White phenomenon seems to be based on negative reactions to positive deviance.

Positive deviance

Although numerous studies in the black sheep tradition highlight the consequences of negative forms of norm deviance for in-group members, what happens to people who demonstrate normatively favorable traits but ones not stereotypically associated with in-group members-- and perhaps as important to the phenomenology of acting White-- positive traits that are more stereotypically associated with out-group members-- has not received much consideration. People generally evaluate non-prototypical in-group members less favorably than prototypical ones (Hogg, Hardie, & Reynolds, 1995), but whether the non-prototypical traits in question were viewed as more prototypical of a specific out-group-- and whether people generally viewed the non-prototypical traits as favorable-- has received little attention. Whether in-group members' reactions to deviance are influenced by how stereotypical the trait is of the group remains an

open question. It could be the case, then, that the joint effects of favorable-but stereotypically out-group traits might elicit an adverse reaction from in-group members, and that such a reaction might reflect Black students' hypothesized dislike of other Black students for acting White.

The Acting White Hypothesis

The purpose of the present experiment was to examine positive deviance in the context of stereotypical racial roles among Black school-aged young adults. Specifically, I tested whether in-group members devalued fellow in-group members for demonstrating positive but stereotypically out-group traits, and I predicted that relative to a Black target with stereotypically Black interests and White targets more broadly (i.e., White targets with stereotypically Black and White interests, respectively), Black young adults would devalue a Black target with stereotypically White interests (i.e., the acting White hypothesis).

METHOD

Experimental Design and Participants

The experiment used a 2 (target race: Black, White) x 2 (target interests: stereotypically Black, stereotypically White) between subjects factorial design. One hundred fifty-four Black young adult participants (aged 18 - 27) were drawn from a panel of respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks (KN) of Menlo Park, CA. KN recruits panel participants using random-digit-dialing telephone selection methods.

Seventy-three percent of participants in the current study were female, and participants' mean age was 22.97 ($SD = 2.88$). The sample, moreover, was educationally heterogeneous, with 8% of participants reporting that they had not completed high school, 21% reporting that they had earned a high school diploma, 53% reporting that they had completed at least some college courses, and 18% reporting the completion of a college degree or higher.

Procedure

Upon accessing the study, panelists read that their participation involved examining differences in people's decision making and friendship preferences within social networking internet profiles. The stimuli were designed to reflect popular online social networking sites.

Experimental Manipulations

Target Race

The profiles manipulated the race of the target by varying whether the profile photograph depicted a Black (in-group) or White (out-group) male young adult. I conducted a separate stimulus test to ensure that the profile photographs differed only in terms of their race (i.e., not as a result of physical attraction or other possible confounds). The results of the stimulus test revealed that participants did not discern any differences between the Black and White

photographs with respect to their attractiveness, perceived SES, warmth, and similarity to oneself.

Target Interests

To manipulate target interests, the profile described targets in terms of either stereotypically Black-but-positive traits (e.g., athletic, tough, religious, suave) or stereotypically White-but-positive traits (e.g., scientifically minded, successful, adventurous, wealthy). These traits were selected based on previous research (Biernat & Ma, 2005) indicating that they (a) are perceived as positive, and (b) are perceived as stereotypical of Black and White Americans, respectively.

Together, the two experimental manipulations yield four corresponding conditions; participants either viewed a Black target with stereotypically Black interests, a Black target with stereotypically White interests, a White target with stereotypically Black interests, or a White target with stereotypically White interests.

Dependent Measure

Social Distance

The social distance measure was adapted from items developed by Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005), and included nine items beginning with the stem, "I would be happy to have this person . . ."; example sentence completions include, "as a neighbor," "as a classmate," and "as a friend." Participants responded on 7-point scales with the anchors of 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*), and scores on these items were reverse-scored and averaged to create a global and reliable index of social distance, with higher values reflecting greater preferred social distance between oneself and the target.

RESULTS

Initial Analyses

A series of analyses were performed to ensure sufficient conditions were met for testing the acting White hypothesis. Given that the sample was 73% female, it was important to determine whether any results were qualified by gender, and they were not; a 2 (participant gender: Female, Male) x 2 (target race: Black, White) x 2 (target interests: stereotypically Black, stereotypically White) between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) with social distance as the dependent measure revealed no significant main or interactive effects of gender (all $F < 1$), and all subsequent analyses were collapsed across this factor.

Second, the primary hypothesis test involved comparing the Black target with stereotypically White interests against the remaining targets as a whole, and thus it was necessary to demonstrate that participants did not differentially evaluate the targets that comprised the reference group. Accordingly, a one-way between subjects ANOVA on the social distance scale examined potential mean differences among the targets included in the reference category (i.e., the remaining targets). The one-way ANOVA on social distance produced a pattern of results

that supports the construction of the above reference category; when excluding the participants who evaluated the Black target with stereotypically White interests, the remaining participants did not differentially evaluate the targets belonging to the reference category, $F < 1$. In summary, participants did not prefer targets based on their race or interests alone, and preliminary analyses provide sufficient justification for creating a reference category to compare against the Black target with stereotypically White interests.

Hypothesis Testing

I predicted that Black adolescents would devalue a Black target with stereotypically White interests. To be exact, I predicted that relative to a Black target with stereotypically Black interests and White targets more broadly (i.e., with stereotypically Black and White interests, respectively), Black adolescents would devalue a Black target with stereotypically White interests on a measure of social distance. Testing this hypothesis involved a planned contrast analysis between the Black target with stereotypically White interests and a reference category including the remaining targets. I therefore assigned the values -3, +1, +1, and +1, respectively, to the Black target with stereotypically White interests, the Black target with stereotypically Black interests, the White target with Stereotypically Black interests, and the White target with stereotypically White interests. Did participants devalue a Black target for "acting White"? To be brief, yes: The planned comparison produced a pattern of results consistent with predictions. Participants were significantly less happy with having the Black target with stereotypically White interests as a friend, neighbor, classmate, etc, compared to the remaining targets.

Table 1

Social Distance Ratings by Target Race and Target Interests

Target Race	Target Interests								$F(1, 149)$	p
	Stereotypically White				Stereotypically Black					
	Black		White		Black		White			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
	4.93	1.58	4.34	1.06	4.48	1.79	4.29	1.23	4.12	.04

Note. $MSE = 2.07$

DISCUSSION

The goal of this experiment was to determine whether Black young adults would devalue a Black target for acting White, and the results were consistent with predictions. If talented Black students underperform for fear of being characterized as White, then that fear appears to be at least partially valid-- relative to other targets, a general population sample of Black young adults reported a desire for increased social distance from a Black target with stereotypically White interests. To date, this is the first experiment to confirm the theorized dislike of Black young adults for acting White, and the results highlight a few important contributions to extant literature on this topic.

Implications

The experimental investigation of the acting White effect discussed here offers at least two value-added contributions to previous literature: (1) a more precise method for testing hypotheses, and (2) an approach that permits causal inferences. First, the notion that Black students dislike other Black students for acting White is often stated in diffuse or absolute terms, without much consideration for whom acting White targets are being evaluated against. The present research tested the acting White hypothesis in comparative terms. Second, these findings add value to previous inquiries into the acting White hypothesis by using random assignment across experimental groups in a general population sample. In doing so, the present results support previous empirical tests of the acting White hypothesis (i.e., Fryer & Torelli, 2010) and isolate stereotypically White traits as one cause of participants' preference for more social distance from Black targets.

Last, the reported results offer an approach to studying the phenomenon of acting White that draws on a relatively under-examined aspect of in-group dynamics research-- reactions to positive deviance. That Black participants devalued a Black target for deviating from in-group norms- even when the target's deviance was normatively favorable- suggests that in-group members pay attention to trait-and-behavior-stereotypicality when evaluating one another. In other words, deviating from group norms in normatively favorable but counter-stereotypical ways may draw the ire of fellow group members simply because the conflicting information causes some type of apprehension.

Conclusion

This experiment was designed as an initial test of the hypothesized acting White effect, and the results provide evidence that the effect is both a real and psychological meaningful one; relative to a stereotypically Black target (and White targets regardless of their stereotypicality), Black young adults desired more social distance from a fellow Black target with stereotypically White interests. The broader implications of these findings suggest that the "acting White" effect likely occurs because the stereotypically White traits in question- although ostensibly positive- are associated with a salient out-group, and associations with salient out-groups are likely perceived as "unseemly." Thus, the reported devaluation of Black targets who demonstrated positive-but-stereotypically White interests could occur in any intergroup context with salient in- and out-groups, and may result from ordinary social psychological processes that can happen to anyone. I hope that, broadly, these findings help to elucidate the role of positive deviance in intra- and inter-group relations, and that, specifically, these results may be used to develop practical solutions to the potential peer harassment of Black students by their in-group peers in academic contexts.

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APPENDIX A

Correlation Matrix of the Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female)	-	-	-	-
2. Target Race (0 = White, 1 = Black)	.01	-	-	-
3. Target Interests (0 = Stereotypically White, 1 = Stereotypically Black)	.03	.07	-	-
4. Social Distance	-.09	.13	-.08	-
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>				.95
<i>M</i>				4.50
<i>SD</i>				1.15

Note. $N = 154$, * = $p < .05$

AUTHOR NOTE

The data for this research was collected by Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences, NSF Grant SES-0094964, Diana Mutz and Arthur Lupia, Principal Investigators. I would like to thank Linda J. Skitka for her helpful advice and comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

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