ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF THE ACTING WHITE ACCUSATION: SOCIAL ANXIETY AND BULLYING VICTIMIZATION

A thesis submitted to Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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Introduction

Black Americans account for the second largest minority group in the U.S., yet little research has been conducted to explore the factors that affect persisting rates of anxiety (Neal-Barnett & Crowther, 2000; Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Murray, Payne, Thomas, Salley, 2011; Wang, Lane, Olfson, Pincus, Wells, & Kessler, 2005). Anxiety disorders affect an estimated 25% of the Black population (Breslau, Kendler, Su, Gaxiola-Aguilar, & Kessler, 2005), but generally are less prevalent among Black populations than their White counterparts (Breslau et al., 2005; Sibrava, Beard, Bjornsson, Moitra, Weisberg, & Keller, 2013). Despite this, previous research has shown that Black Americans experience anxiety symptoms for longer periods of time and at higher perceived rates of distress (Breslau et al., 2005; Friedman, Braunstein, & Halpern, 2006; Neal-Barnett & Crowther, 2000; Williams & Chambless, 1994). Some have attributed these perceived higher levels of distress to an increasing amount of environmental stressors (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Carter, Mitchell, & Sbrocco, 2012). Experiences with racism, unequal treatment, marginalization, and threats to ethnic identity may all contribute to these persistent rates of anxiety.

One source of anxiety most pertinent to Black adolescents is the accusation of acting White (Murray et al., 2012). Adolescence is a stage of development during which many youth are subjected to close scrutiny by their peers and hold the opinions of peers in high regard. Furthermore, negative evaluations by peers can be disconcerting for adolescents and negatively impact their well-being (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990). During adolescence it is not uncommon for adolescents to be called a “nerd” or described as “weird” simply because they appear different in some way. However, clinicians have become
increasingly aware that the acting White accusation (AWA) is particularly distressing for Black youth (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Ogbu, 2004).

The acting White accusation arises when a Black adolescent’s ethnic/racial identity (ERI) is perceived as being not Black enough by another Black adolescent or group of adolescents (Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray & Demmings, 2010). Racial identity perception is conceptualized by action and behaviors (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010) and therefore can be called into question in more than one way. The accusation may be experienced directly, “you are acting White,” or indirectly, “you talk like a White boy.” The indirect accusation is a more subtle form of the acting White accusation that circumvents explicitly stating someone acts White, yet accuses him or her of possessing characteristics similar to White individuals with statements such as “you dress like a White girl.” Regardless of whether it is direct or indirect, many accused adolescents experience the accusation as an attack on their ethnic/racial identity (Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010) and thus experience distress in relation to this accusation. The AWA is one of the most harmful accusations a Black adolescent can hurl at another given that it is an attack against one’s ethnic/racial identity and can occur during a time when identity development is most salient (Kunjufu, 1988; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Steele, 1992; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992; Tyson, 2002).

The Acting White Phenomenon versus the Acting White Accusation

The Phenomenon. The acting White phenomenon was originally framed within the oppositional identity theory, which asserts that Black adolescents form their ERI in direct opposition to the dominant culture, in this case White Americans (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The theory espouses the belief that Blacks must remain in direct opposition to the dominant culture,
and as such, devalue what they perceive as Eurocentric or White values (e.g., academic achievement). Black adolescents commonly form fictive kin networks (social ties not determined by blood or marriage) that give them a sense of connection to one another. Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) were the first to introduce the burden of acting White in their often cited, “Capital High” study. Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) results indicated that Black adolescents devalued academic achievement out of fear of being accused of acting White. Essentially, succeeding in domains that are characteristic of White individuals may cause one to be negatively sanctioned by their Black peers, and it is the fear that drives Black adolescents to devalue such aspects of themselves.

In alignment with Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) original study, Fryer and Torelli (2010) investigated the phenomenon by questioning if the “popularity achievement gradient” is the same for Black and White students. The results yielded significant racial differences in the relationship between popularity and grades. There was little difference between groups with lower grade point averages; however, Black students’ popularity peaks at a 3.5 GPA on a 4-point scale and subsequently begins to decline thereafter. On the contrary, White adolescents continue to gain popularity as their GPA increases. The authors assert that these results provide evidence for the existence of the acting White phenomenon (Fryer & Torelli, 2010).

While Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found support for their theory, subsequent studies have shown ethnic minority youth do not intentionally eschew academic achievement out of fear of receiving the accusation and in fact value academic success (Carter, 2003; Carter, 2005; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Tough, 2004; Wildhagen, 2011). In a more recent study, Wildhagen (2011) did not find support for the acting White phenomenon and in fact reports that Black adolescents had significantly more positive attitudes towards education than did their White counterparts.
Evidence from the educational and developmental literature suggests that Black adolescents’ valuing of academic success may be related to their ERI (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005; Wong et al., 2003). In alignment with this theory, Chavous and colleagues (2003) found Black adolescents’ racial identity attitudes were related to their educational beliefs. Having strong group pride and positive beliefs about society’s view of their ethnic group was related to more positive academic beliefs. Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke (1998) found that racial centrality was significantly related to Black student’s cumulative GPA. The more being Black was central to the self-concept, the higher the students’ GPAs. Cook and Ludwig (1998) conducted an extensive evaluation of the acting White phenomenon and found that Black and White Americans hold similar educational expectations. Furthermore, about 60% of Black and White adolescents expected to earn a 4-year college degree, thus debunking the belief that valuing academic success is acting White given that both groups hold similar expectations.

The Accusation. The existence of the acting White phenomenon is a controversial topic given the mixed research findings throughout the acting White literature. Researchers continue to debate whether the fear of being accused leads to a Black adolescent devaluing academic achievement. Essentially, this argument focuses on the acting White phenomenon. However, when Black adolescents are accused of acting White, they are being told that they are not members of the Black race (Neal-Barnett, 2001). The present investigation seeks to understand the psychological implications of receiving the accusation.

Neal-Barnett (2001) offered a different conceptualization of the acting White accusation by focusing on what it meant to Black. Based on six focus groups with Black adolescents and one group with Black parents, results suggest that there exists a continuum of the meaning of being
Black with extremes on either end. On one end lies the “hardcore Black,” which consists of stereotypical generalization of the meaning of being Black (e.g., using slang and listening to rap). On the other end lies the belief that being Black is no different than being any other race. The acting White accusation occurs when individuals on different ends of the spectrum interact. Essentially, the accusation occurs when one individual’s definition of Black clashes with another individual’s definition of being Black (Neal-Barnett, 2001; pg. 77).

Neal-Barnett and colleagues (2010) were able to identify six themes that lead to an adolescent incurring the accusation—academic achievement, dress, speech, music preference, economics and standards and values. Murray et al. (2012) posited the accusation has less to do with acting White, and everything to do with what it means to be Black. Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) interviewed 64 Black adolescent students to understand what it means to be Black from their perspective. Content analysis revealed five dimensions that resulted from their responses: academic/scholastic, aesthetic/stylistic, behavioral, dispositional, and impressionistic. These categories represent features of education, attire/style, specific acts or activities, qualities that reflect intentions or values, and overall impression and image, respectively. Most of the responses to the items were negative appraisals of behavior and image. Some examples of acting Black include “not going to class” or “using slang.” These studies suggest that many Black adolescents have beliefs about what it means to be Black and not fitting into that description can lead to being cast as an outsider.

The AWA and Bother

Given that the accusation is embedded in ERI and tied to adolescent development, the psychological implications of the accusation need to be fully investigated. A participant in Neal-Barnett’s analysis revealed, “When someone accuses you of acting White it’s a judgment against
the core of which you are” (Neal-Barnett, 2001; pg.79). Many adolescents experience psychological discomfort or they feel bothered when receiving the accusation (Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). Murray (2012) referred to Neal-Barnett et al.’s (2010) examination of psychological distress by examining the extent to which an adolescent is bothered by aspects of the AWA. Responses to being accused of acting White ranged from “didn’t bother me at all” to “bothered me a whole lot.” Thus, some adolescents have a stronger or more negative reaction to the accusation than others. For example, one adolescent accused of acting White may experience increased anxiety with peers, questioning of racial identity, etc. Another adolescent may experience the same accusations but may not be bothered at all by the accusation. Murray and colleagues (2012) found that bother experienced after receiving the accusation was associated with anxiety. Murray’s (2012) results indicated 97 of 110 participants had been accused of acting White either directly “you act White,” or indirectly, for example, “you dress like a White boy.” Results indicated that adolescents who reported higher levels of bother experienced higher levels of anxiety. In a similar study, Durkee and Williams (2013) found that 74% of their sample (n=145) had been accused of acting White. Their findings supported qualitative evidence that suggested Black individuals who identified more with their racial group were more likely to experience psychological discomfort when accused of acting White than those who were less likely to identify with being Black (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham, 1996). However, Durkee and Williams (2013) asserted that while psychological discomfort, a similar construct to bother, was significantly associated with dimensions of racial/ethnic identity in their study, it was not a significant predictor of mental health outcomes. One aspect of their study to make note of is their decision to disregard psychological discomfort as a mental health outcome. In support of the research findings by Neal-Barnett (2001), other researchers have demonstrated the effects of the
accusation on mental health. Bergin and Cooks (2002) found that high achieving Black adolescents in their study did not avoid academic achievement in order to avoid the acting White accusation, although they did experience some level of bother when they were accused of acting White. These findings suggest that bother is a concept experienced by many adolescents when accused of being a non-authentic member of their ethnic/racial group. Because bother experienced from the accusation is linked to psychological distress, it becomes a central component in understanding the impact of the acting White accusation.

**The Acting White Trap**

Adolescence is a time when many ethnic minorities start to explore their ethnic/racial identity. As a part of this exploration, adolescents may take on various personas that include different ways of speaking and dressing. Erickson (1968) and Marcia (1966) have referred to this period of exploration as moratorium, which occurs when an adolescent is in the midst of an identity crisis or a period of questioning who they are. From an ethnic/racial identity perspective, the AWA triggers an identity crisis, which then leads to some adolescents entering a state of moratorium or what has been labeled the “acting White trap.” Spending time in the acting White trap can be healthy for most adolescents. However, difficulties arise when some remain in the trap, either maintaining a moratorium status or adopting a racial persona that may not be in line with their true values and beliefs, which could have a profound effect on identity development (Kunjufu, 1988; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010).

**The AWA and Bullying Victimization**

Bullying is defined as a form of aggression that is intended to harm or cause distress in the victim (Rigby, 2002). Griffin and Gross (2004) differentiate between two forms of bullying: 1) the overt or direct form which includes physical aggression, and physical or verbal threat; and 2)
the covert or indirect format which relates to exclusion, social rejection and rumor spreading. Black adults accused of acting White recall the accusation as a bullying experience (Harris, 2012). Jamelle Bouie (2010), staff writer for The American Prospect reports having been accused of acting White during adolescence, stating the accusation was reserved for Black kids, academically successful or otherwise, who did not fit in with the main crowd. Thus the accusation can be considered a more covert form of bullying among adolescents. The research emphasizing the bullying nature of the accusation has been primarily qualitative. Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008) found that Black adolescents defined acting White as “selling out their race,” “stuck up,” “bougie,” and “snobbish” which are all forms of name calling and pejoratives for those who are viewed as acting White. Grantham and Biddle (2014) view this form of race-based bullying through Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social-ecological bullying framework, which is a multidimensional conceptual model that combines multiple ecologies (e.g., microsystem and macrosystem) related to behaviors. The authors state that the accusation can be viewed at the microsystem or relationship level (e.g., between friends), but that some may argue that it extends beyond the microsystem given the historical underpinnings of the accusation (Grantham & Biddle, 2014; Morris 2002).

In a real-world example of the AWA, former left tackle of the Miami Dolphins, Jonathan Martin, abruptly walked out of the Dolphins’ practice facility and checked into a nearby hospital for psychological treatment (Paul et al., 2014). In the report that followed these events, it became public knowledge that two Black teammates routinely accused Martin of not being “black enough.” Paul and colleagues (2014) found the harassment of Martin consistent with many cases of bullying, where the individuals who are in a position of power harass the less powerful. It should be noted that despite Martin’s age (then 23), physical size (6’5, 300 lbs.), education
(Stanford), he experienced a negative psychological outcome based on being accused of acting White in the scope of bullying victimization.

After an appearance on CNN in 2007, Neal-Barnett received dozens of emails from adults describing their experience with the accusation. The following email details one individual’s experience when he decided to attend a historically Black university.

“I remember on my orientation, I had butterflies. I told my parents with excitement how it felt. I told them I changed my mind and wanted to live on campus. I was originally going to stay at home since I lived that close. Bad idea. Here’s the nightmare. I was verbally attacked and called “Tom,” all over again. You see, they were also large framed like me. I was attacked in my room, beaten, had my class ring stolen, and guitar smashed. I was even walking back from class one day and was pelted with rocks. How can I be living this nightmare at a Black university?”

(J. Smith, personal communication, February 27, 2007)

The individual also mentioned that despite growing up in a predominantly White, middle-class neighborhood he had never encountered the accusation. It was not until high school that he had his first experience with being accused of acting White. Several Black students referred to him as “Uncle Tom,” “wanna-be,” and “sell-out,” which again are all pejoratives for individuals perceived to be acting White. The phrase “Uncle Tom” derives from the main character of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and used as an epithet for a Black person who behaves in a subservient manner to White individuals. The impact of accusation had a lasting impact on him as he describes rarely associating with Black people even as an adult.

Another individual describes being “bullied and tortured” throughout school because she would not conform to others’ ideals about what it meant to be Black. She goes on to state, “My
experiences so many years ago continue to shape how I choose to interact with my Black community, or perhaps more so why I choose not to interact.” One Black female stated “I’d be embarrassed to talk on the phone to my white friends in front of my family members because they would tease me for ‘trying to be like the White girls.’” The following excerpt reflects the experience of many youth who find themselves in the acting White trap after being accused of acting White.

“I too, myself, went through this same torture [receiving the accusation] when I was a young teen being called an Oreo because I would talk like a “White girl.” I began to lack education after that and began to lose my potential as a student. I began to get average grades and instead of A’s I was getting C’s, and even began to lose my identity by speaking what they now call “Ebonics” just to fit in. Oh, what a rough and psychologically damaging time it was for me and I can still remember it like it was yesterday!” (E. Edwards, personal communication, February 27, 2007)

When the individual stated that she would speak Ebonics just to fit in, she is describing the acting White trap. These behaviors and ideas did not truly represent her beliefs, and problems could have arisen had she remained in the trap and formed a racial persona that did not correspond with her true beliefs

**The AWA, Bullying Victimization, and Social Anxiety**

Bullying also has implications for the development of social anxiety, which is defined as a marked fear of one or more social situations, because it has social consequences that make it an impetus for social evaluation concerns (Detweiler, Comer, Crum, & Albano, 2014). For adolescents, friendship and peer relations play essential roles in the development of social skills and feelings of efficacy that are crucial to adult functioning (LaGreca & Lopez, 1998). Further,
peer relationships are assumed to play an integral role in aiding adolescents in their development of a sense of personal identity and in decreasing prior levels of independence on the family (Dusek, 1991; LaGreca & Lopez, 1998). LaGreca and Lopez (1998) asserted “factors that inhibit or impede adolescents' interpersonal functioning represent a critical area for clinical and developmental investigation.” Bullying victimization is associated with increased anxiety, shyness, withdrawnness, low self-esteem, and poor social skills (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Haynie, et al., 2001). Detweiler and colleagues (2014) cited a study conducted by La Greca and Harrison (2005) that found even non-violent, indirect harassment could result in social anxiety if accompanied by a poor quality of friendship with a best friend, which is likely for youth who experience peer rejection and neglect. Given the potential for adolescents to experience the AWA as a bullying experience or an attack against their identity, social anxiety could be an outcome for those who experience the accusation as peer victimization.

McCabe and colleagues (2010) found that adults with Social Anxiety Disorder reported experiencing more teasing in childhood than those with Panic Disorder or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and suggest social anxiety may be the result of being exposed to anxiety-provoking peer interactions during childhood. Similarly, Storch and Masia-Warner (2004) wanted to investigate the relationship between overt (e.g., physical assault) and relational (e.g., rumor spreading) victimization and social anxiety, and found that both forms of victimization were linked to elevated levels of social anxiety and loneliness. These findings reflect other studies that have demonstrated that a relationship exists between bullying victimization and social anxiety in both childhood and adulthood (Boulton, 2013; Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002). Given the association between bullying victimization and social anxiety, and anecdotal evidence suggesting
the acting White accusation is a form of intra-racial bullying, it is plausible to hypothesize that
the accusation plays a role in the development of social anxiety for some youth.

**Ethnic/Racial Identity**

Ethnic/racial identity (ERI) has been conceptualized in many ways throughout the
text of the literature. One of the most cited and well-known models of ethnic/racial identity is the
Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) developed by Sellers, Smith, Shelton,
Rowley, & Chavous (1998). The MMRI conceptualizes ethnic/racial identity along four
dimensions which consist of the extent to which an individual defines him or herself with regard
to race (centrality), the extent to which one’s race is a relevant part of their self-concept at any
particular moment (salience), the affective and evaluative judgment of the group to which they
belong and of being a member of that group (public and private regard), and the beliefs and
attitudes regarding the way the individual feels members of their ethnic/racial group should act
(ideology). All of these dimensions are interrelated (Sellers et al., 1998).

Numerous studies suggest that high ERI serve as a buffer for psychopathology and
academic difficulties. Settles, Navarrete, Pagano, Abdou, and Sidanius (2010) found that among
Black women who reported high public and private regard of their race had lower rates of
depression. They also found that women who endorsed positive feelings of being Black and
reported less depression, endorsed feelings of high racial centrality, meaning race was central to
how they view themselves.

Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, and Ragsdale (2009) found that racial identity was
negatively correlated with depressive symptoms in seventh and eighth grade boys, and
negatively correlated with anxiety in girls. Another study found that Black adolescents who
endorsed negative attitudes about ethnicity were more likely to experience internalizing and
externalizing behaviors (Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004). In a similar study, results indicated that Blacks with lower levels of ethnic identity experienced greater amounts of both anxiety and depression (Williams, Chapman, Wong, & Turkheimer, 2012). This is consistent with research that suggests higher levels of ethnic identity are associated fewer symptoms of internalizing disorders (Pyant & Yanico, 1991; Walker, Wingate, Obasi, & Joiner, 2008; Williams et al., 2012; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006).

Furthermore, various dimensions of ERI have been shown to correlate with perception of discrimination, which only exacerbate negative affect among Black Americans. Burrow and Ong (2010) found that Black doctoral students, who were high in racial centrality and placed greater value on ethnicity, reported more negative reactivity to experiences of discrimination. In line with previous research (Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003), this same study found that negative affect and depressive symptoms were higher in individuals who reported more racial discrimination. Another study found that perceptions of discrimination increased the probability of Black adolescents engaging in problem behaviors and more negative psychological outcomes (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). These studies emphasize the role ERI plays in psychological functioning and how attacks against one’s identity can be detrimental.

Given the existing literature on the relationship between ERI and psychological functioning, researchers must remain cognizant of the many aspects of identity that are vulnerable to threat, and thus contribute to psychopathology. Research has demonstrated how negative interactions with the environment relevant to ERI manifest as internalizing behaviors (i.e., anxiety and depression), which underscores the need to explore the many facets of Black culture that put adolescents at risk for developing negative outcomes. One concept pertinent to this conversation
is the accusation of acting White. Because the accusation is embedded in ERI and is an attack against an individual’s self-conception the complexities of the accusation need to be fully explored. Previous research indicates ERI serves as a protective factor against psychological distress, suggesting that it could buffer the effects of the accusation.

The Present Study

The current study seeks to examine the relationship between the acting White accusation, bullying victimization, social anxiety, and ethnic/racial identity. A review of the literature suggests there has been no study that examines the relationship between these variables using a quantitative approach. Thus, this study is unique in its contribution to the literature. The acting White accusation can be received either directly “you act White” or indirectly “you talk like a White girl,” and either form of the accusation can lead to some level of bother, which is an important component of the accusation.

Hypotheses

It is first hypothesized that the acting White accusation, specifically bother experienced from the accusation, will be positively associated with social anxiety. The more bothered an adolescent feels when receiving the accusation the more social anxiety they experience. Moreover, many individuals describe the accusation as a bullying experience when it has occurred during a critical time in adolescence. The second hypothesis is that acting White accusation will be positively associated with bullying victimization, in that the more bother an adolescent experiences the more bullying victimization they will experience. Lastly, research suggests high ethnic/racial identity serves as a protective factor against psychopathology. Given the accusation is embedded in ethnic/racial identity, the third hypothesis is that racial centrality
and private regard (ERI) will be negatively associated with the accusation. Higher levels of ERI will be associated with lower levels of bother.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Thirty-one (31) adolescent girls completed surveys for this study. All participants (100%) identified as African American/Black. The participants ranged in age from 10 to 18 years old ($M=14$, $SD=2.1$). All participants were recruited through a school-based summer program for Black adolescent girls who were from single-parent households and low-income neighborhoods. The treatment of all participants met guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) standards. This study received prior approval from the Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Procedure**

Participants were administered surveys by a B.A.-level Black research assistant. The adolescents were told that they would be completing surveys relating to their experience of being a Black adolescent girl. Parental and adolescent consent was required for participation in the study. The participants had 30 minutes to complete the measures, but most finished in less than 30 minutes. The research assistant was available throughout the process to help answer questions that arose about the surveys. Once each participant completed their survey they received a $10 need to note gift card to Subway. IRB approval from Kent State University was obtained prior to any data collection.

**Measures**

*The Acting White Experiences Questionnaire (AWEQ; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010).* The AWEQ assesses the degree to which adolescents experience different aspects of the acting White
accusation. The AWEQ assesses the frequency of indirect forms of the accusation such as “The kids around me say I talk proper” and the direct form “Have you ever been accused of acting White?” Participants respond to each item using a six-point Likert-type scale with responses that range from 1 “Never” to 6 “Almost all of the time.” The AWEQ also assesses the degree to which an individual is bothered by the accusation with the statement, “How bothered were you by this?” Responses can be indicated by five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 “Didn’t bother me at all” to “Bothered me a whole lot.” The AWEQ was shown to be a valid and reliable measure in Black populations (Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). For the current sample, the AWEQ was shown to have good reliability (α = .87).

*The Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children 2nd Edition* (MASC-2; March, 2013) The MASC-2 is a 50-item questionnaire that assesses symptoms related to anxiety disorders including social anxiety, general anxiety, and separation anxiety. The questionnaire contains items such “I worry about other people laughing at me” and “I have trouble asking other kids to play with me.” Responses are indicated using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 3 (0- Never, 1- rarely, 2-sometimes and 3- often). The social anxiety subscale was used to assess the presence of symptoms related to social anxiety. The MASC-2 was shown to be a valid and reliable measure for this population (Fracarro, Stelnicki, & Nordstokke, 2015; March, 2013). For the current sample, the MASC-2 was shown to have excellent reliability (α = .90).

*The Gatehouse Bullying Scale* (GBS; Bond, Wolfe, Tollit, Butler, & Patton, 2007) is a 12-item measure designed to assess four forms of bullying victimization (e.g., teasing, rumor spreading, exclusion, and physical harm). The presence of bullying victimization is assessed with questions such as “Has anyone spread rumors about you recently?” and participants can respond either 0 “no” or 1 “yes.” Those who respond “yes” can indicate frequency of bullying (1–most
days, 2- about once a week, and 3 –less than once a week) and how upset they were (1- not at all, 2- a bit, and 3- I was quite upset). The measure consists of four subscales that correspond to each form of bullying and all four scales can be combined to create a composite score of bullying victimization. The GBS was shown to have good reliability in the current sample ($\alpha = .83$).

The racial centrality and private regard subscales from *The Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity* (MIBI; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) were used to assess ERI. Racial centrality assesses the degree to which an individual defines him or herself with regards to race, and how much race is a part of the self-concept. Items within this subscale include “In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image” and “I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people.” The private regard subscale assesses an individual’s evaluative judgments of his or her race. It reflects how positive or negative one feels towards the Black population and their membership in that group. The measure includes items such as “I feel good about Black people” and “I feel that Blacks have made major accomplishments and advancements.” Participants indicate their responses using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree.” Both scales represent separate dimensions of ethnic/racial identity and should not be used to create a composite score. For the current sample, the MIBI was shown to have adequate-poor reliability ($\alpha = .67$).

**Results**

**Acting White**

All 31 participants (100%) indicated that they received the acting White accusation either directly, indirectly, or both. Results indicate 16 of 31 participants were accused indirectly only, one participant was accused only directly, and 14 of 31 were accused both directly and indirectly. The most commonly endorsed items on the questionnaire were “Kids around me say I
talk proper” \((n=23)\), “Kids around me look at me differently because I want to make something of myself” \((n=22)\), “Kids around me say I’m full of myself or bigheaded” \((n=17)\), “People around me say I listen to White music” \((n=16)\), and “Have you ever been accused of acting White?” \((n=15)\). See table 1 for a summary of full results. A composite bother score was calculated using SPSS software by averaging the amount of bother indicated for each form of the accusation that is received. If an individual endorsed five different acting White accusations then the bother scores associated with each were averaged to create a composite bother score. The composite bother scores ranged from 1 to 3.6 \((M=1.6, SD=0)\).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items Endorsed</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Frequency Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Bother Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk proper</td>
<td>(n =23)</td>
<td>4.2 (1.5)</td>
<td>1.4 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to make something of myself</td>
<td>(n = 22)</td>
<td>3.6 (1.6)</td>
<td>2.1 (1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full of myself or bigheaded</td>
<td>(n = 17)</td>
<td>3.4 (1.7)</td>
<td>1.4 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to White music</td>
<td>(n = 16)</td>
<td>3.6 (1.8)</td>
<td>1.5 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accused of acting White</td>
<td>(n =15)</td>
<td>1.0 (0.0)*</td>
<td>2.3 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take pride in myself</td>
<td>(n = 14)</td>
<td>3.6 (1.6)</td>
<td>1.2 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Black hobbies</td>
<td>(n = 12)</td>
<td>3.3 (1.7)</td>
<td>1.8 (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to use big words</td>
<td>(n = 12)</td>
<td>4.1 (1.7)</td>
<td>1.8 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress preppy</td>
<td>(n = 9)</td>
<td>2.8 (1.1)</td>
<td>1.2 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to class every day</td>
<td>(n = 8)</td>
<td>4.1 (1.7)</td>
<td>1.9 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit at lunch table with different races</td>
<td>(n = 8)</td>
<td>3.9 (1.9)</td>
<td>2.0 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In honors courses</td>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
<td>3.4 (1.5)</td>
<td>1.1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to go to college</td>
<td>(n = 7)</td>
<td>3.4 (1.3)</td>
<td>1.1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities are not Black activities</td>
<td>(n = 6)</td>
<td>3.0 (1.7)</td>
<td>1.2 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because of friends, I’m not Black enough  
Get good grades  
Parents make a lot of money  
Study too much

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because of friends, I’m not Black enough</td>
<td>$n = 6$</td>
<td>$3.5 (2.0)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get good grades</td>
<td>$n = 6$</td>
<td>$3.5 (1.8)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents make a lot of money</td>
<td>$n = 6$</td>
<td>$5.0 (1.7)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study too much</td>
<td>$n = 4$</td>
<td>$4.0 (1.4)$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Total $n = 31$; * denotes yes/no response (1=yes, 2=no).

Anxiety

Social anxiety symptoms were assessed using the social anxiety subscale of the MASC-2. Participant scores ranged from 35 to 75 ($M=45.8$, $SD=10.1$) with 40 indicating average levels and 70 indicating elevated levels of social anxiety.

Bullying

Twenty of 31 (64%) participants endorsed some form of bullying victimization. Each subscale of the GBS ranges from 0 to 3 with 0 indicating the absence of bullying victimization and 3 indicating the most severe bullying victimization. All 31 participant scores ranged from 0 to 3 on the teasing subscale ($M=0.8$, $SD=1.2$), rumor spreading subscale ($M=0.6$, $SD=1.1$), exclusion subscale ($M=0.9$, $SD=1.3$), physical harm subscale ($M=0.7$, $SD=1.2$), and the composite bullying score across all subscale ($M=0.8$, $SD=0.8$).

ERI

Scores on racial centrality and private regard can range from 8 to 56 and 6 to 42, respectively. Participant scores on centrality ranged from 24 to 53 ($M=39.2$, $SD=7.2$) while scores on private regard ranged from 29 to 42 ($M=37.2$, $SD=4.4$). See Table 2 for a summary of results.

Table 2  
Participant score range and mean of each measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

A series of linear regressions were conducted to assess the relationships between variables in this study. The first analysis examined the relationship between the bother composite variable and social anxiety. Results suggest bother was significantly associated with social anxiety, $\beta = .53$, $t(29) = 3.37$, $p < .01$. These findings indicate that higher levels of bother experienced when receiving the accusation were associated with higher levels of social anxiety. Furthermore, bother accounted for 28% of the variance in this model ($R^2 = .28$).

It is possible that after receiving multiple forms of the accusation, one in particular could be more bothersome than others; thus a composite may not be an accurate representation of how bothered one is by the accusation. A second analysis was conducted to determine if the highest level of bother for each participant regardless of which accusation was received was associated with social anxiety. Examining the highest level of bother eliminates the possibility of lower bother scores attenuating the mean. Results indicate the highest bother score for each participant
was significantly associated with social anxiety, $\beta = .55$, $t(29) = 3.57$, $p < .01$. This suggests higher bother scores were associated with higher levels of social anxiety. Bother accounted for 30% of the variance in this model ($R^2 = .30$).

Given that many individuals describe the accusation as a bullying experience, a linear regression was conducted to explore the relationship between the two variables. Results indicate that bother was significantly associated with bullying victimization, $\beta = .47$, $t(29) = 2.87$, $p < .01$. This indicates that higher bother scores were associated with higher levels of bullying victimization. Moreover, bother accounted for 22% of the variance ($R^2 = .22$).

It is possible that frequency of the accusation is associated with bullying victimization. If an adolescent encounters the accusation frequently, they may perceive this as a bullying experience. A linear regression was conducted to examine the relationship between the frequency of the accusation and bullying victimization. Results indicate that frequency was positively associated with bullying, $\beta = .36$, $t(29) = 2.10$, $p < .05$. This finding indicates that higher frequencies of the accusation were associated with more bullying experiences. Within this model, frequency accounted for 13% of the variance ($R^2 = .13$).

A multiple regression, with racial centrality and private regard as independent variables and bother as the dependent variable, was conducted to explore the relationship between ethnic/racial identity and the acting White accusation. Results suggest private regard and racial centrality were not significantly associated with bother when receiving the acting White accusation.

Finally, a multiple regression with social anxiety, bullying, racial centrality, and racial regard as independent variables and bother as the dependent variable was conducted. Results indicate social anxiety and bullying victimization accounted for 41% of the variance in this
model \(R^2 = .41\). Social anxiety, \(\beta = .42, t(26) = 2.69, p \leq .01\), and bullying victimization, \(\beta = .32, t(26) = 2.02, p \leq .05\), were significantly associated with bother. The racial centrality and racial regard variables were not significantly related to bother.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Bother</th>
<th>Social anxiety</th>
<th>Centrality</th>
<th>Private regard</th>
<th>Bullying</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>-.146</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>.363*</td>
<td>.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bother</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.531**</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>.471**</td>
<td>-.172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social anxiety</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>.531**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>-.086</td>
<td>.328</td>
<td>-.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality</td>
<td>-.146</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.495**</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>-.294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private regard</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>-.086</td>
<td>.495**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.061</td>
<td>-.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>.363*</td>
<td>.471**</td>
<td>.328</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>-.061</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.454*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>-.172</td>
<td>-.239</td>
<td>-.294</td>
<td>-.079</td>
<td>-.454*</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Discussion**

It is important to highlight that all participants in this sample received the accusation at some point either directly, indirectly, or both, suggesting that it is highly relevant to this population. Many adolescents and adults who recount instances of being accused of acting White recall the negative impact it had on them in the past and present. Some individuals have described the accusation as a form of race-based or intra-racial bullying and have expressed concerns about interacting with their Black peers. Lacking in the research was the quantitative evidence to suggest that the accusation is a form of bullying that may have implications beyond
just teasing. How often an adolescent receives the accusation and how bothered they are by it is important for understanding the psychological implications of the accusation.

The results of this study indicate that the acting White accusation was significantly associated with social anxiety symptoms; higher levels of bother were associated with higher levels of social anxiety symptoms. These findings support the qualitative data that highlight the fears of peer interaction for those who have been accused of acting White. The psychological discomfort experienced when being accused by fellow Black peers could lead to fears of interacting with those same individuals. The accusation was also significantly associated with bullying victimization, which could suggest the more an adolescent experiences the accusation and the more bothered he or she is by it, the more victimized they feel as a result. However, because no causal relationship can be determined, the findings could indicate that those who are victimized more often for various reasons experience the accusation more frequently and are more bothered. The latter explanation suggests that the nature of peer victimization causes more bother and higher frequency. Future studies should consider exploring further implications of the accusation given that it is linked to bullying victimization. Bogart et al. (2014) found that past and present bullying victimization was associated with poorer mental and physical health. It is plausible to hypothesize that constant bullying in the form of the accusation could lead to poorer health outcomes for adolescents. Results also indicate that bullying and social anxiety accounted for 41% of the variance in bother. This finding provides better insight to what adolescents may truly be experiencing when they say they are bothered by the accusation.

Given that the accusation is embedded in ERI, a surprising finding was that neither racial centrality nor private regard was significantly associated with the accusation. It was hypothesized that higher ethnic identity would serve as a buffer for the accusation. However,
because most participants fell within higher ranges of ERI, the lack of significance can be due to little variability within this sample. Also, the MIBI was shown to have questionable reliability in this sample, which could have contributed to the lack of significance.

The present study sought to explore the relationship between the acting White accusation, bullying victimization, social anxiety, and ERI. Prior to this exploration, no other studies utilized a quantitative approach to understand the relationship between the accusation, social anxiety, and bullying. Given that this study is the first, the findings have major implications for how the accusation is conceptualized in research and how clinicians, teachers, administrators, and counselors proceed when working with Black youth who have experienced the accusation.

Limitations

The present study consists only of female participants. Future studies should explore the link between the acting White accusation and bullying victimization in a sample including males. Also, participants were primarily from predominantly Black, urban neighborhoods and this may have implications for the frequency and amount of bother experienced when receiving the accusation. Future studies should include individuals from various socioeconomic statuses and geographic locations. Furthermore, the AWA may be even more distressing for those who are in higher socioeconomic statuses and in ethnically diverse settings, given that racially diverse peer groups and high SES are associated with receiving the accusation.
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