

Perceptions of “Acting Black” Among African American Teens: Implications of Racial Dramaturgy for Academic and Social Achievement

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Content analysis of 56 African American high school students' descriptions of the meaning of “acting Black” revealed five underlying content dimensions: (1) academic/scholastic, (2) aesthetic/stylistic, (3) behavioral, (4) dispositional, and (5) impressionistic. With the exception of the qualities in the aesthetic/stylistic category, the respondents attributed primarily negative qualities to “acting Black.” Although Black youths' perspectives on “acting White” has been a topic of great interest among those concerned about the academic achievement gap between Black and White youths, results of the present study suggest that the quest to improve academic and social achievement among African American youths will need to focus on altering youths' definitions of “acting Black.”

KEY WORDS: acting Black; acting White; racial identity and achievement; identity politics; dramaturgy of race.

For more than 15 years, the empirical research and popular culture arenas have resounded in discussion of the “acting White” hypothesis—the contention that many African American youths avoid academic achievement because of a peer culture that declares academic achievement a White

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domain and that negatively labels achievement-related behaviors as “acting White.”

Steinberg (1996) and Jencks and Phillips (1998) contend that the achievement disparities that exist between Black and White youths are in part due to many Black youths’ presumption that academic success is incompatible with Black identity. In one of the more frequently cited studies about Black students’ racial perceptions and achievement attitudes, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) concluded that the “acting White” concept leads many high achieving Black youths to experience achievement dissonance—the sense that their achievement is racially inappropriate—and that the concept allows under-performing youths to attribute their failures to race loyalty. Similarly, Ford (1994) reported that some African American youths, repeatedly exposed to conditions of underachievement among African Americans, assume academic achievement to be a White domain and thus avoid committing themselves to sustained achievement behaviors that might link them to “White” pursuits.

Ogbu (1985), in another frequently cited study, argued that many Black youths and other involuntary minorities often opt out of achievement quests because they believe that even if they accept and conform to all societal achievement demands, their conformity will not necessarily afford them access to any greater opportunities or resources. Steinberg (1996) argues against Ogbu’s claim, contending instead that many Black youths opt out of academic achievement not because they believe that achievement will provide no positive rewards, but because they often underestimate the negative consequences of failing to achieve.

Kunjufu (1985) concluded that some urban Black youths concealed their academic achievements from their peers because they feared that peers would label their achievement behaviors as “acting White.” He found students who felt compelled to choose between being popular among peers and demonstrating the level of academic performance that school officials would respect. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that some Black youths attempted to please both peers and teachers by displaying achievement behaviors to please teachers and class clown behaviors to appease peers. Similarly, Steinberg (1996) concluded that many Black students felt forced to choose between being accepted by peers and performing well in school. Collins-Eaglin and Karabenick (1993), although not finding that the Black students felt a lack of peer support for achievement, did find that some Black youths, in the attempt to avoid the “acting White” label, avoided seeking needed academic help, which increased their chances of academic failure.

Although the “acting White” hypothesis is a highly popular explanation for low achievement among Black students, some researchers question whether this hypothesis truly explains the Black–White achievement gap.