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# Acting White Among Black College Students: A Phenomenological Study of Social Constructions of Race

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ACTING WHITE AMONG BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF RACE

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Evette L. Allen

August 2014

Advisor: Ryan Evely Gildersleeve, Ph.D.

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### Abstract

This study was a qualitative examination of Black college students' experiences with the Acting White label. In conducting this study, two gaps in literature were addressed: (1) the lack of literature on Black college students and the acting white label, and (2) lack of attention to a US racial history and current structures which allow a label such as "acting white" to exist. Thus, the purpose of this study was to call attention to the experiences of Black college students as it relates to the acting white label. Additionally, the study calls attention to social constructions that allow the acting white label to exist and to be sustained. Data was collected from 14 Black college students at a predominantly white, private, liberal arts university in the west.

Based on responses from students in the study, Black college students do hear that they are acting white. Yet, their reaction to hearing the label does not cause them to underachieve academically, but does have an impact on their social actions. The ways in which Black college students in the study were labeled as acting white was based on academic pursuits, speech patterns, dress, and hobbies. Student reactions to the label ranged from ignoring the label to challenging the accuser. In regards to how the acting white label is sustained, students in the study expressed that they learned what it meant to act white or black from family interactions, social interactions and observations from family and friends, and from media sources. It was concluded that Black college students,

despite reactions, do hear the label and that the label seems to be used as a means to attack Black students and their identity.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This study is a qualitative examination of Black college students' experiences with the label, "acting white," or notions that they are not acting in accordance with their own race. Within this study, I seek to offer an understanding of how Black college students understand the acting white label and the implications this label has for how students understand what it means to "be Black" or to "be White." In addition, attention is given to the social contexts and situations that contribute to students' understanding of actions prescribed for individuals who identify as Black and individuals who identify as White. To move forward with this endeavor, an understanding of previous literature on acting white is important.

The acting white label and its impact on Black students has been a topic of discussion as early as 1970, beginning with an article by McArdle and Young (1970). However, the notion of acting white gained increasing popularity after Fordham and Ogbu (1986) published a paper titled "Black Students and School Success: Coping With the Burden of Acting White." These scholars argued that the "burden of acting white" has to do with a tension between academic performance and racial identity, and that accusations of acting white are one reason, among others, that Black high school students underachieve. Since these initial studies, many scholars have studied the label in an attempt to find out how students react to it and how it affects Black students' overall academic achievement. Additionally, the idea that Black students underachieve based

solely on accusations of acting white (rather than viewing accusations of acting white as just one reason Black students underachieve) has become, for researchers, the subject of much scrutiny of the Fordham and Ogbu piece. In the midst of such articles, there seems to be a huge concentration on whether or not the label exists and how it affects students. These two topics are important; however, a discussion of what allows the label to exist in the first place may provide valuable information in challenging this stereotype as well as negating some of the effects it has on students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The United States is a racialized society, which has implications for how individuals are treated in society based simply on their race. Within the United States, *race* has been used to grant benefits to one set of individuals over another set of individuals. Specifically, individuals with lighter skin and European backgrounds have been given privilege over individuals who have darker skin. How these groups are treated in society is directly related to the social constructions that have developed over time, based on their noted race. These social constructions have become the unwritten rules that describe how individuals should act, dress, or speak, among other things. The term, acting white, is socially constructed, and its use represents one way in which unreal racial prescriptions become reality within U.S. society.

Acting white is a label used to address individuals' actions, most often those of Black students who are acting in ways that have been deemed actions reserved for White people. For example, students discuss being labeled as acting white based on how they dress or talk, or for academic endeavors (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Sohn, 2011). These accusations have been noted to have negative effects

on Black students (Murray, 2011; Neal-Barnett, 2001), but there are also Black individuals who are resilient to such notions of acting white (Ogbu, 2004). Much is known about how students define the idea of acting white and how some students are affected by hearing that they are acting white. However, information on how students come to understand what it means to act white is limited. A few researchers have alluded to societal structures (Buck, 2010; Tyson, 2006) that may contribute to this understanding for students, but there is no known study to address this factor in depth. As examples of societal factors that allow the label, acting white, to exist, some researchers have discussed exposure to situations that lead students to believe that doing well in school is reserved for White students (Buck, 2010; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) or situations that indicate there is limited social and economic mobility for Black individuals (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Sohn, 2011).

In this vein, some, I dare not say all, students are confining themselves to certain actions based on the socially and culturally prescribed characteristics of race, which has led to a collective identity for some Black individuals in the United States in which a member of the Black community can be shunned when his or her actions are not in line with this socially constructed racial identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Therefore, I argue that the continuing conversations on acting white should address a society that privileges “whiteness,” and how this preference has implications for the way Black students are expected to act within society. In the same way that racism will not go away if we ignore it, stereotypes about Black individuals will continue to cycle if they are not addressed. If just one person recognizes his or her racial bias when using the term, acting white, that in itself will help move the cause forward.

## **Redefining Acting White**

Scholars have advanced research on acting white by using such labels as the “acting white accusation” (AWA) (see Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray, & Demmings, 2009) and acting white in general (see Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Harpalani, 2002). Within this paper, I group into what I term, acting white, all conceptualizations that deal either with Black students and socially prescribed norms of racial behavior or with Black students whose behavior is not in accordance with social definitions for a particular race. I am aware of the varying critiques involving how acting white has been used in the past, and it is my understanding that these critiques are present to challenge notions that Black students underachieve based on accusations of acting white. My study is not based on this hypothesis, but rather, the term, acting white, itself. The acting white hypothesis is debatable; however, the fact that students hear the label is the focus here.

The term acting white is problematic because it send the message that there are certain behaviors reserved for White individuals, which Black people or other People of Color should not access. In this study, I use the term, acting white, as a label to discuss social constructions of race; however I am in no way advocating that students who hear the label underachieve based on the label. Whereas I do not believe that Black students underachieve based on this label, I do believe that students hear this label—a label that exists based on social constructions. Using the label and literature on the social construction of race, I seek to have a conversation about why achievement, certain types of dress, or speech are positively associated with White individuals, whereas negative versions of these topics are associated with Black individuals.

## Purpose and Research Questions

Because the acting white phenomenon has been most researched as it pertains to Black students and academic achievement (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Toldson & Owens, 2010), specifically Black students in K-12 settings, with little attention to where or how the label derives, this area begs further research. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation was to investigate Black college students' experiences with the acting white label as well as the social contexts and situations that allow the label to exist. Although there are mixed results regarding student achievement and the acting white label, it was not my primary intention to prove whether or not the label exists or if Black college students underachieve based on the acting white label. Whereas the existence of the label and underachievement may be topics that students in the study expressed, the sole concentration was on their overall experience and social constructions contributing to their understanding of acting white. Whether or not students underachieve based on accusations, evidence has shown that the label does exist. Thus, I approached the study with the understanding that acting white is a *socially constructed* term with *real* consequences and/or reactions. Two research questions were investigated:

- Research Question 1

What are the racialized experiences of Black college students, specifically in regards to accusations of acting white?

This research question allowed an exploration of the stereotypes that Black students may be challenged to adhere to while pursuing their college degree. Although there is a great deal of literature on Black students in K-12 in relation to the acting white

label, as noted above, such literature is not as prevalent when considering Black college students. Hence, there is little understanding of how Black college students understand, experience, and react to the acting white label. With its focus on the acting white label and Black college students, data that addressed this first question adds to current literature on acting white.

- Research Question 2

What are the contexts or situations that have contributed to Black college students' understanding of what it means to be White or Black?

Certain studies have alluded to the larger social structures that have contributed to students' understanding of what it means to act white or act black in an academic realm (see Buck, 2010 and Tyson, 2006). A good example is the idea that students are more likely to perceive advanced classes as reserved for White students when they see only White students or a majority of White students in those classes (Tyson, 2006). Although researchers have touched on these larger institutional factors that contribute to students' understanding of race in academics, I find two factors missing: First, larger social structures have not been considered as a central unit of investigation nor have they been explored on a deeper level. Second, acknowledgement of larger social structures and how they contribute to students' understanding of how to act based on their race is mainly within academics.

There is little attention to topics outside of academics that are affected by larger social structures. Yet, consider how students are labeled as acting white not only for academic achievement but also for how they dress (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Neal-Barnett,

2001) or how they speak (Carter, 2006; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), among other things. In this vein, the second research question served as an effective way to gain both a deeper understanding of the social structures that contribute to students' understanding of acting white or acting black within academics, as well as a deeper understanding of how students think about non-academic actions and race based on the social structures to which they are exposed. In order to effectively examine the above research questions, the phenomenon of acting white was approached in two ways: first, as a *real* thing that has *real* consequences for those who are accused of acting white, but also as something that is developed based on social interaction. Below, I briefly discuss the theoretical framework and conceptual framework used in the study. Together, these two frameworks allowed the acting white label to exist from multiple angles.

### **Frameworks**

Based on the nature in which I sought to investigate the experiences of Black college students, the phenomenon of acting white needed the flexibility to be discussed as a real thing with real consequences as well as discussed with attention to the ways in which the term is socially constructed. To this end, the theoretical framework, social constructionism, provided an appropriate lens through which to explore Black college students' experiences with the acting white label as well as the contexts and social structures that allow the label to exist. The conceptual framework, acting white, allowed discussion of the overarching theme of one aspect of the racialized experiences of Black college students. Using key components of the acting white literature as the conceptual framework allowed me to discuss the racialized experiences of Black college students through an acting white lens. For the purposes of this study, key components of the acting

white literature have henceforth been referred to simply as the acting white framework. In addition, using findings from studies on acting white as a major body of literature offered a background regarding how the label has been used and studied in the past, as well as the real effects that have been proven to be associated with the label.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Constructionism**

*Social constructionism* is a term that refers to perspectives that regard how social life is socially created. In other words, human beings produce society through their actions, and social constructionists view society as a creation rather than viewing society as something given (Marshall, 1998). The social constructionism theory is an interpretive theory, which means that the theory in part focuses on analyzing social actions and is linked to a postmodern perspective.

The two terms, constructivism and constructionism, are sometimes used interchangeably (Andrews, 2012; Burr, 1995), but there are scholars who have argued that there are vast differences between the two ideas. *Constructivism* deals with individuals and how individuals actively create the world in which they live, whereas *constructionism* deals with broader social ideas and discourses (Burr, 2003).

Constructivism and constructionism differ in two distinct ways: “in the extent to which the individual is seen as an agent who is in control of the construction process, and in the extent to which our constructions are the product of social forces, either structural or interactional” (Burr, 2003, p. 20). In sum, constructivism has an individual focus whereas constructionism has a social focus (Andrews, 2012). To acknowledge constructionist perspectives means that people understand how thoughts and ideas create specific realities. Further, the world cannot exist without the critical thoughts (Burr, 1995),



cultural specifications (Burr, 1995), shared constructions (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006), and social relations (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006) of the people who create them.

Social constructionism is very broad (Lock & Strong, 2010) and stems from a number of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, and linguistics (Burr, 2003). Burr (2003) has done an amazing job of articulating the major influences of social constructionism. Such influences include the enlightenment period, postmodernism, sociology, and psychology. According to Burr, the enlightenment period had a significant influence on social constructionist thought, as individuals moved away from a concentration on God and the church to a concentration on issues of the individual, truth, and morality based on objective inquiry. Because postmodernism came with ideas of rejecting an ultimate truth and structuralism, social constructionist thought rejects grand theories and essentialism (Burr, 2003). Further, Burr attributed ideas from scholars in the fields of sociology and psychology as major contributions to social constructionism: from the field of sociology (e.g., Kant, Nietzsche, and Marx), the idea that knowledge is a part of human thought, and from psychology (e.g., Gergen), the idea that knowledge is context specific (Burr, 2003).

Although social constructionism stems from many areas, there are common tenets that piece the ideas of social construction together. Such tenets include (a) how meaning is derived through human interaction and language (Lock & Strong, 2010; Velody & Williams, 1998), (b) an understanding that meaning making and understanding are context based (Burr, 2003, Harris, 2010; Lock & Strong, 2010; Ore, 2009), (c) anti-essentialism (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010, Ore, 2009), and (d) the critical evaluating

of knowledge and social processes (Burr, 2003, Lock & Strong, 2010; Ore, 2009; Velody & Williams, 1998).

First, looking at how meaning is derived from human activities, a central concern is how language provides a background of meaning for individuals (Lock & Strong, 2010). Language is learned from human interaction, and thus, meaning and understanding are derived from human interaction. Language affects how things get constructed (Burr, 2003). To gain a mutual understanding of human activities, individuals place labels on actions. Thus, language and how individuals understand it constitute a huge part of how meaning and understanding exist in the social world. For example, different languages can pose different meanings, indicating that individuals most likely understand and can make meaning of a language spoken in their native tongue, whereas language that is spoken in a foreign tongue is tougher to decipher (Lock & Strong, 2010). In essence, the words that individuals recognize impact their understanding of the world as well as how they interact with others. Nevertheless, just because individuals speak the same language does not mean that a mutual understanding is reached from a conversation. When entering into dialogue with others, individuals must ask questions and continue discussing a concept until a mutual understanding is reached (Lock & Strong, 2010). Ultimately, language is a central piece to how individuals understand one another and the situations within their surroundings (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010).

Second, ways of understanding are context based (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010). This implies that the way individuals understand or interpret events can vary over time and in different settings. Consider a student who has a quiet demeanor in a classroom and is asked to share his or her opinion about the topic. If this student's

understanding of classroom behavior is that the instructor is the sole authority in the classroom and it is disrespectful to challenge an instructor, then this student will be leery to speak in class. It is not until this student and the instructor discuss classroom expectations that the student understands the expectations within the course, and the instructor understands the perspective of the student. Additionally, forms of knowledge are socially and historically relevant. For example, culture and language can play a part in understanding terms as well as the meaning of language over time. This, in turn, affects individuals' understanding based on context. In short, people may understand the world differently based on culture, beliefs, contexts, and situations.

Third, within social constructionism, there is no objective truth to be found (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010). Individuals come to know the world and how to act within it based on social interactions and meaning derived from those interactions. There is no set way of knowing, waiting for individuals to understand. However, based on the ways in which individuals understand the world, objective realities can appear to exist (Cunliffe, 2008; Harris, 2010). One of the ways in which a social construction appears to be a social reality is when the order and value of things and identities appear to be essential or the natural order of things. Thus, the idea of essentialism affects how the world is ordered and the value placed on things within the world (Ore, 2009). Social constructionists reject the idea of essentialism.

Fourth, critically evaluating knowledge and social processes is an important piece of social constructionism, because social constructionists question what is known to be true in society (Burr, 2003). A critical approach begs questions in search of who has established claims of truth, as well as who is harmed and who gains from certain claims

of truth (Lock & Strong, 2010). Challenging and questioning assumptions and awareness of personal standpoints help individuals become critical thinkers and arrive at their own conclusions and develop their own ideas (Ore, 2009). Using this critical lens, there are political possibilities within social constructionism, such as the emergence of social inquiry for the purpose of a social movement (Velody & Williams, 1998), for example, attention to how an oppressed group is defined through social interaction and attention to how those definitions are maintained through social interaction. Using social constructionism as political power, this group would be interested in reformulating the discourse on their identity (Velody & Williams, 1998). Further, the language that individuals use can be seen as a form of social action because realities can get constructed via conversations (Burr, 2003). Individuals should be conscious of the power in what is said. Overall, social constructionism can carry a critical perspective with the intent to reveal political power and institutional operations that work to benefit some while marginalizing others (Lock & Strong, 2010).

Because there are broad beliefs that characterize social constructionism, some scholars have distinguished types of social constructionism (Burr, 2003; Harris, 2010), with the understanding that not all constructionists hold the same view on foundations or concepts of social constructionism (Velody & Williams, 1998). Micro and macro social constructionism deal with the differences between individual-level constructions and institutional-level constructions, respectively (Burr, 2003). *Micro social constructionism* is a concentration on interaction between a few individuals and the meanings that occur from those small interactions (Burr, 2003). Consider an individual who hears, through a conversation with another, that it is not proper for a young lady to major in engineering.

Through this interaction, one individual has just upheld a definition, and the other has learned of a gender construction. Although conversations are one way in which individuals perpetuate constructions on an individual level, this micro level can also be maintained through individual-level observations. *Macro social constructionism* deals more with large structures and institutional policies and practices (Burr, 2003). Using the above example, concentration would be on the larger policies and practices that contribute to a lack of women within engineering fields.

Harris (2010) discussed a distinction between *interpretive social constructionism* (ISC) and *objective social constructionism* (OSC). ISC scholars would argue that meanings are not inherent and are created via social interaction amongst individuals (Harris, 2010). ISC is not concerned with the reality of things, but rather, how meaning is created. Harris used the example of a construction worker in the sense that an interpretive constructionist understands that people are construction workers who create the meanings in society. The labor of a construction worker (individuals in society) consists of building meaning while in conversation and/or interaction with others. OSC deals with the creation of real things. An objective social constructionist would hold the belief that those things that are seen and experienced within society are real rather than an interpretation (Harris, 2010).

Social constructionism has been used in many areas to challenge language and practices that oppress and devalue marginalized identities (Burr, 2003). Using the acting white label as an example, an ISC view would be that the acting white label is not real, but rather something that has derived from conversations with others. Further, from this perspective, the acting white label is only understood because someone placed meaning

on it. In this sense, acting white could very well mean one thing in one context while holding a very different meaning in another context. An OSC view on the acting white label would be the thought that the acting white label is a very real concept. In viewing the label as a tangible thing, OSC is more concerned with the causes of behavior and why behavior occurs. So in the case of acting white, an OSC scholar would seek to find out *why* individuals use the acting white label. Overall, ISC is more concerned with how things within society are viewed and described and how individuals define what something means. OSC is concerned with how real tangible things are created and why people engage in certain real actions. The two perspectives—ISC and OSC—converge when those who hold ISC views agree that meaning making can lead to real tangible things and when those who hold OSC views agree that real tangible things can be affected by their meaning.

In regards to the acting white phenomenon, the social constructionist theory helped with an understanding of how students' realities of what constitutes acting white have been constructed through social interactions. Using the four broad categories discussed above (meaning derived from human activity, meaning as context based, no objective truth, and critical evaluation of knowledge), attention to language and meaning assisted the researcher in examining how language used by and towards students affected their realities. The reality of a student who is often said to act white might appear different than a student who has never heard the label. With the premise that meaning and understanding are rooted in social interactions and shared agreements, social constructionism provided a lens to review the social interactions that might contribute to

notions of acting white, as well as how social interactions might shape shared agreements on what it means to act white.

If ways of understanding are context based, the ways in which Black college students understand the acting white label could vary from those of Black students in contexts that have been studied extensively (i.e., students in K-12 settings). Further, within social constructionism, scholars have often declared that there is no objective truth to be found (Burr, 2003). In regards to race, a social constructionist would argue that race is not an objective truth to be found—one does not find out how to act white or act black. Rather, notions of what it means to act white or act black derive from social interactions with others. Finally, social constructionism has a critical perspective that can be used to highlight institutional and social forms of power that serve to disenfranchise groups of people. In the context of acting white, social constructionism can be used to highlight power imbalances that contribute to definitions of acting white or acting black, or structures that uphold inequitable definitions of what it means to act black or act white.

Individuals are not born with an indication of what it means to be Black or White (Ore, 2009) but develop such definitions from the meanings they learn throughout life. With specific attention to how social constructionism affects conceptions of race and appropriate race behaviors, a small section on the social construction of race is provided below.

**Social constructions of race.** Machery and Faucher (2005) posited that social construction in the context of race is “the belief that a classification based on skin color and other skin-deep properties like body shape or hair style maps onto meaningful important biological kinds” (p. 1208). The above quote identifies how skin color has been

used in the United States to determine what innate behaviors an individual should exhibit. As an example, individuals with darker skin, kinky hair, and curvy features have been identified as less valuable in society (Kolchin, 2002) and thus associated with such characteristics as a feeble mind and being inarticulate. The mistake of associating race with biology rather than something socially constructed creates ideas about how certain races should act in society. Such ideas are not an accident and have come from years of systemic oppression, privilege, and discourse. For years, the discourse on race was related to eugenics and keeping the white race pure (Selden, 2010). Families were encouraged to take tests to identify how pure they were, and students were even instructed on such discourses in U.S. classrooms (Selden, 2010). However, it has been proven that there is more variability within races than between races (Lewontin, 1972). Regardless, such discourses have led to white privilege and oppression of non-Whites, which still exists today.

Because whiteness is privileged in U.S. society, non-Whites are deemed inferior, thus racializing identities that are not in line with the dominant group, White people (Applebaum, 2003). As a result the basis for what is good and right comes from observing the dominant group, white people. Thus, as individuals look to understand what race is outside of white individuals, it is done so by also measuring and defining what it is not (Applebaum, 2003; Pope-Davis & Liu, 2007). Race then becomes good versus bad, right versus wrong, and us versus them (Williams, 1999). For example, the Black students who are labeled as acting white are labeled such because actions reserved for Black individuals in U.S. society are in direct opposition to White individuals; and



when those stereotypes for Black individuals are not reinforced through Black students' actions, they are accused of acting white.

Who is raced and what race means changes over time (Burkholder, 2012; Omi & Winant, 1994). As an example, Dickerson (2005) discussed the media coverage of hurricane Katrina and how blackness can become a media construct based on what is demonstrated on media channels. Dickerson pointed to images of Blacks as dirty, poor, and inarticulate, whereas White individuals were framed as finding food to support their family or staying in the neighborhood to protect their neighbors and family. Therefore, although all Black people are not poor or inarticulate, Dickerson used media examples from hurricane Katrina to exemplify how easily such images of a group of people are constructed. Another example involves journals for teachers. As Black teaching journals began to publish articles on race and racial equality, there were a good number of white teaching journals that did not call attention to new biological discussions on definitions of race (Burkholder, 2012). Such an example points to how language or lack thereof affects how individuals understand society.

The complications of race as socially constructed are also apparent, as multiracial individuals struggle with stereotypes about the races they embody (Ruebeck, Averett, & Bodenhorn, 2009). In this vein, multiracial students challenge traditional understandings of race in U.S. society (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007). Placing value on one group over another does not make that particular group inferior; but such values do affect the experiences of inferiority for those individuals who are assigned less value (Ore, 2009). Consider how social value is placed on one speech style over another (Anderson, 2008). Specifically, consider Black English vernacular versus standard English.

Machery and Faucher (2005) further posited that a social construction of race is “a pseudo-biological concept that has been used to justify and rationalize the unequal treatment of groups of people by others” (p. 1208). In other words, social constructionists would argue that race goes beyond biological determination and is shaped by certain norms within society. Although social constructionists would argue that these characteristics are based on social interactions and constructions, the constant viewing of people with darker skin in poorer and less educated states can make these social constructions appear as realities. This transformation of social constructions into realities allows social stratification in which individuals are ranked based on socially constructed identities (Ore, 2009).

In the case of Black students’ acting white, social constructions pressure these students to act in ways learned from societal interactions, with acting white often having a positive connotation, and acting black, a negative connotation. Such categories of difference become the roots of inequality (Ore, 2009). In this vein, one identity is valued over another, which leads to inequality in societal and interpersonal instances. The issue with projected social constructions of race within the United States is the power of whiteness and white privilege, because whiteness becomes internalized within the minds of many Americans (Arai & Kivel, 2009). Whiteness becomes the norm and area of superiority and power within the society, and thus the ideal identity (Butterworth, 2007). Thus acting white is conceptualized as good and the goal to reach, whereas acting black can be seen as something of which to rid the self. In regards to the acting white label, the social constructionist theory helped with an understanding of how students’ ideas of

academic excellence or other characteristics may be based on what they view as appropriate for their race.

### **Conceptual Framework: Acting White**

Acting white as a conceptual framework highlighted key components that were used to assess Black college students' racialized experiences on a college campus as it relates to race acting. These components include (a) behaviors associated with acting white: acting white in academics, acting white in speech, acting white in dress, and acting white with hobbies; (b) manifestations of acting white: acting white and gender, acting white and context, and acting white and racial identity; and (c) reactions to the acting white label. The areas above represent the three major themes that emerged from the literature on acting white, as discussed below.

**Acting white and behaviors.** First, *acting white in academics* refers to students who are labeled, acting white, based on high standards in school. Examples can include students in advanced placement courses (Neal-Barnett, 2001) or students who make good grades (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fryer & Torelli, 2010; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). Second, *acting white in speech* signifies an individual who speaks proper English (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009). Such an individual, for example, does not speak slang or curse and chooses words, such as flick, to describe going to see a movie (Bergin & Cooks, 1995). Third, *acting white in dress* is used to describe students who, for example, dress preppy versus wearing sagging pants (Neal-Barnett, 2001; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). Also, students who have been labeled as acting white for the way they dress may wear something similar to casual business attire (Goff, Martin & Thomas,

2007). Fourth, *acting white with hobbies* denotes students who have a lot of White friends (Carter, 2006; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006) or students who choose activities thought to be reserved for White individuals. An example includes a student who might listen to alternative, grunge, or rock music (Neal-Barnett et al., 2009) instead of rap music (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). Table 1 depicts the behaviors associated with acting white in academics, in speech, in dress, and with hobbies.

Table 1

*Acting White and Behaviors*

<b>“ACTING WHITE” AND BEHAVIORS</b>		
<b><i>Acting White</i></b>		<b><i>Acting Black</i></b>
Participating in advanced courses, having good grades, working hard in school, and having notions of school importance	<b>ACADEMICS</b>	Not going to class, not doing work, showing street smarts, or achieving racial uplift to negate stereotypes.
Having an extended vocabulary, using proper English, and enunciating	<b>SPEECH</b>	Using Ebonics, slang, and foul language
Wearing Abercrombie and Fitch or Gap brand clothing or casual business attire	<b>DRESS</b>	Wearing saggy pants, braids, hip-hop clothing, or expensive name-brand clothing
Having White friends, listening to alternative or rock music, acting uppity	<b>HOBBIES</b>	Listening to rap music, walking with a stroll, acting disrespectful, having a negative attitude, acting ignorant, and being loud

**Manifestations of acting white.** First, there have been noted gender differences related to the acting white label. Specifically, boys are more likely to be targeted with the

label than girls (Buck, 2010; Carter, 2006). Additionally, students report that it is easier to be an academically successful girl than academically successful as a boy in school (Carter, 2006). For example, in comparison to academically successful women, academically successful men (e.g., those in advanced courses) are more likely to be challenged in various ways, such as in regards to their masculinity or being labeled as gay (Buck, 2010; Carter, 2006).

Research has shown that context also matters when it comes to accusations of acting white. Acting white accusations have been reported as a greater problem in public versus private schools (Fryer & Torelli, 2010) and within integrated schools when compared to schools with a majority of Black students (Buck, 2010). It is important to note that the study done by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) was done in a predominantly, if not all-Black student population. Another important marker for context is cases where Black students are the majority but underrepresented in upper-level courses (Tyson, 2006) or cases where Black students are the majority and there are observable differences between Black students and White students (Wildhagen, 2011b). In such cases, Black students are at higher risk for being accused of acting white.

Racial identity is another manifestation that also has an impact on students' interaction with accusations of acting white. Many students do not report a tension between doing well academically and their racial identity (Andrews, 2009); and this may be due to the high volume of attention to the examination of high-achieving Black students in the acting white literature. In this vein, high-achieving students report a strong Black identity (Horvat & Lewis, 2003) and do not report being affected by accusations of acting white to the extent that they underachieve or engage in other negative behaviors.

To understand the link between high achievement and Black racial identity, consider students in the study by Andrews (2009), who expressed that their achievement was for racial uplift or to negate stereotypes. As it relates to racial identity, it has been found that Black students with high self-esteem and a high Afrocentric identity had high ratings on an achievement test (Spencer, Noll, Stolfus, & Harpalani, 2001). In contrast, Black students who had strong white salience and values, and superficial identification with black culture scored low on the achievement test (Spencer et al., 2001). Such findings have implications for student achievement based on how they view themselves in relation to their racial identity.

**Reactions to the acting white label.** Student reactions to the acting white label can be placed in six large categories: assimilation, downplaying activity, accommodation, resistance, support groups, and emotional reactions. First, *assimilation* occurs when Black students integrate themselves into mainstream Eurocentric culture (Neal-Barnett 2001; Ogbu, 2004). This includes mimicking behaviors shown by White individuals. Second, *downplaying activity* is when students underachieve to avoid the label (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Downplaying activity could include doing just enough to get a C in a course, when the student is undoubtedly capable of earning a higher grade. Third, *accommodation* is when Black students assimilate without giving up cultural norms (Neal-Barnett, 2001; Ogbu, 2004). Accommodation might be best explained as doing what one needs to do in order to get by in any given situation. Moreover, accommodation can also involve code switching in which an individual understands the unwritten rules of the cultures and begins to engage and act *appropriately* according to his or her setting.

Fourth, *resistance* consists of dismissing the label (Ogbu, 2004). Students who often dismiss the label have a strong Black identity and reject notions that an individual must behave in certain ways to be Black. Fifth, Black students report that they engage in *support groups* to deal with accusations of acting white (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). Such support groups surround students with like-minded people who support them in their high-achieving endeavors. With these support groups, students do not worry about being accused of not acting appropriately for their race. Sixth, several *emotional reactions* to the acting white label occur (Murray, 2011; Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings, & Stadulis, 2012; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009). These emotions include anxiety, bother, anger, and the feeling of being disowned by their race. See Table 2 for examples of Black students' reactions to the acting white label.

Table 2

*Reactions to the Acting White Label and Examples*

Reaction	Examples
Assimilation (integration)	1. Assimilate into mainstream culture
Downplaying ability	1. Underachieve due to the label 2. Take on class clown persona
Accommodation (compromise)	1. Assimilate without giving up Black cultural norms
Resistance	1. Become encapsulated in Black culture 2. Dismiss the label
Support Groups	1. Seek a network of racial peers 2. Participate in activities (sports teams; honor societies)
Emotional response	1. Feel anxiety 2. Feel bother 3. Feel anger

	4. Feel disowned
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Again, the three themes (i.e., behaviors, manifestations, and reactions) that emerged from the acting white literature were used as a framework to assess Black college students' experience with the label. Chapter 2 presents two bodies of literature that were also used to inform the study.



## Chapter 2. Literature Review

Chapter 2 is composed of two broad areas of literature that are pertinent to this study. These bodies of literature concern the racialized experiences of Black college students and literature on acting white. The literature on the racialized experiences of Black college students allowed for an overview of some of the prior incidences Black students have had with race on college campuses. Additionally, this literature set the tone for understanding that Black students do encounter racism on college campuses and why it is important to understand the racialized experiences of Black college students. The literature on acting white allowed for a much-needed overview of the previous work on acting white. The overview highlights the key findings over the years as well as some of the contradictions in previous work on acting white.

### **Racialized Experiences of Black College Students**

Black college students undergo a number of challenges while pursuing their degree. Among some of those challenges are their negative experiences with race while in college (Coleman, Chapman, & Wang, 2012; Feagin, 1992; Harper, 2013; Haskins et al., 2013; Love, 2010; McCabe, 2009; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Stayhorn, 2013; Sue, Nadal, Capodilupo, Lin, Torino, & Rivera, 2008). These negative experiences, based on race, can affect students' in a number of ways, including depression (Hammond, 2012), stress (Coleman et al., 2012) or feelings of inferiority/isolation, among other negative reactions. Below is a brief overview of literature highlighting Black students'

encounters with race while in college and the effects of such encounters. Specifically, the sections below cover Black students' racialized experiences in the classroom, on college campuses, off college campuses, and the noted effects of such racialized experiences.

### **Classroom Experiences**

Concerning Black students' racial experiences in the classroom, students reported feeling invisible (Solorzano et al., 2000), issues of discrimination with faculty members (Feagin, 1992; Haskins et al., 2013; Love, 2010), lack of representation in coursework and classes (Feagin, 1992; Haskins et al., 2013), and assumptions of intellectual inferiority (Love, 2010; Sue et al., 2008).

In the classroom, students discussed feeling as though their opinions were not really important based on reactions from other students in the class. Such reactions included having their comments in class discussions blown off (McCabe, 2009), having comments altogether ignored in the classroom (Sue et al., 2008), or feeling isolated from classmates (Love, 2010). Such classroom instances left students lacking validity in classroom conversations (McCabe, 2009). In addition to the topics mentioned above, Black students indicated that there is an assumption of intellectual inferiority from other students (Love, 2010; Sue et al., 2008). Specifically, smart Black students are treated like an exception to Black culture (Sue et al., 2008). One student described an experience where she stated something insightful in class and was met with accolades similar to "that was really smart" or "that was insightful." The student took these comments as an expectation that Black students were not expected to say anything smart or insightful (Sue et al., 2008).

Students also discussed issues of discrimination associated with faculty (Feagin, 1992; Haskins et al., 2013; Love, 2010). For example, faculty may place a heavy weight on Black students to bring up issues affecting individuals who identify as Black (Haskins et al., 2013), to single-handedly represent their culture (Feagin, 1992), or faculty may exemplify low expectations of Black students (Solorzano et al., 2000). For instance, faculty have been reported to confront Black students who exhibit superior work (Harper, 2013) or call on Black students to answer why all individuals in one culture act a certain way (Feagin, 1992). Additionally, Black students have indicated that they receive more support from Black faculty as opposed to White faculty (Haskins et al., 2013). Black students have indicated that they also receive support from White faculty, but only in cases when a problem arises or when White faculty are asked, as opposed to the Black faculty, who students indicated usually volunteer to assist them and support their academic endeavors (Haskins et al., 2013). Students also discussed lack of feedback from college instructors, which brings on additional burden in an atmosphere which is already racially hostile (Feagin, 1992)

Such instances above are interesting in that whereas Black students battle encounters with faculty, they also encounter additional lack of validity from not finding themselves represented in literature or course topics (Haskins et al., 2013). For example, a student in the study by Feagin (1992), when writing an essay on the Black experience, expressed how a teacher suggested that the student write about a universal experience, indicating White experience. This implies a model of white superiority that Black students often combat in their classroom experiences (Feagin, 1992), contributing to additional feelings of inferiority. In the midst of these negative experiences in the

classroom, Black students have found safety in numbers (Solorazano et al., 2000), indicating that they often felt more comfortable in classroom settings where there were other Black students. Such comments point to the importance of their seeing other people who look like them and who understand their experience (Solorzano et al., 2000). The classroom was not the only space on campus where Black students felt discrimination. The section below highlights other areas on campus where Black students indicated frequent racial encounters.

### **On-Campus Experiences**

Additionally, on-campus racial experiences included discomfort in certain areas on campus (Solorzano et al., 2000), double standards for Black students versus students of other races (Solorzano et al., 2000), isolation on campus (Haskins et al., 2013; McCabe, 2009), encounters with campus police (Feagin, 1992; McCabe, 2009), and being asked to speak for their entire race (Haskins et al., 2013). Such experiences leave Black students feeling as though they attend a cold and uncaring campus (Strayhorn, 2013).

Discomfort in areas on campus stemmed from not feeling welcome in certain areas there (Solorzano et al., 2000). The double standards for Black students versus other students on campus was observed by one student who noted that during social functions, Black students had to leave via a rear door while other students, after their social functions, were allowed to leave through the main entrance (Solorzano et al., 2000). The student described this experience as a double-standard.

The isolation that Black have students reported includes the lack of people who look like them (McCabe, 2009) or lack of community (Haskins et al., 2013), which can

lead to feelings of being alone or being the only one who understands one's culture or needs while in college. Whereas students have reported these feelings of isolation, students have also been known to combat these feelings by finding students who represent their race and/or culture (Love, 2010).

Another racialized experience that Black students have often encountered is more frequent associations with campus police when compared to the number of encounters that students of other races have with the police. For example, Black men in a study by McCabe (2009) reported a higher number of instances with campus police than students of other races, and a number of Black students in other studies also noted harassment from campus police (Feagin, 1992).

In cases where students were asked to speak for their entire race (Haskins et al., 2013), they are asked questions that indicated that all Black individuals are alike and think in the same manner. Again, instances such as the ones described above affect how Black students view the college that they attend. Black students may come to view the overall campus climate as cold and uncaring (Strayhorn, 2013) or feel as though staff and administrators on campus are insensitive to their needs and unwilling to learn about their experiences (Feagin, 1992). While in college, students also experience racial injustice when they are not on-campus. The section below highlights some Black students' experiences with race when they were off their college campus.

### **Off-Campus Encounters**

Black students' experiences with race are not limited to on-campus encounters; in fact, evidence has shown that Black students describe unfair treatment in areas, such as banks, restaurants, and bars (Sue et al., 2008; West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2010). In the

case of their experiences in stores, students explained instances of being overlooked by service clerks and as a result, feeling like second-class citizens (Sue et al., 2008).

Consider the experience where a student left money in a clerk's hand to pay for some items, and the clerk placed the change on the counter, rather than in the person's hand (Sue et al., 2008). As it relates to racial incidents, Black students also discussed how they are perceived as threatening in the community (McCabe, 2009; Sue et al., 2008). Such instances where students came to understand that they are perceived as a threat include being followed in stores, being watched closely by security guards (Sue et al., 2008), or having frequent encounters with local police (Feagin, 1992).

Racist names and other language also inform the racial experiences of Black college students (Feagin, 1992). In the study by West et al. (2010), 37% of the student participants indicated that they had experienced some form of overt racism, including being called racist names. Another example of racist language among students occurred as a student overheard friends discussing Black individuals and rap music (Sue et al., 2008). The student felt tokenized when friends indicated, "Oh, but you're not like that." What Black students identified as issues in college classrooms can be explained as microaggressions, defined as "brief, commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Below, the effects of such experiences, both on and off campus are discussed.

## **Effects of Racialized Experiences**

Such racial instances as those described above can have deleterious effects on Black college student satisfaction and retention while attending college (Coleman et al., 2012; Danoff-Burg, Prelow, & Swenson, 2004; Hill, Kobayashi, & Hughes, 2007). In order to best assist this population of students, it is imperative to better understand their negative encounters related to their race. Specifically, racial discrimination can lead to depressive symptoms (Hammond, 2012; West et al., 2010), result in race-related stress (Coleman et al., 2012), or affect student comfort in socializing on a predominantly White campus (Feagin, 1992).

Despite the racial discrimination received by Black students, there are always instances where Black students find ways to deal with such racism and discrimination and continue with their academic endeavors. In fact, many researchers have found that students still have perseverance despite encountering acts of discrimination (Love, 2010). There are numerous ways of coping that work for students. For example, problem-focused or any active response to change the source of stress has led to less depressive symptoms in comparison to students who engaged in lower levels of problem-focused coping (West et al., 2010). Additionally, students who received support from classmates, whether Black or of another race, indicated that the support assisted with completing the academic program (Haskins et al., 2013). Further, when assessing how students who experience race-related stress cope with that stress, students with high hope used more problem-focused coping. For students with low hope, better life satisfaction came with more coping strategies (Danoff-Burg et al., 2004).

Students also coped by picking and choosing battles (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, Hunt, 2013), via resistance coping, including using the voice to make a statement and resisting status quo standards of beauty (Lewis et al., 2013), by relying on a support networks (Lewis et al., 2013), and through self-protective coping which includes ignoring racial microaggressions or overachieving to overcome the bias related to racial stereotyping (Lewis et al., 2013). One interesting coping strategy was when students identified that they would “act white” to fit in. Students were aware that they were more successful with teachers and socially with other students when they “acted white” (Love, 2010). Literature on “acting white” is presented below.

### **Literature on Acting White**

The literature review begins with a summary of definitions and effects related to students in K-12. Following this summary, there is a smaller section highlighting the few authors who have addressed acting white for Black college students. As noted in Chapter 1, I sought to understand how Black students experience the acting white label in a college setting. Specifically, I concentrated on (a) Black college students experience with the acting white label, and (b) how Black college students understand the acting white label, and the social constructions that allow the label to exist. To that end, in Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature on acting white, its meanings and definitions, and the noted effects on Black students.

The literature review below begins with a summary of literature on the acting white label within K-12 settings. The section poses definitions of acting white as well as manifestations of acting white. Definitions of acting white concentrate on the meanings of acting white, as specified by students in various studies. Manifestations of acting white



highlight how the label plays out for different populations and within various settings. Following the definitions and overview of manifestations, which represent a summary based solely on K-12 literature, I move into literature on acting white and Black college students.

### **What is Acting White?**

Acting white is a phenomenon that has been used to discuss Black student behavior and academic achievement (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Toldson & Owens, 2010; Wildhagen, 2011a). It can occur directly or indirectly (Murray, 2011). Students who hear direct accusations of the label hear phrases similar to, “You are acting white,” whereas indirect accusations can bring such phrases as, “You dress like a White person” (Murray, 2011). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) discussed the burden of acting white, which was described as a tension between one’s race and academic success. Yet, there are other definitions of acting white as articulated by different scholars. For example, Fryer (2006) defined acting white as “a set of social interactions in which minority adolescents who get good grades in school enjoy less popularity than white students who do well academically” (p. 53).

The label, acting white, has been studied within a plethora of disciplines, including education (Tucker, 2008), psychology (Burrell, 2013; Murray, 2011, Neal-Barnett, 2001), sociology (Downey & Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Faris, 2006) economics (Austen-Smith & Fryer, 2005; Fryer & Torelli, 2010), and anthropology (Akom, 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004), among others. This implies that the term acting white is understood and acknowledged across disciplines. Many scholars have discussed the term in different ways, including the burden of acting white, acting white, and the

acting white accusation. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have grouped all of these labels as acting white literature. Within this section, I elaborate on the definitions of the behaviors students exhibit that have been associated with being accused of acting white. To reiterate, these behaviors are discussed in the context of academics, speech, hobbies, and dress.

**Acting white and academic achievement.** Again, the acting white label is one explanation that has often been used to explain underachievement or the achievement gap for Black students (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Sohn, 2011). Researchers have found that being in honors or advanced-placement courses (Neal-Barnett, 2001), studying, working hard in school, or getting good grades (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer & Torelli, 2010; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006), as well as having notions of school importance (Murray, 2011) can equal acting white for Black students. On the contrary, acting black academically can mean not going to class, not doing school work, and showing that one is street smart (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

First, taking honors courses has often resulted in Black students' being labeled as acting white. For example, Neal-Barnett (2001) conducted six focus groups with 35 African American students and asked them to define what it meant to act white and to act black. Results indicated that to act white academically meant to take part in honors-level or advanced-placement courses. Further, studying or working hard in school was most cited as an academic endeavor associated with accusations of acting white (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer & Torelli, 2010; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). Consider the study by Mickelson and Velasco (2006). In

their study examining how school structures interact with peer cultures to shape student reactions to race issues and the acting white accusation, it was found that in terms of academic achievement, acting white means getting good grades or studying instead of going out. Additionally, students in other studies confirmed that their understanding of acting white academically was getting good grades or doing well in school. Specifically, Bergin and Cooks (2002) found that students' academic definitions of acting white included a general description of doing well in school.

Considering school as important also has implications for whether Black students are academically labeled as acting white. Murray (2011), when studying 107 low-income adolescents between 14 and 18 years of age in a Midwestern city to examine the relationship between acting white, racial identity, and well-being, found that adolescents with high levels of school relevance were more likely to be bothered by the acting white label, adolescents with higher levels of school efficacy reported lower levels of bother, and adolescents with higher levels of school relevance had a high level of experience with acting white items. Although students who reported experiencing the acting white label had higher levels of anxiety, students with high school-relevance and high school-attachment scores also had low depression scores, and students with high school-efficacy scores also had high self-esteem scores. This may indicate that high-achieving students with a high value for school are less likely to be depressed and more likely to have high self-esteem, but also more likely to be labeled as acting white, which can bring levels of bother.

As noted in the studies above, acting white academically is defined as doing well in school, but whether or not students inhibit their academic achievement based on these

accusations is debated (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fryer, 2006; Fryer & Torelli, 2010). Bergin and Cooks (2002) sought to examine whether or not students reported avoiding academic achievement due to fear of being labeled as acting white and whether or not students felt they had to give up an ethnic identity to do well in school. These researchers interviewed 38 African American and Mexican American students from various public and private high schools in a Midwestern city. Twenty-eight of those students were from a scholarship incentive program, whereas 10 students served as a comparison group. The researchers found that many students denied having to give up their ethnic identity to do well in school, but there was one student who thought that all Black students eventually had to give up their identity to fit in at school.

Student popularity and their GPA have also been used to determine whether students underachieve academically. Fryer and Torelli (2010), using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), based their conclusions about acting white on student grades and student popularity associated with those grades. These researchers found that the most popular students had a GPA of roughly 2.0, and as students achieved higher GPAs, their chances of being labeled as acting white increased. For example, students with a GPA over 3.5 had greater experiences with accusations of acting white, and Black students were more likely to be in fights as their grades increased. However, for low-achievers, the researchers found no acting white effect. Fryer (2006), using longitudinal adolescent health data, found that high-achieving Black students were more popular among their peers than were high-achieving White students, but only when their GPA did not exceed 2.5. At a GPA of 3.5 or higher, Black students appeared to have less friends. The researcher used the lack of popularity among higher-

achieving Black students to indicate that an effect of the acting white accusation was more likely to be present among those students who exceeded a 2.5 GPA.

Black student academic aspirations have been used to refute that the acting white hypothesis exists for Black students (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Faris, 2006; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Tyson, 2006). Researchers Cook and Ludwig (1997) have often been cited for their national database when studying acting white, and many other researchers have cited them to refute that the acting white label exists. Cook and Ludwig, using data from the NELS with emphasis on 8<sup>th</sup> graders, found that both Black and White students had expectations to complete a 4-year college degree, Black and White students missed the same amount of school, and that Black parents were just as involved as White parents in the schooling experiences of their children. When controlling for socioeconomic status, Black students were less likely than White students to have school absences, and more likely to have their parents involved in their schooling experiences. Additionally, the researchers found that Black and White honor students most often did not perceive themselves as unpopular, and being in an honors course increased students' chances of being popular. The researchers argued that their data provided evidence that group differences in student attitudes do not account for the black-white achievement gap in education. Thus, for the students in their study, there was no proof of an oppositional culture to schooling—a conclusion that the researchers claimed had been proposed by Fordham and Ogbu (1986).

Cook and Ludwig (1997) are not the only researchers who have found that the acting white label does not cause Black students to underachieve. First, Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that the acting white phenomenon did not play a large role in the lives of

participants in their study. These researchers collected data from observations at two public urban high schools and interviews with eight high-achieving Black females. These young ladies indicated that they were able to discuss their academic achievement without ridicule. In fact, they reported receiving applause for their academic achievement (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). Second, Neal-Barnett et al. (2009), using data from 177 African American high school adolescents in a Midwestern state, found that patterns of speech and choice of friends were two major contributors to accusations of acting white; however, student achievement was not linked to accusations of acting white. Third, Tyson (2006) argued that it is low achievement rather than high achievement that causes stress to Black students. Based on the results of Tyson's study, it was found that students were proud of their high achievement, and it gave them a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, the students who were not achieving at high levels still exemplified a desire to do well in school and did not attribute their lack of academic achievement to lack of academic ability.

Further, Faris (2006) found that data from over 7,000 students (a longitudinal survey of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders from three counties in North Carolina) did not support the acting white hypothesis (students underachieve to avoid accusations of acting white). Regarding the acting white label and academic success, results indicated that being ridiculed was not linked to academic achievement for students. Finally, Wildhagen (2011a) found that whereas White students engage in more pro-school behaviors than their Black peers, Black students hold significantly more positive attitudes toward school than their White student peers, and Black students on average see education as more important than do their White peers. Wildhagen's data, which was derived from the

educational longitudinal study (NELS) of 2002 and based on a sample limited to students who identified as White or Black ( $N = 9,960$ ), measured classroom effort, standard English, homework outside of school, and school-related attitudes. White and Black student GPAs were unrelated to negative sanctions, and the importance of education was associated with fewer peer sanctions for both White and Black students. Only time spent on homework appeared to elicit negative sanctions, and that effect was only for White students. Wildhagen concluded that there was no support for Black student underachievement due to the acting white label, but that peer sanctions do play a role in the achievement of White students.

The studies mentioned above point to the high academic aspirations of Black students and their intentions for academic achievement. Although Black students are labeled as white for their academic endeavors, many expressed anger from hearing such accusations. Specifically, students expressed, “That implies you can’t be Black and intelligent” (as cited in Neal-Barnett, 2001, p. 82), or “I think [this notion] is ridiculous ’cause that’s meaning that if you’re intelligent, you’re White, if you’re dumb, then you’re Black” (as cited in Mickelson & Velasco, 2006, p. 39). Overall, most low-achieving Black students seemed to equate success with doing well no matter the class level, and high-achieving Black students at some schools appeared to receive a high level of respect from their peers (Tyson et al., 2005).

The study findings discussed above point to definitions of the acting white label, evidence that students underachieve due to the label, as well as evidence that students do not underachieve simply due to the acting white label. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is mixed evidence with regards to the effect of the acting white label. Varying

contexts and methodologies could have a great deal to do with such contradictions in the literature. I would suggest that student ridicule and student praise for academics can occur simultaneously, which further suggests that based on environments and contexts, students can be ridiculed for academic behaviors and/or supported for academic excellence (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). The contradictions also imply that there may be characteristics beyond academic achievement that cause accusations of the label (Bergin & Cooks, 2002). What follows is a synopsis of studies that have examined how the acting white phenomenon affects students in non-academic contexts.

Outside of academics, researchers have found that additional definitions around acting white include speaking standard English (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Goff et al., 2007; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett, 2009), having primarily White friends (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), choosing certain hobbies (Fordham, 1985), listening to a certain type of music (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), wearing a certain type of dress (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), and acting uppity (Carter, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). What follows is a disaggregation of non-academic acting white definitions.

**Acting white and language.** Students who have either been accused of acting white or know other students who have been accused of acting white due to their choice of language have stated that speaking standard English is considered acting white (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Goff et al., 2007; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009). To act black when



speaking means to use Ebonics, slang, and foul language (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

In the study by Bergin and Cooks (1995), student definitions of acting white in speech included talking proper, using big words, enunciating, and using certain terms or phrases, such as saying you are going to a flick instead of saying you are going to the movies. Students also illustrated what not to do in order to act white with speech. This included not using slang, not cursing, not talking ghettoish, not talking with half words, and not making up your own words in conversation. Neal-Barnett et al. (2009), using results from 123 African American students who took the Acting White Experiences Questionnaire and questionnaires on Black student racial identity, found that students in their focus groups described acting white as speaking proper English and talking like a White boy or girl.

Although the above studies illustrated what it means to act white or not act white, there was no indication that not acting white was linked to any particular socially constructed race. In the study by Goff et al. (2007), students defined acting white as well as acting black. The data for the study were collected over 10 days, using focus groups, individual interviews, visual exploration (use of cameras), and observations at an alternative school in a Southwestern U.S. suburban city. Six Black students (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders), 5 teachers, and the principle of the school participated in the study. Acting white in terms of language meant to speak with articulation, whereas acting black was defined as using slang. Additionally, students in the study by Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) identified using Ebonics, slang, and foul language as indicators of acting black.

Data for this study came from interviews with 64, 16- to 17-year-old Black students from a public high school in a large Northeastern urban city.

Within the studies addressed above, it is clear that students have dichotomous expectations for what it means to speak white and to speak black. Mocombe (2006) asserted that it is these sociolinguistic differences that can contribute to Black student academic failure. Mocombe argued that the black English vernacular (BEV) exhibited by some Black students leaves them incompetent in classrooms where standard English is the basis for learning, thus arguing that Black students underachieve due to sociolinguistic socialization differences.

**Acting white and social activities/hobbies.** Students are also accused of acting white based on their choice of hobbies and activities. Hobbies and activities in which students were labeled as acting white included having a lot of White friends (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Carter, 2006; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006), listening to a particular style of music (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), and acting stuck-up/uppity (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Carter, 2006). Mickelson and Velasco (2006), in their three-phase investigation of school reform and educational equity in which they interviewed Black and White students ( $n = 89$ ) and their parents ( $n = 29$ ), found that Black students who hung around White students were often accused of acting white. These students often found themselves living between two worlds: They made strong efforts to associate with Black peers in regular classes to offset the fact that they spent most of their time with White students in upper-level classes. Music preferences that can earn students an accusation of acting white include listening to alternative, grunge, or rock music (Neal-Barnett et al., 2009). In terms of acting uppity, in the study by Carter

(2006), interviews from 68 low-income African American and Latino males and females between the ages of 13 and 20 revealed that acting superior to a student of the same race or ethnicity was cause for being labeled as acting white. This finding provides evidence that if students feel a student of their same race is acting as if he or she is better than they are, this is reason to accuse peers of the same race of acting white or, in other words, betraying their race.

If the behaviors above express what it means to act white when engaging in hobbies and activities, then the question arises, what are black hobbies and activities? Not many scholars have studied what it mean to act black, but Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004), using interview data from 64, 16- to 17-year-old Black students from a public high school in a large Northeastern urban city, found that acting black socially meant listening to rap music, walking with a stroll, acting disrespectful, having a negative attitude, acting ignorant, and being loud. Overall impressions the students described for people acting black include the perception that a person is ignorant, wild, ill-mannered, rude, or out of hand (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

**Acting white and dress.** When considering acting white and dress, professional types of clothing were associated with White individuals, while urban clothing definitions were used to explain how Black students dress. Using information from six focus groups with 35 African American adolescents, participants in the study by Neal-Barnett (2001) indicated that wearing shorts in the winter and dressing in clothes from the Gap or Abercrombie and Fitch rather than Tommy Hilfiger and FUBU constituted acting white. Students in the study by Goff et al. (2007) defined acting white as wearing casual business attire, and defined dressing black as wearing sagging pants. The data for the

study were collected over 10 days, using focus groups, individual interviews, visual exploration (use of cameras), and observations of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Black students, 5 teachers, and a principle at an alternative school in a Southwestern U.S. suburban city. Additionally, Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) found that to dress black means wearing expensive name-brand clothing, wearing braids, or dressing in hip-hop clothing. Data from their study were based on 64, 16- to 17-year-old Black students at a public high school in a large Northeastern urban city.

**Teachers, parents, and White students' understandings of acting white.** Much of the research on acting white deals with how Black adolescents deal with and respond to the acting white accusation. Very few studies have indicated an understanding of how teachers, parents, or White students view and understand the label. Thus, this section highlights the few researchers who have explored how teachers, parents, and White students understand acting white.

Goff et al. (2007) examined six at-risk Black adolescents and five teachers at an alternative school in a Southwestern suburban city in regard to students' experiences with the acting white label and whether or not the label affected students' academic success and visions for post-school transitions. The researchers found that none of the teachers in their study could define acting white. However, when asked by the researchers if students had been called White for their actions, the teachers indicated that students dumbed themselves down and masked their academic abilities for being called White.

Tucker (2008), using data from six male and six female students from a magnet school in an upper middle-class neighborhood, sought to identify factors that contributed to African American students' underrepresentation in advanced placement (AP) courses.

The researcher found that the teachers observed low AP enrollment for African American students, although they had varying theories about why this was true. The thoughts about low enrollment ranged from fear of not excelling in those courses to lack of preparation for the courses. Whereas the teachers did not directly address the issue of students in relation to the acting white phenomenon, they did discuss concepts that could be linked to the label. The concepts included lack of interest in advanced courses by the student or the part that parents play in students' enrollment in such courses.

Using an extensive review of the literature to challenge the misinterpretations of the concept, the burden of acting white, as well as the cultural ecological theory (e.g., the cultural response of marginalized racial groups to conditions in educational systems), Ogbu (2004) found that parents express receiving social sanctions of being uppity in their community based on how they speak. For example, parents who spoke proper English reported sanctions of acting uppity. Further, Neal-Barnett (2001), using information from focus groups with 35 Black adolescents as well as some parents, found that parents may express concern for their students' behaviors and can inadvertently influence their students' perceptions of acting white. In her study, one Black father admitted, "I'm in the store, and I said, 'That person is acting white.' The moment I said it, I realized I had given my child a definition. Now, I've given my child a definition" (p. 86). The above quote exemplifies how children can gain an understanding of behaviors appropriate for their race based on discussions or observations from their parents.

When studying White students' conceptualizations of what it means to act white, there is very little record of white students' understanding. White students in Neal-Barnett's (2001) study gave answers similar to those of the Black students, indicating that

acting white means speaking standard English, wearing preppy clothes, or being placed in honors courses. Additionally, Neal-Barnett et al. (2009) conducted a four-phase study to assess the effects of the acting white accusation. For the first phase, the researchers held focus groups with 35 African American adolescents, 15 Caucasian adolescents, and 22 parents of African American adolescents. In the second phase, the researchers did an item analysis of the previous acting white literature to determine examples of acting white accusations and behavior. In the third phase, the researchers formulated the Acting White Experience Questionnaire, with 177 African American adolescents from a high school in a Midwestern state selected to inform the questionnaire. In the last phase, the researchers used the Acting White Experience Questionnaire and questionnaires on Black student racial identity to determine if there was a correlation between racial identities and how students viewed or experienced the label. One-hundred and twenty-three African American high school students participated in this phase.

White students in the study referred to academic achievement when attempting to describe what it meant for Black students to act white. However, when White students were asked how a White student could act white, there were blank stares (Neal-Barnett et al., 2009). Some White students were unfamiliar with the term, however these students attended school with a small number of Black students. Although White students could not answer how a White person could act white, they did have answers for how a White student could act black. Their answers related to wearing clothing associated with Blacks and listening to black music (Neal-Barnett, 2001). The students also indicated that such an individual is labeled a “wigger” (Neal-Barnett, 2001).

## **Manifestations of Acting White**

This section is an illustration of how the acting white phenomenon plays out in different scenarios and situations as well as how it affects individuals based on their identities. This section has been separated from the section above because definitions of acting white are different from explanations of how one is affected by the label.

**Acting white and gender.** The acting white label seems to have a stronger effect on males compared to females (Buck, 2010; Carter, 2006). To use the example mentioned earlier, in comparison to academically successful females, academically successful males (e.g. those in advanced courses) are more likely to be challenged in various ways, such as in regards to their masculinity or being labeled as gay (Buck, 2010; Carter, 2006). Carter (2006) interviewed (using semi-structured and open-ended questions) 68 low-income African American and Latino males and females, aged 13 to 20. Carter found that students equated white talk with girl talk and that males were called gay if they talk a certain way, for example, talking soft. Students indicated that this was because white talk was softer (making it more feminine) whereas black talk was tougher and harsher (more masculine). When students were asked whether excelling in school was easier for girls or boys, most answered that it was easier for girls. Girls were more likely to report being B students, whereas boys were more likely to report being C students. Students in the study also implied that girls study whereas boys play, indicating a critical difference between males and females' expected school effort. In terms of underperforming to avoid being labeled as acting white, one student asserted that male students might hide their school-related interests to avoid ridicule.

Fryer (2006), using a longitudinal study of adolescent health, found that high-achieving Black boys in integrated schools fare worse than girls in similar situations. The boys had higher instances of experiencing the acting white label than did the girls. This indicated that males were judged more harshly for certain behaviors in comparison to females. Additionally, in a study using the NELS and student GPA to determine student interactions related to the acting white label and how that affected their popularity, Fryer and Torelli (2010) found that Black high-achieving boys have fewer friends than high-achieving girls. Further, Toldson and Owens (2010), using data from a review of national surveys to determine Black students' thoughts about college, found that Black girls were the more likely to be proud of doing well in school and to have supportive friends, whereas boys were more likely to have friends who might disrupt their studies. Although most studies indicated that boys are more likely to experience the label in comparison to girls, girls in the study by Neal-Barnett et al. (2009) reported greater instances with the acting white accusation than did males.

**Acting white and context.** Many researchers asserted that the acting white accusation is a greater problem in public versus private schools (Fryer & Torelli, 2010) and within integrated schools when compared to schools with a majority of Black students (Buck, 2010; Madyun, Lee, & Jumale, 2010). For example, Fryer and Torelli (2010), using data from the NELS, found that there is a greater prevalence of this phenomenon in public schools. When looking at the factor of the composition of schools, Madyun et al., (2010) found that students in all-Black schools or in racially balanced schools rarely recall instances of being accused of acting white; Fryer (2006) found that the acting white accusation is most likely to occur in schools where Black students are



less than 80% of the population; and a student in the study by Stinson (2011) acknowledged that his lack of experience with the burden of acting white may have been due to his school composition (mostly Black students).

Madyun et al. (2010) used network data and followed up with interviews to collect data at a public school in a large inner city that had a Somali African majority (71%) student population. The researchers concluded that the acting white accusation is not likely found among African adolescents, especially in cases where the school size is small, predominantly an ethnic minority race, and a school that has established a culture of valuing academics. Fryer (2006) used national data from the Adolescent Health Survey to measure student popularity and found that there was no evidence of students' grades affecting their popularity in predominantly Black schools, and that the effect of acting white is more prominent in more integrated schools, indicating that students are more likely to encounter the acting white label in more heavily integrated schools. Stinson (2011) interviewed four Black males in their 20s and asked them to respond to the acting white hypothesis while reflecting on their school experiences. One student in particular did not perceive a burden of acting white while in school but did acknowledge that it was possible for other students to have experienced a burden. The student then attributed his lack of experience with the label to the mostly Black high school he had attended. Cook and Ludwig (1997), using NELS data from 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, observed that Black students at predominantly Black schools are rewarded by peers for being in honor society, but Black students in predominantly White schools are neither rewarded nor penalized.

In instances where Black students are the majority at their school, if there is noticeable underrepresentation of Black students in upper-level courses (Tyson, 2006) or observable differences in the engagement of Black versus White students (Wildhagen, 2011b), Black students are at higher risk for being accused of acting white. Tyson (2006) argued that when students are disproportionately underrepresented in upper-level courses and underrepresented on the honor roll, academic achievement becomes another racialized marker. Hence, whereas students may be more likely to experience the label in majority White schools, there is still the possibility that in a majority Black school where students observe a majority of White students in honors classes and on the honor roll, the small number of Black students who exhibit these characteristics can come in contact with the acting white notion. Additionally, in schools where there is an observable difference in White and Black student classroom engagement, with White students having higher levels of engagement, Black students do receive social sanctions for their academic effort (Wildhagen, 2011b). In sum, it appears that the things that become racialized are the things that students observe racial groups doing differently, for example, Black students all being in regular classes (Tyson, 2006).

**Acting white and racial identity.** Literature within this section addresses Black students' racial identity and the notion of acting white. Students become increasingly aware of their racial identity in the middle school and high school years (Buck, 2010) and can hear the accusation of acting white as early as elementary school (Neal-Barnett, 2001). When examining racial identity and acting white, researchers most often have found that students rarely consider their academic achievement and their racial identity to be in conflict. Andrews (2009) interviewed and observed nine Black students to

determine how students construct their racial and achievement self-identity in a predominantly White high school. The researcher concluded that students in the study did not experience tension between being Black and being a high achiever. The students viewed achievement as a human trait that anyone could obtain but also racialized some of their achievements by discussing their achieving in the context of being Black (i.e., achieving for racial uplift or to negate stereotypes) (Andrews, 2009). Horvat and Lewis (2003) conducted an ethnographic study of high-achieving high school females from various socioeconomic statuses. As mentioned earlier, they found that these high-achieving Black females had a strong Black identity and saw their racial identity as central to their being. These ladies reported that they were surrounded by peers who valued their academic success. Many of the ladies in the study aspired to attend a historically Black college or university in order to continue to explore and strengthen their Black identity. In a study by Stinson (2011), using data from four African American males, participants indicated that lack of a Black racial persona was not necessary in order to achieve; however, there was a student in the study who did think his early instances in school were characterized by racelessness.

Further, Spencer et al. (2001) performed a longitudinal study of 562 African American youth in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades from four public middle schools in a metropolitan, Southeastern U.S. city. Within this study, it was found that students with high self-esteem, low euro-centricity, a low superficial racial identity, and high Afrocentric identity had high ratings on the achievement test. These students rated themselves high in terms of how smart they were and how they were valued by others, among other questions. Additionally, students who had strong white salience and values,

and superficial identification with black culture scored low on the achievement test.

Overall, high-achieving Black students in this study seemed to associate a lack of logic with accusations of acting white and indicated they did not feel that the acting white label applied to them, because achievement should not be confined to one group of people.

Also, in terms of acting white, students who do not have a high value for white culture have been noted to have higher self-esteem (Spencer et al., 2001), which may indicate that Black students with a strong racial identity are less likely to be labeled as acting white. In this vein, Murray (2011), using survey data from 107 adolescents between 14 and 18 years of age, found that students are more likely to experience the acting white label if they have high “other group orientation” or a strong value for a group other than their own. Although students with a strong Black identity may be less likely to receive the accusation, adolescents with more positive feelings about being Black have higher levels of bother from the acting white accusation (Neal-Barnett et al., 2009). This does not necessarily mean that students are bothered to an extent that they shy away from academic achievement. Rather, bother could be the anger high-achieving students have articulated in regard to being categorized as White just because they are academically successful. This can be summed up by the following Black student’s comment, quoted earlier: “I think [this notion] is ridiculous ’cause that’s meaning that if you’re intelligent, you’re White, if you’re dumb, then you’re Black” (as cited in Mickelson & Velasco, 2006, p. 39).

Engaging Black students in positive discussions about their racial identity may prove beneficial to offset some accusations of the label. Fordham (1991), during a 2-year ethnographic study of 33 Black students’ school success at a high school in Washington

D.C., concluded that the tracking system (advanced, regular, special education, and the humanities) in place undermined students' collective identity and solidarity and was a barrier to peer proofing. Comments from students in the study indicate that school officials' attempts to get them involved in AP classes was also seen as an attempt to reinvent the students; and in some instances, the students felt as though they had to choose between doing well academically and their racial identity.

Fordham (1991) argued that this causes conflict and ambivalence because Black adolescents are expected to voluntarily separate themselves from their peers, thus causing them to question their racial identity and the value of advanced courses. This researcher argued that if students are taught in ways wherein their academic achievement is inseparable from their racial identity, such action might increase the number of Black students who seek school success. In sum, the literature on acting white in relation to Black student identity provides evidence that a strong Black identity may be essential for Black students in particular to avoid accusations of acting white or for their dealing positively with the acting white accusation.

### **The Acting White Label in Higher Education**

There are a few researchers who have discussed work regarding the acting white label in terms of college student outcomes. A great deal of the acting white literature focuses on students in K-12 settings, thus the above literature review was necessary to achieve an understanding of the label and how it has been most studied and addressed by researchers. First, this section addresses the K-12 literature that has been used to discuss students' post-school plans. Second, work is highlighted from researchers who have

specifically discussed or measured how the acting white phenomenon is manifested on a college campus.

In regards to K-12 students with post-high-school plans, Goff et al. (2007) found that students at an alternative school in a Southwestern U.S. suburban city who identified post-school plans or visions were not heavily affected by the acting white label, whereas students at the school without post-school plans appeared to be more affected by the label. Data from this study were retrieved from focus groups, individual interviews, visual exploration (use of cameras), and observations of six Black students (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders), five teachers, and the principle. Madyun et al. (2010), using data from 47 Black students in a public school in a large inner city, found that high-achieving Black students were fairly popular. The researchers attributed this popularity to the academic-oriented and college-bound school climate shared by the students in the study. What can be implied from the two studies discussed above is that high-achieving Black students with plans to attend college or students who exemplify ambition or vision may be least affected by accusations of acting white in comparison to Black students who may not have college plans or ambitions upon high school graduation.

In regards to acting white and academics in a higher education context, Harper (2006) found no evidence of Black male college students' being accused of acting white for doing well in classes. In regards to speech pattern and dress, Woldoff, Wiggins, and Washington (2011) found that college students could be accused of acting white based on their speech patterns and style of dress. In regards to hobbies, Woldoff et al. found that hanging with a lot of White friends in college is linked to accusations of acting white; but Harper (2006) found that the Black male college students in his study were not ridiculed

for the activities in which they chose to participate. It is important to note that many of the students in the study by Harper indicated that certain organizations provided the space to be amongst a support group of Black peers. Harper also indicated that their perceived dedication to the Black community was one way in which support from their same-race peers was earned. Finally, in terms of reactions to the label for college students, Thompson, Lightfoot, Castillo, and Hurst (2010) found that students experienced high levels of stress associated with the acting white label.

Specifically, Harper (2006) found that high-achieving Black male students ( $N = 32$ ), between ages 18 and 22 from six large public-research universities in the United States, were not sanctioned by their peers for excelling; but rather, these students articulated that they were actually supported by their same-race peers. Harper concluded that Black students are usually supportive of their peers who earn good grades; however, it may be the perceived embracing of white attitudes and behaviors to earn those grades that causes students to be labeled as acting white. In addition, Harper stated that one of the main reasons for Black students' not accusing their peers of acting white might be due to the commitment these high-achieving students had to the upliftment of the Black community. Harper suggested that if these high achievers were just academic achievers, rather than high-achieving *and* highly involved student leaders, the outcome for acting white accusations might be different. Harper posed the following implications from this study: support for predominantly Black organizations/clubs, efforts to increase student interest and participation in such groups, institutional support for student attendance at conferences to network and gain additional peer support, and collaborative programming to bring together African American students from various subgroups.

Additionally, Woldoff et al. (2011) conducted three focus group discussions with a total of 19 participants. The first focus group was with six in-state Black students from rural areas, the second focus group was with nine out-of-state Black students from urban areas, and the third focus group was with four students, two in-state and two out-of-state Black students. In regards to the acting white phenomenon, findings indicated that in-state students were often referred to as acting white by out-of-state students. One in-state student explained that acting white was not just about style but also about a tough urban experience. This same student said that he was labeled soft because he was not raised in a big city. Out-of-state students commonly questioned in-state students' Black authenticity because of the rural location and large White population in their hometowns. Their lack of authenticity was attributed to their speech patterns, clothing styles, and friendships with majority White students, which sometimes caused accusations of acting white. One out-of-state student indicated that Black people from little towns did not know how to interact with other Black people, and she judged in-state Blacks harshly due to their "white" speech patterns.

Finally, Thompson et al. (2010) found that college students who received pressure from their family to not acculturate or act white and to maintain the family's ethnic group language had high levels of acculturative stress. The researchers administered questionnaires to 83 African American college students recruited through an introductory psychology course and an African American graduate listserv. Results indicated that participants were experiencing some stress around the expectation for acculturation. Specifically, students had a higher stress score if they were accused of assimilating into mainstream culture, experienced intragroup marginalization from their family, felt



pressure to maintain their ethnic group's language, had high assimilation, or received accusations of acting white. The researchers concluded that Black students are not only dealing with the pressure of doing well in school but also pressure not to acculturate, which can affect the level of achievement for these students. The study by Thompson et al. demonstrates one of the potential outcomes when students have a strong desire to be a part of the Black community.

As can be seen from some of the studies above, many of the patterns that caused accusations of acting white within the K-12 context are also prevalent in a higher education context, such as being accused of acting white due to speech, dress, and having a lot of White friends (Woldoff et al., 2011) or stress associated with accusations of acting white (Thompson et al., 2010). However, acting white and its relation to academic achievement was not noted to be present at the higher education level (Harper, 2006). Due to the limited number of studies within a higher education context, further research is needed to best address how college students experience and are affected by the acting white label.

### **What is the Big Deal, Acting White?**

The bother and psychological aspects found to be associated with students' experience with the label is reason to have concern as to how the acting white accusation may affect students. For some, the acting white label can be considered a racial slur, because it is a challenge to the nature of one's being (Norwood, 2007), leaving students wondering if they are acting appropriately for their race. This can cause bother and psychological issues for students as they attempt to navigate their behaviors and their racial identity. Noted correlations between anxiety and the acting white label (Murray,

2011), and negative psychological reactions and the acting white label (Neal-Barnett, 2001) have been found. For those students who do not successfully avoid the assumption that they are retreating from their race and who are therefore labeled as acting white, there are a number of reactions to which those students might adhere.

**Reactions to the acting white label -- K-12 literature.** When discussing the acting white label and what it means for students, researchers have also studied how Black students cope with the label. Reactions to the label can include the refraining from academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), anxiety and bother (Murray, 2011; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), assimilation (Neal-Barnett 2001; Ogbu, 2004), accommodation (Neal-Barnett, 2001; Ogbu, 2004), ambivalence (Ogbu, 2004), resistance (Ogbu, 2004), encapsulation (Ogbu, 2004), a class clown persona (Norwood, 2007), adaptability of family roles, high-achievement orientation, high religious orientation (Marsh et al., 2012), the feeling of being disowned (Neal-Barnett, 2001), the seeking of a network of racial peers or other support systems (Marsh et al., 2012; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006), anger (Neal-Barnett, 2001), the finding of hobbies to avoid the label (Fryer & Torelli, 2010), or a dismissing of the label altogether (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). These reactions are briefly described below.

- The *refraining from academic success* is a reaction in which some students shy away from academic work in an effort to avoid being labeled as acting white (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

- *Anxiety and bother* occur when some students become uneasy from coming in contact with the term, acting white, or are bothered that such labeling occurs based on race (Murray, 2011; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009).
- *Assimilation* occurs when students integrate into the mainstream culture or emulate what is considered white behaviors on a consistent basis (Neal-Barnett 2001; Ogbu, 2004).
- *Accommodation* occurs when students take on characteristics associated with White students without giving up what is considered their Black identity (Neal-Barnett, 2001; Ogbu, 2004). This is also referred to as the best of both worlds.
- *Ambivalence* occurs when students have no strong opinion or are indifferent about adopting what is considered behaviors for White students (Ogbu, 2004).
- Students who use *resistance* do not believe they should have to give up black values and culture in any way and are opposed to adopting white cultural norms (Ogbu, 2004).
- *Encapsulation* occurs when an individual is completely immersed in Black cultural traditions and does not have the desire to act or talk like White individuals (Ogbu, 2004).
- When students act like a *class clown*, they do so to avoid a serious persona so that their friends do not think they are smart or think of them as not just smart (Norwood, 2007).

- *Uplift* is when some students use accusations of acting white as an ignition to represent their race in a positive light (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006), so that Black people are not placed in stereotypical categories.
- Students also deal with accusations by continuing to keep an *academic focus and high-achievement* mentality (Marsh et al., 2012).
- Students deal with the accusations by encountering *feelings of being disowned* when they are labeled as acting white, because they have an awareness that their blackness should not be limited to their chosen actions (Neal-Barnett, 2001).
- The *seeking of a network of racial peers or other support systems* has proven helpful for students to deal with the label (Marsh et al., 2012; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). In such cases, students surround themselves with friends or family who support their academic and other personal endeavors.
- Students also *become angry* when referred to in terms of the label (Neal-Barnett, 2001).
- *Engagement in certain hobbies*, such as sports or the honor society, can help students avoid acting white accusations (Fryer & Torelli, 2010).
- Some students *dismiss the label altogether* as an ignorant comment (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006).

Although Fordham and Ogbu (1986) provided evidence that some Black students underachieve in an effort to avoid the acting white label, other researchers have articulated that just because a Black student is accused of acting white, this does not

mean the student will respond by withdrawing from academics (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Norwood, 2007). In fact, as can be seen from some of the coping strategies above, Black students might use the label as motivation to do better in school (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). Below is a summary related to researchers who have critiqued notions and/or examinations of acting white.

### **Critiques of Acting White**

Because most researchers, when conducting studies on the acting white phenomenon, have referred to their interpretation of Fordham and Ogbu's "burden of acting white," this section is used to highlight thoughts from researchers who either critiqued or offered conclusions thought to be in opposition to those from Fordham and Ogbu's 1986 work. It should be noted that this synopsis of critiques reflects the conclusions of researchers cited throughout the literature review in reference to specific topics under discussion.

Bergin and Cooks (2002), in their study of 38 high school students of color in a scholarship incentive program, concluded that they did not hear specific comments addressing how students altered their behavior to avoid accusations of acting white; however these researchers stated that this does not mean such behaviors do not exist. In a counterargument to the Fordham and Ogbu (1986) hypothesis on acting white, Sohn (2011) explained that their original hypothesis relies heavily on a collective identity for Black Americans, and that the support from Black parents as pertains to their students' education is inconsistent with the oppositional culture described in the thesis by Fordham and Ogbu in their 1986 article. Sohn went on to argue that not only is there no proof that school desegregation benefits or harms Black students, but also, there is no consistent

information overall about Black students' opposing education. Harpalani (2002) argued that Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) conceptualization of acting white is incorrect and that the acting white label is not responsible for Black students' academic underachievement nor reflective of a broad cultural frame of reference. Harpalani suggested that the focus be taken off the Black community and placed on the need for American society to re-examine the attitude toward the Black community and how inequity and lack of support in educational systems affect Black students.

Other critiques include Carter's (2006) conclusion that Fordham and Ogbu's acting white thesis does not suffice for the more complex multiple identities that students juggle (e.g., gender, class, and sexuality), which can oversimplify why some students succeed and others do not. This observation by Carter represents a call for an assessment of the more complex ways in which being labeled as acting white can occur. Further, Tyson (2006) addressed three limitations to the original acting white hypothesis: (a) The role of culture is only applicable if Black students have similar attitudes across varying contexts; (b) the treatment of school context is inadequate; and (c) the importance of human development processes is insufficiently addressed. Tyson stated that attention to these areas will allow a better understanding of the inconsistent findings about the burden of acting white and oppositional culture among Black students.

Buck (2010) argued that the acting white accusation blames Black children or makes them seem unable to be educated (p. 2). Lewis (2006) argued that the focus has been on the values and attitudes of Black children and families, rather than the adequacy of their educational opportunities. He asserted that the real solution calls for confronting the larger set of factors that are producing the problem. Lewis concluded that the role of

whiteness has yet to be examined as it concerns shaping outcomes for Black students, such as historic white control over institutions.

Spencer, Cross, Harpalani, and Goss (2003) posited that bad research studies have contributed to the acting white literature, leading to misunderstandings and damaged opportunities for Black youth. These researchers argued that a major flaw has been the assumption of the inferiority of Black students and cultural inferiority. This assumption of inferiority has caused previous work on acting white to neglect within-group differences and has also ignored a history of resiliency of African Americans, even in the midst of oppression (Spencer et al., 2003). Spencer et al., used examples of achievement and motivation among Blacks throughout history from the end of slavery to the 20<sup>th</sup> century to negate the idea that an oppositional culture exists and that Black Americans do not value education. These researchers argued that the lack of achievement seen in the Black community is the result of a lack of the nurturing and encouraging of Black achievement from larger societal structures, rather than a deficit in the Black community itself. Spencer et al. presented the following factors as future variables to be examined in acting white studies: racial identity, ecological systems, code-switching, coping, developmental processes, low expectations from teachers, and racial stereotyping.

Finally, Spencer and Harpalani (2006) proposed that there are conceptual errors to the acting white hypothesis and its revisions. In their article, they attempted to provide evidence that Fordham and Ogbu misinterpreted the meaning of acting white in their original article and in subsequent work. Flaws within the original piece and subsequent work on the topic, as identified by these researchers, are as follows: ignoring the long history of valuing education among Black students, neglecting racial identity and

development processes, and failing to account for the range of coping strategies to which Black students adhere in response to accusations of acting white. Spencer and Harpalani suggested two theoretical frameworks to assist with understanding Black students and the acting white phenomenon: Cross's racial identity formation and Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST). They explained that together, PVEST and Cross's model would help clarify how Black youth interpret and react to acting white accusations. As asserted in an earlier study by Harpalani (2002), Spencer and Harpalani concluded that the acting white accusation is not responsible for Black academic underachievement, nor is it reflective of a broad cultural frame of reference; rather, it is simply one of the many possible coping responses to the devaluation that Black youth encounter. A more appropriate assertion, as indicated by these researchers, is that American society needs to re-examine its attitudes, assumptions, and stereotypes regarding Black communities and provide a more equitable and supportive set of education experiences.

One commonality among the critiques by the researchers discussed in this section is how the acting white label has been used to explain Black student behavior as a result of culture rather than other structural inequities (O'Connor, Horvat, & Lewis, 2006). Additionally, many researchers seem to have argued that accusations of acting white do not cause Black students to underachieve or to adopt a culture that is in opposition to the dominant academic culture. Again, this does not mean that the label does not exist, but rather, a demonstration of the inconclusiveness around whether Black students indeed underachieve due to the label.



Although there are noted critiques of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) conceptualization of the burden of acting white, Fordham (2008) has made it clear in more recent publications that her and Ogbu's original work was in regards to how to preserve a positive Black identity in a White dominated society. Thus, Fordham posited that some researchers who critiqued the original hypothesis have misinterpreted the concepts put forth in the 1986 article. If this is true, then there may be more agreement than has been evidenced amongst academics on how researchers have found the burden of acting white to affect students. Regardless of how the piece by Fordham and Ogbu has been interpreted, there is still agreement that there are critical gaps within the conversation about understanding the acting white phenomenon and how it affects Black students.

Overall, I argue that there are larger societal understandings and structural occurrences that allow the acting white label to exist. Being Black and being smart are not mutually exclusive (Horvat & Lewis, 2003), and as stated earlier, the things that become racialized are the things that students observe racial groups doing differently (e.g., Black students dress one particular way). In situations where Black students are disproportionately underrepresented in upper-level courses and on the honor roll, academic achievement becomes another radicalized marker (Tyson, 2006). Essentially, "when Black students have positive notions of achievement related to their race, the tendency to describe characteristics associated with achievement as 'acting white' will disappear" (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004, p.98).

### Chapter 3. Methodology and Method

This chapter is used to describe the methodology, data collection methods, and data analysis methods I used to study Black college students' experience with the acting white label. I begin with a description of phenomenology and move into data collection where I specify the site, participant selection, and data collection methods, followed by the data analysis, and role of the researcher

#### **Methodology: Phenomenology**

This study was used to examine the lived experiences of Black college students at a predominantly White university. Specifically, I called attention to a phenomenon that has often been studied only at the K-12 level, to gain a better understanding of how Black college students understand, experience, and react to the acting white label. I chose phenomenological research because it allows an examination of the lived experiences of several individuals as it pertains to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Within the phenomenological approach, the key is to determine what participants have in common (Creswell, 2007) and to understand the consciousness related to participants' experiences (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991).

Phenomenology looks at what was experienced and how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994), which relates strongly to the two frameworks that were used in this study: social constructionism and key concepts from the acting white literature (referred to as the acting white framework). Phenomenology and social constructionism are similar

based on the notion that reality is tied to an individual's consciousness. Social constructionism and phenomenology combined allowed an examination of how Black students experienced a certain phenomenon and the consciousness that made the phenomenon real. Phenomenology and acting white, as a framework, are similar because being labeled as acting white is a phenomenon in and of itself that needs more attention at the collegiate level. Additionally, the combining of phenomenology and the acting white framework allowed a discussion on the similarities among Black students who have experienced the acting white label. Based on the above facts, the following research questions were of central concern for the present study (see Appendices B and C for the protocols):

- Research Question 1

What are the racialized experiences of Black college students at a predominantly White institution, specifically in regards to accusations of acting white?

This question was selected based on the scarcity of information about how Black college students are affected by the acting white label. Therefore findings addressed through this question add insight to how Black college students understand, experience, and react to the acting white label. Further, addressing this question allows a discussion of Black college students' racialized experiences when it comes to race acting.

- Research Question 2

What are the contexts or situations that have contributed to Black college students' understanding of what it means to be White or Black?

This research question was used to assess the social situations that have contributed to Black students' understanding of how to act based on their race. Using social constructionism, I was able to discuss the racialized nature of larger institutions and the implications these racialized institutions have for how Black students understand how they should behave based on their race. Again, phenomenology was chosen in order to look at the common experiences of Black college students as pertains to the acting white label at a predominantly White university.

Phenomenology can be traced to work by Edmund Husserl (Cerbone, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Lock & Strong, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). Other researchers who have adhered to phenomenological methods have either added to the philosophy of Husserl or refuted his ideas (Cerbone, 2006), thus the reason for variability within the phenomenological philosophy. Such researchers include Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty (Dowling, 2005). Phenomenology as articulated by Husserl consists of concerns with logic, intentionality, consciousness, and anti-naturalism (Cerbone, 2006). There are also other types of phenomenology, including hermeneutical phenomenology (van Manen, 1990; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007), transcendental phenomenology (Hammond et al., 1991; Moustakas, 1994; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007), existential phenomenology (Hammond et al., 1991; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007), and realistic phenomenology (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

*Hermeneutical phenomenology* is used to investigate lived experiences as “texts” of life. Within this type, a researcher identifies a phenomenon of interest, reflects on the themes that might contribute to the phenomenon, and then writes a description of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Finally, the researcher makes an interpretation of the

lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990). *Transcendental phenomenology* is used to describe participant experiences rather than a concentration on the researcher's interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Transcendental phenomenology seeks to view a phenomenon from a fresh lens, with the understanding that the researcher should set aside all biases or notions about the phenomenon prior to pursuing research (Moustakas, 1994). However, it is not uncommon for researchers using transcendental phenomenology to describe their personal experience with a phenomenon and still disassociate their view from the research process (Creswell, 2007). *Existential phenomenology* rejects the basic tenets of Husserl's phenomenology in that objectivity is rejected (Hammond et al., 1991). In essence, an existential view is that the world and individuals' interpretation of the world cannot exist outside of one another, whereas transcendental phenomenology seeks to bracket individual interpretation from the lived experiences of participants (Hammond et al., 1991). Finally, *realistic phenomenology* deals with consciousness and intentionality and is used to view situations outside of individual consciousness (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) or look at situations "the way they are."

Phenomenology also has some basic philosophical assumptions (Cerbone, 2006; Hammond et al., 1991; Moustakas, 1994). The first assumption involves a return to the traditional tasks of philosophy with an emphasis on the search for wisdom (Creswell, 2007). In this case, the search for wisdom would be a better understanding of how the acting white label affects Black college students. The second assumption relates to the lack of judgment about realism until evidence is presented (Moustakas, 1994). Using a transcendental phenomenological lens, a researcher must suspend all notions of what is

*real* until further evidence is derived. In essence, the researcher is simply setting aside preconceived notions about the object or concept. This ties directly into the third concept of phenomenology articulated above by Husserl, consciousness, in which it is thought that the reality of an object is related to an individual's consciousness of the object (Hammond et al., 1991). In examining the acting white label through a phenomenological lens, the existence of the label would be thought to be tied to individual understanding of and acknowledgement of the label. One final assumption is the interconnectedness of a subject and an object, in other words, the idea that an object cannot exist outside of an individual and his or her interpretation of the object (Creswell, 2007).

Phenomenology was chosen for this study because it allows a consideration of human experiences as they pertain to individual consciousness and material objects (Moustakas, 1994) as well as a study of lived experiences and how those lived experiences contribute to worldviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Such a method is not foreign in exploring the experiences of Black college students. Several researchers have used phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of Black college students (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Haskins et al., 2013; Love, 2010). For example, Harper and Quaye (2007) used phenomenology to understand the experiences of Black male student leaders and the ways that student organizations might provide space for their Black-identity expression. Additionally, Love (2010) used phenomenology to study the experiences of Black nursing students at a predominantly White institution. This present study on the common experiences of Black college students pertaining to the acting white label will add to the list of phenomenological studies on Black students as well as present new information about a phenomenon that can inform practices for Black college

students. Phenomenology allowed me to position the voices of Black college students and gain in-depth information about their experience with the acting white label (Creswell, 2007).

### **Methods: Data Collection**

The following section describes the methods for data collection. These include the site selection, participant selection, and procedure for collection—the in-depth interview and the interview instrument. See Appendix D for an overview of the data collection process.

#### **Data Collection Site**

The site for the study was the University of Denver (DU) campus. This campus was chosen for several reasons. First, DU is a private, elite university with a predominantly White student population. Using these criteria, Black students at DU have a higher chance of having experienced the label. This assumption is based on previous research, which has indicated that Black students in predominantly white environments (Fryer, 2006; Madyun et al., 2010) or environments where the majority of high achievers are White (Tyson, 2006) are more likely to experience the acting white label.

Access is also an important factor when determining the research site (Creswell, 2007). Based on my experience as a student and employee at DU, access to this university did not serve as an obstacle. Additionally, my work with the Black Student Alliance (BSA) and the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), as well as my position as graduate assistant for Black/African American Services, placed me in contact with a number of students who identify as Black at the university. Based on my informal

contact with these individuals, I anticipated that they would have a high level of trust as it relates to me and my research endeavors.

### **Participants and Sample Selection**

The target number for participants was 10 to 20 students. Actual participants for the study were 14 undergraduate and graduate students at DU. The 10 to 20 range for participants was chosen based on the suggestion of scholars to use 3 to 25 participants for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007; Dukes, 1984). Thus, the actual number of 14 participants was ripe for a phenomenological study. As criteria for the present study, participants had to be current DU students who identified as Black (domestic or international) and who have experienced the acting white phenomenon. Having experienced the acting white phenomenon is defined as Black students' experience of having been told they were acting white, either directly or indirectly in any respect (e.g., academics, dress, and speech). Direct accusations of acting white include such comments as, "You are acting white," whereas indirect accusations include such language as, "You dress like a White person" (Murray, 2011).

To obtain the sample for this study, purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used. Purposeful sampling occurs as researchers intentionally identify participants for their richness of data (Creswell, 2009). First, I intentionally identified groups of students, specifically students in the Black Student Association (BSA) and Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), who might have experience with the acting white phenomenon. This included coordinating with listserv managers to send a solicitation email via listservs to those groups of students (i.e. BSA and BGSA). A snowballing technique is a nonprobability sampling method that is used as individuals suggest



additional participants to be interviewed in a study (Babbie, 2007). Accordingly, I asked those students who opted into the study and identified as having been labeled as acting white, if they knew of other students who might have experience with the acting white phenomenon. Those students were asked to share information about the study with potential participants, and these potential participants contacted me if they were interested in the study. A solicitation email and recruitment flyer were used to solicit participants, and any participants who knew of others who may have wanted to participate could forward the email and flyer to interested individuals. (See Appendices and G and H, respectively.) Again, these documents were sent with the permission of listserv managers to groups that had a high concentration of Black individuals.

**Participant demographics.** Of participants in the study, all identified as Black. Specifically, nine students identified as Black/African American, three as biracial (Black and White), one as biracial (Black and Mexican American), and one as Ethiopian American. When asked to articulate their age range, 8 students identified as age 18 to 24, 1 identified as 25 to 30, 3 identified as 31 to 35, 1 identified as 36 to 40, and 1 identified as over 40. In regards to gender, there were 10 women and 4 men in the study. Regarding academic status, 10 were graduate students and 4 were undergraduate students. Finally, students were asked about their socioeconomic status growing up: 4 students identified as low/working class, 3 identified as poor, 4 as middle class, and 3 as upper middle class.

The most common response to why students wanted to participate in the study was, “That is the story of my life,” or “It’s an important topic,” or “It’s an interesting topic.” As students moved into the second interview, I received many comments related to how the students had not thought much about how the label had affected them and

their decisions in life. The individuals who opted to be in the study manifested high attention to issues of race and racial oppression, and a few grew up in homes where being Black was celebrated. Of the students in the study, the earliest encounter with acting white was in kindergarten, and the most recent encounter was during their time at the University of Denver. A good number of participants in the study were high-achieving and academically successful students. For example, most participants had been in advanced courses or academic preparation courses in K-12. Growing up, many of the participants lived in all White neighborhoods, but some participants explained their surroundings growing up as predominantly Black or amongst a mixture of races. About half of the students explained that their high school was predominantly White, and all but two participants attended a predominantly White college as an undergraduate student. Students also expressed having friends of different races in college and high school. (See Appendix L for participant profiles.)

### **Procedure**

Students were interviewed twice and asked to write a reflection to collect data for the study. All 14 participants completed interview one, 12 completed the reflection, and 13 completed interview two. Once participants opted into the study, they were sent an additional email with a doodle (online scheduling assistant) link to choose a time for their first interview. Using this method, students were able to select a time most convenient for them, and participants could change the time as needed by returning to the link provided. The settings on the doodle application were set to private, which allowed only me, the researcher, to see who had completed the doodle. Participants could only see what times were available for an interview, but not the names of other participants. I checked the

doodle link daily and sent a confirmation email, as needed, to those who signed up for an interview. The confirmation email contained the date, time, and location of the interview and thanked the student for his or her participation. In this email, the participants were also reminded that they could opt out of the study at any time with no ramifications (see Appendix I). Within 24 to 48 hours of the interview, I sent a reminder email to participants, indicating that they signed up for the study, as well as when and where the first interview would take place. Again, participants were reminded that they could opt out at any time (see Appendix J). Once students completed interview one, they were asked to complete a reflection on their experience with the acting white label. Upon completion of the reflection, students sent the reflection to the researcher. Once the researcher received the reflection, students received an email with a doodle (online scheduling assistant) link to choose a time for their second interview. The process for choosing their second interview was the same as the description above about the first interview.

**The in-depth interview.** Due to the in-depth nature of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007), I selected the in-depth interview as the primary method of inquiry. The in-depth interview was chosen to provide an extensive interview of the phenomenon being studied. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the Morgridge College of Education, Center for Multicultural Excellence, or Anderson Academic Commons. When a face-to-face option was not possible, the interviews were conducted via skype or over the phone. Each participant was interviewed twice and completed a reflection about his or her experience with the “acting white” label.

Regarding the number of in-depth interviews conducted with each participant, Seidman (2006) recommended three as ideal for phenomenological research: The first should focus on past experiences with the label, the second should focus on current experiences, and the third should join the two areas to explain the participants' experience with the phenomenon. Taking this into consideration, two interviews were used for this study. The first interview combined questions to address the participants' past and current experiences with the acting white label. The second interview allowed additional questions to be asked to better understand student experiences with the acting white label, as well as a concentration on the narrative to describe participants' experiences with the label. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) suggested choosing a time length for interviews that will allow enough time to cover the main topic, but not too long where participants will become tired from interviewing. Thus, each interview was scheduled for 1 to 2 hours, and interviews lasted approximately one hour.

During the first interview, participants were asked to self-identify the following: age bracket, race, classification (undergraduate or graduate), gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status (See Appendix A for the Participant Information Sheet). Once demographic information was collected, I began with an overview of the study and general questions so that the interviewee could become comfortable with me as a researcher. The overview addressed key points from the informed consent form and the logistics of getting started (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). With permission from the participants, the interviews were audiotaped. Students were then asked two, broad open-ended questions, using a pre-set interview protocol pertaining to their experience with the acting white" label (See Appendix B).

After Interview Number 1 and prior to Interview Number 2, students were asked to reflect via journaling about their experience with the acting white label (see Appendix K). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), when focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, in-depth interviews can be supplemented by journal writing or other data. In this study, the purpose of the reflection was to provide another avenue for students to tell their story about their experience with the acting white label. In particular, students were asked to respond to the question: “What encounters have I had with the acting white label and how have those experiences affected me?”

Finally, students were asked to visit with the researcher for a second interview, either face-to-face or via skype, once they had reflected on their experience with the acting white label. During Interview Number 2, participants were asked follow-up questions based on themes that emerged from the first interview (see Appendix C). Students also had the opportunity to discuss any themes from their reflection. Based on the nature of the topic, it was possible that students might become uncomfortable or might want to discuss issues that arose with a professional. For that reason, participants were provided a list of counseling services in the case they wanted to seek professional services (see Appendix M).

**Instrument.** The main instrument for this study was an interview protocol. The interview protocol contained two broad research questions about students’ experience with the acting white label and how they developed their understanding of what it means to act black and act white, along with follow-up questions within each category (see Appendices B and C for the protocols for Interviews 1 and 2, respectively). The categories were used to identify themes that were relevant to the phenomenon of acting

white. As the researcher, I developed the questions for the protocol, having taken into consideration the literature regarding acting white, the tenets of phenomenology, and the tenets of social constructionism. The data collection process occurred with consent from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Denver. All documents and procedures were approved prior to use in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

To conduct an analysis of the data, I used the following steps suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2006): (a) organizing the data, (b) becoming immersed in the data, (c) coding the data, (d) generating themes, (e) interpreting the data, and (f) reporting the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

First, I organized (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) or prepared the data for analysis (Creswell, 2009). Organizing the data occurred throughout the process by recording the type of data collected, along with the pseudonym of participants, type of activity, date, and location. To prepare the data, I also hired an outside company to transcribe the interviews, and I organized any additional documents (e.g., reflections). The transcribed data resulted in 469 pages of data (279 pages from interview one, 13 pages from the reflections, and 177 pages from interview two). Second, once the documents were organized, to become immersed in the data, I read through the transcripts and reflections to get a general sense of the data and what participants were trying to say about their overall experience with the acting white label (Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this phase, I looked to get a general idea of the participants' experiences and began to note key quotes.

Third, I coded the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and used coding techniques to classify and label concepts and themes (Babbie, 2007; Creswell, 2009). This began with line-by-line coding, followed by grouping smaller categories into larger themes. The ideas, themes, or language that I looked for in this phase were key words or themes from the literature on acting white as well as key words or themes from literature on social constructionism. In essence, I was looking to group the statements into meaningful units (Creswell, 2007). The coding process produced a total of 689 open codes, and 98 closed codes (based on themes identified in acting white literature and literature on social constructionism). For a list of closed codes used, see Appendix E.

Fourth, I sifted through the data to look for recurring ideas, themes, or language (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The coding process mentioned above resulted in five larger themes, three representing research question one and two representing research question two. Fifth, I began to interpret the data by highlighting the meanings behind the codes that were established (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This included the beginning of the story that emerged about Black college students' experience with the acting white label. Sixth, I reported the findings by addressing the two broad research questions. The findings section also relates findings to the frameworks used in this study. Finally, validation of the data consisted of member checking by orally asking participants, in Interview 2, about the major themes from Interview 1 and subsequently asking them to respond on the accuracy.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In research such as this, it is important for a researcher to be clear about his or her role and interest in a study (Creswell, 2007). My interest in this research began as I was

reflecting on my educational experiences in one of my courses in the first year of my doctoral program. Although part of the class assignment entailed reflection on my formal experiences with education, the assignment also left room to discuss informal educational experiences. I used that paper to describe part of my experience of being labeled a “Black, White girl” based on certain characteristics. I was labeled as White in reference to enrollment in advanced courses, the clothing I wore, and how I spoke. According to peers, I dressed like a White girl, and talked like a White girl.

The reflection and editing of the paper within that course brought me to consider reviewing whether or not others had experienced the label or at least written about their experience with the acting white label. That is when I found an entire body of literature dedicated to reviewing Black students in K-12 and the acting white label as it pertained to their academic achievement. As I began to discuss the topic with others, I found that many of my high-achieving Black peers had experienced the same labeling, and many of those peers often called the acting white phenomenon, “the story of my life.”

As I began to read more and hear more anecdotal evidence, I began to ponder how people could be so closed minded and ignorant as to suggest that Black individuals who are academically successful or who dress or speak a certain way must be an exception to the norm. For me, to label a Black individual as acting white for certain behaviors is to suggest that Black individuals should not act or behave in those manners. This is troubling considering the definitions of acting white that suggest that an individual must be White to achieve academically, dress preppy, or speak proper English. I am very clear that I enter this research with a real experience of having been labeled as acting white based on achievements, and I am conscious of the bias that I may bring to the research.



As a result of this consciousness, I was intentional about not making assumptions in regards to the research and was careful to let the data inform the results and conclusions. Prior to interviewing participants, I reflected on my own experience with the acting white label so as to bracket the experience (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Reflection allowed me to think about any biases prior to engaging in the interview with participants. However, my insider perspective also served as a benefit to the study in that I was able to understand participant experiences, and participants were easily able to relate to the questions I posed in the interviews. While I understand the bias that comes with having been labeled “acting white,” I also understand the level of knowledge that such an experience afforded me as I pursued this research.

## Chapter 4. Findings

As stated earlier in this paper, the notion of acting white has engendered a long-standing debate about whether it exists and whether it affects students' academic endeavors. Much of the literature on students acting white has been in the context of discussing the academic achievements and demeanors of Black students in K-12. Specifically, the acting white hypothesis (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) has been used as a way to describe how some students may underachieve to avoid accusations that they are acting white. Since the introduction of this seminal work by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), researchers who add to literature on acting white have focused on whether the label exists and how it academically affects students in K-12. Based on the lack of studies on how the acting white label affects college students as well as the social contexts that contribute to students' understanding of what it means to act white or act black, this study represented an exploration of those two areas. In this chapter, I revisit the two overarching research questions and present findings based on data collection from the 14 participants. However, prior to getting into the main two research questions, it is important to note participants' understanding of what it means to act white or act black.

Thinking about how the acting white label has been studied in the past, there has been much debate on whether or not students academically underachieve based on accusations of acting white. There has been evidence to support both sides of this argument (see Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Sohn, 2011; Toldson &

Owens, 2010), with most confirmations noting that Black students do not underachieve related to the label. Despite this debate, one thing is evident as it relates to the label of acting white: Students have a definition of the label, whether or not they let the label affect them, their academic behaviors, or social behaviors. Below are findings from students in the study as they explained what it meant to act white and act black.

### **Defining Acting White**

When participants were asked to define their understanding of what it meant to act white, many participants referenced the negative stereotypes of Black individuals as a starting point. In such cases, participants explained that to act white meant not to comply with the negative stereotypes associated with Black individuals in the United States. One participant, Danielle, stated, “Acting white meant that I was not acting like the negative stereotypes that they saw Black people being, and so they were seeing me not acting like a thug, not acting like whatever.” Another participant, CocoSupreme, indicated,

My understanding of that is just like I said before. I’m not—I think that there’s just a certain—there’s too many stereotypes on how each race should act. So I feel like I have been called that because I don’t speak like a Shenene from the Martin show or that sort of thing. Or I don’t maybe look the part of what people—or what the stereotype is for—that people try to put on African Americans. So that’s what I think that it is.

Amy described what it meant to act white as follows:

Anything that doesn’t fit the stereotype of the normal African American woman. It’s like if you’re listening to a different type of music. If you’re listening to

classical music or if you're just not fitting the stereotypes. Being an African American woman, if you're not loud, outspoken, they're like huh, okay.

Each of the participants above expressed some of the stereotypes they felt were associated with Black individuals in the United States. First, the thug personality was discussed. Many Black students in previous studies expressed that there has been an assumption that they are threatening on college campuses and in the community (McCabe, 2009; Sue et al., 2008). As described earlier, examples include students who are followed in stores, students who are watched closely by security guards (Sue et al., 2008), and students who have more frequent encounters with campus and local police (Feagin, 1992) in comparison to students of other races (McCabe, 2009).

CocoSupreme and Amy discussed stereotypes of Black women, understanding those expectations to be that Black women should be loud and ghetto. This relates to the angry Black woman myth, which characterizes many Black women as aggressive and hostile (Ashley, 2014). When looking closely at how Black women are portrayed on television, there are examples of how media outlets reinforce such stereotypes (Kretsedemas, 2010). Participants in the study mentioned characters, such as Shenene from the Martin show, as an example. From watching the show, her character is loud and aggressive, and one whom others on the show try to avoid. When she becomes annoyed with someone or feels disrespected, there are threats to fight or put someone in his or her place. Danielle, one of the participants, expressed that she too found that people on her job expect her to act this way when someone makes her angry. She shared the example that when she told a co-worker how someone else had treated her badly, the co-worker's

response was a question as to why Danielle did not “go off” on that particular person.

Danielle explained that an aggressive demeanor was not part of her character, yet she was constantly associated with such a personality.

Other behaviors that students in the study defined as acting white include the pursuit of an education, how one talks, how one dresses, the race of an individual’s friends, and other hobbies in which an individual chooses to engage. When discussing the pursuit of education as acting white, D explained the education piece by saying, “Stereotypically, all right. Say, pursuing an education. You know, I’d say trying to further your education has been perceived as white by White and Black people, you know.” Amy stated, “Acting white. I think just being in an institution like this, being [an] African American woman, you’re acting white.” By institution like this, Amy was referring to the University of Denver as a private, predominantly White institution of higher education. D and Amy, among other participants, articulated how the simple act of attending an institution of higher education is looked upon by some as acting white. Such an assumption points to education as the property of Whites (Harris, 1993). Education as the property of Whites assumes that it is an institution and space reserved only for those who are identified as White.

Higher education in general was designed for upper-class, heterosexual, White men as a way to teach them how to be productive members of society. Additionally, there were strategic occurrences that allowed early colleges to be sustained in terms of religion and ethnicity (Thelin, 2004). As oppressed groups, such as Blacks, began to demand access to institutions of higher education, they were exposed to systems that were not made for them. Their subsequent integration into a predominantly white education system

resulted in their giving up their Black teachers and, in turn, their not being taught by teachers who cared about them or their success (Buck, 2010). In this vein, it is not hard to understand why Black students who are in an educational system that values whiteness may see education as reserved for White individuals. Such an articulation was confirmed by the participants highlighted above, who suggested that they were accused of acting white simply because they chose to attend college.

Related to the acting white accusation based on speech, Ashley articulated that talking in ways identified as acting white include “being unfamiliar with slang and using very standard English.” Ashley went on to explain how she was often not up-to-date on the latest slang terms and would often get labeled as acting white based on that lack of knowledge. The findings in this section are consistent with past research in which researchers have found that to act white means to speak standard English (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006).

In terms of dress, Alexander explained that dressing in ways that brought on the label of acting white included dressing in “khakis, button-downs, polos tucked in, ties, and not sneakers or especially like boots, like Timberland boots.” The distinction made in the quote above is that sneakers and Timberland boots were attire that is not associated with acting white, whereas button-downs and polo shirts are associated with acting white. Alexander’s allusion to casual business attire as an indication of acting white has also been confirmed by other researchers (see Goff et al., 2007).

The race of one’s friends was identified as another way a person might hear that he or she was acting white, particularly if the majority of that person’s friends identified as White. The participant, Gia, stated,

I guess my personal definition—this is gonna sound bad—would probably be just people who have a lot of White friends or—I don't know—there's certain cultural norms, I feel like, that they don't adhere to. And it's just weird. I mean, I don't personally use the term white washed anymore, but I guess, if I'm being completely honest, that's how I probably think about it in my mind, so.

One interesting point in Gia's quote surrounds the cultural norm piece. I understood her words to mean that Black students who hang out with majority White friends are missing out on an important component of black culture. The cultural piece of acting white has been discussed by other authors (see Bergin & Cooks, 1995) who found that students in their study associated having a lot of White friends with acting white. Overall, what is considered a weak Black identity may bring about accusations of acting white (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006).

Hobbies that participants referenced as related to acting white include music choices and sports choices. Renee discussed the following in terms of music associated with accusations of acting white: "I guess a big one would be like folk and bluegrass and country are the main three that I think of." Amy also talked about the type of music an individual listens to that could affect whether or not that person is labeled as acting white. Using Amy's definition, Black individuals are expected to listen to rap rather than classical music, for example. When students in the study explained that they listened to something other than music associated with black culture, they were accused of acting white. Such an example is consistent with what some researchers have found regarding students' definitions of music reserved for Black individuals. For example, Peterson-

Lewis and Bratton (2004) found that acting black socially meant listening to rap music. In this vein, it is important that attention be given to the cultural differences that arose from segregation. It is my thought that for so many years, people likely only listened to music produced by those of their own race, and as a result, associated music that was sung and performed by Black people as “black music,” and the same for music sung and performed by White individuals. For example, whereas some of the participants explained that they listened to music such as country music, they were also very aware that country music singers were predominantly White. Interestingly, some participants in the study were labeled as acting white based on listening to this genre of music. The sports mentioned related to acting white include tennis, lacrosse, and volleyball.

Although these definitions related to acting white may not have affected how the students in the study chose to carry out their daily lives, they did understand what it meant when someone stated that they were “acting white.” It should be noted that many students made the distinction that they did not agree with the label of acting white, but that they understood what actions brought about accusations of acting white. For example, consider Catherine’s statement:

I guess my definition of acting white would sort of just be—I don’t know because I disagree with the concept of acting white, so I always hesitate because I feel like I’m validating it. That said, I guess when people say that I’m acting white, they’re referring to how I speak and how I present myself and how I dress.

Whereas definitions of what it meant to act white came fairly easily for participants, they struggled with the questions regarding what it meant to act black.



Participants were asked this question after they posed their definitions of what it meant to act white in U.S. society. Again, some of these students based their definition of acting white in direct opposition to negative stereotypes associated with Black individuals. In grappling with the question of acting black, many participants asked me if they should articulate their definition or society's definition. This is interesting because they could easily articulate stereotypes of Black individuals to assist with definitions of acting white, but when asked to define acting black, there was a struggle. So, the students expressed both their definition and society's definitions. Results are presented below.

### **Defining Acting Black**

The following quote by Assata is a good example of how students in the study struggled with defining acting black based on negative stereotypical definitions, while also trying to relay their thoughts on how acting black should have positive connotations:

Oh, now, that's interesting. See, I guess I don't look at—I don't know if I really actually ever thought of acting black. I guess using slang, listening to rap music or, you know, but I did that. And no, I shouldn't say I listened to rap. I listened to hard core rap. I listened to MC Hammer. But, you know, listening to rap music, inner city type of living, I guess. I don't know. I guess because now I'm so—I don't see it as a negative thing. I don't see being Black as a negative thing. And putting it against acting white has always seemed like it was a negative, and that bothered me because it was like they had to embrace this negative in order to be Black as if black is something negative.

Again, many of the students in the study wanted to distinguish that any negative definitions they articulated were based on stereotypes beyond their control, stereotypes placed upon Black individuals in the United States. Beginning with what students deemed societal definitions, acting black was articulated as an individual's demeanor, speech patterns, dress ensemble, friends, and various hobbies. Renee described acting black demeanor as "very colorful, very loud. Very sassy. Very strong. Like always ready to fight for something or someone that you believe in, I'd say would be acting black, like stereotypically." Additionally, D stated, "Aggression, I mean, behavior that was meant to harm others in some type of way. That's what was kind of associated with especially African American males for a very long time. African American women as well." Using the above information, students in the study understood the aggressive type of demeanor expected from Black individuals. Again, this is related to discussions about the assumption that Black individuals have criminal intentions (McCabe, 2009; Sue et al., 2008) or aggressive, attitudinal behaviors (Ashley, 2010).

How someone speaks was also used to explain what it means to act black. Participants pointed to slang or Ebonics as speech patterns associated with acting black. For example, Catherine said,

I guess I would describe it as the African American vernacular English. So just using certain words like "frontin'" or "ratchet" or like shortening the end of words. It also has an entirely different—just grammar and text, the way you organize sentences, the tenses used. I have so much respect for the African American vernacular, and so it frustrates me to hear people say you legitimize it

as a dialect of English, because I think it's actually a refined dialect with real grammatical rules that can be written out if you're so inclined.

What Catherine articulated is related to the value placed on standard English within the United States. Catherine's understanding of what is considered as acting black in speech has also been confirmed by other researchers. For example, Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) identified using Ebonics, using slang, and using foul language as indicators of acting black. Catherine also noted that black English vernacular could be a language of its own, with set grammatical rules. However, that is not what is taught or valued within U.S. society, thus looked upon as incorrect.

Hobbies deemed acting black were explained as listening to rap music, playing certain sports, and choosing friends to hang around. Gia offered the following example of the music believed to be appropriate for Black individuals: "I'd probably say listening to rap and/or hip hop. Especially like real rap, like hard-core rap. Not like they play on the radio, but like Tupac. I don't know." Related to sports, Catherine said, "Or you know, certain sports like basketball and football are dominated by Black people. I'm really bad at basketball though."

Other hobbies participants discussed were related to the friends of an individual. Specifically, Paul described how his sister had more Black friends than he did, noting that most of his friends identified as White. The music one listens to, the speech patterns, and association with friends have also been noted in other studies as factors that help define what it means to act black (see Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

So, although students in the study were very aware of the negative stereotypes of Black individuals in the United States, they also made a point to highlight their thoughts on negating the negative stereotypes in order to look at how acting black should be viewed in a positive manner. It should also be noted that I perceived students in the study to have a positive Black identity and understanding of past and current societal oppression for Black individuals. Amy stated,

Well there's the stereotypes and then there is being proud of your ethnicity and being proud of who you are, and I think what I've seen actually throughout college is some of us actually lose that, that we feel like we have to conform into what society expects, what different institutions do you expect us to act, so we kind of lose that little aspect of being proud of being African American, being a minority.

In a similar vein, Alexander offered,

I'm going to base my definition off of my family members and people that I interact with. So I'm going to say that acting black is being proud of your heritage, representing yourself in a real way, confident, and able to be proud of everything that you do.

Renee defined acting black from this positive perspective:

My definition today is if you are Black or identify as Black, whatever you do is acting black, to me, so it's just I think people, based off of stereotypes, but I'm

like I can do what I want and whatever I do, because I'm Black, is acting black.  
So there is that.

The above definitions bring up a point that has been argued when looking at how Black students are impacted by accusations of acting white: resiliency in the black community. Spencer et al. (2003) used examples of resiliency and the achievement of African Americans throughout history in order to negate ideas that the acting white label causes students to underachieve. In this vein, it is apparent that students in the study, even after hearing the label and recognizing societal stereotypes, had positive viewpoints of Black individuals. Students' understanding of what it meant to act black or act white has a lot to do with their experience hearing the label at multiple points in their life. To better understand these college students' experiences with the acting white label throughout their life, Research Question 1 was addressed using the themes that emerged from the participants' responses.

### **Racialized Experiences and the Acting White Label**

Research Question 1 asked, "What are the racialized experiences of Black college students, specifically in regards to accusations of acting white?" Based on responses from students in the study, three themes emerged: hearing the label, impact of the label, and coping with the label. The theme *hearing the label* concentrates on the ways in which students in the study heard they were labeled as acting white. The theme *impact of the label* highlights how students were impacted by the ways in which they heard they were acting white. Finally, the theme *coping with the label* illustrates the ways participants coped with hearing accusations that they were acting white.

It should be noted that the definitions of acting white and acting black from the prior section differ from the information within this section in that the above-mentioned definitions refer to students' understanding of what it meant to act black or act white. The information below pertains to the ways in which students in the study were actually labeled as acting white. So, although a student may have mentioned his or her understanding of acting white in dress to mean sagging your pants, that student may not have actually been labeled as acting white for the way he or she dressed. Where appropriate, student responses on their experience in K-12 are distinguished from their responses related to their experience in college and beyond.

### **Hearing the Label**

Students in the study most often recalled experiences hearing the acting white label in relation to their academics, how they dressed, their chosen hobbies, and how they spoke (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Experiences Related to Acting White and Academics, Dress, Hobbies, and Speech*

Experience	Definition
Acting White & Academics	Students labeled as acting white based on academic achievements, such as taking advanced courses or maintaining good grades, as opposed to hanging out.
Acting White & Dress	Students labeled as acting white based on dressing in professional attire, as opposed to urban attire or sagging pants.

Acting White & Hobbies	Students labeled as acting white based on chosen hobbies that are populated by White individuals, rather than hobbies populated by Black individuals.
Acting White & Speech	Students labeled as acting white for speaking proper English as opposed to Ebonics or slang.

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**Acting white and academics, K-12.** In terms of academics in K-12, students were labeled acting white academically if they got good grades, took advanced-level courses, or were adamant about their homework or other academic development opportunities, such as college prep programs. Danielle recalled a specific example of a young man who used to tease her for getting good grades. She elaborated, “Yes, all the time in high school. All the time I was getting good grades. So I’m getting good grades so now I’m acting white with my academics? I remember that especially with that little Terrance guy.” Alexander, reminiscing on his academic experience in K-12, relayed the following:

And so I heard that I was acting white more because of...the higher-level classes that I was in. I remember ninth grade specifically, and I don't know if—well, I was a part of Upward Bound and that experience. I mean, I don't remember where it was instilled that—oh, ninth grade is the start of when colleges start to look at you. So I was really focused on getting straight As for that year. And so, I would say I heard it more so that year because I was so focused on academics.

Below Gia discussed her efforts to stay up-to-date on her homework and how she was accused of being whitewashed based on her actions:

I mean, usually it was in reference to the fact—they'd like—I'd rather finish my homework and then go out. Or I'd rather finish it and then go out instead of just putting it off. And then—and going out and then coming back. I'm not gonna come back from going out and do work. Or not wanting to do something because I knew I had work to do that had to be accomplished.

Again, the students in the study were labeled as acting white based on getting good grades, taking advanced-level courses, passion about their homework, or other academic development opportunities. Many researchers also found that getting good grades (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Fryer & Torelli, 2010) and placing emphasis on the importance of school (Murray, 2011) can equal acting white for Black students. One interesting thing about the ways in which students in the study discussed their experiences with being labeled as acting white includes how they understood the stereotypes but worked to promote that such stereotypes were ridiculous and ill informed.

Amy provided this example:

I actually went to class, and the thing is that they reinforced their own negative stereotypes. It's like, why would you do that to your own people, and I wanted to educate myself, and the thing, is most of the people from my high school went to school to stand in the hallways.



Yet another example was offered by Catherine: “Oh gosh, yeah. It’s depressing hearing people accusing me of acting white for being in advanced class. Like, come on people. You gotta have a higher opinion of yourself.” As stated before, students in the study had a positive Black identity that was evident as they discussed their experiences with the acting white label.

**Acting white and dress, K-12.** Below participants described ways in which they dressed that brought about their hearing personal accusations of acting white.

CocoSupreme explained,

I just—I would—used to wear just jeans. And I know one of my outfits in high school, I remember because I took a picture in it, was like a Batman shirt. But then, I would have on like the Birkenstock sandals. So it was—so just that kinda – mainly what—I would kinda dress like that or just kinda my own style and still kinda finding myself. But maybe it wasn’t like how all the other Black girls were dressing, per say. And then, that’s when that would—I would hear that.

Alexander discussed what he called professional attire, described as khakis and a button-down shirt, and how those clothing choices affected how he was viewed. Alexander shared,

I think it's annoying that—and I don't know how much of this I actually reflected on at the time, but that acting white was more professional as opposed—so whenever I always dressed more professional, you're acting white. And that is annoying because, you know, to be Black, does that mean you're never professional and you can't look nice, so there.

Finally, Renee talked about her experience related to dress:

I forgot what I was wearing, but I remember it was like a skirt, some like random blouse or something, I don't know. Then just some sneakers, it was no big deal. I was like walking by and someone said something that was a compliment, I guess. Then the other person was like, oh, she looks white. So I'm just like, this is just a basic outfit.

The accusations that these students heard based on how they dressed are consistent with previous literature wherein certain types of clothing, such as Abercrombie and Fitch (Neal-Barnett, 2001) and casual business attire (Goff et al., 2007) were noted as indicators of white culture and therefore, acting white.

**Acting white and hobbies, K-12.** As discussed earlier, music and sports were considered significant hobbies that gained students accusations for acting white. Specifically, students discussed that if they did not listen to rap music, they were labeled as acting white. Assata gave some examples of music she listened to:

Oh yes, definitely the type of music I listened to. During that time, I was really into oldies, like Dion and Del Shannon, and I loved Guns N' Roses and Metallica, and then Nirvana was really big then, and Soundgarden and all that good stuff, Toad the Wet Sprocket, so definitely by the music that I listened to, very much so.

D recalled that he would be asked, "Why are you listening to White folks' music?" essentially when listening to rock music. Other music students mentioned included jazz,

rock and roll, and country music. Sports represented another hobby mentioned where students would hear accusations of acting white. In this area, students pointed out stereotypical sports of Black individuals, such as basketball and football. Other sports, such as soccer, swimming, and snowboarding, were mentioned as sports deemed inappropriate for Black people, thus attracting the label of acting white when one of the participants engaged in such sports. Catherine articulated,

I tend to get labeled acting white for the things that I didn't do. Like, I'm really not athletic, so I didn't go out and go out for the basketball or anything. You know, I was a little kid. I liked to play piano and be in girl scouts, but people made fun of me for not fitting very specific stereotypes they have in their head.

Whereas Catherine's experience was in reference to what she chose not to engage in, Bruce and Paul had experiences based on the sports in which they did engage. Bruce commented, "Yeah, I played soccer all the way until sophomore year of high school, and everyone started giving me crap for it. It was like Black people don't play soccer, and I picked up basketball junior year of high school." In regards to his love for swimming, Paul explained,

It was more of like, "You swim. Can Black people swim? I thought they can't swim." I'm like, "Oh, I didn't know it was in our genetic makeup to not swim. I just thought it was because we didn't have access to pools or whatever."

Paul mentioned an excellent point as it pertained to the exposure of Blacks to certain sports and so on. His point highlights how segregation affects exposure to certain

activities and thus affects the activities in which people might participate. Further, the hobbies that students engaged in that brought about accusations of acting white are similar to those from previous studies. For example, Neal-Barnett et al. (2009) found that music preferences that can earn students an accusation of acting white include listening to alternative, grunge, or rock music. However, the specific mention of sports appears to be unique to this study.

**Acting white and speech, K-12.** Students in the study expressed that they most often heard they were acting white in speech when they spoke proper English or did not use slang. CocoSupreme said, “Oh, I mean, I would open up my mouth. It was like, ‘Oh you a White Black girl.’ It’s like, ‘No, it’s just—this is how I talk, I’m not sure what you want me to do.’” When CocoSupreme was asked to explain how she spoke, it was explained as proper English. Alexander was also accused of acting white based on speaking proper, which he called professional speak. Alexander also heard accusations based on his higher pitched voice. He described his experience regarding the way he talked as follows:

Yes, for various reasons. One, because I have a high voice. And so, that's always been the case. And so people would say that I sounded white anyway. And then I think I would try to use words that I did learn.

As with the students in this study, the use of standard English was also frequently mentioned in other articles on student experiences with acting white (Bergin & Cooks, 1995; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2006; Goff et al., 2007; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Neal-Barnett, 2001; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009).

**Hearing the label from whom, K-12.** While discussing their experience with being labeled as acting white for certain behaviors, students in the study also identified the people from whom they heard such accusations. Most often, they heard the label from Black individuals, expressly from Black family members, those in their community, and friends/associates at school. The following quote from Gia explains an instance where a family member told her that skiing is for White people:

I do remember distinctly, though, one time. It was fourth grade, fifth grade. And there was a class ski trip. And like I said, my grandparents are really traditional. And they did not want me to go. They refused to let me go. They weren't gonna pay. But I was so excited. I just wanted to go and ski. And obviously, you have to buy the clothes for that, blah, blah, blah. Granted, they were probably expensive. I don't remember. But they refused to let me go because skiing is something that only White people do, and I shouldn't be skiing, and they don't even know why the school is taking us. But then my mom let me go anyway, so. That's the only thing I remember.

Students also discussed hearing accusations from other family members, such as parents, siblings, and aunts. Ashley described a situation with some young girls in her community who always teased her for such actions as reading and how she dressed:

Well, I mean, those were the kids. Those were the ones that called me White. Those are the White—I don't think White people called Black people white washed. I mean, I've had very, very uncomfortable moments... But it was mostly the kids from the neighborhood that would call me—not really the—yeah.

Although the majority of participants expressed that the race of the accuser was often a person of color, most often a Black person, there were instances where students discussed hearing the label from White individuals. For example, Catherine specifically did not remember any instance where other Black people labeled her as acting white. Catherine shared,

I think it made me a lot more frustrated because it was never a label that was put on me by Black people, because we were in such small numbers in that community that we just banded together; but it was very, very hard to hear. It was coming from White people almost entirely. It was just like, “You can’t tell me how Black people are supposed to act, you’re not Black.”

An interesting point in Catherine’s quote is how she pointed out the cohesiveness of the Black people with whom she associated. Her quote indicates that the Black people in her community dared not relay the label to others in the community. This type of finding was very prevalent among the college experiences of the participants. Many discussed how they felt they might have heard the label less in college because they hung around other Black people who heard the label in K-12 and were aware of how hurtful and derogatory the label could be.

Although the above topics add to literature on how Black students experience the acting white label in K-12 settings, few studies have examined if this experience is similar for Black students in college. The overview of students’ K-12 experiences offers good background for a phenomenological study in that it allows an assessment of past

experiences that can be compared to more recent experiences to provide a more robust explanation of student experiences with a particular phenomenon, in this case, the acting white phenomenon. Below is a summary of findings on how participants in the study experienced hearing accusations of acting white while in college.

**Acting white and academics, college.** As students moved to discussions of hearing accusations of acting white while in college, the occasions of hearing the label were present, but on a much smaller scale. Regarding academics, student accusations of acting white in college surrounded the act of pursuing higher education and one's choice of a major while pursuing higher education. Gia discussed the simple act of attending college as a trigger for her to hear that she was acting white, specifically when she went back home to see friends from high school who chose not to pursue higher education. In Gia's words,

Every single time I go back to my home city, all of my previous friends from my high school and stuff. That's all I hear. Most of them still haven't graduated and no GEDs. Most of them aren't in college or college-focused. So, if they have jobs, they work at Wendy's. So things like that. Every time I go home, like, "Oh you're too college on us now. Oh, you're so White." Like, "Why you can't come hang out?" And to me, it's always like, "I'm not gonna come hang out and do delinquent things with you when I have more important stuff to do. I'm trying to get a job."

Bruce discussed his major as a trigger for hearing that he was acting white. He would be pursuing medical school in the future, and when one of his friends heard the

news, Bruce was reminded that pursuing a job in medicine was for White individuals. He said, “I was told that I was going to medical school, and it’s like, ‘That’s a White person’s thing, because it’s a no-struggle job.’ I’m like, ‘That’s exactly what you want.’” Bruce went on to discuss his friend’s thoughts that to be Black, one must have some sort of struggle to be considered authentic. For Bruce’s friend, pursuing medicine was a no-struggle job, or a job that would likely provide sufficient income, and therefore, not for Black people. Another participant, Ashley, also received criticism for pursuing work in international studies. She was told that she should consider work that directly involves issues of African Americans within the United States rather than international issues. The reasoning the person gave was that the international studies field is primarily White people.

**Acting white and dress, college.** For students in the study, hearing accusations of acting white based on dress when they were in college was related to not sagging their pants and to what one participant referred to as “dressing-up.” First, Bruce discussed how he was deemed as more white than the people he hung around because he did not sag his pants. Bruce remembered, “Someone told me that because I don’t sag my pants, it makes me more white than others around me.” Also, Ashley recalled hearing the accusations based on how “dressed-up” she was on any particular day:

I think it’s more become just a way of how [name1] dresses, like very rarely in pants or things like that. But I think the tab was more that I dress—I overdressed. Yeah. I think that’s what they were trying to say when they said that they were—yeah. So, constantly—and very, very feminine clothing. Yeah. I think that’s what they were trying to imply.



Definitions of dress attire appropriate for Black individuals was in opposition to the attire considered appropriate for White individuals. Such notions can be seen in participant responses, such as the one received by Bruce when he was labeled acting white for not sagging his pants. In the K-12 literature on acting white, sagging pants has been related to acting black (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004); and, as has been found in this study, when students do not adhere to such stereotypes, they are labeled as acting white. Few studies have data on the experiences of Black college students related to the acting white label, however, similar to findings in this study, Woldoff et al. (2011) found that students in college could also be accused of acting white based on their dress attire.

**Acting white and hobbies, college.** Black student experiences hearing the acting white label related to hobbies in college were based on the organizations in which they chose to be a part. Ashley discussed her experience attending a church that was not of the Black Protestant tradition. She explained that she had been told by a few people that she was not Black because she attended a catholic church versus a church such as a Baptist church or Church of Christ. Ashley explained, “I’m Catholic. So—but I attend a church that has a lot of African Americans. But I’ve been told that I’m not Black because I don’t attend a Black Protestant church.” Alexander also discussed his experience in college hearing the acting white accusation because he was not in a lot of Black organizations.

Overall, this information about hearing the acting white label is similar to the study by Harper (2006) in which it was found that students were not ridiculed as acting white for their academic achievement and were highly involved in the Black community at their college. Harper concluded that this involvement may have had something to do

with how the students in his study were viewed by their peers. However, in Alexander's case, an opposite effect was noted. Alexander felt he was ridiculed because of his lack of involvement in organizations with a large population of Black students, such as the Black student organization on campus.

Other topics mentioned regarding hobbies included music, sports, and green initiatives. Specifically, students were accused of acting white in college based on music such as rock, sports such as cheerleading, and general activities and interests such as going to the beach or caring about the environment. The accusations based on music have been noted in other studies (Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), as discussed earlier, but the sports piece and attention to green initiatives appear to be unique to this study.

**Acting white and speech, college.** Student experiences hearing accusations of acting white in college were also related to speaking proper English and lack of slang. Danielle explained,

I would hear all the time, "You talk like a White person." Even my dad, and I don't know if this counts, but he said, once I came to college he was like, "You don't talk like a White person anymore. You don't talk white anymore."

Joan shared her experience:

Well, just that one incident I told you about on the bus, that they could hear in my voice that I was from another part of the country, and they did call me White: "Yeah, you're acting like a White girl; you talk like a White girl." That's what they said, and I turned around and said, "The word is *educated*. I speak well

because I'm educated." And then my friend was pulling me down like, "You're going to get us killed." So that one really stands out in my mind.

Also, Jamie shared that her friends would tease her for not being able to talk ghetto, which she linked to stereotypical standards of talking black. According to Jamie, when she would attempt to use certain slang, she was told she was too white to do that. Jamie recalled, "So, I just remember when people—like when you talk...so, talking black. And I can't really talk ghetto very well. And they're like, 'Oh, you're too white to do that.'" It is important to note that Jamie identified as biracial (Black and White), and she shared several instances where people challenged her to either hang around one race or the other, implying she had to choose and could not embrace both races. Similar to what was found in this study, Woldoff et al. (2011) found that college students could be accused of acting white based on their speech patterns.

From the explanations above, it is evident that students in the study had many more encounters with hearing accusations of acting white in K-12 than in college. Whereas themes emerged for students in the study surrounding their K-12 experience, the experiences discussed in the college section were less prevalent. Participants' experiences in college are important, but definitely confirm their perceptions that they heard the label less as they got older.

**Hearing the label from whom, college.** K-12 experiences for students seemed to deal with many accusations from family members. College experiences dealt more with associates or friends on campus, and students recalled hearing statements of acting white from students of color as well as White students. Ashley recalled, "A couple months ago,

one of my persons that I supervise—a White girl—proceeded to call me an honorary White person.” Jamie also discussed hearing accusations from people with whom she worked. Both Jamie and Ashley were referring to individuals with whom they worked on campus. Jamie related this scenario:

And my friend and I, who were both on the staff, are biracial, were both Black and White, and we both have jokes—comments made to us in our work environment about acting white and not being Black. “Well neither of you are Black. You're both mixed, and you both act white,” and just little things and—which I think, when you put that, that’s where my nickname of being half [Black] doesn’t come out. But, yeah. That’s staff.

Jamie went on to discuss how accusations and jokes about her acting white and her biracial status came from both Black and White staff members. The people from whom students in the study heard the label exemplifies how stereotypical notions of what it means to act black or act white are understood across race, across groups, and in varying environments. As students heard accusations, some were affected, although others used the label as motivation to succeed in certain areas.

### **Impact of the Label**

This section is used to explain how hearing the acting white label impacted students while in K-12 and college. As discussed earlier, there has been a long dispute over whether or not Black students underachieve based on accusations of acting white. Some researchers have found that students are academically affected by the label (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), whereas others have found that students are not academically

affected by the label (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Faris, 2006; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Neal-Barnett et al. (2009). For participants, academic impacts were almost non-existent, although they were greatly impacted socially from hearing they were acting white.

Looking at academic impacts, students relayed that they did not let acting white accusations affect their academic performance. Jamie said,

So—and I've always hated stereotypes, so I never thought like, maybe I should do bad in school so that I—people would associate me with being Black. And so, I never really fed into stereotypes like that.

Assata articulated,

No, because I wanted to be the best. I didn't care. I wanted to be the smartest because that was something my mom, and she does it even with my own children now, she always told us, "You're the smartest girl in the class." And so, because my momma said it, I wanted to be it, and I didn't care who didn't like it. I was going to fight for every single grade and that was just—if they didn't like me because of it, oh well.

D had similar sentiments:

Yeah, yeah. So when it came to the education thing, that's just something I've always been unwilling to compromise on whatsoever, you know. If pursuing your education is acting white, then I guess I'm acting—you know. Yeah. I didn't ever really conform to that whole—that's nonsense to me. Anyone who—any African

American who knows African American history well knows that's nonsense. So that one always fell on deaf ears.

As evidenced in the quotes above, Black students did not let accusations of acting white affect their academic performance. However, hearing accusations of acting white did affect their social performance. The ways in which students in the study were impacted socially by the label involved (a) removing all interactions with Black people; (b) trying to fit in; (c) changing various behaviors or actions, including how they dressed, the hobbies they engaged in, and speech patterns; and (d) internalizing the label.

**Removing interaction with Black people.** Most notably, some students shied away from interactions with individuals who identified as Black. Participants explained that this movement away from individuals in the Black community was because hearing accusations made them feel uncomfortable around Black people or feel as though they did not belong with Black individuals. Jamie relayed the following experience:

Part of it, like in high school and stuff, was—students will say, “You act”—the comments about acting white. And then also, never have had—I never had a group of students who were Black or friends who were Black. I mean, I had students of color, but not Black and—I was kinda saying about biracial—it's different. It's very different. So I just never had that group of students. And whenever I did have interactions—or not—I won't say every interaction by any means, but the interaction that stood out to me were Black students saying like, “Why do you do your hair like that? Why don't you do it like us?” And so, have had negative interactions with them. So when I got to college—and I probably

had this great new opportunity to be—to engage in it. I didn't because I think I was partially scared because I was so used to acting white that I didn't have a reason to, I guess.

In the same vein, Amy explained,

I'm African American. They are both in there, and it is just more of I did not fit what everyone around me wanted me to become; and at a certain point, it pushed me away from the African American community because I was like, "I don't want to conform into anything that you want me to become." I'm not that type of person. I was just, I don't know to describe it, but it's very intense.

Another student, Ashley, commented, "I just—unfortunately, a lot of times when I was younger, I was not comfortable around Black people, knowing that they were going to say those things about me, so."

The above quotes show instances where students shied away from interactions with Black people, which could have been missed opportunities to get engaged in the Black community. From the responses of students in the study, they hung out where they felt they were safe and comfortable. This may have included majority White friends, which is another marker with acting white, because several researchers have found that having majority White friends heightens students' chances of being labeled as acting white (Carter, 2006; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Woldoff et al., 2011). Many of such reactions occurred when participants were younger, or the interactions were limited to Black individuals who did not label them as acting white. Although some students looked

to move away from the Black community, other students were looking for ways to better fit in with the Black community.

**Trying to fit in.** As noted above, hanging out with majority White students as close friends can earn Black students the label of acting white. The students in the study seemed to be very aware of this as well as other characteristics that would determine whether they were seen as “black enough” by their peers. This understanding trickled into students’ behaviors when they wanted to appear as acting black. Assata discussed taking classes to become more familiar with African American history. She believed that this assisted with her becoming more immersed in African American culture, explaining,

In a way, I tried to take more classes about Black people to kind of prove that I was Black, like taking more classes in the African Studies Department or African American Literature or things like that. So I guess, to prove that I was Black, I tried to take more black classes.

Ashley recalled her experience of trying to fit in:

I definitely sought out black things—more black things, like BSA...or things like that, that were—or even working—what I do with [supervisor]. So that is a way, not of proving my blackness, but connecting me to a Black community.

Paul described his purposeful efforts:

Yes. I think I would make sure because I’m still heavily involved with my church—my Black friends, and I like hanging out with them. But I make sure that I would purposely get that time in, so I’m like okay, I’m good, I’m not just White.



Here, Paul was referring to how he would ensure that he spent time with his Black friends who were not necessarily prevalent at the church he attended.

It appears that students in the study considered acting black to mean being immersed in and engaged in the Black community in some way. As participants mentioned, black history, black culture, and associating with Black friends assisted them with feeling as though they were a part of the Black community. The tactics mentioned above appear as positive representations of the Black community. Learning black history and engaging with the Black community serve as a positive aspect that can assist students with better understanding black culture and history. Yet, there were students who completely changed their actions to reflect negative stereotypes within the Black community as a way to fit in.

**Changing actions.** Some students specifically changed behaviors to try and avoid hearing accusations that they were acting white. Bruce did an excellent job of summarizing why some participants may have chosen to change their actions in order to “fit in with the Black community.” He explained,

It’s because basically, like I said before, it’s like you grew up around these things, and it’s like your background; and someone tells you that you’re not your background because you do this one thing, you feel like you’re inclined to do whatever it is that you need to do to feel more integrated with basically all you’ve identified with so far.

Bruce's comment brings up a point about Black identity. It had been found that students with a strong Black identity are less affected academically (Spencer et al., 2001) but more bothered by accusations that they are acting white (Neal-Barnett et al., 2009). Although students with a strong Black identity did not let accusations of acting white affect their academic performance, they were bothered that people could succumb to such ignorant notions of what it should mean to act black.

The ways students in the study changed their behaviors included how they dressed and how they spoke. Bruce shared, "I didn't sag my pants. I think that was the main reason that I started sagging my pants junior year," in reference to how he changed his dress pattern when he was called acting white for wearing his pants near his waist. Thus, in order to avoid these accusations, he began sagging his pants. Bruce had another instance in which he stopped playing soccer because it was deemed a white sport, and he switched to playing basketball. Despite these changes when he was younger, he explained that as he got older, he no longer paid attention to these accusations and did what he felt comfortable doing. Another participant, Paul, discussed how he went through a phase where he tried different types of clothing, particularly clothes associated with Black people, in order to move towards that community. Paul also talked about highlighting the music to which he listened. In certain contexts, he would be sure to bring up music associated with black culture in an effort to fit in. He gave this account:

So like that's when I went through, let me try FUBU and Sean John and all that. And then I would purposely make sure I brought up all the black music I listened to, so that way they're like look, I have some people. Don't you worry.

In the following quote, Gia described how the way she spoke was intentional, resulting in her not receiving accusations of acting white:

I don't think I was ever labeled as acting white for the way I spoke. But I think that's because I intentionally decided to speak a different way. I would use slang. I would drop the N word. That's really when I started to curse. So things like that. And not to—maybe it wasn't a conscious choice to say, oh I'm gonna talk like this to not sound white, but I definitely remember practicing how I sounded when I said the N word and things like that. So I feel like—did I say that right? And so, definitely that happened in high school.

When students described how they changed their actions to fit in with other Black students, it is evidence that even though they did not agree with the label, they were aware of what they needed to do to earn status in the Black community. In a way, their changing of actions links to the ways in which they internalized the label.

**Internalizing the label.** One of the most interesting of the study's findings consists of the ways in which participants internalized the accusation that they were acting white. The instances described below are not instances where participants reacted to accusations from someone else, but rather instances where students placed limits on themselves based on thoughts that they might be perceived as acting white. Catherine spoke to this point as follows:

It's important to note that it has limited—when I was younger it really limited the things I felt comfortable doing. It didn't necessarily limit the things that I did do,

but I felt weird like not listening to certain music or going out for sports. I felt like I was just not being a real Black person.

Joan explained an instance where she liked a guy and wanted him to ask her out at a school function, but she internalized that he might think she was too white to ask out:

Well, skating when I was in the fifth grade, the whole fifth grade class went skating. There was a guy named Howard. He was just really attractive, had the afro and all that, and I was afraid he thought I was too white acting and all.

Renee shared,

I don't know if I would think, I do think in my mind, this is something that a lot of White people do. But also maybe just being in Denver, like I see a lot of White people there and not very many people who look like me. That's something that I guess, yeah, hobbies post-high school, I would associate with more like white hobbies than not. And it might just be a function of geography.

In this sense, many of the participants internalized the stereotypes of how Black people should act. Internalized racism is prevalent here. Internalized racism deals with the acceptance, by people of color, that White individuals are at the top of a racial hierarchy (Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006). Such a mentality would cause individuals to associate positive characteristics with White over Black individuals—characteristics that are alluded to by using the acting white label. In this study, students limited their social actions according to what societal definitions told them they should do based on the color

of their skin. In cases where students may not have limited their social actions, what they felt comfortable doing was limited. They found various ways of coping with hearing the acting white label, as discussed below.

### **Coping With the Label**

The theme discussed above, the impact of the label, featured student responses that defined how hearing the label impacted their actions and decisions, consciously or subconsciously. Below, I highlight the third theme related to Research Question 1, which describes how students in the study coped with hearing accusations that they were acting white. The two main ways in which students coped with the label included ignoring the accusations and discussing the accusations with family or friends.

CocoSupreme discussed how she ignored the label, because she had gotten used to it after hearing it over several years:

For me, I think that by the time college came around—and even if I did maybe hear that label, it didn't bother me as much as it maybe used to, because I was so used to it. And it was just—kinda became a thing where it's like, "Hey, it is what it is. I can't change your mind." I can't—whatever. I kinda started growing more used to it, I guess.

Jamie expressed how she tried to ignore the accusations as a means to getting over how she felt about hearing such accusations:

In the moment, I probably usually didn't say anything and just ignored it, and after that—at least the first few years, I didn't really have best friends who I felt like I could go to. I didn't have mentors or anybody that I felt safe going to

discuss anything. And so, I think for the most part, I just bottled up and—I know I used to read things. I used to go on rants in my mind about why none of this makes sense. But I didn't have my friend like I did in high school to discuss it. And so, yeah. I think for the most part, I just kept it in and ignored it and tried to get over it.

The students mentioned above may have ignored the label hoping it would go away or hoping that individuals might stop using such language. Such a coping style is considered passive in comparison to the active coping style of students who discussed the accusations with others. Students in the study who expressed that they discussed the label with family and friends indicated that they did so as a way to process being accused of acting white. Amy explained how she used a close friend to process the things that occurred related to accusations of acting white:

It's just like having him and being able to talk about the things that piss us off and the things that make us happy and the fact that we came to the realization that we are here for an education, and we are here to improve ourselves. And it doesn't matter what they think, but it's more of learning about ourselves and learning how to work around it or work with it.

Paul called a family member, his dad, in order to discuss his racial experiences. He elaborated as follows:

That's one method I did. I called my dad a lot whenever I was frustrated about anything dealing with race, and it helped; and then it didn't because Dad is way

too positive for his own good, where he kind of jumps the gun. I think me and him have worked together on how to make sure to back it up before we get to the positive outlook. But yeah, so I talked to him. I talked to some of my White friends.

Thus, for participants, ignoring the label or discussing these accusations with family and friends represented the best solution for them. Such a finding is not new, as other researchers have found that dismissing the label altogether (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006) or seeking a network of racial peers or other support systems (Marsh et al., 2012; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006) has been a noted way to cope with accusations of acting white.

Other ways in which participants coped with hearing accusations that they were acting white included emotions of hurt, bother, and anger; writing in a journal; challenging stereotypes; and changing actions. When it came to their emotions, they explained how they felt hurt or anger while in high school, but that those emotions changed to defensiveness or the challenging of stereotypes as they got older and moved into college. Danielle shared how, in her college years, she no longer felt hurt by the accusations; instead, she experienced feelings of a different, less definable and possibly more action-oriented nature:

In college, I think if somebody said I was acting white, it felt different than it did in high school, because I remember that senior year feeling hurt. In college, I don't know that I felt hurt or if I felt like, "I gotta do something." I don't know. It

was a different feeling. I don't know if I can describe it but it wasn't that hurt. I didn't feel that hurt.

Danielle could not remember what her feelings were in college, but she was sure she felt hurt when hearing the label in high school. From listening to her response, it seems that she became more pro-active when it came to hearing accusations of acting white in college. Danielle used those accusations as drive to achieve and prove that Black individuals were just as capable of achieving as White individuals. Assata expressed how she used writing to cope with hearing accusations of acting white. As she dealt with her identity, she had to write in order to place herself in spaces where she did not have to think about what others thought of her. She explained, "I wrote a lot. I've always been a writer, and I created all of these stories where it wasn't like that."

In terms of challenging stereotypes, Gia recalled her reactions:

If I was called that, I think I'd more of like, "Oh like I can't be smart? I can't be Black and be smart?" Like, "I can't do this and be Black at the same time?" Like, "Why?" Like, "That makes no sense. You're stupid." Pretty much—I think that was my reaction. Probably a mixture of defensiveness and confusion. Like, "Are you stupid or what?" Like, "You—I can't be both?"

In this vein, Gia was sure to question the words of those who accused her of acting white. This method was intended to make individuals question their own words and really take the time to think about their biases toward individuals based on race.

From the quotes by Danielle and Gia, the thought of resistance emerges, in the sense that



these students coped in a way wherein they resisted stereotypes and challenged those who adhered to negative stereotypes about Black individuals. Resistance has been noted as a coping mechanism by other researchers (Ogbu, 2004). Bother (Murray, 2011; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009) is also prevalent here, because students express their disgust that people still place themselves in boxes and adhere to stereotypes.

Finally, students discussed changing their actions as a way to cope with hearing accusations that they were acting white. A quote from Catherine showcases how one student changed who she hung out with in order to cope with accusations. Catherine explained, “I mean, I would try to change my behavior. I would—like I said before, I would change the people I was spending time with if they were making me too uncomfortable.” The quote from Catherine is similar to comments expressed by some of the participants in the impact section above wherein they described having intentionally changed the way they talked or the way they dressed to try and lessen accusations of acting white. In Catherine’s case, she just changed who she hung around.

### **Relevancy of the Framework to Findings on Students’ Behaviors and Reactions**

Overall, using the acting white framework from the literature discussed earlier in this dissertation, Black college students did have encounters with the acting white label. Specifically, the two areas relevant from the framework include students’ behaviors associated with acting white and students’ reactions to being labeled as acting white.

### **Students’ Behaviors and the Acting White Framework**

Within the framework from precious literature, four main domains were addressed in this study pertaining to the first area of the framework—behaviors associated with acting white: academics, speech, dress, and hobbies. In turn, two main

findings emerged related to the framework. First, each of the above-listed behaviors suggested characteristics in which Black students understand the difference between acting black and acting white. In other words, Black students understand the behaviors associated with academics, speech, dress, and hobbies that can earn them accusations of acting white and accusations of acting black. Second, each of those behaviors constitutes areas wherein students in the study had been labeled as acting white. Moreover, for each of these behavior categories (academics, speech, dress, and hobbies) in the framework, some of the college students in the study had heard that they were acting white.

Related to academics, the acting white framework suggests that advanced courses, good grades, working hard in school, and notions of school importance are associated with acting white, whereas not going to class, not doing work, street smarts, and racial uplift to negate stereotypes are associated with acting black. These very characteristics are what participants expressed as they discussed definitions of acting white and acting black as well as ways in which they had been labeled acting white. According to the framework, speech patterns associated with acting white are listed as proper English and extended vocabulary. Speech patterns associated with acting black include slang and Ebonics. This is consistent with what students in the study articulated.

In terms of dress attire, students in the study mentioned causal business attire as associated with acting white, and sagging pants and urban clothing as associated with acting black. Within the acting white framework, specific name brands were mentioned. Although all the characteristics in the framework on dress were not identified by participants, they did mention some of the ways of dress that were listed in the framework. Finally, hobbies listed in the framework were consistent with what was found

in the study. Students in the study were labeled as acting white based on the friends they hung around and the music they listened to. On the other hand, students were labeled as not acting black when they did not listen to rap music.

### **Students' Reactions and the Acting White Framework**

The ways in which students reacted to accusations that they were acting white fall into six large categories that make up the acting white framework: (a) assimilation, (b) downplaying, (c) accommodation, (d) resistance, (e) support groups, and (f) emotional reactions. Of these reactions included in the framework, all were relevant to those of participants except the downplaying aspect. Each of the six categories is briefly described below in terms of relevancy to the study's findings.

*Assimilation* occurs when Black students integrate themselves into mainstream Eurocentric culture (Neal-Barnett 2001; Ogbu, 2004). This includes mimicking behaviors shown by White individuals. Students in the study expressed how they changed their behaviors to reflect those of White students. One student in particular discussed how she mimicked what her White peers did, and this was the only way she knew that she should study for the ACT. *Downplaying activity* is when students underachieve to avoid the label (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Downplaying activity could include doing just enough to get a C in a course, when the student is undoubtedly capable of earning a higher grade. For students in the study, the downplaying aspect of the framework was irrelevant, because no students expressed downplaying their academic achievement in order to fit in.

*Accommodation* is when Black students assimilate without giving up cultural norms (Neal-Barnett, 2001; Ogbu, 2004). Accommodation might be best explained as doing what one needs to do in order to get by in any given situation. Accommodation can also

be code switching, in which an individual understands the unwritten rules of the cultures and begins to engage and act “appropriately” according to the setting. Some students in the study understood what was needed to avoid ridicule in certain situations. Alexander, for example, remembered that he spoke one way when he was in the classroom and another way when he played sports. Specifically, his language in the classroom could be defined as proper English, whereas his language during sports could be explained as slang.

*Resistance* consists of dismissing the label (Ogbu, 2004). Students who often dismiss the label have a strong Black identity and reject notions that an individual must behave in certain ways to “be Black.” Catherine, who acknowledged that the black English vernacular was indeed a complicated dialect and legitimate set of grammatical rules, exemplifies a way in which study participants resisted dominant standards of action. *Support groups* are groups where students surround themselves with like-minded people who support them in their high-achieving endeavors (Marsh et al., 2012; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). With these support groups, students do not worry about being accused of not acting appropriately for their race. Many students in the study expressed that they dealt with accusations of acting white by talking it over with friends or family members. *Emotional reactions* include anxiety and bother (Murray, 2011; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2009), anger (Neal-Barnett, 2001), and the feeling of being disowned by one’s race (Neal-Barnett, 2001). Several students in the study mentioned such emotions in connection with accusations of acting white.

The above information is an indication of how students in the study understood what it meant to act black and/or white, based on their personal experiences with having

been told they act white. To reiterate, this aspect has been studied extensively among Black students in K-12, but very rarely among Black college students. Understanding the experiences of Black college students provides insight into their experience with the label once they attend college. Within this study, it was found that students heard the label less as they entered college, but there were lingering impacts from hearing the label in K-12 that affected them in college.

As stated before, I argue that there are larger societal understandings and structural occurrences that allow the acting white label to exist. In this vein, the second part of the study findings concentrates on how these Black students developed their understanding of what it meant to act white or act black. Specifically, students discussed societal happenings that affected how they came to understand what was deemed socially appropriate for Black individuals and White individuals.

### **Themes Contributing to the Development of an Understanding of the Label**

Research Question 2 asked, “What are the contexts or situations that have contributed to Black college students’ understanding of what it means to be White or Black?” In this section, I highlight the findings, articulated by participants, as they discussed how they came to understand what it means to act black or act white. The two large themes describing how students came to such an understanding include what they *heard* and what they *saw*. As I present student responses below, I also present the data using a social construction lens.

#### **“That’s What I Heard”**

The first theme, what students heard, includes what participants heard growing up and in greater society that contributed to their understanding of how a Black or White

person should act. Family encounters and social interactions contributed a great deal to how participants developed their understanding of acting white and acting black.

**Family encounters.** Family encounters are where people learn basic values and begin to understand the world, and it is evident that what students in this study heard from their parents or other family members contributed to how they came to understand socially prescribed notions of acting black or acting white. CocoSupreme described an instance where she suggested certain activities to her parents and was told that such activities were for White people:

That probably—I would say that kind of started in, for me, in elementary school because I went to an, pretty much, an old white Catholic school. And so, the kids there would be talking about going skiing. And they would talk about going to Martha’s Vineyard. And then I would bring these ideals to my parents, and they would say, “First of all, we don’t have the money for that. Second of all, White people do that.” I mean, especially more so the Martha’s Vineyard thing, as opposed to skiing. But—so probably if—it pretty much started there because, I mean, I would hear all these different things that these children were doing, and were Caucasian. And I thought that was my whole—that was kinda like—the thought was, “This is for—this is what White people do.”

Renee described one experience where her grandmother’s friend thought she was a “White girl” when she answered the phone:

And also, some of what the speech came from family members, not from my immediate family, because they're just kind of whatever. But from my extended family, yeah, I came from that, because I remember my Gramma, well, one of them, lives in North Carolina. And I remember answering the phone for her one time, and I don't know which one of her friends had called, and then, I give the phone to my Gramma. And my Gramma was like, “Oh, she said you sound like a little White girl.” And I was like, “That's just really annoying. But whatever.” So yeah, I think that came from family and then, or experiences with family, and then everything else just from school and whatnot.

In each of the instances described above, students heard a direct definition of what it means to act white from someone close to them. Unknowingly, students may have

carried such definitions with them as they got older. Related to social constructionism, ideas cannot exist absent of the social relations (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006) of the people who create them. In this sense, students' hearing family members articulate what it meant to act white had a direct connection to how these students came to understand the world. Language is powerful when developing an understanding of the world (Lock & Strong, 2010; Velody & Williams, 1998), and the students in the study confirmed that language heard from family members contributed to their understanding of acting white or acting black.

Family members and close friends are likely some of the first encounters some of these students had and thus had an influence on some of their early ideas of what it meant to act white or black. In the case of CocoSupreme, she heard these accusations as early as elementary school, which appeared to have affected and influenced her understanding from an early age. At such an early age, students may not yet be thinking critically and likely take on knowledge expressed to them by family members or other respected persons such as teachers. Renee did not hear accusations from immediate family members, but remembered hearing accusations from a family friend. Renee's experience was still another case of hearing language about how a Black person should act from someone that the child likely respects. Another area that contributed to participants' understanding of what it meant to act white or act black based on what they heard was their social interactions.

**Societal interactions.** The social interactions that students in the study described include what they heard in terms of what they wore, how they spoke, and other actions. Alexander described his experience based on what he wore. According to Alexander,

when he wore athletic gear or Timberland boots, he would get a different reaction than when he wore khakis and a polo shirt. Based on these reactions, he became more aware of what he wore, admitting that he was more conscious about what he wore based on the reactions he heard from other people. He gave this explanation:

I think, generally speaking, dress played a big part too, and the different reactions that you would get when you wear certain things. So when I would wear Timberland boots and jeans, I would get a different reaction than when I wore casual shoes and khakis. So, just the reactions from people.

Alexander's quote demonstrates the awareness that comes from observing one's surroundings. In this case, he observed what he heard from people based on his attire on any particular day. In his interactions with others, Alexander became aware that people treated him differently, in action and speech, based on what he wore. For example, when wearing timberland boots and athletic gear, Alexander remembered being solicited for drugs. Yet, such interactions did not occur when he wore polos and khakis. Alexander explained that wearing polos and khakis were viewed as acting white. Simple interactions such as those could affect what a person wears. Even if an individual enjoys wearing relaxed athletic clothing, if he or she has negative encounters when wearing such gear, that person might be persuaded to wear clothing that attracts more positive experiences and comments. However, the response of the person who assumed that Alexander sold drugs based on his clothing should also be noted. That person was also likely influenced by stereotypes of Black men in urban clothing. The confidence that the person exuded by approaching Alexander and asking for drugs demonstrates that the person was sure Alexander must have sold drugs, and demonstrates the power of social constructions. That person's understandings was developed via social interactions, and he may have



used his memory of something in the past to connect how he felt he should interact with Alexander. Without knowing anything about Alexander, he used a socially constructed understanding on which to base his interaction.

Paul's experience was based on how he spoke. He explained that he was judged based on his pronunciation of words. Based on his articulation when he spoke and some of the hobbies in which he engaged, he was often told that his White friends acted blacker than he did. Paul shared the following:

It's definitely the voice. I think everybody really judges the way people speak. It has a very distinct way of judging: "Oh, this is a black way of speaking," Ebonics as they like to say. And I'm like, "What? That's outdated. Or urban to protect themselves." I'm like, "What. That doesn't even make sense." Or there's me who, who doesn't even speak that way, but I pronounce things differently I guess. And so people are like, "Oh, there you go." White people tell me they act blacker than me, so.

Paul, in explaining that his White friends would often say that they acted blacker than him, demonstrates the internalization of his friends on how a Black person should act. In his interview, Paul remembers being labeled as acting white mostly based on how he spoke, although there were other instances. In his interview, I perceived Paul to be quite articulate. The fact that his friends took his being articulate as a reason that they are blacker than him relates to the stereotypes about Black people in which they are assumed to speak an urban slang. In this vein, definitions of being black were developed by basing them off of what is considered to be the opposite of acting white (Applebaum, 2003; Pope-Davis, Liu, 2007).

Joan described an instance where she got her hair done at the salon. As she was walking across campus with flowing hair, she heard another young lady yell that she must think she's White:

I remember second semester, walking across campus, and I had my hair relaxed and cut, and one of the girls was hanging out the window, Rhonda, I remember her, Rhonda, and she yelled, “Look at all that hair. You think you’re White now, huh.” And I just laughed and said, “Yeah, girl.” So that’s when they clearly saw that my hair texture was different because of the humidity down there. It really kind of fuzzed up, but after having it done at the beauty salon, it looked nice. And that’s the first time they really saw my hair and then wondered if I was Creole, if I was from New Orleans or somewhere else, just strictly because of the color of my hair.

The above quote by Joan brings up the conversation about “good hair.” In such cases, thicker, curlier hair has often been associated with Black individuals, whereas straight and flowing hair has been associated with White individuals. Joan was seen as acting white because her hair was long and flowing rather than in an afro. The impact of media is mentioned below, but it is also relevant in this section, because people did not often see images of people who looked like themselves in media sources. This lack of appearance could have contributed to Black students’ understanding of what was “good hair.”

This overall section serves as an example of how meaning is derived through human interaction (Lock & Strong, 2010; Velody & Williams, 1998). The students in the study gained meaning for certain actions based on what they heard from others and based on their decisions to act in a certain way. To gain a mutual understanding of human activities, individuals place labels on actions. Thus, labeling actions is a way for individuals to make sense of the world around them, and making sense of the world appeared to be associated with placing Black individuals in a box regarding what they should and should not do. Those who assisted students in the study with developing an understanding of how to act according to their race likely also did so because of what they heard from others, demonstrating how the cycle can continue. Language and how

individuals understand language represent a huge part of how meaning and understanding exist in the social world. For participants, their various societal interactions and the language used within those interactions gave them a sense of what it meant to act according to race in U.S. society. In addition to what students heard, they also noted what they saw and how those images contributed to their current understanding of acting white and acting black.

### **“That’s What I Saw”**

In this section, I discuss what students said they saw in society that influenced their understanding of what it meant to act white or to act black. Everyday interactions, racial composition of advanced classes, and media representation were the main ways in which students described that they gained this information related to appropriate race acting.

**Everyday interactions.** Alexander pointed out one way in which he began to associate “hanging out” with acting black and going to class as acting white. He described his interaction with Black students as opposed to his interaction with White students in high school:

But I kind of associated being Black with having a good time, because those were the times outside of class, like I was social, you know, you're laughing, you're eating, you're talking. So I considered that being more of a relaxed feeling as opposed to acting white and being studious.

Alexander’s social interaction may have been based on the contexts in which he engaged with these populations. For example, he described that he engaged with Black students outside of class and associated acting black with having a good time. The classes that Alexander took had a racial composition of mostly White students, and as noted above,

he associated acting white with being studious. In this sense, there were likely white students who hung out and Black students who were studious, but Alexander's main interactions were with Black students outside of the classroom and White students inside the classroom. Thus, his interactions and only seeing the majority of one race in a certain light affected his understanding of race acting.

Paul explained that there were certain sports that were deemed white sports in which he rarely saw Black people engaging. He illustrated this point as follows: "And it was weird to me that other people didn't know how to swim, but like, yeah, there wasn't anybody in the yearbook that you saw was on the swim team that was Black." As he described the lack of Black people on the swim team, Paul also discussed a comment made to him about Black people's not liking or being able to swim. In the interview, Paul made a comment about what was said regarding Black people' not swimming. He stated that it was not about Black people being genetically incapable of swimming, it was more about exposure to swimming. In this vein, exposure plays a great part in social construction. Specifically, what students observe racial groups doing differently becomes a racialized marker for how to act (Tyson, 2006). If students are not exposed to or do not see people of their race engaging in certain activities, their opinion of how to act according to their race is affected. The racial makeup of advanced-level U.S. classrooms is one example where Black students see few if any people who look like them.

**Only White people in advanced courses.** A majority of the students in the study were in advanced-placement courses or an equivalent while in high school. As students discussed the make-up of those courses, such courses had a majority racial composition of White students, even in cases where the racial composition of the school was majority

students of color. When asked about how she made the connection that upper-level classes were associated with White students, Assata explained,

I was in mostly accelerated classes, and there weren't a lot of other Black people in those classes. I actually can only think of one girl who was my competition. And so, coming from others, I would say that that was the demarcation between them and myself is that they weren't in any of my classes, but they were all in classes together.

Similarly, Jamie gave this response:

I'm not sure about middle school. But in high school, I would say because—like I said, I was in the IB Program. And the bulk of the students in that program were White. And they kind of associated everybody else who was in the program as acting white, in general.

Alexander was even younger when he made the connection between advanced classes and White students:

I would say it started for me in second grade. That's when I was taken out of my current class in elementary school and put into an academically gifted class, and I was at that point the only male of color. And I would say from then on, I was with a lot of the same people. So that acting white label, I got more of a sense of what that meant in early elementary school.

In general, in situations where Black students are disproportionately underrepresented in upper-level courses and on the honor roll, academic achievement becomes another radicalized marker (Tyson, 2006). For students in the study, they were one of few or the only one in upper-level or advanced courses, and seeing mostly White students in such classes affected their definition of race acting. Whereas the students in the study were in advanced courses, they recalled that a majority of other Black students in the school were in what they considered “regular classes.” If the students in the study noticed the racial discrepancy, I am sure that students in regular classes did as well. Such a racial discrepancy could affect Black students’ academic confidence as they begin to

question why all the people who look like them are in a certain level of courses while White students are in higher-level, college-track courses (Buck, 2010). As students observe the same make-up of classes year after year in K-12, their understanding of where they belong educationally is affected, sometimes in long-term ways. Further, the students develop concepts that education is reserved for White students, specifically noting that education, or quality education, appears to be reserved for the White students there (Tyson, 2006). When considering social constructions, students begin to internalize those racial markers as realities.

**Media representation.** Finally, media was a huge contributor to the development of participants' ideas and understanding of what it meant to act white or act black. Students specifically mentioned television shows and the actions of certain characters. Based on the television shows and characters mentioned, students did not see a lot of versatility among Black characters on television, thus contributing to their understanding of stereotypical actions for Black individuals. Catherine emphasized this point as follows:

I think that I've been really, really influenced by media....I don't know, like if you think about the most famous movies about the most famous black stories being told, you'll see mostly stories of oppression or slavery or discrimination or hardship, and I think that the fact that that is the story that's being widely told, you know that seems to be the dominant black narrative. It really impacts the way people see race....When you see a Black actor on television, they're playing a role that can only be played by a Black actor, so you know they're playing a slave or they're playing Aretha Franklin or something. You rarely see images of Black people just being people. You know, just going out and being a nurse or an author or an astrophysicist, or you know, I feel like the reason the people who don't fit a specific set of characteristics—I feel like the reason people don't fit a certain stereotype are labeled as not acting black is because the only images we see of Black people are of specific stereotypes.

What Catherine observed on television was Black individuals representing a certain type of character, rather than a diversity of characters. What seems to be

suggested by Catherine is that the lack of versatility in Black characters among media sources has an affect on how Black people are seen and expected to act within society. For some people, media sources might be their only means of interacting with Black individuals and that can greatly skew how they think they should interact with Black individuals. For example, one of the participants, Bruce, explained how he was once asked if he smoked weed. Bruce replied no, and the other individual stated that he thought all Black people smoked weed. Bruce questioned the student's interaction with Black people and found out that the student only had limited interaction with Black people. Such an example brings about concern when media is the only interaction that some people have with Black individuals, because those media portrayals seem to be based highly on stereotypes.

Whereas Catherine gave a general overview of what she saw on television that contributed to stereotypes for Black individuals, Assata and Gia mentioned specific television shows and characters as examples of stereotypical Black portrayals. Assata recalled,

And I also think that it wasn't so much during my younger years, but as I got a little older, just images in media. You would see—like even *Martin* and when he did the whole Sheneneh thing, and that neck boxing was the best thing in the world if you want to tell someone off. But when I was growing up, of course, we had *The Cosby Show*, which was very clean cut; but then *In Living Color*, the whole Jamie Foxx, and, I forgot, Wanda, just all of those types of things kind of added to what black was and I didn't really fit that.

Gia also talked about specific movies and characters that contributed to the stereotyping of Black individuals:

I don't know. Just like—especially like the media that you see that's glorified as like black media in my mind, is like, the first thing I think of is Tyler Perry. And every Tyler Perry movie, no matter what it is—obviously, they have Madea who's

like—obviously, she was raised in the hood. She’s obviously got her gun with her. She’s super loud. She’s serious. And, I mean, I guess in some ways she could be a strong, independent Black woman. But also, at the same time, she very much falls into these traditional roles of that older Black woman who’s supposed to help the kids and blah, blah, blah. I mean, you don’t ever see Madea running the head of some corporation or something. And, I mean, you see successful people in those movies, but they’re also, at the same time, they’re going through some kinda struggle or something that’s bringing them down. And usually, it’s probably more than likely because of their race or the relationship that they’re in. Things like that.

The characters and shows mentioned above explain some of the stereotypes about Black people of which the participants were aware. Whereas most noted were examples of stereotypes of struggle or acting aggressive and ghetto, I also recall that *The Cosby Show* was mentioned. As an avid watcher of *The Cosby Show*, I would explain it as an excellent portrayal of a Black middle class family. However, I have noted that although students may be aware of shows such as *The Cosby Show*, what stick in their mind are the shows or sources that reinforce negative notions of what it means to be black. In much the same way, people of other races are doing the same thing and placing Black individuals in a box regarding negative characteristics while ignoring any positive representation. I should also note that it was hard for students to think of other positive representation of Black individuals in media sources, and that fact in itself might be telling.

Bruce discussed another specific form of media entertainment that contributed to his understanding of stereotypes associated with race:

I guess it’s stuff that you see in the media, too, so I like to listen to a lot of comedy, a lot of stand-up comedy. And it’s funny but it’s stuff like that that will stick with you, so it will be like the way that people dress. I remember someone told me that, or it was a comedian, I forget his last name but his first name is Chris something, and he was talking about articles of clothing, and he was talking



about how Black people dress completely different than White people. And it was basically like a given, if you're Black, then you have to dress really nice.

What Bruce explained was how comedy can become attached to reality for individuals. I distinctly remember listening to a comedian as a child, and the certain piece I was listening to was about how Black preachers pray versus how White preachers pray. In his act, he suggested that Black preachers pray a lot longer than White preachers. It was something that I did not think about until that moment, but after that moment, I began to pay more attention when I visited churches with a Black preacher versus churches with a White preacher. In the same way that I was influenced to recognize certain things based on race from this comedian, students in the study indicated that they too began to observe differences of race based what they saw from media sources.

With constant images of Black people acting in prescribed ways, our constructions become a product of interactional forces (Burr, 2003) based on what is seen. Individuals are not born with an indication of what it means to be Black or White (Ore, 2009) but develop such definitions from the meanings they learn throughout life. Media representations are everywhere, and the ways in which Black people are constantly portrayed via media sources provide an example of how such images turn into meanings.

### **The Social Construction of Acting White/Black**

Below, I use the four main tenets expressed in the frameworks section on social constructionism. Those four tenets have been related to the findings of this study in an interpretation of how race, specifically acting white and acting black, becomes socially constructed.

## **Meaning Derived from Human Activity**

Social constructionism concerns how meaning is derived from human interaction (Lock & Strong, 2010). Considering what participants articulated relating to how they came to understand actions based on race, language, and interaction constituted huge pieces in the study. The language piece came into play when students heard language surrounding how Black people should act. As students heard similar language in similar situations, they too began to develop an understanding of behaviors appropriate for Black or White individuals based on language. For example, if an individual constantly hears that wearing polos is “for White people,” there is a high probability that such language coupled with other things might influence how the student understands how to dress based on his or her race. Some participants even used such language to describe other people’s actions, thus confirming how they developed and articulated such language. The fact that students were able to understand and articulate what it means when someone says that “you are acting white” is evidence that they understood the labels placed on actions associated with a certain race.

Additionally, other interactions affected students’ understanding of how to act based on race. For example, the things that individuals observed in society also affected their understanding of how to act based on race. If they observed quite a few people of one race doing things one way, it was often associated with all individuals of that race. In essence, students heard and observed language and actions that helped develop their understanding of acting according to race, thus impacting their racial view of the world as well as how they interacted with others. Had their language and interactions been different, so too might have been their understanding. Language is a central piece to how

individuals understand one another and the situations within their surroundings (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010), thus explaining why the participants all had similar understandings of what was meant when being labeled as acting white. They were using language learned as a way to place people and situations in categories for understanding and organization. In addition to what was learned from students in the study, it is important to note the everyday language in society that affects how people of a certain race are seen. Whether this is the language in academic journals or in various media sources, it is important to be aware of how language affects understanding. If language surrounding an entire race is often derogatory, such language contributes to how individuals view that race, as well as how people might interact with individuals of a certain race.

### **Meaning as Context Based**

Another tenet of social constructionism is how ways of understanding are context based (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010). This implies that the way individuals understand or interpret events can vary over time and in different settings. Participants' understanding of what it meant to act White changed over time and in different contexts. For example, when students were in the classroom, the definition of acting white was different than when in social settings. Additionally, students appeared to be more influenced by the opinions of their peers at a younger age, but exposure and awareness affected these students' opinions as they got older. Specifically, it appeared as though most participants had an increased understanding of issues affecting Black Americans as they got older, and exposure to Black individuals in more than one context, thus affecting their more positive opinion of Black individuals as they got older. Yet, these students still

understood social prescriptions related to the labels, acting white and acting black; but because of their awareness and exposure to various contexts, these students rejected those stereotypes.

Additionally, historical relevance of meaning is important. In this vein, the economic and social circumstances of Black individuals have affected how Black people have been viewed over time in U.S. society. Although some of these understandings have changed over time, there are unfortunately some meanings attributed to Black individuals from the past that are still emphasized in current day contexts. For example, some of the participants pointed to the discrimination and segregation of Black individuals, such as lack of exposure to certain resources, which now contributes to current understandings of how Black individuals should act. Thus, an understanding of historical contexts can assist in understanding current beliefs about race. Beliefs and culture are also important when considering context, because a person's beliefs and culture can affect how he or she believes individuals should be treated. Some participants emphasized that they were raised to respect all individual regardless of race, and such upbringing affected how they viewed and treated others. Overall, context affects how individuals understand society.

### **No Objective Truth**

Social constructionism also operates under the premise that there is no objective truth (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010). This point relates to the two points above in that people understand the world based on social interactions and contextual situations. There is no set way of knowing, thus individuals do not understand what it means to be Black or White in the absence of social interactions. For example, students in the study could not explain their definition of acting white or acting black or any situations in which they had

been labeled as acting white without also discussing the interactions that helped them to develop an understanding of those labels and situations. However, based on the ways in which individuals understand the world, objective realities can appear to exist (Cunliffe, 2008; Harris, 2010). For example, whereas race is a social construction, the ways in which race are discussed and observed can affect whether or not race is seen as biological and innate or constructed. For participants, there was a general notion that there was no definite truth to labels of acting black and acting white. However, students did sometimes discuss the labels as a real and fixed thing based on the emphasis placed on the labels within society.

### **Critically Evaluating Knowledge**

Related to lack of essentialism, social constructionists question what is known to be true in society (Burr, 2003). The study itself is a way to critically evaluate social constructions. That is, the constructions that have been taken as real and fixed in society become challenged. For example, in the case of acting white or acting black, individuals begin to challenge the social prescriptions for acting in a certain way. This is similar to one participant who would question the people who said that she was acting white. By questioning those who labeled her as acting white, she was challenging them to articulate why a certain way of behaving was considered acting white, and in turn, challenging current understandings of acting white. Additionally, students in the study challenged assumptions by rejecting the socially prescribed ways to act black. For example, students would pursue academic excellence or participate in certain activities as a way to challenge stereotypes.

Further, a critical approach challenges those who gain and those who are oppressed based on what is established as truth (Lock & Strong, 2010). In this vein, Black individuals become oppressed from claims of truth on how they should act, whereas White individuals gain from claims of truth on how they should act. Using this critical lens, there are political possibilities within social constructionism (Velody & Williams, 1998), meaning that as individuals challenge what it means to act black or white, they can also attempt to change the language and other circumstances that occur to reinforce such notions.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Reviewing the results related to the experiences and perceptions of students in the study, several discussion items and implications emerged. These are discussed below.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Within this study, it was found that labels of acting white occurred for the students in the study. Although students did not underachieve because of the label, other actions were affected. Students were also able to articulate similar responses related to definitions of acting white and acting black. Thus, although other researchers have claimed that the label does not exist, what those researchers were communicating is that the label does not cause Black students to underachieve academically, as has also been found in this study. However, the label itself does exist and is used to describe Black students, and Black students in the student were aware of its meaning. Because race was created to provide advantage to a certain group of people over others (Machery & Faucher, 2005), it is a complicated concept. Within this study, it has been discussed as both a social construction and a real thing. This is because social constructions can seem to be realities without critical analysis. Thus, a point of this study was to critically assess how a term that has been used as a real thing is also a social construction.

Racial categories have allowed certain groups of people to be denied benefits simply based on the color of their skin. Specifically, individuals considered of African decent were denied rights that were afforded to White individuals. Using race as a marker

for who was allowed to engage in certain activities, there was an effect regarding who people hung around and the activities in which they engaged. From years of such practices came the notion that one's race was connected to certain genetic markers, specific activities, and personality characteristics. In reality, the characteristics associated with race were based on years of segregation, oppression, and wealth. For example, there were certain activities that a Black person might not have engaged in based on lack of exposure or monetary access. Segregation played a huge part in how people were expected to act. Although there have been movements to increase civil rights and gain equal access in certain areas, the effects of segregation and oppression related to beliefs on how people should act can still be seen today.

The acting white label is one example of how the past is manifested in present thinking on race. Students in the study, although they may not have agreed with the various definitions of acting white, were aware of what it meant when someone said they were acting white. These definitions included behaviors, such as academic achievement or professional dress attire. Such definitions are evidence of how prevalent stereotypes are within U.S. society and how years of segregation have affected what is deemed appropriate actions for a certain race. Students in the study had an overall positive definition of what it means to act black, but these students were also very aware of the stereotypical definitions that contribute to a larger societal understanding of what it means to act black. Although students expressed that acting black should mean pride in one's race, the definitions they expressed based on societal definitions included negative images of Black individuals, thus exemplifying the competing definitions and



underscoring that one can have a positive definition of his or her race that is in competition with what is relayed via societal standards.

It was interesting that for students in the study, it was easier to define acting white than to define acting black. I am unsure if participants struggled because they did not want to discuss stereotypes, but I remember comments, such as “Oooh, that’s a hard one.” Students were first asked what it meant to act white, and the definitions typically rolled easily off their tongues; but when they were in turn asked what it meant to act black, there was a struggle. It was as if the participants assumed that acting black had to be the opposite of acting white. So when they were asked what it meant to act black after being asked what it meant to act white, they would most often say something to the extent of, “Do you want my definition or society’s definition?” Another reason for the students’ hesitation in defining acting black may have been based on not wanting to present Black individuals in that light. Many of the participants, when discussing various aspects of acting according to racial stereotypes, indicated that they felt horrible for thinking in that manner. Below is a discussion of how students in the study experienced the acting white label. Again, the definitional piece only recorded how the students defined acting white or acting black, but the piece below is a discussion of how students actually experienced the label.

Student accusations of acting white in K-12 included academic success, how they talked, how they dressed, the race of their friends, and their hobbies. First, accusations of acting white for academic success included getting good grades, taking advanced courses, completing their homework, and participation in academic development opportunities. Accusations while in college were simply related to the act of attending college and their

choice of an academic major while in college. In cases where students heard they were acting white based on attending college, they heard arguments that they were acting differently. Specifically, one participant discussed an instance where a spouse indicated she thought she was better than him based on her academic pursuits. Another participant remembered hearing such accusations when going home to an area where many of her high school friends did not choose to attend college. Again, the claims that such academic actions were associated with acting white are evidence of the power of what students saw. When looking at the results of how students came to understand acting white and acting black, it was found that they associated behaviors with what they observed from people based on race. Students in the study mostly observed white students achieving academically, thus affecting their understanding of acting white and acting black.

Inequality within educational systems has been used to argue for how the acting white label has been manifested within the K-12 context (Buck, 2010; Tyson, 2006). Within the arguments, there is the notion that educational systems have a role in the social construction of race. Tyson (2006), in her book chapter on the burden of acting white in schools, argued that students do not arrive with notions that academic achievement is for Whites only; but rather, such ideas develop in the process of schooling as students look for tools to make sense of the racial disparities in placement and achievement within some schools. Additionally, in his book based on a review of literature and data in various areas related to acting white, Buck (2010) argued that during segregation, Black students had Black inspirational people to look to (e.g., teachers, perceived as smart, who cared about the students and came into their communities) versus desegregation, where Black students had to be removed from their

schools, placed in schools with White students (leaving their culture), and associated with teachers who, most often, did not care about them. Further, Tyson and Buck both argued that the effects of tracking had an impact on student perceptions, because White students were placed in higher tracks, whereas Black students were placed on technical tracks. These researchers argued that from this tracking came the notion that Black students were not smart enough to be placed in upper-level tracks and that such upper-level courses were for White students only.

Lewis (2006) posited that white skin privilege in education provides certain advantages for White students over Black students (e.g., White students are more likely to attend schools with the most resources). The assumption that Black students' educational needs are substandard to the educational needs of White students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) is one explanation for how white skin privilege works in favor of White students. For example, a teacher might encourage White students to register for advanced-level courses while that same teacher might not encourage a Black student to pursue advanced-level work due to the perception that the Black student's needs are substandard.

Academically, K-12 administrators should take a look at the racial composition of their courses as well as other procedures that may affect the numbers of Black students in higher-level courses. Additionally, students do not only need to see excellence from other students who look like them; seeing teachers who look like them and care about them is also important. To see Black teachers is a move toward increasing a positive racial perspective for Black students, but even better are teachers who understand the needs of Black students and genuinely care about Black students. This could be a teacher of any

race or background who is trained in multicultural perspectives and who genuinely has an interest in supporting Black students. Teachers should be aware that the label exists as well as that there are occurrences in K-12 and college that perpetuate such ideas. With this information, teachers can intentionally work toward combatting the perpetuation of negative stereotypes for Black students.

Based on the dress of students in K-12 and college, there was no set definition of what brought about accusations of acting white; but in general, the attire can be explained as professional attire or explanations of what students did not do. What students wore that triggered accusations of acting white ranged from the type of shoes they wore to whether or not their pants were on their waist. So although a good number of students in the study were accused of acting white based on how they dressed, there were a variety of styles that could have earned them the accusation. This is related to the context piece of social constructionism, because the definition of acting white in terms of dress appeared to vary from K-12 and college, and the definition depended on the person. Either way, dress is a symbol for how students are seen. One area for further research in this area might be an assessment of students and the label based on styles of dress, or an assessment of how uniforms might affect student accusations of acting white compared to schools where no uniforms are required.

The main hobbies that gained students accusations for acting white in K-12 were music and sports. These accusations seemed to be based on the musical artists who performed the music and who the students observed playing certain sports. Specifically, music performed by Black individuals versus music performed by White individuals formed the basis for what was black music and what was white music. Students in the

study described how people would say “White people listen to that” and the music would be genres in which the predominant performers were White. For example, country music was most often noted as music for White people, and rap music was often stated as music for Black people. This might indicate that who people see performing the music could affect who they think should listen to the music.

Additionally, the lack of Black individuals on teams, such as the swimming team, helped form student understanding of what sports a Black person should play. Exposure is key here, because some students may not have had exposure to city swimming pools or the financial means to buy equipment for sports, such as golf. In college, accusations based on hobbies were based on the organizations in which the students chose to be a part. The types of organizations affected how they were seen amongst those in the Black community. Being a part of organizations composed of mostly White individuals was associated with accusations of acting white, whereas participation in organizations composed of mostly Black individuals brought about the assumption that students were engaged in the Black community. This is similar to the study by Harper (2006), in which he found that students in his study had a perceived dedication to the Black community via involvement in Black organizations; and as a result, there was a lack of acting white accusations for students in that study. In this vein, the activities that students are involved in that appear to be in support of the Black community might deter accusations that they are acting white.

Speech was another acting white marker when participants were in K-12 and college. Students were mostly ridiculed for speaking proper English and the lack of slang in their vocabulary. Such accusations bring up conversations about what is the

appropriate and valued language in U.S. society. There are scholars who would argue that black English vernacular, which is considered an alternative to standard English, is a valid dialect and pertinent for the success of Black students in K-12 (see Mocombe, 2006). If this is the case, school administrators might want to consider how to account for sociolinguistic differences when teaching students in K-12.

In K-12 and college, students heard accusations of acting white mainly from other Black students, and sometimes students of other races. Some scholars have posited that the Black students who label other Black students as acting white may do so as a way to hide their resentment for those students doing well in school (see Tyson, 2006). Students in the study also had very polar reactions when discussing their feelings of hearing accusations from a Black person versus a White person. In most cases, students indicated that the effect of hearing that they were acting white from a Black person was more powerful than hearing it from a White person. Reactions of hurt and bother were most salient when it came to hearing accusations from the Black community, whereas students seemed mostly nonchalant if they said they heard the label from a White person. Students did say anger was an emotion that characterized their feelings when hearing a White person label them as acting white, but the response to White people was mostly something along the line of “You’re White; how can you tell me how to be Black?” Thus, participants viewed accusations from Black individuals as more valid. This may indicate that students are more likely to attempt to change behavior based on what they hear from Black individuals versus White individuals. Also, students may be more affected by accusations from Black students versus White students.

Occurrences of hearing the accusations mentioned above were much less in college than in K-12. This may be the case because students in the study explained that they were surrounded by others who were “like them” when in college. By this they meant students who were also high achieving and academically focused while in high school. Some students even indicated that while in college, Black students “like them” would not dare accuse someone of acting white because they had heard it before in K-12 and knew the hurt and other emotions associated with such accusations. Thus, being surrounded by “people like me” brings to light the act of attending college in general. Such an act, in itself, can be defined as acting white. Despite having heard the label less in college, students in the study also admitted that although people may not have verbally accused them of acting white, people could have been thinking those ideas. In this vein, political correctness is a viable point. Did students hear the label less because it has been dissipated or are people more aware of the things that they should or should not say as they get older?

In hearing the label, it appeared that accusations came more from not acting in socially prescribed ways for Black individuals rather than simply “acting white.” For example, although students did explain that they heard accusations of acting white, some accusations were related to not acting black. In that sense, students’ recollection of being accused of acting white could come from their assumption that by being accused that they were not acting black, they were acting white. Viewing this through a social construction lens, definitions of what counts as acting black are based directly opposite of what is considered as acting white, because White is considered the center against which to judge

all other races in the United States. Thus, it might be easy to accept arguments of not acting black as acting white.

The second research question regarded how students came to understand what it meant to act black or act white. Their answers were based on what they saw and what they heard. First, considering what they heard, students heard instructional language from family members and family friends on how to act based on their race. From family members and family friends, students heard about what hobbies they should engage in and whether or not their behaviors were acceptable actions for a Black individual. As such, family members and friends seemed to reinforce stereotypes about what Black students in the study should do and how they should behave. With this in mind, family members and family friends should be aware of what is said to their children in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes about their race. Parents and other family members may not be aware of how they reinforce negative stereotypes but may also just be repeating what they have observed over the years. Thus, the challenging piece of social constructionism is relevant here. Parents and other family members can challenge notions of what it means to be Black. For example, when Renee said that her grandmother repeated what a friend said, “She said you talk like a White girl,” the grandmother could have responded to the friend by asking, “How does a White girl sound?” to challenge notions that only White people speak proper.

To assist with providing information to Black parents and families about acting white, maybe a workshop series sponsored by the school could help parents not only instill racial pride within their children but also understand what it means to place limitations on their children. Some of the students in the study came from families with a



great deal of Black pride, but there were other students in the study who recalled hearing from their parents or other family members, “That is for White people.” Hearing such statements from the people closest to an individual can really affect that person’s understanding of how he or she should act. However, parents and family members may not be aware that what they say has an effect on what their students do or feel comfortable doing. Thus assistance with recognizing how parents affect their student’s decisions as well as how to support their student will be a benefit. Students also heard things in greater society that contributed to their understanding of acting white. What they heard was ridicule when they did not act in ways that were deemed appropriate for their race. Thus, in addition to the indications from parents, students were also influenced by what was said to them in greater society.

In addition to what they heard, students also saw things that contributed to their understanding of what it meant to act white and act black. What they saw were everyday interactions during which they indicated that they observed mostly Black students behaving in one way and mostly White students behaving one way. Such observations stuck in the minds of students as they elaborated on what contributed to how they made connections to what is considered acting black and what is considered acting white. Whereas observations may have been correct, there also may have been a connection to stereotypes and student understandings, because stereotypes may have caused heightened awareness to certain behaviors for certain populations. One of the things that students observed was a majority White students in higher-level courses. Students were very aware that they were one of few Black students in such classes, and this observation, along with accusations from peers that they were acting white for being in such classes,

connects to students' current understanding about acting white in relation to advanced courses.

Finally, media representation was the most salient theme pertaining to what students saw that contributed to their understanding of acting black and acting white. Mostly television shows were mentioned as contributing to students' understanding of acting white and acting black. This has implications for how Black students see people who look like them on television and how such images impact these students' understanding of black culture. Critically assessing media sources might also be a valuable course lesson to get students thinking about racial stereotypes and how they are reinforced by media.

As stated earlier in this dissertation, many studies on acting white were conducted to assess whether the acting white label affected Black students and their academic achievement. For students within this study, the impact of the label was more social than academic, indicating that students did not let accusations of acting white affect their academic ability, but it did affect their social actions and decisions. When I asked one participant why she compromised her social actions but not her academic actions to fit in, she let me know that she did not have strong self-esteem when it came to social interactions. However, when she had a book or was in the classroom, she was often very sure of herself. This has implications regarding the importance of confidence for students. Although all students may not have felt this way in regard to the lack of academic impact, the strong social impact from hearing the acting white label is important. Future researchers might explore this confidence piece in more detail, specifically whether the academic confidence of students affects how they react to accusations of acting white.

Overall, evidence outside the classroom pertaining to the acting white label seems to be targeted at students who appear to neglect peers of their own race by engaging in certain behaviors. These accusations appear to occur more often than accusations of acting white based on academic achievement, and this could suggest that sociocultural factors may bother students more than accusations within an academic context (Neal-Barnett et al., 2009).

The results of the study pertaining to the academic actions of participants are consistent with those of researchers who have suggested that Black individuals have had a long history of valuing education. As stated earlier, Spencer et al. (2003) used examples of resiliency and the achievement of African Americans throughout history in order to negate ideas that the acting white label causes students to underachieve. Based on findings from the current study, it is evident that the acting white label has little to no effect on students academically. These findings are consistent with a study by Wildhagen (2011), reported earlier in the study. This researcher found that Black students have more positive attitudes toward school than their White peers. Such a finding may provide insight into why these students are not academically affected by accusations of acting white.

Other impacts of the label on students in the study ranged from ignoring the accusation to changing behaviors (e.g. hanging around more Black people, trying to fit in, and changing behaviors such as dress) based on accusations that they were acting white. Most notably, the label did not academically affect students, but socially, students changed their actions to try and fit in with other Black students. Academically, students continued to achieve, and some wanted to achieve in order to debunk negative

stereotypes of Black individuals. The changing of social actions was based on stereotypes of what it meant to be Black. For example, one student sagged his pants in order to fit in with what he thought was appropriate for Black individuals. Although the student later changed his actions and did not sag his pants, he was still affected by the label in a negative manner. The concept of stereotype threat is pertinent here. *Stereotype threat* is the risk that an individual will change his or her actions based on stereotypes associated with his or her racial identity (Steele & Aronson, 1995). A key point in stereotype threat is whether or not race is emphasized. As students hear accusations that they are acting white, race is emphasized, possibly affecting whether or not a student complies with stereotypical notions of acting black to fit in. Such stereotypes can affect what students do or feel comfortable doing.

Although participants seemed quite appalled at the concept of acting white, I could see and hear how some had internalized the label. For example, some students recalled how they limited their actions based on what they thought others would think of them. Much of the internalization I noticed was at a younger age, and as participants got older, they seemed overall to have a strong Black identity, and most had significant ties with the Black community. Those characteristics, a strong Black identity and strong ties with the Black community, provide a bit of background into the type of student who chose to participate in the study. Those students with a strong Black identity and/or interest in issues concerning Blacks in the United States seemed to be adamant about debunking the stereotypes of Black individuals. However, the results may have varied if participants had not had as strong a Black identity or concern for the Black community.

In order to cope with the label, students ignored the label, consulted with family members or friends, challenged behaviors or expressed behaviors such as hurt or anger. Although ignoring the label might have worked to temporarily relieve students of hearing accusations, it may not have been the most effective way to approach the situation. It has been found in other studies that action-focused coping, in comparison to coping that does not involve action, leads to less depressive symptoms (Donovan & Roemer, 2010). The action coping that took place for students in this study involved speaking with family members or friends and challenging behaviors. When students spoke to family members or friends, they were able to discuss strategies for dealing with the accusations or simply release negative tension by speaking with individuals who cared about their well-being. As students challenged behaviors, they were resisting society's definition of how they should act, thus exerting power to change socially constructed definitions, a powerful piece of the social constructionism theory.

As far as participant demographics, it is important to note that students in this study were college-going, academic-achieving students who had a great deal of Black pride. The results of the study might have been different had I chosen a population of, say, Black students who chose not to pursue college or Black students who were not considered high academic achievers. My study, along with many other studies that have examined the experiences of Black students in K-12, had an emphasis on academic-achieving students. Future research should concentrate on the voices of students who are not academically achieving.

The earliest encounter expressed by one of the participants was during elementary school; and if the label starts, or notions of the label start this early, there should be an

awareness and action to combat such accusations. One way to combat stereotypes is to educate teachers in ways that allow them to be aware of stereotypes that affect the images of Black students. Another way to combat such stereotypes is to ensure that Black students have positive images of the people who look like them. This way, students begin to see positive images and definitions of Black people at an early age.

However, such a task is easier said than done, because young students are sometimes highly influenced by the opinions of their peers. For example, I remember one participant discussed having come from a family with a strong Black identity. Growing up, there were images of Black people within the household, and she was often told that she should be proud of being Black. However this participant stated that society had more influence on her at that time in her life than did her parents. She believed the people outside of her home before she believed what her parents were teaching her in her home. Thus, even though she heard that she was smart and beautiful from her mother, she remembered, at an earlier time in her life, wanting to have white skin. It is important for parents to have these conversations with their children as well, but there seems to be a large influence from the people children interact with in school. Therefore, it will take a team effort from those who engage students at school and those who engage students in their home.

### **Implications for K-12 and College**

As woven throughout the section above, there are some specific implications for K-12 teachers and administrators. First, knowledge of the acting white label itself and how it might affect students is important for K-12 teachers and administrators to understand so that they may be able to combat the systematic occurrences that affect

occurrences of hearing the label. Such occurrences include, for example, the lack of Black students in upper-level courses. Also pertinent is understanding the coping mechanism that can assist Black students with managing their encounters with the acting white label. Second, ensuring that Black students see people like themselves represented in the classroom. This includes Black teachers and administrators as well as how Black students are represented in the course curriculum. Third, training for teachers is essential so that they have an understanding of the needs of Black students. Many times, Black cultural norms are devalued in K-12 systems (Love, 2010; Mocombe, 2011), and teachers and administrators can brainstorm ways to embrace those cultural norms, showing that Black students' experiences are valued.

As with K-12 teachers and administrators, this study has implications for the faculty, staff, and administration on college campuses. First, college sports teams or other clubs or campus can be aware of recruiting strategies for underrepresented students. Second, various offices on campus that assist with programming or campus activities can ensure that a wide variety of programming is available to appeal to student populations, including Black students. Third, counter spaces are important for Black students to discuss their experiences with racism (Grier-Reed, 2010; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), thus groups, such as Black Student Alliances, are important for this group of students. Fourth, college faculty also affect the experiences of Black students (Harper, 2013) and should attempt to incorporate multicultural perspectives within their classroom curriculum.

## **Future Research and Limitations**

Although this study brought about some interesting information related to the experiences of Black students on a college campus, there are still areas for further research as concerns the acting white label. First, the label has often been studied in relation to academic effects on students; however, as seen in this study, social aspects might be a more viable area to study in relation to students and the acting white label. Maybe future studies can explore the social aspect in more depth. Additionally, concerning the academic aspect, the approach to looking at how Black students deal with acting white can be viewed as deficit. Future researchers might look at how to transform language regarding acting white into a positive lens for Black students. For example, instead of using language surrounding coping strategies for Black students, language surrounding an achievement ideology for Black students might provide a different and more positive lens through which to view Black students' experiences with the acting white label.

Also students in the study had a great deal of social consciousness. If students with less social consciousness were studied, there may have been different results. Possibly a study comparing the difference between socially conscious Black students versus those who are not socially conscious might provide insight into whether social consciousness affects students' view and understanding of the acting white label.

The fact that students were college-going has implications for the acting white label in itself. Therefore studying students who chose not to attend college or students who chose to attend a different type of college may produce different results. Students who, for example, may have gone straight into the job market after high school might



view acting white in a different way, or the experiences of students at an HBCU, or the experience of students at a community college would be interesting to compare to the results of students in this study who were from a predominantly White, private, 4-year institution. It would also be interesting to explore whether or not students who have not experienced the label, attend college. Even students who attend college but may not be considered high academic achievers might have a different perspective on the notion of acting white and may be affected differently by the label or not hear the label at all.

Additionally, there were certain areas of the study that served as symbols of acting black or acting white. Those symbols include speech patterns, styles of dress, and types of hobbies. Many of those symbols have been studied in conjunction with one another or only in relation to how students defined those symbols. Future researchers might concentrate on those factors in more depth. In this vein, studying factors that neutralize symbols might be helpful. For example, dress was a noted marker for how someone was perceived racially, and studying K-12 schools that have students wear uniforms might provide insight. Also, schools that have a high population of Black students or students of color in advanced courses might provide additional insight on the academic piece.

Timing of hearing the label was another finding in this study. One of the students indicated that he heard the label as early as kindergarten, but this was based on reflection. A longitudinal study of Black students from an early age to college might provide information on accusations as they occur for students, or information on how early the accusations occur. Differences between the graduate students in the study and

undergraduate students in the study were not noted in depth. It was noted that graduate students in the study were more socially conscious, but there is definitely space in that area for further inquiry. Whereas there was only one participant who identified as over 40, her experience was an outlier to many of the other students in the study. In this vein, a study assessing how Black people across generations have viewed the label would be interesting. For example, an assessment of how acting white was defined during the Civil Rights Movement versus now. Finally, considering that students in the study coped in a variety of ways, it might be beneficial to assess whether one way of coping versus another is linked to heightened levels of stress or lowered achievement.

Regarding limitations, the first limitation is connected to the nature of phenomenology. Phenomenology presented a method in which common themes emerged, so it is evident that the common themes were based upon the experiences of Black college students at a private, predominantly White university in the West. Thus, although the data may have provided implications for a broader population, it may not necessarily be generalizable to a broader population. Second, the nature of the topic could have proved emotional for some students in the study, especially because many students mentioned that they did not think about such an experience in depth until the study. To account for this limitation, a list of counselors was assembled for the students to contact should the material they discussed in the interviews and in their reflection emotionally disturb them.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the acting white label does exist and Black students do understand the term, but the term does not necessarily affect their academic achievement. There are a

variety of ways that the label has affected students, and that might need to be explored further with varying student populations. Use of the acting white label is in large part a result of cultural differences that emerged from years of segregation and separation. Ideas, which were made reality in those times, have trickled into the present day. The use of the acting white label is one way in which stereotypes about race are shown and manifested throughout U.S. society. In order to combat this label, a great deal of education and action will need to occur. Such education will need to surround a racial history to allow people to understand how segregation and lack of exposure affected the activities in which individuals engaged. The action piece should focus on encouraging Black students not to confine themselves to socially prescribed notions of what it means to be Black. Then, when Black students see themselves in a positive manner academically and socially, they will begin to have more positive perceptions of themselves and their race (Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

The information presented in this study was used to call attention to a derogatory term hurled at Black students for certain behaviors. Those who read or cite this study should note that the central point was a critical assessment of the term, “acting white.” Regardless of Black students’ response to the label of acting white, there are deeply rooted racial concerns in the US, which merit attention. The acting white label is just one way in which to call attention to a horrible racial past and how it affects present thinking on race relations. Thus, the research here can be used to challenge K-12 and college faculty, staff, and administrators to look at the ways in which Black students are underrepresented at their institutions, and the ways in which Black students are supported at their institutions.

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## **Appendices**

### Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

#### **Demographic Questions**

What is your current age: 18-24; 25-30; 30-35; 35-40; over 40?

How do you identify your race?

What is your academic classification (i.e. Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduate Student)?

How do you identify your nationality?

How do you identify your gender?

What is the socioeconomic status of your immediate family?

What pseudonym would you like for the study?

## Appendix B: Research Protocol, Interview One

Overarching Research Question(s): (1) What are the racialized experiences of Black college students at a predominantly white institution, specifically as it relates to accusations of “acting white?” And (2) “What are the contexts or situations that have contributed to Black college students’ understanding of what it means to be White/Black?”

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Black college students who experienced the “acting white” label. Further, this study will potentially assist with understanding the contexts and situations that allow the “acting white” label to exist. Interview number one will address questions about students’ past and current experiences with the label, as well as contexts and situations that contributed to their understandings about race acting.

### Questions

**This set of questions will help me to understand your *past* experiences with the “acting white” label (which include contexts and situations that have contributed to your understanding of what it means to act Black/White)**

1. What was your earliest encounter with the “acting white” label?
2. What is your understanding of the acting white label? Please explain what it means to “act white” in your own words.
  - a. What behaviors are associated with the “acting white” label? Can you offer an example?
  - b. How do you know this to be true?
3. What is your understanding of what it means to act Black? Please explain what it means to “act Black” in your own words.
  - a. What behaviors are associated with “acting black”? can you offer an example?
  - b. How do you know this to be true?
4. Have you ever heard the “acting white” label at home? If so, please explain.
5. Have you ever heard the “acting white” label at school (K-12 only)? If so, please explain.
6. In what type of environment did you grow up, in regards to race? And do you think that environment affected your experiences with the acting white label?
7. How did the majority of your friends in high school identify? Did this ever affect your experience with the label?
8. Have your friends ever labeled you as “acting white?”
9. How has the “acting white” label been used to describe you?
  - a. Dress
  - b. Speak
  - c. Academics
  - d. Hobbies

- i. Extracurricular activities
  - ii. Friends
  - iii. Music
- 10. Are there any other situations or contexts where you have heard that you were “acting white”
- 11. As a man/woman, in past situations did you feel you were more or less likely to hear the label than a man/woman?
  - a. Do you have an example?
- 12. Did you attend a predominantly white high school? How did this affect your experience with the acting white label, if at all?
- 13. Did the “acting white” label ever affect your academic actions or decisions in high school? If so, please provide an example.
- 14. Did the “acting white” label ever affect your social actions or decisions in high school? If so, please provide an example.
- 15. How did you react to or cope with the label in high school?
- 16. How would you describe your affinity with your racial identity in high school?
- 17. Have you ever underachieved due to the label? Please explain in what ways.
- 18. Have you ever overachieved due to the label? Please explain in what ways.

**This set of questions will help me to understand your current experiences with the “acting white” label (racialized experiences on your college campus).**

- 1. What was your most recent encounter with the “acting white” label?
- 2. What experiences have you had with being labeled “acting white” on a college campus?
  - a. Dress
  - b. Speak
  - c. Academics
  - d. Hobbies
    - i. Extracurricular activities
    - ii. Friends
  - e. Music
- 3. As a man/woman, do you feel you are more or less likely to hear the label than a man/woman?
  - a. Do you have an example?
- 4. How do the majority of your friends in college identify? Did this ever affect your experience with the label?
- 5. Who has used the label to describe you (friends, administrators, instructors, students of color, white students)? Please explain.
- 6. How, if at all, does a predominately white school environment affect your experience with the label?
- 7. Has the “acting white” label ever affected your academic actions or decisions? If so, please provide an example.
- 8. Has the “acting white” label ever affected your social actions or decisions? If so, please provide an example.
- 9. How do you react to or cope with the label?



10. How would you describe your affinity with your racial identity?
11. Have you ever underachieved due to the label? Please explain in what ways.
12. Have you ever overachieved due to the label? Please explain in what ways.

**This set of questions will help me to understand the contexts and situations that have contributed to your understanding of what it means to act Black/White. Now I am going to wrap up the interview by quickly walking through what we covered to ensure I didn't miss anything.**

1. First, we talked about your experience with the acting white label. We discussed your understanding of the label as well as if/how it has affected your decisions. I heard...
2. Then we went into the contexts and situations that have affected your understanding of what it means to "act Black" or "act White." I heard...
3. Is there anything you would like to add before ending the interview?

*Thank you for your participation. Would you like a transcript? Would you like a summary of the findings?*

## Appendix C: Research Protocol, Interview Two

Overarching Research Question(s): (1) What are the racialized experiences of Black college students at a predominantly White institution, specifically as it relates to accusations of “acting white?” And (2) “What are the contexts or situations which have contributed to Black college students’ understanding of what it means to be White/Black?”

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Black college students who experienced the “acting white” label. Further, this study will potentially assist with understanding the contexts and situations that allow the “acting white” label to exist. Interview 1 addresses any additional questions that emerged from Interview 1 as well as concentrate on students’ reflection on “acting white.”

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### Questions

**This set of questions will allow a deeper discussion of the reflection you wrote addressing the following question: “What encounters have I had with the acting white label and how have these experiences affected me?”**

1. Are there any lingering comments from Interview #1 that you wish to discuss today?
2. I have a few themes that emerged from Interview #1 and I want to obtain your opinion on the following topics
  - a. Topic 1 (based on preliminary analysis)
  - b. Topic 2 (based on preliminary analysis)
  - c. Topic 3 (based on preliminary analysis)
  - d. Topic 4 (based on preliminary analysis)
  - e. Topic 5 (based on preliminary analysis)
3. What are some of the major themes from your reflection that you would like to discuss today?
4. As a result of this study, have you learned anything new about yourself? If so, what have you learned?
5. What are your overall thoughts on what it means to
  - a. Act white?
  - b. Act black?
6. Any final comments on your experience with “acting white?”

Appendix D: Data Collection

Method	Description	Constructs(s) Measured	Purpose
Participant Information Sheet	Each participant was asked to complete an Information sheet, where he or she identified a pseudonym for this study	Students' background and how their background may have affected their experience with acting white	To collect and maintain student demographic information
Interview #1	Each participant participated in a 1-to2-hour initial interview	(1) Overall experience with the "acting white" label (definitions, understanding)  (2) Social contexts that contribute to their understandings about race	Allowed me to investigate how Black college students understand, experience, and react to the "acting white" label, as well as what social contexts contribute to these students' understanding about race
Reflection	Each participant was asked to write a reflection on his or her experience with the "acting white" label	Overall experience with the label	Allowed students to describe their experience with the acting white label and gives voice to the participant
Interview #2	Each participant participated in a 1-to 2-hour follow-up interview	Consciousness and influence of race on their everyday behaviors	Interview #2 allowed me to follow-up on any themes or lingering questions from Interview #1 and discuss student reflections

Appendix E: Data Analysis Codes

Code	Abbreviation	Description/Meaning
Acting White-Academics	AWA	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting white for academic choices or have a definition of “acting white” based on academic choices.
Acting White-Language	AWL	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting white for language choices or have a definition of “acting white” based language choices.
Acting White-Dress	AWD	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting white for clothing choices or have a definition of “acting white” based on clothing choices.
Acting White-Hobbies	AWH	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting white for their choice of hobbies or have a definition of what it means to act white based on one’s choice of hobbies.
Acting White-Gender	AWG	Denotes a discussion of gender differences when it comes to acting white accusations.
Acting White-Context	AWC	Denotes a discussion of context differences when it comes to accusations of acting white.
Acting White-Racial Identity	AWR	Denotes a discussion of a student’s racial identity as it relates to acting white.
Acting Black-Academics	ABA	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting black for academic choices or have a definition of “acting black” based on academic

		choices.
Acting Black-Language	ABL	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting black for language choices or have a definition of “acting black” based language choices.
Acting Black-Dress	ABD	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting black for clothing choices or have a definition of “acting black” based on clothing choices.
Acting Black-Hobbies	ABH	Denotes students who express having been accused of acting black for their choice of hobbies or have a definition of what it means to act black based on ones choice of hobbies.
Acting Black-Gender	ABG	Denotes a discussion of gender differences when it comes to acting black accusations.
Acting Black-Context	ABC	Denotes a discussion of context differences when it comes to accusations of acting black.
Acting Black-Racial Identity	ABR	Denotes a discussion of a student’s racial identity as it relates to acting black.
Acting White-Definition	AWD	Denotes how students defined acting white
Acting Black-Definition	ABD	Denotes how students defined acting black
Academic Endeavors	AE	Denotes the academic behaviors of students in the study. Can include advanced courses or college prep courses. Any behaviors considered enhancing academics.
What I Saw	WS	Denotes what students said they saw that contributed to how they understood how to

		act according to race. Includes social interactions and media.
What I Heard	WH	Denotes what students said they heard that contributed to how they understood how to act according to race. Includes social interactions and family interactions.
Background (Growing Up)	BG	Denotes times when students mentioned their background growing up. Includes their community, friends, type of K-12 school, home life.
Hearing the Label-Impact	HLI	Denotes how students said they were impacted by the label--includes academic and social impacts.
Heard Accusations From	HAF	Denotes from whom the students said they heard acting white accusations.
Heard Label Less	HLL	Denotes the students who stated they heard the label less in college.
Labeling Others	LO	Denotes the students who discussed how they labeled themselves or others using "acting white." This includes verbal and thought processes.
Participation	PT	Denotes when students described why they participated.
People Like Me	PLM	Denotes when students discussed the people they were surrounded by or the people with whom they intentionally surrounded themselves.
Racial Affinity	RA	Denotes when students discussed their racial affinity.
Reaction/Coping	RC	Denotes students' reaction or how they coped with hearing that they were acting white.

## Appendix F: Consent Form

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM: INTERVIEW ONE

**Approval Date:** April 2, 2014 **Valid for Use Through:** April 3, 2015  
**Project Title:** Acting White Among Black College Students: A Phenomenological Study of Social Constructions of Race  
**Principal Investigator:** Evette L. Allen  
**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Judy Kiyama (judy.kiyama@du.edu)  
**DU IRB Protocol #:** 568535-1

#### **Description of Subject Involvement**

You are invited to participate in a study that will assess your experience with “acting white,” a label used to imply that you are not acting in accordance with your racial reference group. This study is being conducted to evaluate how Black college students understand, experience, and react to accusations that they are not acting in accordance with their race. Results will be used to gain insight into the overall experiences of individuals who have experienced the label as well as the contexts and situations that have contributed to understandings of the label. The researcher is looking for 20-25 undergraduate or graduate students at the University of Denver who identify as Black and who are 18 years of age or older. Minors (those under 18) will be excluded from the study. The principal investigator will describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. The principal investigator for this study is Evette Allen, Doctoral Student, Higher Education at the Morgridge College of Education, Denver, CO 80208. Evette Allen can be reached at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu).

The study will involve two individual interviews and a journal reflection. Interviews 1 and 2 will take approximately one to two hours in length, and the journal reflection should take approximately one hour. During interview one, the researcher will ask you two broad questions specifically concerning your experiences with the “acting white” label and the situations, which have contributed to your understanding of the label. When completing the reflection, you will be asked to write about your experience with the “acting white” label using the question: What encounters have I had with the acting white label and how have those experiences affected me? While the researcher only asks you to use an hour of your time for the reflection, you may write as much or as little as you prefer. During the second interview, you will be asked questions based on the results of your reflection, as well as any follow-up questions related to themes from Interview 1. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary.

#### **Possible Risks and Discomforts**

The risks associated with this project are as follows. You may experience discomfort from discussing issues of race. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interview at any time. The University of Denver Health and Counseling Center (303.871.2205) is available should the nature of this study ignite emotions that are difficult to process. The researcher will also provide a list of professional counseling

references for participants. Since the researcher will keep some research files on a personal computer, loss or theft of the computer is a potential risk. However, the computer is password protected and has a tracking device. Additionally, information sensitive documents will be encrypted.

### **Possible Benefits of the Study**

You may benefit from this research by being able to tell your story about your experience as a Black college student, and this research will be used to better understand the racialized experiences of Black students.

### **Compensation**

You will not receive compensation for this study.

### **Study Costs**

You will be expected to pay for your own transportation, parking, or child care, if needed.

### **Confidentiality, Storage, and Future Use of Data**

Your responses will be identified by a code number or pseudonym and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Your responses will be recorded and transcribed, and upon transcription of all audio recordings for the study, the audiotapes will be kept for up to 24 months after the completion of the dissertation study in an effort to synthesize the additional findings for presentation and publication purposes. The results of the study will be used in the final dissertation publication, scholarly presentations, and article publications.

### **Who Will see my Research Information?**

Only the researcher will have access to your individual data. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. Although we will do everything we can to keep your records a secret, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Both the records that identify you and the consent form signed by you may be looked at by Federal agencies that monitor human subject research or Human Subject Research Committee. All of these people are required to keep your identity confidential. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. Also, if you tell us something that makes us believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, we may report that information to the appropriate agencies.



**Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to withdraw early, the information or data you provided will be destroyed. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Contact Information**

The researcher carrying out this study is Evette Allen. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may email *Evette Allen* at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu). If the researchers cannot be reached, or if you would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) about (1) questions, concerns or complaints regarding this study, (2) research participant rights, (3) research-related injuries, or (4) other human subjects issues, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may contact the Office for Research Compliance by emailing [du-irb@du.edu](mailto:du-irb@du.edu), calling 303-871-4050 or in writing (University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121).

**Agreement to be in this Study**

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign below if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I understand the possible risks and benefits of this study. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study: I will get a copy of this consent form.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Please initial here if you agree to be audiotaped.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please initial here if you agree to have your data from this study used in future research.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please initial here if you are or will be 18 years of age or older by March 24, 2014. *Please note that minors (those under 18) are not being solicited for this study. If you are unable to check this box, you will not be able to participate in the study.*

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be emailed to me at the following postal or email address: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G: Solicitation Email

Greetings,

Have you ever been accused of not acting your race based on certain actions (speech, dress, academic excellence)? Do you have a definition of what it means to “act white” or “act black?” If so, you are invited to participate in a study to tell your story about your experience. This study is being conducted to evaluate how Black college students understand and experience the “acting white” label. Participation in the study will involve two, 1-2 hour interviews and a journal reflection. The research study is being conducted by Evette Allen, a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Program at the University of Denver. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Additional details explaining how this data will be used, participant confidentiality, and the time commitment is in the attached consent form.

If you are interested in the study or have questions, please contact the researcher, Evette Allen at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu)

# **Ever labeled “acting white” for academic achievement, the way you dress or the way you talk?**

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If so, you are invited to participate in a study to tell your story about your experience with the “acting white” label. This study is being conducted to evaluate how Black college students understand and experience the “acting white” label. Participation in the study will involve two, 1-2 hour interviews and a journal reflection. The research study is being conducted by Evette Allen, a doctoral student in the Higher Education Program at the University of Denver. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Additional details explaining how this data will be used, participant confidentiality, and the time commitment is in the attached consent form.

If you are interested in the study or have questions, please contact the researcher, Evette Allen at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu)

## Appendix I: Confirmation Emails for Interviews

### Interview #1

Hi [STUDENT NAME],

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study to discuss your experience with and understanding of “acting white.” Please complete the following doodle link to indicate when you are available for interview #1: [INSERT DOODLE LINK]. Interview #1 will occur between April 8-14, 2014. When completing the doodle, please note the time you select and I will send you a reminder email approximately 48 hours prior to the interview time you choose. Again, this study is completely voluntary, and you have the discretion to reverse your decision to participate in interview #1 at any time.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to share your experience, and I look forward to speaking with you soon. If any questions or concerns arise prior to our meeting, please feel free to contact me at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu).

Best,  
Evette L. Allen  
Principal Investigator

### Interview #2

Hi [STUDENT NAME],

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study to discuss your experience with and understanding of “acting white.” Please complete the following doodle link to indicate when you are available for an interview #2: [INSERT DOODLE LINK]. Interview #2 will occur between April 21-28, 2014. When completing the doodle link, please note the time you select and I will send you a reminder email approximately 48 hour prior to the interview time you choose. Again, this study is completely voluntary and you have the discretion to reverse your decision to participate in interview #2 at any time.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to share your experience and I look forward to speaking with you soon. If any questions or concerns arise prior to our meeting, please feel free to contact me at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu).

Best,  
Evette L. Allen  
Principal Investigator

## Appendix J: Reminder Email

### Interview#1

Hi [STUDENT NAME],

This email serves as a reminder of your *first* interview to discuss your experience with and understanding of the “acting white” label. Your interview is scheduled for [DAY] [MONTH] [DATE], [YEAR] at [TIME]. The interview will be conducted at [LOCATION] (INSERT ADDRESS). Again, this study is completely voluntary and you have the discretion to reverse your decision to participate in interview #1 at any time.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to share your experience and I look forward to speaking with you soon. If any questions or concerns arise prior to our meeting, please feel free to contact me at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu).

Best,  
Evette L. Allen  
Principal Investigator

### Interview#2

Hi [STUDENT NAME],

This email serves as a reminder of your *second* interview to discuss your experience with and understanding of the “acting white” label. Your interview is scheduled for [DAY] [MONTH] [DATE], [YEAR] at [TIME]. The interview will be conducted at [LOCATION] (INSERT ADDRESS). Again, this study is completely voluntary and you have the discretion to reverse your decision to participate in interview #2 at any time.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to share your experience and I look forward to speaking with you soon. If any questions or concerns arise prior to our meeting, please feel free to contact me at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu).

Best,  
Evette L. Allen  
Principal Investigator

## Appendix K: Email About Reflection

Hi [STUDENT NAME],

Since you have completed interview#1, you are ready for the reflection portion of the study on your experience with and understanding of “acting white.” You should complete your reflection on the following question: “What is my experience with the acting white label and how has it affected me?” by Monday April 21, 2014 or 48 hours prior to your second interview (whichever comes sooner). Again, this study is completely voluntary and you have the discretion to reverse your decision to participate in reflection at any time.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to share your experience and I look forward to reading your reflection. If any questions or concerns arise prior to our meeting, please feel free to contact me at [Evette.allen@du.edu](mailto:Evette.allen@du.edu).

Best,  
Evette L. Allen  
Principal Investigator

Appendix L: Participant Demographic Sheet

Participant	Age Range	Race	Gender	Classification
D	25-30	African American/Black	Man	Graduate Student (Master's)
Jamie	18-24	Bi-Racial	Woman	Graduate Student (Master's)
Renee	18-24	African American/Black	Woman	Graduate Student (Master's)
Coco-Supreme	31-35	African American/Black	Woman	Graduate Student (Doctorate)
Danielle	36-40	African American/Black	Woman	Graduate Student (Doctorate)
Assata	31-35	African American/Black	Woman	Graduate Student (Doctorate)
Paul	18-24	Bi-Racial	Man	Graduate Student (Master's)
Bruce	18-24	African American/Black	Man	Undergraduate
Gia	18-24	Bi-Racial	Woman	Undergraduate
Amy	18-24	African American/Black	Woman	Undergraduate
Catherine	18-24	Bi-Racial	Woman	Undergraduate
Joan	over 50	African American/Black	Woman	Graduate Student (Doctorate)
Ashley	18-24	African	Woman	Graduate Student

		American/Black		(Master's)
Alexander	31-35	African American/Black	Man	Graduate Student (Doctorate)



Appendix M: List of Counselors

**Professional Reference List**

**University of Denver, Health and Counseling Center**

2240 East Buechel Blvd., Suite 3N  
Denver, CO 80208  
(303) 871-2205

**Porter Adventist Hospital**

2525 S. Downing St  
Denver, CO 80210  
(303) 778-1955

**Front Range Counseling Center**

7200 East Hampden Ave., Suite 205  
Denver, Colorado  
(303) 933-5800

**MD Counseling Center (for mental health)**

1355 S. Colorado Blvd, Ste. C-100  
Denver, CO 80222

**Noeticus Counseling Center  
and Training Institute**

190 East 9th Avenue, Suite #290  
Denver, CO 80203-2744  
(303) 399-9988

**Denver Counseling Center**

323 S. Pearl St  
Denver, CO 80209  
(303) 778-8105