Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology

Cultural Invalidations: Deconstructing the “Acting White” Phenomenon Among Black and Latinx College Students

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CITATION
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**Objectives:** The accusation of “acting White” (AW) represents a common cultural invalidation that youth of color encounter during adolescence. However, few studies have examined the broader implications of AW beyond academic achievement and it is unclear how multiple racial/ethnic groups internalize this invalidation during late adolescence. The present study addresses these gaps by examining the meaning ascribed to AW among a diverse sample of youth and evaluates whether interpretations of AW vary across demographic factors (race/ethnicity, gender). **Method:** We utilized a subset of participants (n = 282; 47% Black; 53% Latinx; 68% female) from the Minority College Cohort Study—a longitudinal investigation of minority college students. Qualitative responses were analyzed through content analysis. **Results:** The AW construct was defined by four themes: speech/behavior, style/social preferences, cultural ideologies, and academics/success. AW was described most frequently in terms of speech patterns, while achievement/success was the least commonly described theme. Several important demographic distinctions are also highlighted and discussed. **Conclusion:** Results indicate that AW invalidations are interpreted in a similar fashion across diverse populations. Our sample defined AW in a manner that critically examined rigid racial/ethnic norms and stereotypes within U.S. society. Findings indicate that cultural invalidations, such as AW, should be examined more broadly because they are relevant for diverse populations and may yield significant psychological implications for individuals targeted by these threats.

**Keywords:** acting White, Black, cultural invalidations, Latinx

After three decades of research, there is still a lack of consensus regarding the practical and conceptual meaning of “acting White” (AW). The term AW was coined in the academic literature by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) to describe racial insults used by Black youth to discourage assimilation into White culture. The AW accusation implies that a person of color has violated the norms of their racial/ethnic group for demonstrating behaviors or traits that are stereotyped to be normative for White culture (Durkee & Williams, 2015; Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings, & Stadulis, 2012). In this article we propose that AW accusations lie within a broader framework, which we define as cultural invalidations—identity threats that intentionally or unintentionally discredit or undermine a person’s membership within one or more social identities.

Psychological studies find that AW accusations stem from social attributes (e.g., music, clothing, and style of speech) more commonly than academic attributes (e.g., academic achievement, academic behaviors; Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Neal-Barnett, Demmings, & Stadulis, 2010; Thelamour & Johnson, 2017). This distinction is noteworthy because the original AW hypothesis suggested that AW insults serve as a deterrent to academic achievement because high achieving Black youth are likely to be ostracized by their own race for modeling the norms and values of White culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This hypothesis was fueled by the assumption that the norms of Black culture are less conducive to academic achievement than the norms of White culture (Ogbu, 2004). As a result, the bulk of literature examining the AW phenomenon has focused primarily on educational outcomes (see Cokley, 2014 and Sohn, 2011 for a detailed review). This study adds to the empirical literature by examining both racial/ethnic and gender differences in how youth define and internalize AW. Additionally, by focusing on late adolescence this study seeks to provide new developmental insights because the AW literature has primarily examined early and middle adolescence.

**Cultural Invalidations**

We conceptualize cultural invalidations as insults and identity threats that strategically undermine the validity of a person’s mem-
bership within one or more social identities. Social identity theory (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979) argues that individuals develop a positive self-concept and self-esteem through the social groups they belong to. Threats to one’s social identity may result in aversive psychological outcomes (Hogg & Hornsey, 2006). AW insults are a form of identity invalidation because they imply that individuals who violate racial/ethnic norms are perceived as inauthentic members of their race/ethnicity (Durkee & Williams, 2015). Previous research has examined racial identity invalidations among multicultural populations (Franco, Katz, & O’Brien, 2016; Franco & O’Brien, 2018) and identity denial among monoracial and multiracial populations (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Johnson & Ashburn-Nardo, 2014). We argue that cultural invalidations provide a broader lens to capture identity threats and cultural policing across multiple social identities (race/ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, etc.). This term also unifies related constructs that focus primarily on threats to specific identities. Conceptually, cultural invalidations are similar to racial microaggressions and specifically microinvalidations—“communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). While microinvalidations primarily capture interracial prejudice, cultural invalidations are designed to capture both intergroup and intragroup identity threats.

Cultural invalidations such as AW most often target people of color who demonstrate behaviors or traits that are perceived to be normative for White culture. Cultural invalidations are used as a means of policing individuals who do not conform to the norms or stereotypes of a specific social identity (Contrada et al., 2001; Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Although cultural invalidations are commonly perpetrated by ingroup members to reinforce group norms, these insults are also perpetrated by outgroup members (Franco & Franco, 2016). Speech patterns are a common basis for cultural invalidations and research demonstrates that Black and Latinx adolescents who do not conform to prototypical speech patterns are likely to be accused of AW (Bergin & Cooks, 2002).

Broadening the Scope of “Acting White” (AW)

In an ethnographic study, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that some Black students were less drawn to high academic achievement because it was perceived as a core value of White culture. This observation prompted the “AW hypothesis”—a social dynamic where racially marginalized youth become less motivated to pursue high academic achievement because of AW accusations from peers who perceive their behaviors as culturally inauthentic (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004). This hypothesis suggests that embracing “White” cultural values may lead Black students to experience invalidations from peers who believe they are betraying their own culture. However, a sizable body of literature has challenged the theoretical underpinnings of the AW hypothesis and concluded that the burden of AW does not offer a viable explanation for the achievement of minority youth within the United States (see Cokley, 2014). In fact, Bergin and Cooks (2002) reported that among a sample of high-achieving Black and Latinx students from several high schools, “We did not hear a single comment from students admitting that they had altered their behavior, reduced their [academic] effort, or earned poor grades in order to avoid accusations of acting white” (p.132). While academic achievement does not appear to be the primary catalyst behind the AW accusation, several studies demonstrate that AW insults are still prevalent among youth of color (Durkee & Williams, 2015; Murray et al., 2012).

AW accusations most commonly result from social and behavioral attributes such as style of speech, music preferences, clothing, and extracurricular activities (Bergin & Cooks, 2002). Neal-Barnett and colleagues (2010) found that among Black high school students, style of speech was most frequently associated with AW accusations and these findings are consistent with several qualitative investigations (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2005; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). Additionally, sociocultural factors (e.g., music preferences, racial composition of friends) are closely associated with AW accusations, whereas academic behaviors (e.g., studying a lot, getting good grades) were less commonly associated with these insults (Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). More work is needed to understand how cultural invalidations like AW are encountered across sociodemographics to determine whether race/ethnicity or gender play a major role in how youth internalize these invalidations.

Demographic Variation in “Acting White” (AW)

Race and Ethnicity

The AW literature has focused primarily on Black youth and only few qualitative studies have included Latinx youth (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Carter, 2005). These investigations find that Latinx youth experience the AW accusation similar to Black youth, easily recall the AW label, and describe AW similarly to Black peers. Bergin and Cooks (2002) found that among youth who were directly accused of AW, both Mexican American and African American students denied having to give up aspects of their racial/ethnic identity to perform well in school. The primary distinction between Black and Latinx adolescents was that the inability to speak Spanish was an important marker of AW for Latinx youth. The biculturalism literature indicates that monolingual fluency can ostracize Latinx individuals from either mainstream American culture or Latinx culture (Basilio et al., 2014; Birman, 1998). A major limitation of the few AW studies containing Latinx participants is that these samples have been predominantly Black with only a small proportion of Latinx participants.

Gender

Qualitative investigations indicate that adolescent males who speak in a formal manner are often perceived as less masculine and consequently receive cultural invalidations pertaining to their masculinity interchangeably with the AW accusation (Carter, 2005, 2006). Therefore, males of color may be double stigmatized because AW insults can threaten both their race/ethnicity and masculinity. However, adolescent females are primarily invalidated in terms of their race/ethnicity when criticized for speech patterns and evidence from Carter (2005, 2006) indicates that female youth of color are targeted by AW accusations at a significantly higher rate than males because males are interchangeably targeted with masculinity substitutes for AW (i.e., acting “soft” or “like a punk”). This pattern is further supported by survey research, which finds that Black female students receive the AW accusation more frequently than Black males (Durkee & Williams, 2015; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). However, less is known about the gender...
dynamics of other racial/ethnic groups because they have been understudied.

Age

The vast majority of AW literature has used adolescent samples recruited from middle schools and high schools (Thelamour & Johnson, 2017; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). One of the few studies to examine longitudinal changes in the meaning of AW found that Black middle school students complicated their understanding of AW after 1 year (Thelamour & Johnson, 2017). This research found that immigrant and nonimmigrant Black youth initially defined AW as primarily determined by one’s appearance and behaviors, but a year later the majority of participants shifted their definitions to comprise race-related beliefs regarding one’s cultural identity. This change demonstrates an important developmental shift in how youth conceptualize the AW label over time. It is likely that adolescents continue to develop a more in-depth understanding of AW as they age, but only a handful of studies have sampled late adolescents (Durkee & Williams, 2015; Webb & Linn, 2016). Missing from the literature is a clear comprehension of how late adolescents internalize AW invalidations.

Current Study

The present study is designed to examine the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender in relation to how late adolescents define AW. First, we evaluate how late adolescents describe AW to determine the most prevalent qualitative themes. Second, we determine whether interpretations differ by race/ethnicity, gender, or the intersection of these social identities.

Method

Procedures

Data were from the Minority College Cohort Study (MCCS)—a longitudinal examination of college transition and persistence among Black and Latinx students at five predominantly White universities in the Midwest. Administrators at each of the universities distributed an e-mail containing a study description and link to the online survey during September 2013. To qualify, participants were required to be full-time college freshman and self-identify as either African American/Black or Hispanic/Latinx. Six waves of data collection occurred during the first 2 years of college. Qualitative data for this study was collected at Wave 1 with an open-ended question. The Wave 1 survey required 45 min to complete and participants were compensated with a $25 gift card. The host institution’s Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures and data collection was managed using REDCap software hosted by the University of Chicago (Harris et al., 2009).

Participants

A total of 533 Black and Latinx students (41% and 59%, respectively) met the criteria for the study and were recruited at Wave 1. The mean age at recruitment was 18.2 years old (SD = 0.45). The sample was selected from 2 urban private universities, 1 urban public university, 1 rural public university, and 1 suburban public university, all located in the Midwest. The racial/ethnic composition of Black students within these universities ranged from 3 to 18% (M = 8.28, SD = 3.74), and the composition of Latinx students ranged from 9 to 25% (M = 16.16, SD = 6.76). Participants graduated from 255 different high schools (86% public). Forty-eight percent of Black students and 69% of Latinx students were first-generation college students. Approximately 75% of Black and 57% of Latinx participants were women; this is reflective of the current gender imbalance in college enrollment in the United States (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2015). The ethnic composition of Black participants was 84% African American, 6% African, 2% Caribbean, and 9% multiracial. The ethnic composition of Latinx participants was 68% Mexican, 8% Puerto Rican, 5% South American, 2% Central American, 2% Dominican, 1% Cuban, 4% Other Latinx, and 9% multiracial. Only 8% of the sample was foreign-born, but 57% of the sample had at least one foreign-born parent—25% of Black and 81% of Latinx participants.

An open-ended question at Wave 1 asked: “What does the ‘acting White’ label really mean to you? And how has it affected your life in anyway?” The term “acting White” was defined as an instance where they “received criticism for behavior that others didn’t consider to be ‘authentic’ Black/Latinx behavior.” The question was tailored to the participants’ respective racial/ethnic group. A total of 361 participants (68% of sample) provided a written response and these ranged in length from 1 to 10 sentences. Missing data analyses indicated that the response rate did not vary based on any demographics in the data set. Forty-seven individuals reported that they were unfamiliar with AW and these responses were excluded from analyses (9% of Black and 12% of Latinx participants). There were no demographic differences among participants unfamiliar with AW. An additional 32 participants provided obscure responses that did not match any codes in the codebook and were also excluded from analyses. Obscure responses described AW through vague stereotypes of White Americans or as a meaningless joke. There was a significant gender difference in obscure responses (females = 7%, males = 16%; χ²(1) = 6.77, p = .009) but no racial/ethnic differences were found. The final analytic sample contained 282 participants: 105 Black women (37%), 27 Black men (10%), 87 Latinx women (31%), and 63 Latinx men (22%). Pseudonyms were used to protect participants’ identities.

Analyses

Content analysis (Roberts, 2001) was utilized to identify the primary themes used to define AW. The present study followed the steps recommended by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) for a conventional content analysis: full data immersion, exploratory coding to identify initial codes, refinement of codes, development and implementation of a coding hierarchy, validity checks, and examination of results.

The authors read the open-ended responses multiple times and constructed an exhaustive list of codes. We were unable to tease apart the two dimensions of the open-ended prompt because participants did not distinguish the meaning of AW from how it affected them. The authors compared notes and reduced the exhaustive list from 74 to 11 codes. The final codes were organized
into four themes. Two undergraduate research assistants conducted the final coding. The research assistants coded a random subset of 13 excerpts and the initial interrater agreement was 70.7%. Next, they read all of the transcripts and met with the first author to ask clarification questions. The research assistants then coded all the transcripts and interrater agreement was 93.2%. To obtain complete agreement, the research assistants discussed each discrepancy with the first author and reached a final consensus. To enhance validity, the second author had no contact with the research assistants and was able to audit their work for accuracy and consistency.

Results

The average number of codes reported by each participant was 1.70 (SD = .98). A t test comparison of means indicated that there were no racial/ethnic differences in the amount of codes reported by Black (M = 1.74, SD = 1.09) and Latinx participants (M = 1.67, SD = .87); t(280) = .63, p = .53. However, there was a significant gender difference and females (M = 1.80, SD = 1.01) reported more codes than males (M = 1.49, SD = .87); t(280) = 2.41, p = .02.

Four themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: (a) speech and behavior, (b) style and social preferences, (c) cultural ideologies, and (d) academics and success. Each of these themes are described below (see Table 1). Quantitative results examining the frequency of codes are only discussed when significant differences between sociodemographics were observed. The sociodemographics of each code are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 1

"Acting White" (AW) Codes, Definitions, and Proportions Reported by the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sample (%)</th>
<th>(n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech and behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Speech patterns</td>
<td>Styles of speech that preference standard English over other English dialects (Ebonics) or languages (Spanish)</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>(147)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Respectable behaviors</td>
<td>Carrying oneself in a manner that is described as “proper,” “preppy,” or “civilized”</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>(86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Pretentious behaviors</td>
<td>Elitist mannerisms that carry a negative connotation such as “uptight,” “stuck up,” “condescending,” or “bougie”</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>(63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style and social preferences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Clothing</td>
<td>Wearing particular clothing brands or dressing in a style that is described as “preppy”</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>(74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Music and dance</td>
<td>Listening to mainstream music genres (rock, pop, and electronic) or dancing in an awkward style</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Activities</td>
<td>Engaging in activities, sports, or hobbies that are less expected for racial/ethnic minorities</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>(32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interracial contact</td>
<td>Extensive interracial contact, interracial friendships, or interracial dating experiences</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Food</td>
<td>Avoiding native cuisine or being very particular about food selection (gluten-free, organic)</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural ideologies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Cultural alienation</td>
<td>Disconnected from one’s cultural heritage because of limited exposure or intentional cultural rejection to avoid stigma</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>(58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Normalizing “White” as “American”</td>
<td>Assimilation process of “White” behavioral traits being construed as the default attributes for American culture</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>(38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics and success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Achievement and aspirations</td>
<td>Belief that high academic achievement or high aspirations for success are less common for racial/ethnic minorities</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>(32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *n* = sample size. Proportions do not sum to 100% because participants could report multiple codes.

Speech and Behavior

Speech and behavior contained three codes: *speech patterns*, *respectable behaviors*, and *pretentious behaviors*. This theme was emphasized by the majority of the sample (53%).

Speech patterns. The most frequently mentioned attribute of AW involved speech patterns that emphasized standard American English over dialects and languages specific to racial/ethnic minorities (e.g., African American vernacular English or Spanish). Speech patterns were reported by 31% of the sample and participants frequently mentioned “speaking proper,” using “proper English,” or “avoiding slang.” For example, Keisha (Black female) described speech patterns as learned behaviors that are influenced by one’s environment:

"["Acting White"] means talking proper with a preppy attitude. Normally, Black people do not talk proper. Instead, many talk with slang and it is a natural thing. It is the way we are brought up, if we have existed around other Blacks who talk the same way. Blacks who ‘act White’ usually come from predominantly White schools or communities.

Negative sentiment toward AW being construed as “proper” speech patterns was equally expressed across demographic groups. Selena (Latinx female) captured the general sense of frustration from these connotations:

It pisses me off so much when someone says I “act white” or “talk white.” What they’re really saying is that I speak proper English and do not act, I do not know, ghetto? Which is really dumb, considering the fact that I...
know plenty of White people who do not speak proper English and act, well, trashy. That’s a personal thing, not a racial thing.

Participants agreed that the AW label was used to describe Black and Latinx youth who did not use “slang” in their natural speech and they opposed social norms that placed linguistic restraints on how racial/ethnic groups should speak. Latinx participants uniquely emphasized the inability to speak Spanish or intentional effort to avoid Spanish as important markers of AW. They reported that a strong preference for English over Spanish was perceived as AW within the Latinx community:

To me, acting white means acting “Americanized.” The Mexican culture stigmatizes people who speak English over Spanish. (Carlos, Latinx male)

[“Acting White” means] listening to just music in English, and just speaking in English. (Silvia, Latinx female)

Black students described speech patterns at a significantly higher rate than Latinx students (41 vs. 22%; \( p < .001 \); see Table 2). Black females reported speech patterns at a higher rate than Black males (48 vs. 15%; \( p = .003 \), but there was no gender difference between Latinx females and males (24 vs. 18%; \( p = .36 \)). Black females described proper speech at a higher rate than any other demographic group in the sample (see Table 3).

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Black (n = 132)</th>
<th>Latinx (n = 150)</th>
<th>( \chi^2 (df = 1, n = 282) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech and behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Speech patterns</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Respectable behaviors</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Pretentious behaviors</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style and social preferences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Clothing</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Music and dance</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Activities</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interracial contact</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Food</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3.62†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural ideologies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Cultural alienation</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Normalizing “White” as “American”</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13.60***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Academics and success:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Black (n = 132)</th>
<th>Latinx (n = 150)</th>
<th>( \chi^2 (df = 1, n = 282) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Achievement and aspirations</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( n = \) sample size. Proportions do not sum to 100% because participants could report multiple codes.

\( \ast p < .10 \) \( \ast \ast p < .05 \) \( \ast \ast \ast p < .01 \) \( \ast \ast \ast \ast p < .001 \).

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**Respectable behaviors.** Participants (23%) emphasized that AW includes behaviors they are expected to demonstrate in order to maintain a respectable demeanor. These behaviors were described as “acting proper,” “civilized,” or “not ghetto.”

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latinx</th>
<th>( \chi^2 (df = 1, n = 282) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech and behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Speech patterns</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>8.94**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Respectable behaviors</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Pretentious behavior</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style and social preferences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Clothing</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Music and dance</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Activities</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interracial contact</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Food</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural ideologies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Cultural alienation</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Normalizing “White” as “American”</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics and success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Achievement and aspirations</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( n = \) sample size. Proportions do not sum to 100% because participants could report multiple codes.

\( \ast \ast p < .01 \)
participants were uncomfortable with respectable behaviors being construed with AW, as indicated by the following responses:

In my opinion, it really shouldn’t be a label. I feel as [though] people label ‘acting White’ as acting proper, and I do not have to be White to act proper. (Sophia, Latinx female)

“Acting White” in my experience has been associated with being proper—demeanor and speech included. It has affected my life by making me question why is the “White way” correlated with meaning the right way? (Tasha, Black female)

A subset of participants emphasized a social distance between themselves and their own racial/ethnic group because of their behavioral preferences:

[“Acting White”] just means acting proper and acting in a manner that is more acceptable to society and not Black people. It has made me want to act more White especially now that I am in a college environment. (Thomas, Black male)

For me [“acting White”] means acting civilized and not similar to my surrounding peers. Also I didn’t settle for less and I looked for ways to better myself while people like me just settled for less. In a way I felt like it meant acting better than the rest. It affected me in a sense that pushed me to work even harder to show my peers that being Latina was not a bad thing, if other people that represent the majority can do it, why cannot we. (Christina, Latinx female)

The previous excerpts demonstrate a desire to assimilate into the dominant culture while simultaneously internalizing negative stereotypes about one’s own culture (i.e., internalized oppression; David, 2013). Overall, participants were keenly aware that the AW label promoted “White” behaviors as ideal. Some participants expressed active resistance toward this connotation, whereas others accommodated this social dynamic.

Pretentious behaviors. Participants (11%) described pretentious behaviors with a negative connotation and used labels such as “uptight,” “stuck up,” or “condescending.” These behaviors described an arrogant demeanor depicting someone who felt that they were superior to ingroup members or from a higher socioeconomic status. Pretentious behaviors were also ascribed to individuals who were superior to ingroup members or from a higher socioeconomic status. Pretentious behaviors were also ascribed to individuals who were superior to ingroup members or from a higher socioeconomic status.

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I feel like it means looking down on your race and essentially forgetting who you are as an individual. Blacks that do not like other Blacks or look down on them. (Kiki, Black female)

To me [“acting White”] means acting very pretentious and appearing as if you have a lot of money. Since I have heard a lot of people refer to me as “White” it has led me to identify less with my Hispanic culture. Most of the time it is my own race that accuses me of being White which is why I do not really like to surround myself with them as much as others. (Gizelle, Latinx female)

For the record, many of my friends are Black and Latino. When I accuse my friends of “acting White,” I am often referring to their sense of entitlement. Some of them do not understand what it means to struggle economically and live in areas where little examples of success are present . . . Thus, “acting White” has more to do with a sense of privilege that some folks develop and internalize. (Jamal, Black male)

Style and Social Preferences

The second theme that emerged for AW involved stylistic preferences and social interests. This theme was expressed by 27% of the sample and included the following five codes: clothing, music and dance, activities, interracial contact, and food.

Clothing. Participants (14%) described specific clothing styles and brands as AW.

“Acting White” just means acting proper, and being associated with things that are more acceptable to society and not Black people. It has made me want to act more White especially now that I am in a college environment. (Thomas, Black male)

For me [“acting White”] means acting civilized and not similar to my surrounding peers. Also I didn’t settle for less and I looked for ways to better myself while people like me just settled for less. In a way I felt like it meant acting better than the rest. It affected me in a sense that pushed me to work even harder to show my peers that being Latina was not a bad thing, if other people that represent the majority can do it, why cannot we. (Christina, Latinx female)

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For the record, many of my friends are Black and Latino. When I accuse my friends of “acting White,” I am often referring to their sense of entitlement. Some of them do not understand what it means to struggle economically and live in areas where little examples of success are present . . . Thus, “acting White” has more to do with a sense of privilege that some folks develop and internalize. (Jamal, Black male)

Nonrhythmic dance styles were also described as AW:

I get accused of “acting White” . . . But other ways of being considered “White” would be through dancing, which is just stiff movements rather than soulful dancing. (Victoria, Latinx female)

Demographic patterns revealed that Latinx students described music and dance styles at a higher rate than Black students (16 vs. 7%; p = .02).

Activities. Participants (4%) associated specific extracurricular activities and sports with AW. Sports were the most frequently mentioned activities. Latinx students were stereotyped to play soccer, whereas Black students were stereotyped to play basketball or football. However, participation in any nonprototypical activities were associated with AW:
I was part of the band program ever since 4th grade and there has never been much diversity there. I have also done swimming since I was little and there weren’t many Hispanics, African Americans, or other races in that as well. So I was told that I do “White people” activities. (Amelia, Latinx female)

In my schooling environment, often times when I was referred to as “White,” it meant that I was not acting “Latino.” Which was in regards to me not playing soccer...I was often times called “White” by Latinos who represented Latinos in a negative light. It hasn’t really bothered me to be viewed as “White” because I didn’t identify as White. I knew I was Peruvian and Mexican, it just so happened that I enjoy to play baseball instead of soccer. (Christian, Latinx male)

Nonprototypical activities were described similarly across sociodemographics. Participants emphasized the extent to which extracurricular activities have been racialized within American society and they highlighted the process of negotiating racial boundaries while engaging in nonprototypical activities.

**Interracial contact.** Participants (4%) described extensive interracial contact as an indicator of AW and this included interracial friendships and interracial romantic relationships. Extensive interracial contact, particularly with White peers, made individuals more susceptible to AW accusations. This narrative was similar across sociodemographics:

To me, “acting White” truly means that you only want to surround yourself with White people and not embrace your own race. It’s not a problem to hang with people of other races, but it becomes a problem when you do it purposefully. (Sean, Black male)

“[“Acting White” means] hanging out with people outside of your own race and enjoying yourself with them. I also do not fit in with “ghetto Black girls” so they like to throw the “you act White” at me too. (Shawna, Black female)

The “acting White” label means that a person talks like a White person and hangs out with White people more than their own race. (Maria, Latinx Female)

Interracial contact, by itself, was not perceived as a problem or uncommon. However, extensive interracial contact, especially with White peers, was interpreted as a preference for the dominant culture over one’s own culture and, thus, a determinant for AW.

**Food.** Participants (1%) reported food as an attribute of AW and this code was only mentioned by Latinx students. Food preferences were perceived to be an indicator of cultural authenticity through statements like “not eating the native food,” “being picky about food,” and “eating fast food.”

**Cultural Ideologies**

The third theme for AW involved perceptions of cultural ideologies. This theme was expressed by 19% of the sample and encompassed: *cultural alienation* and *normalizing “White” as “American.”*

**Cultural alienation.** Participants (14%) described AW as a sense of cultural alienation where one is disconnected from their racial/ethnic identity. Cultural alienation involved identity-conscious statements that depicted a sense of identity confusion or the absence of intraracial ties.

When other Black people use the phrase [“acting White”], they tend to suggest that one has lost, or is losing, a sense of their heritage and, thus, their identity. It implies that one is betraying their people. (Jamal, Black male)

[“Acting White”] seems to carry connotations of going against your own Hispanic heritage. You turn your back on being Latino if you “act White.” It’s annoying and a little hurtful to be looked at as a traitor by other Latinos. (Gloria, Latinx female)

Participants described culturally alienated individuals as people who may betray their own culture. These identity-conscious statements demonstrate the degree to which perceptions of cultural affiliation heavily influence interpersonal interactions.

**Normalizing “White” as “American.”** Participants (9%) defined AW as the process of adopting “White” norms to integrate into mainstream American culture. The content of these messages varied between Black and Latinx participants. Latinx students frequently described a process of assimilation into mainstream American culture and emphasized societal pressure to adopt “White” attributes over “Latinx/Hispanic” attributes.

[“Acting White”] means to me, being assimilated with American culture and losing touch with your own culture. It has affected me negatively because I am criticized for not being able to speak Spanish. (Robert, Latinx male)

The Americanization of a culture and traditions. It has affected my life as it has taken me away from my origins. (Stephanie, Latinx female)

Although Black students never mentioned “assimilation,” they described how American culture has historically promoted “White” norms, and Sasha (Black female) describes how this process contributes to self-hatred:

[“Acting White” is] a strong affinity for mainstream American culture coupled with a strong disregard for the importance of Black historical or political presence. It has affected my life by bringing to my attention that the presence of such behavior indicates self-hatred because of race and sparked within me the desire to learn more about my history and educate my peers and Black youth about their history so that they can have race pride and a better sense of self while living and functioning as a Black person in America today.

Additionally, participants expressed frustration with White culture being construed as the default norms for all Americans:

Once my ex-boyfriend, who was White, said, “you do not look Mexican.” So I asked him, “what do I look then?” He responded with, “I do not know . . . normal. Aren’t you part White?” I am 100% Mexican, and this made me mad. People consider “White” as a kind of default normal human, at least in the U.S. (Selena, Latinx female)

This excerpt demonstrates how White individuals may perpetrate AW insults by normalizing specific characteristics as “White” and invalidating the identity of people of color.

Normalizing “White” as “American” was mentioned more frequently among Latinx students compared with Black students (15 vs. 2%; p < .001).

**Academics and Success**

A fourth theme included a single code for achievement and aspirations. Participants (11%) expressed resentment toward the
portrayal of academic achievement and success as AW, but they noted that peers and family still accused them of AW for embodying these attributes. This dynamic is highlighted in the following responses:

I grew up with mostly White people and I hate when someone says “you act like a White person” when the person is simply educated . . . Intelligence and education are not exclusive to the White race and saying that someone “acts White” when they are well-mannered is a reason why segregation and racism still exist. It’s a pet peeve of mine and it irritates me when someone tells me I “act White.” (Miguel, Latinx male)

To me [“acting White”] means that I’m an intellectual individual and that I strive to be the best in everything I do. I am very educated and my academic performance reflects that. (Leah, Black female)

Although the vast majority of participants maintained high achievement attitudes despite being accused of AW, there was one case where a male student described a reduction in academic effort to avoid the AW accusation:

It angers me because just because I am trying to make something out of myself, it makes me “act White.” Most of the Time I would act less intelligent since I did not want to be accused of “acting White.” (Michael, Latinx male)

Female participants described academic achievement interchangeably with aspirations for success, whereas male participants focused primarily on achievement. The following response highlights the overlap between achievement and aspirations among female participants:

“Acting White” to me means being educated and wanting more for myself. Staying focused on the bigger things in life. Being this way has shown me that I can do whatever I set my mind to no matter how I “act.” (Tiffany, Black female)

The combination of academic achievement and high aspirations among female students demonstrates that AW accusations did not deter these individuals from pursuing their goals. Although male students did not integrate achievement and aspirations to the same degree as females, they still maintained high achievement attitudes with only one exception.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how a diverse sample of late adolescents define AW, and examine how AW may be understood differently across sociodemographics. We uncovered depths of meaning and manifestations of AW that highlight the capacity of Black and Latinx late adolescents to critically examine cultural invalidations within American society.

Findings indicate that 11 unique codes, categorized into four themes, captured the breadth of meaning associated with AW. Several themes, including speech and behavior, style and social preferences, and academics and success, replicate previous investigations with younger adolescents (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). Speech patterns were the most frequently reported characteristic of AW and this supports previous research indicating that speech patterns are the most heavily targeted attributes of AW (Neal-Barnett et al., 2010; Webb & Linn, 2016). Black females in this study emphasized speech patterns 2–3 times more frequently than any other sociodemographic. Prior gender differences have been found (Carter, 2005, 2006), but the present study is one of the first to identify a racialized gender difference where Black females reported speech patterns twice as frequently as Latinx females. Existing research in linguistics has demonstrated that cultural dialects of English, such as African American Vernacular English and Latinx/Chicano English, are associated with greater discrimination within residential housing, employment, and salaries (Grogger, 2011; Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999; Rickford et al., 2015). However, these studies have yet to parcel out discrepancies to determine whether women face greater risk for language-based discrimination than men. This is one of the first studies to explicitly examine whether the meaning of AW differs for males and females across racial/ethnic groups.

Academic achievement was the least frequently reported theme for AW and this finding, along with recent work (Webb & Linn, 2016), suggests that academic achievement is not as central to AW as previous literature suggested (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Although Fordham and Ogbu (1986) proposed the “AW hypothesis” as a deterrent to academic achievement, results from this study indicate that the vast majority of Black and Latinx youth continue to hold high academic beliefs despite being frustrated by AW accusations. These findings align with meta-analyses showing positive relationships between academic achievement and racial/ethnic affect among Black and Latinx students (Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2016; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Considering that the AW label reinforces stereotypes about marginalized racial/ethnic groups and normalizes “White” attributes, it is likely that youth of color with a well-developed racial/ethnic identity may resent the underlying messages implied by the AW accusation and become motivated to defy negative stereotypes ascribed to their culture (i.e., stereotype threat; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Cultural ideologies represent a unique theme that has not received much attention in the AW literature and this sample of late adolescents utilized their keen sense of social norms and racial/ethnic identity to deconstruct AW. Specifically the sample reflected heavily on their understanding of race/ethnicity to describe the sense of cultural alienation that defines AW. Cultural ideologies likely emerged in this study because late adolescents are more attuned to racial/ethnic identity and social norms compared with research with younger adolescents (Bergin & Cooks, 2002). The transition into college is another catalyst that may have made cultural ideologies more salient because identity exploration increases dramatically during college as students try to comprehend their social identities (Arnett, 2016; Phinney, 2006).

While several demographic differences emerged in how students define AW, there was great consistency in AW definitions across social identities. The considerable amount of similarity in AW definitions suggests that these cultural invalidations are relevant for youth from multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds. While little research has examined AW among Latinx youth, this study demonstrates that this population faces AW invalidations regularly. Although Latinx populations in the United States possess distinct norms and stereotypes, a common denominator among marginalized racial/ethnic groups is that they must navigate a challenging racial climate where nonconformity to racial/ethnic norms and stereotypes may lead them to be targeted by cultural invalidations. It is important to examine the meaning-making processes of cultural invalidations, because the salience of these
threats may vary across individuals, social identities, and contexts. The present study contributes to the literature by providing a detailed taxonomy of how late adolescents make meaning of AW during college-entry.

Implications of Cultural Invalidations

This study highlights many distinguishing features of AW that should be further examined to enhance our understanding of cultural validations. For example, the content of AW varied widely and invalidations pertaining to speech patterns, clothing, or activities may each have unique psychological consequences. Second, cultural invalidations may carry distinct implications for various sociodemographics (e.g., invalidations pertaining to speech patterns may have distinct consequences for Black women vs. Latinx women). Third, the present study demonstrates that peers, close friends, parents, and White individuals may all perpetrate AW accusations, but the psychological consequences of these invalidations may vary across perpetrators. More research is needed to explore each of these important implications of AW. Classifying AW within the broader construct of cultural invalidations will help to unify this body of work with a single terminology that encompasses multiple variants of identity threats for specific social identities: racial identity invalidations (Franco & O’Brien, 2018), racial microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007), and identity denial (Johnson & Ashburn-Nardo, 2014).

Limitations and Conclusion

Several factors limit the generalizability of the present findings. First, the sample included high achieving minority students who were admitted to 4-year, predominantly White universities in the Midwest. Therefore, the findings do not generalize to late adolescents who enrolled at minority-serving institutions or those who did not matriculate to college. Additionally, Black males were underrepresented in the study and quantitative results may not accurately capture the experiences of this group because $\chi^2$ statistics are sensitive to sample size (Roscoe & Byars, 1971). Lastly, the most salient features of AW were prioritized and findings are not intended to provide an exhaustive list of all AW characteristics.

While the present study focused on the meaning of AW, it is important to understand how diverse populations internalize cultural invalidations. AW represents a common invalidation for people of color and a broader examination of cultural invalidations may help researchers classify identity threats that discredit or undermine specific social identities (e.g., gender, religion, social class, etc.). Claude Steele (2010) argues that all human beings are susceptible to stereotype threats; we posit that all human beings are similarly susceptible to cultural invalidations whenever the prototypical norms of a social identity are violated. As additional research dissects these intrinsic social dynamics, the breadth of cultural invalidations will become more evident and improve our understanding of their robust implications.

References


