

## Identity and School Adjustment: Revisiting the “Acting White” Assumption

Margaret Beale Spencer, Elizabeth Noll, Jill Stoltzfus, and Vinay Harpalani

*Graduate School of Education  
University of Pennsylvania*

It has long been offered as an explanation for the achievement gap between White and African American students, that African American youth would do better if they adopted a Eurocentric cultural values system. Unfortunately, this theory, along with a great amount of the established literature on minority youth identity development, depends on a deficit-oriented perspective to explain the discrepancy between African American and White students. This is problematic because the perspective denies minority youth a culturally specific normative developmental perspective of their own, and instead, compares their experience to the normative developmental processes observed in White children.

This article invalidates that perspective with a Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (Spencer, 1995) approach to a study of African American secondary school students. These students, contrary to the traditionally offered “acting White” assumption, show high self-esteem and achievement goals in conjunction with high Afrocentricity. Further discussion of the study stresses the importance of considering the undeniable influence of culture and context. It makes obvious the need for researchers and policymakers to focus on the contextual challenges facing these youths to have a better understanding of and to institute better teaching strategies for African American youth and minority youth in general.

Schooling and the identity formation processes of African American children tend to be treated in terms of one reductionism or another, with experiences of Whites and middle-income people serving as the norm from which nonmajority children are seen as deviating. In psychiatry, sociology, criminal justice, and in the media of the past half century, minority schooling and identity are framed in terms of pathology and deviance. In contrast, traditional developmental theory and perspectives continue to frame the life course experiences of Whites and middle-income people more generally (Spencer, in press).

Universalist biological interpretations of behavioral development, too, are often just as reductionist, ignoring the contribution of culture in human development and the role of cultural learning in human history (Massimini & Fave, 2000). On the other hand, analyses by ethnographers concerning adaptations that consider a group’s culture without similarly considering normative developmental processes appear un-

necessarily reductionist, and thus, frequently promote an incomplete analysis of youths’ productive and unproductive adaptive responses to contexts as they vary in level of support and challenge. Such perspectives ignore the potential psychological vulnerability that accompanies particular developmental stages, such as adolescence.

In the education literature, schooling of minority youth is dealt with in terms of normative experiences and expectations without reference to the context of underserved neighborhoods, chronically impoverished communities, and families under stress that characterize urban, and frequently African American, children (Tienda, 1991). Not only can the fragile infrastructure of many urban centers be described as “poor places,” but so too are school settings in urban America, irrespective of the socioeconomic status of students.

The effects of these everyday life contexts at the microsystemic level are exacerbated by discrepant social and school policies that make what is actually expected from students and their families unclear (Chestang, 1972). Worse yet, these expectations are often left for students themselves to unravel in their traditional youth cultures, frequently without the benefit of cultural translators (e.g., parents, mentors, supportive adults). We know from the literature on parenting

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Margaret Beale Spencer, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216. E-mail: marges@gse.upenn.edu

(Brookins, 1985; Jarrett, 1995; Johnson, 1988; Spencer, 1983, 1990) that parents have an effective role to play in the process. However, their impact is greatest during the early years of development, when parental influences have less competition from such socializing forces as the school, the media, peer contacts, and broader society in general. Analyses of these influences often neglect the ways that parental knowledge and monitoring mediate the impact of social and contextual variables for children in middle childhood and adolescence (Spencer, Cunningham, & Swanson, 1995). Peers and macrostructural factors do not necessarily have a similar and unidirectional impact on youth outcomes.

Accordingly, the theoretical assertion that a positive achievement orientation as held by African American youths is associated with a White cultural identity is challenged by empirical findings. Specifically, the “acting White” theory, as presented by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and made highly visible by the national media, suggests that youth of color, and particularly African Americans, do not value education. The view itself contributes to cultural stereotyping in its failure to acknowledge the role of solidly entrenched social stereotyping in the school adjustment and coping requirements of African Americans.

This article takes a critical look at the acting White assertion. We review empirical research on identity formation processes and the role of social stereotypes and the reactive coping responses of African American youth. We then present a systems theory that views the negative achievement orientation of some Black youth as a “right-to-respect” reactive coping response. Illustrative empirical data are included for demonstrating this alternative interpretation of the achievement patterns of African American adolescents.

A central question addressed in this research review is the degree to which adolescents evolve their own beliefs about self-efficacy (i.e., perceived self-worth as a learner) as an explanation for school-based performance (i.e., as a consequence of their own processing of phenomena), or whether they accept the assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations of others.

## BACKGROUND

Although culture is often underanalyzed when applied generally to the experiences of minority youth and particularly to those living in urban settings, culture does indeed matter. Unfortunately, its integrated use in the consideration of urban children and adolescents has too frequently come under the rubric of *a priori* assumptions of psychopathology and deviancy (see Spencer, 1999b). Even worse, the impact of culture has been unilaterally applied without a differentiated analysis of the unique contributions of urban contexts, developmental status, mediators of resiliency, and parental and community supports as protective contributions against the inherent contextual challenges experienced by young people.

In general, cross-cultural psychologists have articulated the salience of culture for human behavior. However, its relevance and application to the experiences of urban youth remains shallow at best. Massimini and Fave (2000) suggested that if one examines topics from cognition to social behavior and human development, patterned differences among individuals can be determined from cultural contexts. As reviewed elsewhere (Spencer, 1999b), the major problem with much of this literature is that, regarding contextual impacts and cultural adaptations, it assumes only negative adaptive processes (e.g., the assumed unilateral reactions of “caste-like minorities” to racism; see Ogbu, 1985). It generally ignores the presence of protective factors and consequent resiliency indicative of many youth and their familial socializing contexts. For example, particularly concerning preschool children, the early experience of racism has had less power because very young children are too egocentric to really experience racism (see Spencer, 1999b; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). The less than expected social-emotional impact of early racist experience (e.g., as race stereotypes) has been associated with developmental status (i.e., the normative egocentric character of preschool youngsters’ thought processes; Spencer, 1999b).

## Culture, Human Behavior, and Development

Massimini and Fave (2000) noted the prevalence of interdisciplinary studies, indicating that the biological underpinning of development alone does not serve as the epiphenomenon for explaining behavior. Rather, culture also has a dramatic impact. The researchers explain

That a biologically grounded model leaves no room for the system of values focused on democracy and individual rights that has been laboriously developed in several cultures, at least during the last three centuries. These values are the inspiring guidelines of many societies. If we disregard them as epiphenomenal and subject to biological fitness, how can we build a psychological model based on human development as a growth toward individual complexity and cultural integration, shaping human beings as full-fledged members of mankind? (p. 25)

Massimini and Fave’s (2000) point is that adaptive strategies require social learning and a dependence on the production and use of artifacts, materials, or symbols that help create social norms and roles. This set of products can be labeled as culture and serve to promote one’s adaptation to varied ecological niches. Consistent with Cloak (1975), such products suggest that horizontal and vertical transmission of cultural information occurs in various ways, including verbal language, social learning, and artifacts, and that all are credited with contributing to the development of cultural systems.

Advancing matters further, Massimini and Fave (2000) cited Tomasello, Kruger, and Ratner (1993), whose theory proposes that, in fact, the attainment of cultural knowledge and a posture of unceasing learning represent the antecedents for survival. As described by Boykin (1986, p. 65), the character of the required unceasing learning results in a triple quandary for many African American youths and represents three contexts of experiential negotiations: the mainstream, minority, and Black cultural experiences.

The dilemma of competing allegiances and competing socialization contexts in the filtering of adaptive cultural learning makes the developmental course more challenging for such youths. However, when analyzing the achievement gap between African American and White youth, attention is given only to the objective magnitude of the gap, rather than to the diverse ways that youths respond to conflicting messages concerning the nature of the self as an individual and as a member of a particular cultural unit.

### Structural Racism and Achievement

Structural racism in American society is manifested as systematic, institutionalized practices resulting in the subordination and devaluation of minority groups (Spencer, Harpalani, & Dell'Angelo (in press). In this context, these practices may be conceptualized as parallel sets of conditions because their impact is felt as much directly as indirectly. The indirect effect is cast from a perspective where a condition's unacknowledged existence is left without treatment or responsive remedy, thus making its impact much more salient, much like an undiagnosed cancer. One researcher's description of a teacher's very sincere response to teaching expectations, practices, and character makes the case in point: "I thought it was my job to teach those kids who 'get it' and to 'refer out' those kids for remediation who 'did not get it'" (Williams, 1999). The teacher's assumption represents the personal delivery at the microlevel that the macrolevel structural racism affords.

The consequences of systematic and institutionalized problematic processes for minorities, particularly for visible groups such as African Americans, result in at least a twofold set of outcomes for youth. First, minority youth in America often live and mature in extremely challenging environments that are depicted generally by significant structural barriers to success. These system-wide structural obstacles effect conditions within the family, neighborhood, workplace, and school contexts, along with the interactions among these different contexts. The relations between settings and the larger social, economic, and political forces in American society are also impacted. In effect, these challenges are not offset by near-equivalent sources of social and structural supports. A substantial number of African American youth demonstrate resiliency despite these challenging circumstances. However, instances of minority adolescents' resiliency (i.e., suc-

cess and competence despite adverse living conditions) often go unrecognized. Accordingly, a lack of understanding of cultural contexts leads to a misinterpretation of minority youth behavior and development.

It is important to note, however, that even when successes are acknowledged, the unique contributors leading to success and resiliency in challenging environments are not typically identified or integrated into teacher training and policy considerations. In fact, the consequences are not only dire predictions for the experiences of youth, who are required by law to have formal schooling experiences, but are also problematic for adults. Observations by Lisa Delpit (1988) are instructive in this regard. Delpit's report of the following quote by an African American woman teaching in a multicultural urban primary grade setting illuminates the frustration with Whites often expressed by people of color. The African American teacher notes that

When you're talking to White people they will still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they're so headstrong, they think they know what's best for *everybody*, for *everybody's* children. They won't listen. White folks are going to do what they want to do *anyway*.

It's really hard. They just don't listen well. No, they listen, but they don't *hear*—you know how your mama used to say you listen to the radio, but you *hear* your mother? Well they don't *hear* me.

So I just try to shut them out so I can hold my temper. You can only beat your head against a brick wall for so long before you draw blood. If I try to stop arguing with them I can't help myself from getting angry. Then I end up walking around praying all day "Please Lord, remove the bile I feel for these people so I can sleep tonight." It's funny, but it can become a cancer, a sore.

So, I shut them out. I go back to my own little cubby, my classroom, and I try to teach the way I know will work, no matter what those folks say. And when I get Black kids, I just try to undo the damage they did.

I'm not going to let any man, woman, or child drive me crazy—White folks will try to do that to you if you let them. You just have to stop talking to them, that's what I do. I just keep smiling, but I won't talk to them (pp. 280–281).

Critically important about Delpit's (1988) report is that the individual noting the extreme level of frustration is an adult and a teaching professional. However, this individual's absolute desperation is evident. Such a critical level of frustration, as linked to expectations for behavior and particular intergroup relations, is generally understood by most adults and requires specific and productive coping responses that are learned. Most adults can relate to the state of affairs reported by Delpit in situations involving work, more generic interpersonal relations, and familial interactions. It is the repetitive use and honing of productive coping responses that maximize midlife opportunities and outcomes. However, there is seldom exploration of the way parallel situations that include obvious differences in power relations are responded to by

young people. Particularly important are the reactive responses of adolescents who are already handling developmental challenges in their social and cognitive awareness of self and other as their affect is heightened and their thought processes change.

The adolescent literature portrays adolescents as hypersensitive and hyperaware, due mainly to normative physiological and cognitive changes that herald the onset of adolescence and a set of developmental tasks associated with puberty, most notably, identity formation (see Havighurst, 1953; Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998). It takes significant time and coping experience for children and adolescents to develop responsive and effective coping skills to handle dissonance-producing environments. Evocative responses frequently result in a diminished level of youths' own sense of agency and efficacy. Frequently, such challenges result in the deployment of unproductive coping responses in reaction to significant challenges accompanied by insufficient social support (Spencer, 1999a). Unfortunately, failure to understand youths' reactive coping responses results in frequent underdeveloped analysis. As an interesting though dissonance-producing example, the achievement gap phenomenon between Black and White students evident across socioeconomic lines has been framed as an acting White theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

### Acting White or Reactive Coping Responses to Stereotype Threat?

As suggested by Williams's (1999) descriptive analysis, the teacher's failure to recognize the varied cultural contexts and plethora of reasons why all students do not necessarily "get it" in the same way demonstrates the long-term and broad consequences of the oversight. It underscores the pervasiveness of stereotypes. It also begs a revisitation of the acting White hypothesis as a widely used and media-hyped explanation for the achievement gap between Black and White learners.

**Racial stereotyping.** Racial stereotyping continues to represent an insidious expression of American racism. Members of devalued and culturally defined groups may have very different experiences from those considered more mainstream. Such groups are generally socially constructed, and their societal position based on assumptions of inferior versus superior social status. The positioning is often due directly to the omnipresent, though generally ignored, impacts of racism expressed through group stereotyping.

Approximately a century ago, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), the first African American Harvard-graduated social scientist, pronounced that the heavy burden of the 20th century for Americans would be the issue of the color line. Ninety-five years later, although retired from the federal bench, Leon Higginbotham (as cited in Odom, 1998, p.

E-1) noted that "the problem with the 21st century is *not* recognizing the consequences of racism." Higginbotham's perspective suggested the complexity and unchanging character of American race relations as it is expressed both consciously and unconsciously as racial attitudes, racial bias, symbolic racism (Bobo, 1983), and racial stereotypes. There are few discussions of its sequelae. As noted by Harpalani (1999), despite its broad implications, there is a large and central void in the scholarship on racial stereotyping. Representing one side of this void is research from the field of social psychology, which examines the cognitive processes involved in stereotype formation and their relation to prejudice (Bar-Tal, Graumann, Kruglanski, & Stroebe, 1989; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). The approach focuses on the attitudes of majority group individuals; it largely neglects the consequences of stereotyping for the recipients of prejudice—ethnic minorities.

The social psychological approach also frequently ignores the underlying structural and sociohistorical factors that create the foundation for psychological expressions such as racial stereotyping (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). It is this pattern of oversight that allows assertions such as the acting White theory to not only misinterpret ethnographic findings (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) but, in fact, to contribute to further stereotyping as opposed to focusing attention on the underlying phenomenon and the role of perpetrators. C. M. Steele's (1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) research focused on the broader issue of *stereotype threat* and attempted to get closer to the contributing context character, although normative developmental themes were not considered.

Harpalani (1999) suggested that the other side of the large void in scholarship is sociological, anthropological, and clinical literature that focuses on sociohistorical manifestations of racism and their consequences for ethnic minorities. These lines of scholarship often utilize a deficit model and view minorities as pathological products of oppression (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hoberman, 1997; Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951). In addition, this research has often used sociohistorical data to derive undue inferences regarding the psychological development and phenomenological experiences of members of ethnic minority groups.

More often than not, this work is well intentioned and frequently provides an adequate presentation of the sociohistorical context for racial stereotyping. However, an ethnocentric viewpoint is commonly employed and coupled with assumptions of cultural deficiency and pathology. As a consequence, there is a void in scholarship that links a context of racial stereotyping on coping processes and that also considers normative developmental themes and identity formation processes.

*A corrective to reductionism: Phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST).* PVEST, as an identity-focused cultural ecological (ICE) perspective, provides a different approach to investigating African Ameri-

can adolescents' achievement behavior. Of late, there are few places in the education literature where unilateral assumptions have been made more frequently concerning youths' responses to structural racism and their experience in classrooms than in the acting White analysis of achievement gaps between Blacks and Whites in American schools. The problem with acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), caste-like minority formulations (e.g., Ogbu, 1985), and assumptions about minority youths' achievement efforts, is that these perspectives lack a dynamic integration of context character, cultural traditions, developmental status, and diverse responsive adaptations. Similar to the traditional treatment and set of assumptions from the identity formation literature, *a priori* assumptions of group-level psychopathology and self-hatred have continued to take center stage in the debate concerning the underpinnings of the current Black–White achievement differences (see Williams, 1996, 2000). Of course, it is interesting and critical to note that no similar psychopathology assumption takes center stage when discussing either the parallel White–Asian American achievement gap or the Jewish American–White gap (see Lesser & Stodolsky, 1970). The lack of stereotyping has important implications for life-course identity processes.

*Acting White hypotheses to be examined.* The use of a systems theoretical framework that provides an ICE perspective aids a more developmentally sensitive and dynamic analysis. It affords a demonstration of links between context character, sociohistorical factors, and related psychological processes. More to the point, the framework abates the probability of simplistic conclusions; it offers a corrective to the omnipresent reductionism, including acting White conclusions that permeate the several literatures that include educational practice and training. Accordingly, the several hypotheses to be explored make use of a longitudinal database of largely male, African American early adolescents from the nation's southeastern region.

The first hypothesis establishes the normative character of the sample—that is, as would be expected, normative concerns with significant growth and development should be apparent and are explored. Therefore, the first hypothesis is that normative views about self-processes (e.g., concerning the acquisition of physical developmental milestones) are expected for both male and female African American adolescents.

Similarly, because the referent “other” is one's own family and reference group, it is important to establish that this sample is similar to others for whom self-esteem has been documented. Therefore, the second hypothesis is that, counter to media-hyped assumptions, adolescents demonstrate traditional and positive values concerning self-efficacy in which high academic performance is valued and poor performance (e.g., flunking a class) is devalued.

The acting White achievement explanation (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) assumes a positive association between high

achievement and high Eurocentric values (i.e., performing well in school is associated with an extreme White salience belief system, or high Eurocentrism). However, our data show that high Eurocentric values (i.e., White salience attitudes and values) are associated with low achievement (National Percentile Ranking score) patterns, high Eurocentric values (i.e., White salience attitudes and values) are associated with low self-efficacy scores, and high Eurocentric values (i.e., White salience attitudes and values) are associated with low (inferred, devalued, and reflected) self-esteem scores.

Following the presentation of our data, the interpretation of findings is framed within the PVEST (Spencer, 1995, 1999a; Swanson et al., 1998). As an ICE perspective, PVEST provides a heuristic device for linking the experience of risk with experienced stress (i.e., the net effect of challenge vs. support), responses, and coping strategies (both reactive coping, that can either produce productive or unproductive displays, and more stable coping responses as identity processes that are not independent of context). Particular life-stage coping outcomes result that may represent either (a) productive, and thus positive, life-stage outcomes that may lead to significantly less risk as one moves across the life course; or (b) less than optimal outcomes that may exacerbate the character of risk experienced at subsequent periods of development across the life course.

## AN EXAMINATION OF THE ACTING WHITE HYPOTHESIS

The promotion of academic competence (PAC) project database represents a large longitudinal study of 562 African American youth. It explores the relation between neighborhood and family characteristics and perceived context experiences and achievement, focusing specifically on the development of competence and resiliency in African American boys. Theory-driven analyses through the PVEST model examine adolescent coping methods and competence outcomes. Some of the analyses predicted productive coping methods (e.g., learning responsibility behavior and academic self-esteem) versus maladaptive coping methods (e.g., negative learning attitudes).

The PAC project included 562 African American adolescents (394 boys and 168 girls) from sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade classrooms of four participating public middle schools in a metropolitan, southeastern American city. The ages of the participants ranged from 11 to 16. For three of the four schools, 80% to 90% of the students received free or reduced lunch support. The rate was approximately 70% at the fourth school. Approximately 58% of the participants' families met federal poverty guidelines according to parental self-report data (i.e., for a family size of four in 1990, the criterion for poverty used was an annual family income of \$13,395).

We used a modified version of the Life Events Record (Coddington, 1972) to measure physical changes due to puberty and school suspension or expulsion. Self-concept was measured with items from the Blythe (1982) and the Hare Self-Esteem Scale (Hare, 1977). The Blythe and the Hare Self-Esteem Scale was originally developed with a sample that included African American youths and includes 30 self-report items with good psychometric properties. A revision of the Racial Identity Attitude Scale, a self-report inventory intended to measure hierarchical stages or racial identity (Cross, 1971; Parham & Helms, 1985), was employed (McDermott & Spencer, 1996). The version used for this project included 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale and was modified for use with adolescents. Information about this scale appears in Table 1. Finally, academic achievement was measured in terms of students' national percentile scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

### Overall Findings and Specific Data Themes

Pearson correlations indicated a range of significant and positive intercorrelations between the standardized achievement measure and the three self-concept scores: High self-esteem is associated with high performance on the achievement test,  $r(453) = .16$  for "How smart are you?";  $r(452) = .13$  for "How good are you in school?"; and  $r(412) = .15$  for "Valued by others"; all  $ps < .01$ .

As we hypothesized, the intercorrelations among academic achievement and subscale scores of the racial identity measure vary and suggest specific relations as a function of the subscale's meaning (*vis-à-vis* African American cultural identity themes). Accordingly, high Eurocentricity (White salience attitudes and values) is associated with low achievement performances,  $r(471) = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , and is, in fact, opposite from the acting White assertion. Similarly, the immersion racial identity score (reactive Afrocentricity) is also associated with low achievement,  $r(441) = -.12$ ,  $p < .05$ . These findings are not counterintuitive, because the scale items from the reactive Afrocentric identity subscale indicate a superficial identification with Black culture. In fact, the classic illustration of the point is youths' penchant for wearing Malcolm X or Martin Luther King apparel without a concomitant understanding of either's contribution to Black

history. Youths' use of such cultural displays is purely superficial and does not provide sustenance (i.e., as productive coping strategies). In sum, the potential "cultural benefits" are muted and cultural meanings obfuscated because of youths' fad-like use of cultural icons. Youths with high-immersion racial identity do not have possession of an Afrocentric cultural identity that is proactive and psychologically fulfilling. More than likely, they use their superficial identification as a reactive way of coping with the discomfort of the schooling complex. They may reactively "act out" on others who may do better by claiming an authentic Black consciousness and demeaning others' achievement efforts as a reactive method for maintaining personal self-esteem.

In contrast, the correlation coefficients suggest a significant (although modest) relation between the encounter racial identity score (i.e., transitional cultural identity),  $r(441) = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ , and between achievement and internalized racial identity (i.e., proactive Afrocentricity—an internalized race consciousness),  $r(441) = .10$ ,  $p < .05$ . The modest correlation is consistent with other data that suggest the challenges of maintaining an authentic, proactive, and psychologically sustaining (own group valuing) cultural identity. The concern is relevant for youths' experiences in home, school, neighborhood, and media exposure. In general, contexts do not explicitly indicate the positive valuing of marginal group status, because even parents have difficulty discussing issues of race, racism, and ethnicity unless youths raise the issues (Spencer, 1983, 1990).

### Normative Developmental Self Processes

Independent of ethnicity, race, and social class, adolescence is associated with rapid physical changes in height and weight. The normative process begins earlier for girls than boys (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990). We assessed physical changes and attitudes regarding those changes to establish that our sample was normative in this regard. On items from the Life Events Record (Coddington, 1972), approximately 70% of students reported, "I changed a lot physically (i.e., in the last year)," with no differences evident by gender. Of those who noted significant physical changes, both boys and girls reported that the changes were "pretty/very good." Figure 1 indicates that, of the approximate 20% to 33% who reported a significant weight gain, girls noted feeling "very

TABLE 1  
Stages of Racial Identity as Measured by the Racial Identity Attitude Scale

Stage	Label	Description
Preencounter	Eurocentric	White salience attitudes and values and identification with anti-Black stereotypes
Encounter	Transitional	Movement or transition from anti-Black attitudes
Immersion	Reactive Afrocentrism	Black salience and anti-White attitudes that represent a reactionary identification with superficial cultural icons
Internalization	Proactive Afrocentrism	An internalized and proactive Black salience identity that also acknowledges the positive aspects of other cultural traditions

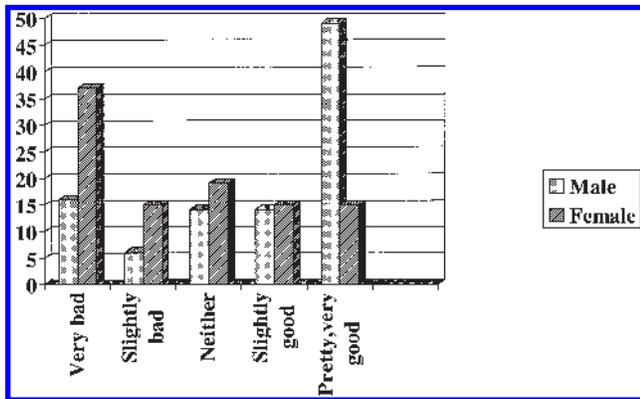


FIGURE 1 "I gained a lot of weight." Evaluations of how bad or good was this event.

bad" most frequently, although boys reported feeling "pretty/very good" for the most part. Finally, the majority of participants reported, "I've grown much taller," whereas boys more frequently reported feeling "pretty/very good" about the physical growth and development.

Importance of School Experience

For each event queried, students were asked whether the change or event had occurred (i.e., yes or no) and how significant the event was to them. Of those few students reporting, "I was suspended from school," the majority of both boys and girls felt that it was a "bad or slightly bad event." Similarly, flunking a class was viewed as "very bad" by both girls and boys, with a slightly higher rate for girls (see Figure 2). Boys and girls equally reported having earned poor grades as "very bad." Finally, both girls and boys equally responded "pretty/very good" to having received an academic honor.

Racial Identity Findings and Themes

*Racial identity and achievement.* Table 2 describes the distribution of high and low achievement scores for each racial identity subscale score: (a) Eurocentric White salience values (preencounter subscale score), (b) movement from Eurocentric to Afrocentric values (transitional subscale score), (c) reactive superficial Afrocentricity (immersion subscale score); and (d) proactive adaptive Afrocentric values (internalization subscale score).

We grouped our sample into low and high achieving scores by indicating those above the median on achievement as high and those at or below the median score as low. Similarly, for each of the four response categories of racial identity, a high score represented a score above the median, and low scores were either at or below the median score. Because our concern is with high Eurocentricity and high achieve-

ment, other scores (i.e., low scores) are referred to as such (i.e., "other") in Table 2. As listed in Table 2, for Eurocentricity, low achievement is more often associated with adolescents who score high on Eurocentricity; high achievement is more often associated with the low Eurocentric group. Achievement performance is somewhat similar for the transitional racial identity groups (i.e., both high and other). On the other hand, those scoring high on achievement are more often associated with the low reactive Afrocentric racial identity group. Finally, for the proactive Afrocentric racial identity category, low achievement is more often associated with those scoring low (i.e., other) on proactive Afrocentric racial identity. In summary, as we found in our correlation analyses, youth with higher achievement are more likely to score high on Afrocentric identity and lower on Eurocentric identity.

*Racial identity and self-esteem.*

Responses on the self-concept measure were classified as low or high depending on median scores: Above the median is high and at or below the median is low. Chi-square results reported in Table 3 note only the self-esteem variable, "How valued by others ...," to be significantly different by Eurocentric racial identity level. Those who generally scored low on the reflected appraisal by others are also adolescents who scored high for Eurocentricity. Similarly, those scoring high on positively reflected self-appraisals by others are more often from the low (i.e., other) Eurocentric group.

DISCUSSION

These findings reveal a more complicated and less homogeneous set of relations than generally assumed. In fact, from a normal adolescent developmental perspective, the data demonstrate the traditional character of this adolescent sample of urban, mostly male, African American youth. Specifically,

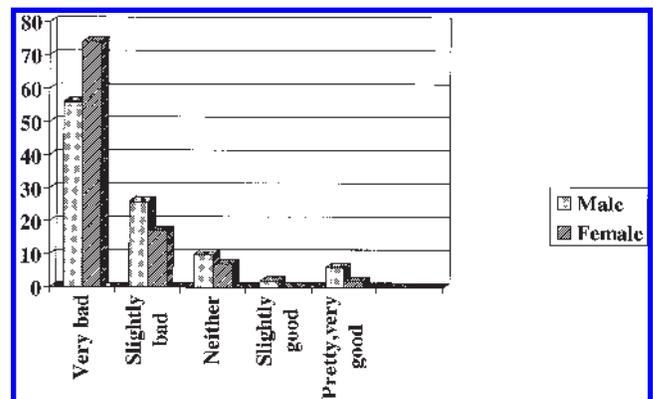


FIGURE 2 "I flunked a class." Evaluations of how bad or good was this event.

TABLE 2  
Percentage of High and Low Achievers Within  
Each Racial Identity Group

Racial Identity Group	Achievement	
	High (n = 208)	Low (n = 217)
Eurocentric (White salience)		
High	6.2%	61.7%
Other (low)	3.8%	38.2%
Transitional		
High	53%	43%
Other (low)	47%	57%
Reactive Afrocentric		
High	40%	52%
Other (low)	60%	48%
Proactive Afrocentric		
High	45%	40%
Other (low)	55%	60%

TABLE 3  
Overall Chi-Square Findings for Eurocentric (White Salience)  
Racial Attitudes by Self-Esteem

Self-Esteem Variable	Eurocentricity (White Salience) Racial Attitudes		$\chi^2$ p Value
	High	Other	
How smart I am ...			
Low	61.5%	38.5%	< .07
High	48.3%	51.7%	
How good at school			
Low	54.0%	46.0%	ns
High	49.0%	51.0%	
How valued by others			
Low	58.3%	41.7%	< .001
High	41.5%	58.5%	

they responded as expected to physical change associated with puberty and show well-documented gender patterns. Furthermore, the sample demonstrated a clear value for school and high academic performance, with students expressing disappointment over poor academic performance and other events, such as flunking a course or being suspended.

When achievement is defined by performance on standardized achievement tests, low scores were associated with high Eurocentric (White salience values) racial attitudes. This suggests the opposite relation from the one put forth in the acting White (e.g., see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) and caste-like minority (see Ogbu, 1985) literatures. In parallel fashion, data from Table 3 suggest that, for the self-esteem score that represents "a reflected self" (i.e., valued by others score), a higher self-esteem score is not associated with highly Eurocentric racial attitudes scores. In fact, more specific to the acting White assumption concerning achievement and racial attitudes and values, findings suggest that self-esteem is a significant and positive predictor of low Eurocentrism.

The findings also indicate a particularly patterned set of relations among youths' use and reference to cultural values,

minority status (i.e., specifically African Americans), and achievement behavior. In fact, the term *acting White* may not refer to a homogeneous phenomenon, because the reality of being White in itself is often subsumed by other contextual variables. For example, socioeconomic status has traditionally been a stronger identifier for White individuals. And, thus, for minority status individuals, cultural values in some situations may represent identification with a position of power. This is particularly salient for African American youth, as indicated in the data reported, who continue to maintain a positive sense of self (personal regard) irrespective of how the group is viewed "from the outside" (i.e., as inferred from nonreference group members).

This interpretation may come closer to the perspective that Whites have of themselves, because throughout every period of American history, being White represented a social, rather than physical, description that excluded certain people based on who could and could not do what was considered man's work (Ignatiev, 1995). Ethnicity represents another contextual variable with greater relevance to Whites' sense of identity than race (Coverdill, 1997); religion and other affiliations are also strong sources of identification for Whites (Katz & Ivey, 1977). Accordingly, given that White individuals as a whole do not appear to forge a collective sense of self based on skin color (Flagg, 1993; Grover, 1996; S. Steele, 1990), the notion of acting White among African American adolescents and its implications for school achievement and subsequent self-esteem are unavoidably, and not unexpectedly, complex. As usual, the media's use of the notion inevitably dilutes subsequent discussion of the relations, shortcomings of the assumption, and practical implications for teacher training, parental socialization efforts, and social policy—to name just a few. The oversimplified application unavoidably contributes to the stereotype threat as experienced by minorities and described by S. Steele (1990). At the same time, inferred assumptions by Whites about themselves also contribute to notions of superiority that may leave some White youths open to a special quality of vulnerability and life-course risk.

What exactly does it mean to act White, if acting White has so many potential variations based on multiple contextual realities? How is this phenomenon understood, either similarly or differently, by non-White adolescents, and what are the consequences for peer relations and classroom performance? In addition, what does the social psychology literature contribute in terms of acting White as it relates to in-group and out-group affiliations (see Abele & Petzold, 1996; Franco & Maass, 1996; Lindeman, 1997; Mackie & Ahn, 1998; Moy & Ng, 1996; Terry & Callan, 1998), given the general tendency to make stereotyped assumptions about out-groups (Harasty, 1997; Koomen & Dijker, 1997), as well as to view out-groups in a way that is more negative than one's own identified group (Harasty, 1997)? If the process is this complex for Whites as the in-group available as a behavioral model, the data presented suggest that the inference-making process, as experi-

enced by African American adolescents, is even more complex. It is evident from the findings that a lack of high Eurocentricity is associated with better achievement performance and particular components of self-esteem processes. These processes appear contextually and referentially linked and are more intricate than expected. Specifically, high-achieving African American adolescents are not only failing to identify with acting White values, but more than likely, have a better understanding of the irrelevance of the comparison for Blacks and in what seems to be the term's lack of meaning, even for Whites.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was prepared with funding provided by the National Institutes of Mental Health, National Science Foundation, Office of Educational Research Improvement (Field Initiated Studies), and the Ford and Kellogg Foundations. Funding of the empirical data presented in this article was provided to Margaret Beale Spencer from several sources: Spencer, W. T. Grant and Ford Foundations, and the Commonwealth Fund.

An earlier version of this article was made as an invited presentation in August 1999 to Division 15 of the American Psychological Association meetings convened in Boston, MA.

We are indebted to Linda Fitzgerald and several anonymous reviewers for their suggested revisions.

### REFERENCES

- Abele, A., & Petzold, P. (1996). Asymmetrical evaluation of in-group versus out-group members: A look from an information integration perspective. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 26*, 219–231.
- Bar-Tal, D., Graumann, C. F., Kruglanski, A. W., & Stroebe, W. (1989). *Stereotyping and prejudice: Changing conceptions*. New York: Amistad Press.
- Blyth, D. A. (1982). Mapping the social world of adolescents: Issues, techniques, and problems. In F. C. Serafica (Ed.), *Social cognitive development in context* (pp. 240–272). New York: Guilford.
- Bobo, L. (1983). Whites' opposition to busing: Symbolic racism or realistic group conflict? *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 45*, 1196–1210.
- Boykin, A. W. (1986). The triple quandary and the schooling of Afro-American children. In U. Neisser (Ed.), *The school achievement of minority children* (pp. 57–92). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Brookins, G. K. (1985). Black children's sex-role ideologies and occupational choices in families of employed mothers. In M. B. Spencer, G. K. Brookins, & W. R. Allen (Eds.), *Beginnings: The social and affective development of Black children* (pp. 257–272). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1996). Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation. *American Sociological Review, 62*, 465–480.
- Brooks-Gunn, J., & Reiter, E. O. (1990). The role of pubertal processes. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliot (Eds.), *At the threshold* (pp. 16–53). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chestang, L. W. (1972). *Character development in a hostile environment* (Occasional Paper No. 3, Series, pp. 1–12). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cloak, F. T. (1975). Is a cultural ethology possible? *Human Ecology, 3*, 161–182.
- Coddington, R. D. (1972). The significance of life events as etiologic factors in the diseases of children: II. A study of a normal population. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 16*, 205–213.
- Coverdill, J. E. (1997). White ethnic identification and racial attitudes. In S. A. Tuch & J. K. Martin (Eds.), *Racial attitudes in the 1990s* (pp. 144–164). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Cross, W. E., Jr. (1971). Negro to Black conversion experience. *Black World, 20*, 13–17.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silences dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*, 280–298.
- Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (1986). *Prejudice, discrimination and racism*. Orlando, FL: Academic.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett.
- Flagg, B. J. (1993). The transparency phenomenon, race-neutral decision-making, and discriminatory intent. In R. Delgado & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White studies: Looking behind the mirror* (pp. 220–226). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of acting White." *Urban Review, 18*, 176–206.
- Franco, F. M., & Maass, A. (1996). Implicit versus explicit strategies of out-group discrimination: The role of intentional control in biased language use and reward allocation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 15*, 335–359.
- Grover, B. K. (1996). Growing up White in America? In R. Delgado & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White studies: Looking behind the mirror* (pp. 34–35). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Harasty, A. S. (1997). The interpersonal nature of social stereotypes: Differential discussion patterns about in-groups and out-groups. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 23*, 270–284.
- Hare, B. R. (1977). Racial and socioeconomic variations in preadolescence area specific and general self esteem. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 1*(3), 31–51.
- Harpalani, V. (1999). *Research on racial stereotypes: Developmental consequences and considerations*. Unpublished manuscript, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Havighurst, R. J. (1953). *Human development and education*. New York: McKay.
- Hoberman, J. (1997). *Darwin's athletes: How sport has damaged Black America and preserved the myth of race*. New York: Mariner Books.
- Ignatiev, N. (1995). *How the Irish became White*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Jarrett, R. L. (1995). Growing up poor: The family experiences of socially mobile youth in low-income African American neighborhoods. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 10*(1), 111–135.
- Johnson, D. J. (1988). Racial socialization strategies of parents in three Black private schools. In D. T. Slaughter & D. J. Johnson (Eds.), *Visible now: Black in private schools* (pp. 251–267). New York: Greenwood.
- Kardiner, A., & Ovesey, L. (1951). *The mark of oppression: Explorations in the personality of the American Negro*. Cleveland, OH: World.
- Katz, J. H., & Ivey, A. (1977). White awareness: The frontier of racism awareness training. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 55*, 485–489.
- Koomen, W., & Dijker, A. J. (1997). In-group and out-group stereotypes and selective processing. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 27*, 589–601.
- Lesser, G., & Stodolsky, S. (1970). Equal opportunity for maximum development. In J. S. Coleman (Ed.), *Equal educational opportunity: Harvard educational review* (pp. 126–138). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lindeman, M. (1997). In-group bias, self-enhancement and group identification. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 27*, 337–355.
- Mackie, D. M., & Ahn, M. N. (1998). In-group and out-group inferences: When in-group bias overwhelms outcome bias. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 28*, 343–360.
- Massimini, F., & Fave, A. D. (2000). Individual development in a bio-cultural perspective. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 24–33.
- McDermott, P. A., & Spencer, M. B. (1996). *Measurement properties of revised racial identity scale* (Interim Research Rep. No. 21). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Center for Health, Achievement, Neighborhood, Growth, and Ethnic Studies.

- Moy, J., & Ng, S. H. (1996). Expectation of out-group behaviour: Can you trust the out-group? *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *26*, 333–340.
- Odom, M. (1998, March 17). Judge decries growing gap between races. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. E-1.
- Ogbu, J. (1985). A cultural ecology of competence among inner-city blacks. In M. B. Spencer, G. K. Brookins, & W. R. Allen (Eds.), *Beginnings: Social and affective development* (pp. 45–66). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Parham, T. A., & Helms, J. E. (1985). Attitudes of racial identity and self-esteem of Black students: An exploratory investigation. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, *26*(2), 143–147.
- Spencer, M. B. (1983). Children's cultural values and parental child rearing strategies. *Developmental Review*, *4*, 351–370.
- Spencer, M. B. (1990). Parental values transmission. In J. B. Stewart & H. Cheatham (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary perspectives on Black families* (pp. 111–130). New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions.
- Spencer, M. B. (1995). Old issues and new theorizing about African American youth: A phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory. In R. L. Taylor (Ed.), *Black youth: Perspectives on their status in the United States* (pp. 37–69). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Spencer, M. B. (1999a). Social and cultural influences on school adjustment: The application of an identity-focused cultural ecological perspective. *Educational Psychologist*, *34*, 43–57.
- Spencer, M. B. (1999b). Transitions and continuities in cultural values: Kenneth Clark revisited. In R. C. Jones (Ed.), *African American children, youth and parenting* (pp. 183–208). Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry.
- Spencer, M. B. (2000). Identity, achievement, orientation and race: "Lessons learned" about the normative developmental experiences of African American males. In B. Watkins (Ed.), *Race and education: The roles of history and society in educating African American students* (100–127). New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Spencer, M. B., Cunningham, M., & Swanson, D. P. (1995). Identity as coping: Adolescent African-American males' adaptive responses to high-risk environments. In H. W. Harris, H. C. Blue, & E. H. Griffith (Eds.), *Racial and ethnic identity: Psychological development and creative expression* (pp. 31–52). New York: Routledge.
- Spencer, M. B., & Dornbusch, S. (1990). Challenges in studying minority youth. In S. Feldman & G. Elliot (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 123–146). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Spencer, M. B., Harpalani, V., & Dell'Angelo, T. (in press). Structural racism and community health: A theory-driven model for intervention. In W. Allen, C. O'Conner, & M. B. Spencer (Eds.), *New perspectives on African American education: Race, achievement, and social inequality*. Los Angeles: JAI.
- Spencer, M. B., & Markstrom-Adams, C. (1990). Identity processes among racial and ethnic minority children in America. *Child Development*, *61*, 290–310.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air. *American Psychologist*, *6*, 613–629.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 797–811.
- Steele, S. (1990). *The content of our character: A new vision of race in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Swanson, D. P., Spencer M. B., & Petersen, A. (1998). Identity formation in adolescence. In K. Borman & B. Schneider (Eds.), *The adolescent years: Social influences and educational challenges* (Ninety-seventh Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education—Part 1, pp. 18–41). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Terry, D. J., & Callan, V. J. (1998). In-group bias in response to an organizational merger. *Group Dynamics*, *2*, 67–81.
- Tienda, M. (1991). Poor people and poor places: Deciphering neighborhood effects on poverty outcomes. In J. Huber (Ed.), *Macro/micro linkages in sociology* (pp. 244–262). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tomasello, M., Kruger, A. C., & Ratner, H. H. (1993). Cultural learning. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *16*, 495–552.
- Williams, B. (1996). The nature of the achievement gap: The call for a vision to guide change. In B. Williams (Ed.), *Closing the achievement gap* (pp. 1–9). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Williams, B. (1999, November). Paper presented at the meeting of the Center for Health, Achievement, Neighborhood, Growth, and Ethnic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Williams, B. (2000, August). *Building on the strengths of diversity in scaling up urban school reform*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.