

Testimony before U.S. Civil Rights Commission

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Stuart Buck

I'm Stuart Buck, a Distinguished Doctoral Fellow at the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, and an honors graduate of Harvard Law School. I wrote the book "Acting White," published by Yale University Press last year. I'm going to talk about the "acting white" criticism as a form of intra-racial bullying.

What is "acting white"? "Acting white" is when a black student accuses a fellow classmate of "acting white" or "trying to be white" because of the classmate's behavior. That behavior could be studying hard or showing too much interest in classwork, but can also include things such as how someone dresses, how they talk, what music they listen to, and the like.

Here's a recent example from Norfolk VA: Ixavion Wright graduated first in his class at Lake Taylor High School. He told a local newspaper that he "thinks the 'acting white' pressure influenced other students": "They feel they're supposed to be cool, and cool is not supposed to be making good grades in school. As I've gone through my whole school career, people have called me white because I've made good grades and didn't conform to the stereotype."

Here's another example from Mesa, AZ: "All of my life, I've been accused of acting white," Alexandra Gray told a local newspaper. "Just because you are articulate or take (Advanced Placement) classes, kids want to say that. But I'm only being me. I'm only being myself." Many students echoed her ideas, saying that taking ballet classes or playing the violin brought accusations that they weren't "acting black enough."

In Florida, Clarence Stephen, the 2004 valedictorian at Seminole High School, heard his black classmates say that he was a "white boy in a black man's body."¹

These are just anecdotes, of course. What about more systematic evidence? There are over a dozen scholarly studies from 1970 to the present day demonstrating that the "acting white" criticism affects a substantial

¹ Leslie Postal and Dave Weber, "Achievement Gap Vexes Schools; Black Students – and Hispanics – Lag Behind White Classmates," Orlando Sentinel, 16 May 2004.

number of black schoolchildren, although, to be sure, it is impossible to find “the” exact rate at which “acting white” occurs – the rate surely differs widely depending on the time and place, and many such incidents are never reported in any event.

A recent study surveyed 166 gifted black students in Ohio, and found that 66% reported that they knew someone who was ridiculed for doing well in school, that most students thought of “acting white” as being smart, and that most students thought of “acting black” as being dumb and pretending not to care about school.²

Ronald Ferguson of Harvard did a survey of 20 high schools in eight states. He found that in integrated schools, almost half of the A-students reported that they were “sometimes” or “always” accused of acting white.³

In a 1996 book, psychology professor Laurence Steinberg reported on the results of a multi-year study that surveyed some 20,000 high school students as well as hundreds of parents and teachers. In his words, “we heard variations on the ‘acting White’ theme many, many times over the course of our interviews with high school students.” As a result, many black students “are forced to choose between doing well in school and having friends.”⁴

Sociologist Karolyn Tyson found, based on four ethnographic studies conducted over nine years, that “some black students are indeed accused of ‘acting white’ by their peers.”⁵ Tyson points out that students who “attended all-black schools or schools that had more racially balanced classrooms” “rarely recalled ever being accused of acting white.”⁶ (Racially balanced classrooms avoid the scenario in racially balanced *schools* wherein white students tend to be in the same advanced classes.)

² Donna Y. Ford, Tarek C. Grantham, and Gilman W. Whiting, “Another Look at the Achievement Gap,” Urban Education 43 no. 2 (2008): 216-239.

³ Ronald F. Ferguson,, “New Evidence on Why Black High Schoolers Get Accused of ‘Acting White’,” at p. 2, available at <http://agi.harvard.edu/events/download.php?id=104>.

⁴ Laurence Steinberg, Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need To Do (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

⁵ Karolyn Tyson, “The Making of a ‘Burden’: Tracing the Development of a ‘Burden of Acting White’ in Schools,” in Beyond Acting White: Reframing the Debate on Black Student Achievement, Erin McNamara Horvat and Carla O’Connor, eds., (Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 2006), p. 57.

⁶ Id. at 61, 73.

The most recent evidence comes from Roland Fryer, an African-American economist at Harvard. He found in a large and nationally representative survey that while white students' popularity grew along with their GPA, black students with a 3.5 GPA or higher suffered a huge hit to their popularity. In his words, "A black student with a 4.0 has, on average, 1.5 fewer friends of the same ethnicity than a white student with the same GPA." To be sure, Fryer's study is about popularity in general, not just about specific bullying incidents, but it sheds light on the unfortunate fact that academic success can be penalized by one's peers.

Interestingly, the "acting white" criticism seems to have a stronger effect on boys, which potentially could help explain why black boys graduate from high school at a lower rate than black girls.⁷ Specifically, Roland Fryer found that the cost of academic success is higher for black males than for black females: "Popularity begins to decrease at lower GPAs for young black men than young black women (3.25 GPA compared with a 3.5), and the rate at which males lose friends after this point is far greater. As a result, black male high achievers have notably fewer friends than do female ones."⁸

I should emphasize that there are many students from all races who criticize nerds and geeks, or who are antagonistic towards the world of school.⁹ Close to 50 years ago, the eminent sociologist James Coleman's The

⁷ See Jay P. Greene & Marcus A. Winters, "The Boys Left Behind: The Gender Graduation Gap," *National Review* (April 19, 2006) ("Notably, while females of all racial groups graduate at higher rates than their male counterparts, the size of this gap differs substantially by race. The difference in graduation rates between females and males was about five-percentage points for white students and only 3 percentage points for Asian students. Among Hispanic and black female students the graduation rates are 58 percent and 59 percent, respectively, compared to 49 percent for Hispanic males and 48 percent for black males. Thus, the gender gap is twice as large for minority students as for white students.").

⁸ Fryer, at p. 56.

⁹ For a bit of the research on this, see Paul Willis, Learning to Labor: Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Penelope Eckert, Jocks & Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in the High School (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989); Jay MacLeod, Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987); Rochelle Manor-Bullock, Christine Look, and David N. Dixon, "Is Giftedness Socially Stigmatizing? The Impact of High Achievement on Social Interactions," Journal of Education of the Gifted 18 no. 3 (1995): 319-338; John H. Bishop et al., "Why We Harass Nerds and Freaks: A Formal Theory of Student Culture and Norms," Journal of School Health 74 no. 7 (2004): 235-251; Tiffani Chin and Meredith Phillips, "The Ubiquity of Oppositional Culture," available at

Adolescent Society looked at several white high schools in Illinois. Even back then, boys were prized for their cars or athletic ability, while girls were valued mainly for their “physical beauty, nice clothes, and an enticing manner.”¹⁰ Coleman observes that the “adolescent subcultures in these schools exert a rather strong deterrent to academic achievement.”¹¹ More recently, Laurence Steinberg found in his study of some 20,000 students that “adolescent peer culture in contemporary America demeans academic success and scorns students who try to do well in school.”¹²

Still, the “acting white” accusation may be more devastating than the “nerd” or “geek” labels. As one black scholar pointed out, a student who is accused of acting white is “essentially being told they do not belong in the black race,” and acting white “is the most negative accusation that can be hurled at black adolescents.”¹³

As far as I know, there has been one federal lawsuit alleging in part that the “acting white” criticism was so pervasive that it created a hostile racial environment in violation of 42 U.S.C. § 2000(d). The lawsuit was settled out of court (the case is *Gasque, et al. v. Williamsburg County School District et al.*, Civil Action No. 4:07-CV-01757-RBH, U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina). As reported in *South Carolina Lawyers Weekly*, the plaintiffs’ lawyer said, “You have a culture where to act like you want to do well in school is considered acting white. And that is part of why we're saying that it was racial, even though the students were all of the same race because they

http://www.iga.ucdavis.edu/conf/hic/papers/Meredith_Phillips.pdf (May 2005) (cited with permission); David A. Kinney, “From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School,” *Sociology of Education* 66 no. 1 (1993): 21-40.

¹⁰ James S. Coleman, *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education* (New York: Free Press, 1961), pp. 50-51.

¹¹ Id. at 265.

¹² Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need To Do* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 19. Indeed, a form of “acting white” is sometimes present in the Hispanic community as well. See Elaine Jarvik, “Coloring with ‘Brown,’” *Deseret Morning News*, 16 May 2004.

¹³ Angela M. Neal-Barnett, “Being Black: New Thoughts on the Old Phenomenon of Acting White,” in *Forging Links: African American Children, Clinical Developmental Perspectives*, Angela M. Neal-Barnett, Josefina M. Contreras, & Kathryn A. Kerns, eds. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), pp. 75, 79-81, 87.

weren't acting how the others thought they should be acting as members of that race.”

Should the law be involved here? However you answer that question, I think the answer should be the same as your answer to the question of sexual orientation discrimination.

The statutory prohibitions as to sex discrimination (42 U.S.C. § 1681) and race (42 U.S.C. § 2000d) are exactly parallel to each other. You may think that sex discrimination should include discrimination against a male (or female) not merely for being male per se but for being male *along with* exhibiting certain behaviors or preferences. If that's your interpretation of "sex" discrimination under 42 U.S.C. § 1681, then you should also believe that "race" discrimination under 42 U.S.C. § 2000d includes instances where a black student harasses another black student not merely for being black, but for being black *along with* exhibiting certain behaviors and preferences.

That's all I have. Thank you for inviting me.