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The Performativity of Race

Humphrey Nartey

Discussions of race are often centered around Black and White issues, with both races expected to act or “perform” in certain ways (Ibrahim, 2014). These performance-like behaviours are especially noticeable when analyzing the acting White hypothesis. According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), the acting White hypothesis attributes Black students’ academic struggles to a disconnect between their academic effort and success. This stems from White Americans’ refusal to acknowledge Black Americans’ intellect, causing Black Americans to doubt themselves and their intellectual ability. Subsequently, Black Americans began to define academic success as a White person’s privilege, including discouraging their Black peers, whether consciously or unconsciously, from emulating the academic pursuits of White people (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Hence, generations of Black children are taught that being Black in America means they “have to be twice as good to get half as far” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177). This type of cultural orientation that expects Blacks to be twice as good to get half as far, defines academic learning as “acting White”, and academic success as a privilege associated with White Americans (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Therefore, Black students who excel academically are categorized as “sell-outs”, because they seemingly disengage from their Black culture and assimilate into the dominant White culture in order to achieve success (Fordham, 1991). Striving for academic

success while attempting to maintain an authentic Black identity creates the “burden of acting White”, which is responsible for the devaluation of education and low achievement in school among Black Americans. This “paradox of underachievement” prevents Black American students from reaching their full academic potential, even though many of them hold positive views about school success and achievement (Ford, 1993). Those with positive views about school are thus willing to sacrifice their ethnic identity since Blackness does not seem to be valued academically by the dominant White culture (Bergin & Cooks, 2002). Others suppress their academic abilities out of fear of being accused of “selling out”, culminating in the failure to reach their potential, even though they are intellectually capable (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This internal conflict arises because the acting White hypothesis presupposes that based on race, Blacks are to behave in stereotypical ways, and any attempts to distinguish oneself from the stereotypical Black culture leads to doubts about one’s Blackness, and by default, accusations of acting White (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Ferguson, 2001).

The appropriateness of Blackness.

Acting White or acting Black and how this is manifested in sports and education in Canada was a widely discussed topic among the participants in this study. Participants were not explicitly asked about the acting White hypothesis, but rather what role, if any, had Blackness played in their student-athlete experience. The combination of similar life experiences and what it means to be Black in Canada exemplified forms of collective racialization among these Black Canadian student-athletes, despite circumstances

pertaining to their individualized experiences that created nuanced approaches to the acting White hypothesis.

One of the topics discussed by the participants in my study was engaging in behaviours that they deemed to be appropriate for Black males as a way of maintaining their Blackness. Sefa Dei and James (1998) found that many Black students used Blackness as a strategy to challenge the dominant conceptions of identity. One of my participants, Jamal, asserted that success came in a variety of fashions, and therefore no one, particularly Whites, would cause him to hold back his Blackness or dictate to him what was acceptable behaviour, whether one is White or Black. Unlike Jamal who was upfront about his Blackness, Fred was more strategic regarding the appropriateness of his Blackness. In order to ensure that his Blackness was not questioned because he did not present the stereotypical image of a Black male, Fred engaged in behaviours that seemingly enhanced his racial identity by making him appear “Blacker”. He pretended to support rap music as a means of pacifying his teammates and limiting accusations of “acting White” or “sell-out” from his peers. However, neither he, nor any of the other participants in this study curbed their academic abilities out of fear of being categorized as “acting White”. Nor did they sacrifice their racial identity to excel academically.

The value of education for immigrants.

The assumption that Blacks do not belong to Canada is rooted in their apparent failure to assimilate (James, 2012; Walcott, 2001), leading to questions of, “No, where are you *really* from?” According to Boatwain and Lalonde (2000), this form of exclusion creates pressure to assimilate, pushing Black Canadians to identify more with the Black

American culture. Sealy (2000) echoed this sentiment, arguing in Rinaldo Walcott's edited book, *Rude*, that it is difficult for Blacks to identify with Canada because Canada is not seen as a nation where Blacks are prominent. This apparently makes it impossible to be both Black and Canadian, since Canada has garnered an image of being a place without Black people, or more accurately, a place where Black people are always deemed to be from elsewhere (Walcott, 2000).

Although not limited to Blacks or Canada, this outsider mentality is largely responsible for the strong belief in the benefits of education that is more often seen among recent immigrant families. Frank, who was a child of Congolese parents and a 2nd-generation immigrant, challenged not only the North American expectation that he was to excel in athletics at the expense of academics, but also the immigrant expectation that he was to excel academically at the expense of athletics. His pursuit of athletics while maintaining above average grades as demanded by his parents, challenged both stereotypes and showed that athletic *and* academic success was an attainable goal for Black Canadian male student-athletes.

Due to the familiarity with the Black American culture, the boundary between Canada and the USA is blurred, leading many Black Canadian youth to think they are a part of the Black American culture. Evidence of this is seen with Francophone African-Canadian youths who formulate their Black identities based on others who are "like them", and with whom they share similarities of race, culture, and lifestyle (Ibrahim, 1999). Ibrahim (1999) argued that Blackness is a learned trait that these immigrant youths need to adopt because they are not considered Black in their homelands. Learning to become Black in Canada involves an acquisition of Black popular culture from the

USA, such as rap and hip-hop, that is used for Black identification in Canada. The apprehension of these Francophone African-Canadians assimilating into White Canadian culture supports James's (2012) and Codjoe's (2006) assessment that Black immigrants are less likely to assimilate when they feel like outsiders. Moreover, their display of primary cultural differences not only keeps them from integrating into the host Canadian culture but emphasizes a collective identity among North American Blacks that is used to distinguish them from the White racial majority group (Phinney, 1990; Ogbu, 2004).

Concluding thoughts on the performativity of race.

As mostly voluntary Canadian migrants, the participants in this study were aware of the expectation that they were to "perform" their race and "become Black" by engaging in behaviours that accentuated their Blackness. Some of them resisted appropriating White culture, pushing a form of hyper-Blackness used to authenticate themselves and gain acceptance or confirmation that they were just as Black as their Black peers. Others "embraced" the acting White hypothesis by continuing to engage in behaviours conducive for academic success, despite the increased accusations that they were selling out their own race (Sefa Dei & James, 1998).

The academic success exhibited by many of the participants challenged the paradox of underachievement and dismantled the stereotype of Black academic inferiority. In the Canadian university system that emphasizes education, the expectation is that all students, regardless of race or athlete status, are to succeed academically. This is particularly true for student-athletes, who have greater academic requirements placed on them.

Whereas non-student-athletes can opt for part-time status, student-athletes must maintain full-time status as a prerequisite of their athletic eligibility (Athlete's Guide, 2015), along with meeting the requirements of their program. Furthermore, the structure of the Canadian university sport system offers a greater educational and athletic balance, allowing Black Canadian male student-athletes to demonstrate resiliency and challenge the conception that they are marginalized and racialized as the other (James, 2012; Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997). This is in stark contrast to the American collegiate sport system that does not offer this balance, and as a result sees Black American youth overrepresented in sports and underrepresented in careers obtained through education (Lee, 1985). Thus, although the academic requirements of these student-athletes likely led to an increase in allegations of acting White, their academic success did not necessarily reproduce the acting White hypothesis but instead challenged it, illustrating that these student-athletes were not influenced by the acting White hypothesis.