

You may be wondering ...

How do I respond if students make jokes about “acting White”?

During Session 2 of the Identity Project, students learn more about the harm in stereotyping. As students discuss stereotypes, they may joke around that certain students in their class “act White.” It is important to understand this statement and its harmful effects. Here are a few tips and tricks about addressing this potential student reaction.

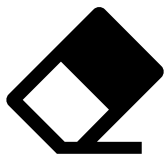
“Acting White”

One joke you might hear is that students accuse each other of “acting White.” They may call another student an “Oreo,” “banana,” or “coconut,” all of which are to suggest that a Black, Asian, or Latinx person (respectively) is really “White” on the inside. This joke might be made about a student of color with a White parent, such as a student who is multiracial or transracially adopted. It may also be made about a monoracial student of color who is seen as an “exception” to a stereotype about their group and is therefore deemed to be “acting White.”



Erasure of Identity Through Jokes

These jokes can be harmful because they erase or invalidate the student’s identity as a person of color. Centrality, or how central an identity is to one’s self-concept, is a critical part of ethnic-racial identity development. Some research suggests that young people whose ethnic-racial identity is a strong part of their self-concept report experiencing fewer symptoms of depression than their counterparts, whose ethnic-racial identities are not as central to how they define themselves¹. Invalidating one’s identity as a person of color can interfere with the healthy development of ethnic-racial identity centrality. The process of erasing one’s identity can also be a tool for reinforcing the status quo in ways that exclude others from the conversation. Erasure can be a hindrance to creating and maintaining a welcoming and inclusive classroom community.



Stereotyping Through Jokes

Jokes about “acting White” may also suggest certain behaviors are inherent to members of a certain racial group, therefore bolstering stereotypes rather than dismantling them. What does it even mean to “act White”? Why are some behaviors tied to a certain racial group? Using phrases like “acting White” suggests that there is such a thing as “White behavior”, which runs counter to Session 2’s lessons about the harm in stereotyping certain groups of people.

Students may not realize the harmful effects of the phrase “acting White.” Ask students to work in pairs to think about *why* this phrase is harmful. What connections can students make between the phrase and Session 2 of the Identity Project? What beliefs do students hold about “White” behavior? How are those beliefs reinforced when claiming someone is “acting White”? How can students challenge these beliefs?

First, have students think about these questions on their own (i.e., think). Next, ask students to share their thoughts in pairs (i.e. pair); finally, lead a large group discussion in which students share the ideas and discussion that emerged in their pairs with the whole class (i.e., share).



Key Takeaway:

All racial jokes are harmful, including statements that someone is “acting White.” Claiming that someone is “acting White” suggests that certain behaviors are inherent to White people. This type of statement makes inaccurate assumptions about an entire group of people. When this statement is leveraged towards people of color, it erases their identity.

References and Articles for Further Reading:

1. Yip, T., Seaton, E., & Sellers, R. M. (2006). African American racial identity across the lifespan: Identity status, identity content, and depressive symptoms. *Child Development*, 77(5), 1504–1517.
2. Ong, S. (2016, April). I am not white on the inside, yellow on the outside. I’m what you call an Asian American. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@sherina.ong/i-am-not-white-on-the-inside-yellow-on-the-outside-i-m-what-you-call-an-asian-american-f8e59b178f81>.
3. Capehart, J. (2014, July). Obama goes there on ‘acting white’. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2014/07/22/obama-goes-there-on-acting-white/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2e90490473b9
4. Sehgal, P. (2016, February). Fighting ‘Erasure’. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/magazine/the-painful-consequences-of-erasure.html>

Please note that this is proprietary material and cannot be modified or sold without express written permission of Dr. Adriana Umaña-Taylor. For more information, please visit: <https://umana-taylorlab.gse.harvard.edu/>.

How to cite: Umaña-Taylor, A. J. & AERID lab (2020). *You May Be Wondering...How do I respond if students make jokes about “acting White”?*. [Fact Sheet]. <https://umana-taylorlab.gse.harvard.edu/>