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# **Racial Identity Attitudes, School Achievement, and Academic Self-Efficacy Among African American High School Students**

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*Literature has postulated that African American students often choose not to succeed in school because achievement is seen as acting White. This study examined the extent to which racial identity, self-esteem, and academic self-concept were related to academic achievement for 86 African American high school students. The majority of students indicated support from both peers and parents for their academic work. Multiple regression analysis indicated that grade point average is best predicted by immersion racial identity attitudes and academic self-concept. Limitations of the present study, implications, and suggestions for future research are presented.*

African American students “generally earn lower grades, drop out more often, and attain less education than do Whites” (Mickelson, 1990, p. 44). Although there is considerable agreement that ethnic and racial differences in school performance exist, there is little consensus about the causes of these differences (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1991). Both biological and environmental causes are among the explanations for the consistent and

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disturbing finding that the academic performance of many African American students falls behind that of other groups.

Steinberg et al. (1991) examined the roles of parenting, familial values, and beliefs about rewards of success with approximately 15,000 high school students. A significant finding related to the African American students was that the absence of peer support seemed to undermine the positive influences of authoritative parenting on their school performance. Steinberg et al. reported that African American students face a unique situation because although their parents were supportive of academic success, it was much more difficult to join a peer group that encouraged academic excellence.

The recognition that the peer group greatly influences African American students is not itself surprising. After all, developmental theory has consistently talked about the importance of friends and peer acceptance during adolescent years. For African American adolescents, racial identity may be intricately linked with the struggle for peer acceptance. Students from various racial or ethnic backgrounds may experience negative labeling for high academic achievement (e.g., brain, nerd, bookworm). Unique to the struggle for peer acceptance by African American adolescents is the fear that peers will accuse them of not “being Black.” African American students who get good grades are often accused of trying to “act White” because performing well in school has been deemed as a White behavior by some. Many talented Black students find that one of the most surprising sources of obstacles to academic achievement is their peer group (Gregory, 1992).

Fordham (1988) conducted a qualitative investigation to explore the process by which African American students achieve academic success. Fordham suggested that for African American students to succeed in school, they consciously or unconsciously dissociate themselves from the African American community—its values, beliefs, and customs—and embrace the culture of the school. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described this phenomenon as “the burden of acting White.” They proposed that this burden arose partly because White Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge the intellectual capabilities of African Americans and partly because African Americans began to doubt their own abilities, thereby defining success as the domain of Whites. According to Fordham and Ogbu, students who minimize their connection to their indigenous culture and assimilate into the school culture improve their chances of succeeding in school. Fordham called this deliberate coping strategy cultivating a raceless persona.

The conclusions reached by Fordham (1988) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that an adolescent cannot identify with the African American community and be a successful student. Fordham’s notion of racelessness as a coping strategy, although perhaps true for some students, may be only one

side of the story. In contrast, Ward (1990) proposed another alternative for high achieving African American high school students. In interviews of approximately 20 students, Ward found that racial identity, personal commitment, and academic achievement successfully converged during the high school years. The students that Ward interviewed reported feeling good about their race and personally strengthened by their racial status. Ward concluded that the African American adolescent must reject White society's negative evaluation of Blackness and construct an identity that includes one's Blackness as positively valued and desired.

These two studies, Fordham (1988) and Ward (1990), have yielded conflicting results regarding the relationship of reference group identity and high school achievement. Although both of these studies addressed the impact of the students' race, neither of these studies used a popular prevailing theory of Black identity development (i.e., Cross, 1971), nor did these investigations operationalize racial identity attitudes with the Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS; Parham & Helms, 1981). Fordham (1988) and Ward (1990) provided qualitative data from a small number of research participants and the transferability of these results to other adolescents has yet to be determined. Variables such as self-esteem and self-concept were not measured. Nevertheless, the researchers postulated that a relationship existed among school achievement, self-esteem, and racial identity.

Few studies have examined the relationship between racial identity (e.g., the attitudes one holds about his or her Blackness) and high school achievement. Cross (1971) postulated a four-stage model of racial identity development. Cross's first stage, Preencounter, is characterized by one's racial attitudes being primarily pro-White or anti-Black. The individual devalues his or her ascribed race and racial group in favor of Euro-American culture. The second stage, Encounter, begins when the individual has an experience that challenges his or her prior view of Blackness. The third stage, Immersion/Emersion, represents a turning point in the conversion from an old to a new frame of reference. This stage involves learning and experiencing the meaning and value of one's race and culture. This stage is characterized by the tendency to be pro-Black and anti-White. The fourth stage, Internalization, is the stage in which the individual achieves pride and security in his or her race and identity. This stage is also illustrated by psychological openness, ideological flexibility, and general decline of anti-White feelings, though Black reference groups remain primary.

In a review of ethnic identity research with adolescents, Phinney (1990) concluded that empirical investigations have yielded conflicting results regarding the relationships of self-concept measures and identity. Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) have suggested that to better understand the

complex process of identity formation, investigations should examine both racial or ethnic identity and self-esteem. For this study, self-esteem and academic self-concept (or one's sense of personal efficacy about academic activities) will be measured.

The purpose of the present investigation was to explore the psychosociocultural variables related to African American students' school performance. More specifically, a main objective was to examine the extent to which racial identity, self-esteem, and academic self-concept could predict academic success for African American high school students. An additional objective of this investigation was to look at the interplay of family and peer support on school performance. Given the history of inferior academic achievement of African American students and the important role of education for advancement in today's society, rigorous research is warranted to examine the relationship between academic success and racial identity. Based on the literature related to African American school performance, the following research questions were examined: (a) What is the relationship between the various racial identity attitudes, self-esteem, academic self-concept, and grade point average (GPA)? (b) What are the students' perceptions of family support and peer support? and (c) What is the best predictor model of GPA?

## METHODOLOGY

The participants were 86 African American high school students in Upward Bound programs at two medium-size universities in the Midwest. Project Upward Bound is a national precollegiate program funded by the United States Department of Education that has a curriculum designed to encourage the development of skills, motivation, and sophistication needed for success in education (K. Ingram, personal communication, January 25, 1993). Students chosen for Upward Bound must submit a high school transcript showing classes and grades with a 2.0 GPA or higher and be a member of a low income family and/or will be a first-generation college student on graduation from high school.

Although all Upward Bound students from the two programs were invited to participate in the study, only respondents who identified themselves as Black or African American were used in this study. Thirty-nine of the participants were from one Upward Bound program (59%) and 47 of the participants were from the other Upward Bound program (41%). Thirty-five percent of the participants were male ( $n = 30$ ) and 65% ( $n = 56$ ) were female. Students were divided among class levels as follows: 25 were freshman

(29.4%), 17 were sophomores (20%), 29 were juniors (34.1%), and 14 were seniors (16.5%). The students' ages ranged from 12 to 18 years, with average age of 15.4 years ( $SD = 1.22$ ). Parental consent was obtained for all of the research participants. No financial or credit incentives were given for participation. Both Upward Bound project administrators supplied final cumulative GPAs of participants, which were used as a measure of school performance.

## INSTRUMENTS

*Student questionnaire.* A brief questionnaire was presented to respondents asking their age, gender, ethnicity, race, and class rank. In addition, respondents answered five open-ended questions that were used to specifically assess the perceived conflict between being popular with the Black peer group or being smart. These questions were adapted from an inventory used by Kunjufu (1988). Only the two questions pertaining to peer and family support were analyzed in this study: "Does your family encourage your academic activities?" and "Do most of your friends encourage your academic activities?"

*Personal Orientation Inventory/Self-Regard subscale.* The Personal Orientation Inventory (POI; Shostrom, 1963) is a measure to assess self-actualization. The Self-Regard subscale is a 16-item scale that measures the degree of positive feelings an individual has due to sense of worth, strength, or self-esteem. The inventory consists of pairs of numbered statements from which participants choose the item that most consistently applies to them. Each question is assigned a point value (0 or 1), with possible total scores ranging from 0 to 16. The higher the score, the stronger the self-esteem. The test-retest reliability for the Self-Regard subscale has been found to be .71 (Parham & Helms, 1985). Parham and Helms (1985) found that positive scores on the Self-Regard subscale were negatively correlated with pre-encounter and immersion-emersion attitudes and that encounter attitudes (as measured by RIAS) were positively correlated with high scores of the Self-Regard subscale.

*Academic Self-Concept scale.* The Academic Self-Concept scale (ASCS) was developed by Reynolds, Ramirez, Magrina, and Allen (1980) to assess how positively one feels about his or her academic ability. Where the word *college* appeared in the scale, it was substituted for the word *school* to make the inventory relevant to this high school sample. The ASCS consists of 40 statements with a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*

to 4 = *strongly agree*, with no neutral point. Scores can range from 40 to 160; the higher the score, the stronger the level of academic self-concept. Reynolds et al. reported an internal consistency of .91. The ASCS has been found to correlate with GPA ( $r = .40-.52$ ), SAT scores ( $r = .12-.22$ ), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale ( $r = .45$ ; Reynolds et al., 1980).

*RIAS-short form B.* The RIAS (Parham & Helms, 1981) is a 30-item scale that measures attitudes associated with the Cross (1971) model of Black identity development, psychological nigrescence. This scale was developed from Hall, Cross, and Freedle's (1972) Q-sort procedure that asked subjects to sort cards that reflected attitudes at the various stages of racial identity.

Each RIAS item consists of statements to which participants respond how much that statement describes him or her using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). There are four subscales that correspond to the four stages of Black identity development (Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, and Internalization). A mean scale score is computed for each stage by summing the responses to the item keyed in a particular subscale and dividing by the number of items in each subscale.

Internal consistency reliabilities for the subscales have been found to be the following for each subscale: Preencounter = .67, Encounter = .72, Immersion/Emersion = .66, Internalization = .71 (Parham & Helms, 1981). Ponterotto and Wise (1987), using oblique factor analytic methods and examining alternative factor solutions, found strong support for three of the four constructs described in the Cross (1971) model. They found little statistical support for the Encounter stage as measured by the RIAS. Furthermore, some of the subscale intercorrelations were high enough to question the independence of the scale constructs. Despite these potential difficulties, there has been consistent evidence for the construct validity of the scale.

## PROCEDURE

Upward Bound students from the first university were introduced to the research study at a parent's orientation day. Parents were able to turn in consent forms to the investigators that day. Subsequently, parents who were not at the orientation were mailed consent forms with return envelopes. Students were administered surveys as a group at one of their weekly meetings. Students were given up to 45 minutes to answer items as thoroughly as possible. Follow-up phone calls were made to the parents of students who needed to complete parent or guardian consent forms. The Upward Bound students from the second university were given individual

packets by program administrators that contained surveys and parent or guardian consent forms. The only directions given were to complete surveys as thoroughly as possible and to return the completed packet along with the consent form to the Upward Bound office.

## RESULTS

### DESCRIPTIVE DATA

A series of ANOVAs were conducted to assess for possible Upward Bound program location, gender, and class rank differences on all predictor and criterion variables. These preliminary analyses were conducted as a justification for collapsing the different sample subgroups. Adjusting our stated probability level of .05 with the Bonferroni test, no significant mean differences were found for location and class rank. There were significant differences found by gender. Gender was found to be significantly related to GPA and Immersion scores. Planned comparisons using Tukey's HSD indicated that women possessed higher mean GPAs than men (2.72 vs. 2.12;  $F = 5.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Men had higher mean Immersion scores than women (3.25 vs. 2.86;  $F = 9.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Table 1 summarizes the means, standard deviations, and score ranges for each of the variables of interest.

Reliability coefficients were calculated for the RIAS subscales and the ASCS inventory. The internal consistency measures for Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion, and Internalization were .53, .42, .64, and .44, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha calculated for ASCS was .90.

A correlation matrix for all of the research variables is presented in Table 2. Among the RIAS subscales, Preencounter attitudes had a significant negative correlation with Internalization attitudes. Encounter attitudes had high significant correlation with both Immersion and Internalization attitudes. Immersion attitudes were found to have a significant positive relationship with Internalization attitudes. ASCS scores were positively correlated with GPA and POI scores. POI scores were not significantly correlated with any of the RIAS subscales.

Responses to the questions, "Does your family encourage your academic activities?" and "Do most of your friends encourage your academic activities?" on the student information survey were analyzed for content and placed into the following categories by the authors: 89.8% of the participants stated that their family encouraged their academic activities, 4.5% said their parents did not encourage their academic activities, and 2.3% said that sometimes



**TABLE 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for all Variables**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Potential Range</i>	<i>Obtained Range</i>
Grade point average	2.51	.77	0.00 - 4.00	0.71 - 4.00
Preencounter attitudes	2.02	.52	1.00 - 5.00	1.00 - 3.67
Encounter attitudes	3.32	.78	1.00 - 5.00	1.00 - 3.67
Immersion attitudes	2.99	.69	1.00 - 5.00	1.25 - 4.75
Internalization attitudes	4.02	.44	1.00 - 5.00	2.78 - 5.00
ASCS	111.83	14.92	40.00 - 160.00	89.00 - 148.00
POI	11.98	2.16	1.00 - 16.00	5.00 - 16.00

NOTE: ASCS = Academic Self-Concept scale scores. POI = Personal Orientation Inventory, Self-Regard subscale.

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlation Coefficients for Variables**

<i>Grade Point Average</i>	<i>Preencounter Attitudes</i>	<i>Encounter Attitudes</i>	<i>Immersion Attitudes</i>	<i>Internalization Attitudes</i>	<i>ASCS</i>	<i>POI</i>
Grade point average	—	-.1193	-.2751*	-.3147**	-.0357	.3702**
Preencounter attitudes		—	-.0067	-.1798	-.2684*	-.1916
Encounter attitudes			—	.6662**	.5153**	-.1192
Immersion attitudes				—	.4801**	-.1693
Internalization attitudes					—	.1514
ASCS						—
POI						—

NOTE: ASCS = Academic Self-Concept scale scores. POI = Personal Orientation Inventory, Self-Regard subscale.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

their parents encouraged their academic activities, leaving 3.4% who did not respond to the question. For the question regarding peer support, 45.5% said their friends encouraged their academic activities, 30.7% said their friends did not encourage their academic activities, 11.4% said sometimes their friends encourage academic activities, 9.1% said that some of their friends encourage their academic activities, and 3.4% did not respond to the question.

**TABLE 3**  
**Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis**  
**for Grade Point Average**

<i>Variable</i>	$R^2$	$\beta$	T	p <
Preencounter attitudes	.00	-.071	-.635	.523
Immersion attitudes	.14	-.378	-2.86	.006**
Internalization attitudes	.02	.133	.975	.333
ASCS	.13	.362	3.03	.004**
POI	.03	.183	-1.51	.137

NOTE: ASCS = Academic Self-Concept scale scores, POI = Personal Orientation Inventory, Self-Regard subscale.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

Because the purpose of the study was to test a model that would predict GPA, a simultaneous multiple regression equation was calculated with POI scores, ASCS scores, and the RIAS subscales as independent variables. A forced-entry method was chosen over a stepwise method to examine the combined influence of the variables of interest (see Table 3).

The best predictor model for GPA was Immersion attitudes and academic self-concept as measured by the ASCS. Together, Immersion and ASCS accounted for 27% of the variance in GPA scores,  $F(7, 68) = 3.42$ ,  $R^2 = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ . Immersion attitudes had an inverse relationship with GPA. Thus, as Immersion attitudes increased, the student's GPA decreased. ASCS and GPA had a positive relationship. Thus, the higher the ASCS, the higher the GPA.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which racial identity attitudes, self-esteem, and academic self-concept could predict school performance for an African American high school student population. The results as they relate to the research questions and relevant literature will be presented in this section. Limitations of the study and implications for future research will also be discussed.

### **RACIAL IDENTITY ATTITUDES AND GPA, ASCS, AND POI**

None of the various racial identity attitudes were significantly correlated with ASCS scores or POI scores. This was somewhat surprising. Prior

research had reported that Preencounter attitudes were related to feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and lack of self-acceptance (Butler, 1975; Cross, 1971; Parham & Helms, 1985). It is important to recognize that the findings of the present investigation were based on students in a different developmental stage than the previously cited research. POI scores were positively related to ASCS scores. As self-esteem increased, so did academic self-concept; likewise, as self-esteem decreased, so did academic self-concept. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine causation from this correlation. Although nonsignificant, the correlations between ASCS scores and Preencounter, Encounter, and Immersion attitudes were all in a negative direction, whereas the correlation between ASCS and Internalization scores were in a positive direction. These trends are intriguing to consider. Only attitudes reflecting internalized racial identity tended to be positively related to higher academic self-concepts. Furthermore, ASCS scores were significantly correlated with GPA. Self-efficacy theory would predict that student's academic self-concept would be an important mediator of academic performance.

Both Encounter and Immersion attitudes were inversely related to GPA. The more that students held Encounter and Immersion attitudes, the lower their GPA. Immersion attitudes and ASCS scores were significant predictors of GPA. Involving oneself in Black culture is a central part of the Immersion stage. Gregory (1992) and McCalope (1991) explained that some African American students fear that their academic-related events will be associated with White behavior. "Coping strategies that seemingly correspond to the Immersion-Emersion phase appear to occur quite often among Black adolescents who find themselves adrift in White educational settings" (Helms, 1990, p. 27).

Young men endorsed Immersion attitudes significantly more than young women. The response to an angry, young African American male may operate in the form of not inviting him to fully participate in the learning environment and/or his withdrawal from the school environment, either one of which could result in lower grades. Adding additional confirmation to this hypothesis is the finding that being female was found to be a significant predictor of higher GPA. Obviously, some of the young men in this investigation were struggling with both issues of racial identity and academic achievement. Certainly, causation cannot be inferred from these correlations. We cannot determine which comes first—lower grades or Immersion attitudes—yet it is interesting to speculate.

Some studies have suggested that African Americans have to give up their racial identification with the Black community to succeed (Fordham, 1988), whereas other studies have found that pride in their race strengthened students and aided their academic success (Ward, 1990). According to the present

investigation, neither of these results were wrong. Instead, it appears that a variety of racial identity attitudes actually exist within the high school student population. This study found high school students with positive Black identity attitudes and good grades. This study also found students with pro-Black/anti-White attitudes who had poor grades. Perhaps the Fordham (1988) and the Ward (1990) studies tapped into students holding a preponderance of one racial identity attitude or another.

#### **FAMILY SUPPORT AND PEER SUPPORT**

Ninety percent of the sample said that their family encouraged their academic activities. Steinberg et al. (1991) found that in general, African American high school students had active, involved, authoritative parents who were very supportive of academics. It was disturbing to discover that 5% of the students reported that their parents did not encourage academics and 2% reported that their parents occasionally encouraged academic activities. Respondents were not asked to describe specific ways in which they felt their parents were unsupportive. Nonetheless, the lack of encouraging parents, or worse yet, the effect of disparaging remarks from parents, could be detrimental to a student's academic and personal development. This investigation highlights the importance of understanding the familial context within which African American high school students may find themselves.

Forty-six percent of the students reported that their friends encouraged academic activities and 31% of the students reported that friends did not encourage academics. Kunjufu (1988), in his survey of over 300 African American high school students, found that the majority of students reported that their friends encouraged their academic activities. Although Kunjufu's results were corroborated in this study, there was a significant portion of the students in the present sample who described an unsupportive peer group. This suggests that an interest in academics could be a potential hindrance for students who desire to connect with other African American peers. The possibility that these students would choose to downplay school-related activities such as class participation, studying for exams, and participating in nontraditional extracurricular activities exists for a significant number of students in this study. Ultimately, these choices may divert educational and career accomplishments and are therefore of great concern.

### LIMITATIONS OF PRESENT STUDY

The participants in this study were all recruited from two Upward Bound programs; this particular environment may have had an effect on the results found. For example, in explaining the finding that close to half (46%) of the group reported that their friends supported their academic endeavors, it may be that this sample of high school students was surrounded by more peers who readily support academics because they participated in Upward Bound programs. Upward Bound brings together students with the aim of providing support services that would enable them to succeed in college. Consequently, generalizability to the wider African American high school student population might be limited. The use of cumulative GPA as the only outcome variable for school performance is also problematic because it is such a distal measure. Perhaps more proximal variables (i.e., classroom behavior, time spent on homework, amount of preparation for exams) might have yielded a better assessment of school performance.

Because the instruments used in the study were normed on a college-age population, reliability coefficients were calculated for each of the instruments. The reliability coefficient for the POI (.54) was lower in comparison to previous findings (Shostrom, 1963). However, the Cronbach's alpha for the ASCS (.90) was consistent with other investigations. The reliability coefficients for the RIAS subscales were also lower than those reported in other recent studies (e.g., Stevenson, 1995). It is not at all clear why this was the case. For some reason, this sample of adolescents did not respond in a consistent manner on the RIAS. During the administration of the survey packet with the first group of Upward Bound students, several of the students made audible disparaging comments about some of the words used in the RIAS (e.g., honky, the man). Perhaps different versions of the RIAS were used in these different investigations. Whether the RIAS can be appropriately used to assess the racial identity of noncollege populations remains to be determined (Helms, 1990). Although the RIAS is written at an eighth-grade reading level, the reliability coefficients calculated for the subscales certainly call into question whether it is a valid measure for high school students. Moreover, the high correlations among the RIAS subscales affect the stability of the regression analysis that was performed. This investigation did, however, have enough statistical power to achieve adequate results. A power

analysis found that with 86 subjects and an alpha level of .01, the power was .985, which was more than adequate.

On the other hand, Stevenson (1995), in a study with 287 adolescents age 14 and 15 years, found support for use of the 50-item RIAS scale. Factor analytic procedures yielded moderately reliable factors corresponding to the Preencounter, Immersion, and Internalization stages. Plummer (1995) also successfully used the RIAS with 300 adolescents to identify, among other things, gender differences in the expression of Preencounter attitudes. Taken together, this is a confusing state of affairs for the RIAS. It is difficult to ascertain if the problems with the RIAS are of a conceptual or measurement nature.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the findings about gender differences in achievement, research is warranted that examines the different ways in which African American male and female students are coping in high schools. Also, more research on racial identity attitudes in high school populations, including an examination of parental socialization messages around race and academic achievement, is needed. This would necessitate the development of an age-appropriate measure or a revision of the RIAS for high school populations.

In conclusion, this investigation has found that there are indeed within-group differences in racial identity attitudes of African American high school students that may be related to the various ways that students perform in school. It is hoped that with continued research, psychoeducational interventions could be developed aimed at helping all African American students succeed academically.

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