African American Identity in Adolescence

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Introduction

William James, one of the founders of modern psychology, laid the groundwork for the study of self-concept by noting that the self is both content - what one knows about one's self and also process - cognition, motivation, attentional processes (James, 1890). Since this early work, it has been clear that both aspects of the self are critical. That is, what I know about myself provides answers to key existential questions -- 'who am I?' and 'where do I belong?'. But also, the self is a cognitive structure that mediates and organizes everyday experience, regulates affect and channels motivation (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Therefore, making sense of self concept provides a tool for making sense of everyday choices. Adolescence is a critical phase in the process of self-making both because it is a time during which youth create an outline of the self they will become as adults (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Cantor & Zirkel, 1990; Harter & Marold, 1991; Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994). And also because choices made during adolescence are likely to have important consequences for the future -- dropping out of school increases the likelihood of unemployment, delinquency and early, unwanted pregnancy; staying in school improves labor market participation and future earnings (Caprara & Rutter, 1995; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Lynam, Moffitt, Stouthamer-Loeber, 1993).

For African American youth, answers to the 'who am I?' question are likely to include both distinctive, unique features of the self one will become and also representations of oneself as a black person in America. That is, the self-concept is likely to contain both personal identity and also racial identity - a sense of what it means to be both American and of African heritage. In this way, racial identity deals with the dual membership of African Americans -- membership in a group with traditions, culture and heritage that is interdependent or collectivistic in focus and also as a membership in a post-industrial, individualistically oriented society that has negative stereotypes about one's racial group, particularly with regard to academics, the very domain critical to a successful transition to adulthood.

Research on African American or black identity has focused on its content with the premise that content of black identity is related to feelings of well-being vs depression and of competence vs lack of efficacy (Carter, 1991; Phinney, 1990; Pyant & Yanico, 1991). In fact, having a positive ethnic or racial identity has been related to feelings of competence and well-being (Carter, 1991; Phinney, 1990; Pyant & Yanico, 1991) and to feeling connected to the black community (Feagin & Sikes, 1994). The literature has focused primarily on sense of connectedness or common fate, a positive sense of heritage and history, and awareness of racism and negative stereotyping as identity components (Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989; Azibo, 1991; Daniels, Wodarski, & Davis, 1987; Jackson; 1992; Jencks, 1991; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; McAddo, 1991; Oyserman et al., 1995). In addition, earlier research focused on political consciousness (e.g. Gurin & Epps, 1975) and although work in this

tradition continues (e.g. Cross, 1978; 1987; Whittler, Calantone, & Young, 1991), this line of research has not directly addressed issues of school persistence and academic achievement and has been focused primarily on adults.

Relevant, though not often integrated into this work, is the literature on the content of white stereotypes of blacks (e.g. Brown-Collins & Sussewell, 1986; Pettigrew, 1989). A great deal of this research has looked at the ways in which larger society, whites in particular, hold or may hold negative or racist views of African Americans (eg. Jackson, McCullough, Gurin, & Broman, 1991; Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, & Kraus, 1995). This work can be termed an 'outsiders' view of stereotyping in that it focuses on the ways in which members of the outgroup view the ingroup (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995) . Some of the most promising recent work focuses on the ways in which identity may interplay with awareness of stereotyped views held by others about African Americans. This work can be termed an 'insiders' view of stereotyping' in that it focuses on ways in which members of the ingroup make sense of, deal with or respond to stereotyping (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In our work, we focus on the 'insiders view', asking what is the experience of *being* African American for black youths. Our premise is that in urban centers black youths cannot choose to ignore or not take into account this social identity. The reality of this identity is made salient in a number of ways. First, the majority of others in one's everyday life are likely to be black, and many in one's age cohort do not stay in school. Beyond the peer group, poverty, under- and un- employment, crime and other indicators of social strain are almost certain to be high in one's own social niche. Youths must make some sense of how it is that members of one's own group appear to be badly off. Social identity theory would suggest that this process makes intergroup boundaries salient and therefore results in construction of a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The content of racial identity and the interplay between content of racial identity and academic achievement in the adolescent transition is the focus of this paper.

African American identity as risk reducing

Positive in-group attitudes and identification are correlated with higher self-esteem, less stress and less delinquent involvement (McCreary, Slavin, & Berry, 1996; Beale-Spencer, Cunningham, & Swanson, 1995). Bat-Chava & Steen's (1996) recent meta-analysis of doctoral and master theses studies suggests a moderate connection between various measures of ethnic identity and self-esteem. Further, it seems plausible that racial identity will be linked with reduced risk of depression first because feeling connected to one's community provides a positive sense of one's roots and a sense of belonging, reducing sense of isolation and aloneness. And secondly, being aware of racism provides a non-self-denigrating explanation for setbacks and failures, reducing excessive self-blame (Crocker & Major, 1989). Defining oneself in terms of both of these components of racial identity is likely to provide a sense of rootedness (I know where I came from and who I belong to) and an understanding of possible negative responses from others or difficulties (Some people may expect less of me because I am black).

Reading the literature, it becomes clear that ethnic and racial identity are typically measured by some mix of items focused on the importance and centrality of ethnic or racial group membership to one's sense of self, one's everyday behaviors or everyday life. In addition, sense of common fate and positive connection to the traditions and heritage are commonly assessed. Less often, awareness of racism, perception of negative out-group opinions, or even negative attitudes toward

the outgroup are assessed. Some authors focus on global assessment of the positivity or level of racial identity while others use a more multi-dimensional approach (e.g., Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989; Azibo, 1991; Bat-Chava, Allen, Seidman, Aber, & Ventura, 1996; Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, et al., 1991; Cross, 1987; Cross & Fhagen, in press; Hudson, 1991; Jackson, McCullough, Gurin, & Broman, 1991; Jackson, 1992; Jencks, 1991; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; McAddo, 1991; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998; Whittler, Calantone, & Young, 1991).

Racial Identity and school success

Recent research focuses on the interplay between black identity, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Hare, 1988; Hughes & Demo, 1989; Hughes & Hertel, 1990); vulnerability to stereotyping (Bylsma, Tomaks, Luhtanen, & Crocker, 1992; Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine &, Broadnax, 1994; Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Osborne, 1995; Spencer & Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995); and development of adolescent self-images in opposition to what is deemed white (Fordham, 1988; Ogbu, 1991). Much of this work has been applied directly to the context of school and has sought to address the question of school *under-achievement* rather than school *success* (for a more extensive review of this issue see Oyserman et al., 1995).

The importance of defining school and academic achievement as central to one's social identity as an African American can be seen in case studies of successful male African American students who describe the ways in which significant others in their lives centralized school success, making it an important part of what it meant to be a good son, a good brother and so on (Bowser and Perkins, 1991; Maton, 1998). Within this relational context, youth came to view themselves as both able to do well and required to do well in school. Further, these black males stated that it was in the context of these relationships that they came to believe that school success was possible for them in the future- that they could develop strategies to do well and avoid failure. In this way, working hard and getting good grades became integral to their social identity and resulted in academically focused vision of themselves in the future that kept the youths focused and persistent in their efforts to attain school success.

Yet many African American youth underperform in school; the interplay between race and dis-avowal of achievement is the focus of a number of theories (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graham, 1994; Hudson, 1991). Thus, Ogbu (1991) and others (e.g., Steele, 1988) have described how awareness of racism and the need for collective struggle against racism result in a sense of in-group policing of boundaries. Group members who attempt to affiliate with whites or engage in activites viewed as white are sanctioned by the group. This may result in 'cultural inversion' or viewing conventional successes and achievements as not black and as threatening one's blackness. Similar in-group policing is described by Dyson (1993) among black academics, authors, musicians and creative artists who may find themselves channeled into particular content domains, techniques or styles and risk criticism by others in the black community if their work does not fit a narrow view of blackness or black traditions. Thus attempts to define blackness as not white may result in sanctions for those who focus on academics and schooling.

In exploring underachievement at the university level, Steele and his colleagues (Steele, 1995) have suggested that being black is an example of a socially marked identity. Making marked identities such as femaleness or blackness salient elicits vulnerability to academic under-achievement (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele argues that those with marked identities wish

to succeed but are not able to pursue success single-mindedly because their marked identity provides a ready explanation for failures and set backs, making failure seem unavoidable (Steele, 1996).

The tripartite model of identity: Racial identity as containing academic achievement

The above review suggests that when black identity involves only two components: C*onnectedness* (e.g. commonality of history and experience, a feeling of belonging to the group) and *awareness of racism* (e.g. knowledge that others will view one in terms of group membership and may have negative opinions of one's in-group), it is not necessarily conducive to school achievement (Steele, 1996). That is, these two components of black identity do not address the ways that identity can help organize experience and mobilize motivation in the pursuit school success. Rather, as suggested by Steele's work, these two identity components may deflate efforts to do well in school. Therefore, these components alone are clearly not a complete model of racial identity. The missing component involves conceptualization of academic achievement as part of being African American. Youths able to conceptualize themselves in terms of a sense of *connectedness* with the black community and heritage, an *awareness of racism* and likely structural barriers, and a view of *achievement as connected* to and an integral part of being African American are likely to both perform better at school and be at reduced risk of depression (Oyserman et al., 1995).

In terms of school performance, youth who view school performance as part of being African American are likely to put more sustained effort into school and therefore attain better school outcomes, especially if the other components of racial identity - connectedness and awareness of racism, are also present. That is because connectedness to one's community and a belief in achievement as an African American bolster the importance of continued effort (Doing well in school is good for my community and being part of my community is important to who I am). Similarly, endorsing both community-focused-achievement and awareness-of-racism as central identity components provides alternative explanations for setbacks and allows the youth to focus on continued effort (Doing well in school is central to my black identity, and people have often tried to prevent blacks from succeeding). In this way, the tripartite model posits interaction effects of identity components on school performance, especially in contexts which may not be promotive of school success.

Our model focuses on development and instantiation of a sense of the self one will become and of one's African American identity. As, African Americans, youths are heir to both black traditions of communal helping, family aid and connectedness to the natural environment (Asante & Asante, 1985; Baldwin, 1985) and the Protestant work ethic-based cultural imperatives to be independent, successful, achieving and self-focused (Katz & Hass, 1988). These traditions provide competing perspectives on how to be a self. The latter, individualistic perspective is part of larger American society which may transmit subtle and not so subtle messages to African Americans about their accomplishments, value and place in America. Embedded in contexts that provide both sets of messages, black youths must struggle to create a sense of self that is both interdependent and independent, achieving and connected. Given the cultural centrality of achievement, particularly academic success, it is no wonder that there are reports in the literature that school success has been defined as 'white'. Due to its central role in larger society, it is likely that many groups vie to co-op 'school success' as part of their socio-ethnic or

group identity. That is why we proposed that achievement must itself be contained within one's social identity rather than being viewed as external to it. Further, we proposed that African American identity can serve to decrease personalization of negative or failure experiences, reducing vulnerability to feelings of depression. Our findings support this view (Oyserman, et al., 1995; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998). When one's identity promotes a sense that failure and setbacks may in part be due to structural forces, then youth may be both less likely to feel depressed and also be able to continue to work hard in school because the possibility of failing in school may be less personally threatening.

Clearly the interplay between negative stereotypes about a social group, social identity and behavioral and emotional consequences of identity has potential in making sense of the choices youth make in the transition to adulthood. Although we have developed a model of African American Identity, we believe that our model and findings may be generalizable to other distinctive minorities dealing with the interplay between collective and interdependent traditions and the press of majority society. As Tajfel (1981) has argued, the social psychological consequences of social identities comes from their shared reality. One's own group identity seems distinctive, becomes salient and is likely to have motivational and behavioral consequences particularly in an intergroup context where membership is made to matter (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Further research is of course needed to study the generalizability of the three components we suggested for African American youth, however, early efforts suggests that these components are relevant to other minorities (e.g. Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1998).

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