Racial Identity Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Academic Achievement among

African American Adolescents

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore the extent to which racial identity attitudes and self-esteem could predict academic performance for African American middle school students. A total of 175 African American adolescents in 7th grade attending one of two urban schools participated in the study. The Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) were used to measure children's feelings toward themselves and their group. Cumulative grade point average (gpa) was used to measure academic achievement.

The findings partially supported the hypothesis that racial identity and self-esteem are predictors of academic performance. Self-esteem and racial affiliation were significant predictors of academic achievement, but not the racial identity search component of the MEIM. The results revealed self-esteem to be less predictive of academic achievement than racial affiliation.

The second part of the study was to examine the effects of racial identity and self-esteem on African American adolescents' academic performance. The hypothesis was supported. Students who exhibited high levels of self-esteem and racial identity performed better academically than students who showed low levels of self-esteem and racial identity.

Racial Identity Attitudes, Academic Achievement, and Self-Esteem among

African American Adolescents

The development of the racial and self - attitudes in young African American children over time has been a concern of many. It is believed that one of the most relevant areas of research integrating culture into the mental health and development of the individual is the work being done on racial and ethnic identity development (Rowe, Behrens, & Leach, 1995). The development of racial and ethnic identification is believed to be an integral part of minority group children's total development of self.

Many authors have stressed the importance of parental attitudes and family values as intervening variables in the development of self. The impact of school experiences, peer group acceptance, and the mass media also have been singled out as important socializing agents upon how the child views his or her racial group. All of these forces combine to form the child's view of how he or she and his or her ethnic group fit into his or her view of the world. The child's awareness of his or her individual existence and the perceptions of who and what he or she is result from the interaction with his or her environment and how significant others in this domain view him or her and the groups of which he or she is a member.

Several researchers have found that negative racial or ethnic identity is associated with problem behaviors (Rotherman-Borus, 1989), decreased self-esteem and mental health (Arroyo

& Zigler, 1995; Munford, 1994; Rowley, Severs, Chavous, & Small, 1998), and lower academic achievement (Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997).

Racial Identity, Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

The research on racial and self - attitudes and academic achievement primarily has addressed the question of whether strong identification with oneself and being Black is detrimental or beneficial for African American students' academic achievement. There are conflicting results regarding the relationship of racial group identity and academic achievement. Fordham (1988) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggested that for African American students to succeed in school, they must dissociate themselves from the African American community. On the other hand, Ward (1990) argues 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. Few studies have examined the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement. Racial identity may be especially meaningful to study for low achieving youth because of association with academic outcomes (Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997).

Racial Identity and Self-Esteem

In a review of the 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.

African-American students "generally earn lower grades, drop out more often, and attain less education than do Whites" (Mickleson, 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).

The purpose of the present study was to explore the psychosocio-cultural variables related to African American students' academic achievement. More specifically, a main objective was to examine the extent to which academic achievement is related to self-esteem and racial identity for African American middle school students.

Hypotheses:

1a. The way a child feels about oneself will be related to academic achievement scores.

1b. The way a child identifies with one's own racial or ethnic group will be related to academic achievement scores.

2a. Higher achieving students will identify and affiliate more with their own racial group than lower achieving students.

2b. Higher achieving students will feel better about themselves than lower achieving students.

Method

Participants

A total of 175 African-American adolescents in 7th grade attending one of two urban schools located in the southern region of the United States participated in the study. Students ranged in age from 12 to 15 years with a mean age of 12.65. The sample consisted of 108 females and 67 males.

Dependent Measures

Measures of children's feelings toward their group and toward themselves were used: The Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) developed by Phinney (1992), The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) developed by Rosenberg (1979), and Academic Achievement.

The Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) was used to measure racial identity among the adolescents. The MEIM is a 15-item instrument that assesses ethnic identity search and

ethnic affiliation, belonging, and commitment. The instrument is divided into two categories, the Ethnic Identity Search and the Ethnic Affiliation, Belonging, and Commitment Scale. Each scale of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure is defined below.

Ethnic Identity Search – examines a youth's level at which the youth seeks out information about his or her ethnic/cultural group and engages in behaviors associated with his or her ethnic/cultural group. The Ethnic Identity Search includes questions 1, 2, 4, 8, and 10. (Possible Range of Scores 1-20)

An example of an item is: "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs."

Ethnic Affiliation, Belonging, and Commitment – focuses on the level of affiliation, belonging, and connectedness that the youth feels toward his or her ethnic/cultural group. The Ethnic Affiliation, Belonging, and Commitment include questions 3, 5, 6,

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7, 9, 11, and 12. (Possible Range of Scores 1-28).

An example of an item is: "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me."

High scores on the subscales of the Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure suggest a strong identification and affiliation with one's ethnic group.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSE) measure was used to measure the youth's global self-esteem. The RSE is a 10- item instrument that assesses overall self-esteem. A high score on the RSE suggest a high level of self-esteem (Possible Range of Scores 0 - 30). An example of an item is: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities."

Academic achievement was measured by the participants' cumulative grade point average for the academic year. The student grade point average was taken from school records. Based on the student cumulative grade point average, the students were then assigned or grouped into one of three categories; higher achieving, average achieving, or lower achieving. Higher achieving was defined by having an overall grade point average of 3.0 or higher, average achieving was defined by having an overall grade point average between 2.0 and 2.9, and lower achieving was defined by having an overall grade point average of 1.9 or lower.

Procedure

The 7th grade students, who returned parental consent forms, from the two urban schools were introduced to the research study. Students were administered surveys as a group during one of their 90-minutes class period. The only directions given were to complete surveys as thoroughly as possible and to return the completed packet to the principal investigator.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which racial identity and self-esteem are predictors of academic achievement. Standard correlation and multiple regression procedures were performed to explore the extent to which self-esteem and racial identity are related to academic achievement. Also, analyses of variances were performed to determine if differences exist among the levels of academic achievement in relation to racial identity and self-esteem.

Self-Esteem as a Predictor of Academic Achievement

To test the hypothesis feelings about oneself are related to academic achievement, a Pearson correlation and a regression analysis were performed. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between self-esteem and academic achievement, r = .219, p < .01 (see Table 1). Self-esteem was positively correlated with academic achievement. The higher the self-esteem score, the higher the gpa score.

A regression analysis revealed self-esteem to be a statistically significant predictor of academic achievement. However, there was very little variance in the prediction of academic achievement based on self-esteem scores. Only 4% of the variance in academic achievement can be explained by one's self-esteem (see Table 2).

Racial Identity as a Predictor of Academic Achievement

To test the hypothesis that African American children awareness and ability to identify and affiliate with their racial or ethnic group is related to academic achievement, a Pearson correlation and a multiple regression analysis were performed. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between academic achievement and ethnic identity, r = .200, p < .05 as well as between academic achievement and ethnic affiliation, r = .350, p < .01 (see Table 1).

A multiple regression analysis revealed that ethnic identity search was not a statistically significant predictor of academic achievement. The results showed zero variance in the prediction of academic achievement based on ethnic identity search scores (see Table 3). However, ethnic affiliation was found to be a statistically significant predictor of academic

performance. The findings revealed that one's ethnic affiliation score can explain 9% of the variance in academic achievement (see Table 3).

Self-Esteem and Racial Identity

To test the hypothesis that self-esteem and racial identity are interrelated, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between self-esteem and ethnic affiliation, $r = .418$, $p < .01$ (see Table 4). The higher the self-esteem score, the higher the ethnic affiliation score.

Effects of Self-Esteem on Academic Achievement

Of primary interest for the purpose of the study was testing the hypothesis that higher achieving students will have higher self-esteem than lower achieving students. To test this hypothesis, an analysis of variance was performed. The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between higher achieving and lower achieving students, $F(2, 150) = 3.960$, $p < .021$ (see Table 5). The means showed higher achieving students had a lower self-esteem score than average or lower achieving students (see Table 6). Students who demonstrate high levels of self-esteem tend to perform better in school than students who demonstrate low levels of self-esteem.

Effects of Racial Identity on Academic Achievement

Of primary interest for the purpose of the study was testing the hypothesis that higher achieving students will have higher racial identity scores than lower achieving students. To test this hypothesis, an analysis of variance was performed.

Ethnic Identity Search on Academic Achievement. The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between higher achieving and lower achieving students, $F(2, 153) =$

3.917, p < .022 (see Table 5). The means showed higher achieving students had a higher ethnic

identity search score than average or lower achieving students (see Table 7). Students who seek

out information and engage in positive behaviors associated with their racial group tend to

perform better in school than those students who had a lower level of identity toward their racial

group.

Ethnic Affiliation on Academic Achievement. The analysis revealed statistically

significant differences between higher achieving and lower achieving students, F(2, 148) =

12.133, p < .000 (see Table 5). The means showed higher achieving students had a higher ethnic

affiliation score than average or lower achieving students (see Table 7). Students who felt a

sense of belonging or level of affiliation toward their racial group tend to perform better in

school than those students who had a lower level of affiliation toward their racial group.

Discussion

The present study addressed the growing concern of many regarding racial and self -

attitudes in the development of the individual as they relate to school performance. The purpose

of the current study was to examine the psychosocial-cultural variables related to African

American students school performance.

The findings partially supported the first hypothesis that self-esteem and racial identity

are predictors of academic achievement. Students who had a high self-esteem and/or identified

with their racial group performed better in school than students who had low self-esteem.

However, there was very little variance shared between self-esteem and academic achievement.

Similar results were found for ethnic identity search and academic achievement. The strongest

prediction was found between academic achievement and ethnic affiliation. The findings seem to

reveal that having a sense of belonging and connecting to one's own racial or ethnic is more

important than being involved or participating in activities centered around one's own racial

group.

The second hypothesis was supported. The findings revealed that students' who were

higher achieving tended to affiliate and identify more with their own racial group and feel better

about themselves than average or lower achieving students. Additional analyses revealed that

higher achieving students differ statistically significantly from average or lower achieving

students in relation to self-esteem and racial identity. Thus, higher achieving students exhibited

higher self-esteem and identified more with their own racial group than average or lower

achieving students.

Findings from the study suggest that self-esteem and racial identity may play a vital role in the total development of self for African American children. Which in turn, may be important in their school performance and success later in life. In many ways findings from this study support the

notion of integrating a multicultural curriculum into the school system in which all racial or ethnic groups are positively highlighted without degrading any racial or ethnic group.

Future studies should explore the connection between a multicultural curriculum and the effects of such curriculum on self-esteem, racial identity, and racial attitudes as they related to school performance and success later in life.

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Table 1

Correlations of Self-Esteem and Racial Identity with Academic Achievement

Racial Identity	Academic Achievement
Ethnic Identity Search	.200*
Ethnic Affiliation	.350**
Self-Esteem	.219**

** p < .01

* p < .05

Table 2

Regression Analysis of Self-Esteem with Academic Achievement

Self-Esteem	Academic Achievement	
	Beta	R
Total Self-Esteem	.219	.04*

* p < .05

Table 3

Regression Analysis of Racial Identity with Academic Achievement

Racial Identity	Academic Achievement	
	Beta	R
Ethnic Identity Search	.061	.00
Ethnic Affiliation	.295	.09***

*** p < .001

Table 4

Correlations of Self-Esteem and Racial Identity

Racial Identity	Self-Esteem
Ethnic Identity Search	-.068
Ethnic Affiliation	-.418**

** p < .01

Table 5

Significant Analysis of Variance of Academic Achievement

Sources of Variances	DF	MS	F	p<___
Self-Esteem	2	131.48	3.96	.021
Ethnic Identity Search	2	38.23	3.92	.022
Ethnic Affiliation	2	167.48	12.13	.00

_____

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Esteem by Academic Achievement

Academic Achievement		Self-Esteem		
	N	Mean	SD	
3.00 – 4.00	51	16.39	5.27	
2.00 – 2.99	68	17.41	5.78	

| 0.00 – 1.99 | 34 | 19.94 | 6.40 |

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Table 7

Means and Standard Deviations of Racial Identity by Academic Achievement

Academic Achievement	Ethnic Identity Search			Ethnic Affiliation		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD

3.00 – 4.00	52	13.88	2.95	50	24.06	3.25
2.00 – 2.99	71	13.59	3.26	67	22.84	3.75
0.00 – 1.99	33	12.03	3.10	34	20.03	4.25