

Racial/Ethnic Identity and Academic Achievement: Is This the Right Paradigm to Explain the Achievement Gap?

The 2007 film *The Great Debaters* was the story about how a debate team from a small historically Black institution in Texas, Wiley College, was able to compete in the national debate championship against Harvard University and win. Set in 1935, the film depicted the harsh reality of Jim Crow laws and racial prejudices of the time. In one scene, the professor and debate coach Melvin Tolson (played by Denzel Washington), is preparing the Wiley College debate team and he makes the following statement: "Denigrate. There's a word for you. From the Latin word *niger*, to defame, to blacken. It's always there, isn't it? Even in the dictionary. Even in the speech of a Negro professor. Somehow, *black* is always equated with failure."

Being Black in this country has always been associated with inferiority, especially intellectual and academic inferiority. While it is now considered impolitic to explicitly link the words Black and inferior in mainstream dialogue about academic achievement, other buzzwords and catchphrases are used that essentially communicate the same message. No other buzzword or catchphrase better symbolizes this link between being Black and assumed to be intellectually inferior than the *achievement gap*. The achievement gap is defined by the National Education Association as "the differences between the test scores of minority and/or low-income students and the test scores of their White and Asian peers." The meaning of achievement gap has moved beyond standardized test scores to also include grades and other academic outcomes such as graduation rates.

The questions that are often asked (either publicly or privately) go something like this: Why do Black students perform poorer academically compared to White and Asian students? What is it about being Black that is so consistently linked to academic underachievement? Some observers attribute the achievement gap to innate biological and genetic differences in intelligence (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1973; Rushton, 1997; Rushton & Jensen, 2005). Rather than focus on psychological, social, or even cultural explanations underlying race and racial identity, this hereditarian approach focuses on the presumed biology of race and racial identity. Interestingly, there appears to be virtually no scientifically agreed-upon identification of biological or genetic

markers that serve as definitive mechanisms which "cause" Black students to perform poorer than White and Asian students. The hereditarian position posits that the achievement gap is attributable to 50% genetic influences and 50% environmental influences (Rushton & Jensen, 2005). However, a review of hereditarian research and scholarship suggests that much more than 50% attention is placed on the role of genetic influences. Like most reputable social scientists, I categorically reject any notion that Black academic underachievement is linked to biological and genetic differences in intelligence.

A second explanation focuses more on the psychological aspects related to Black identity. The basic question asked is, "What is the relationship between Black identity (racial or ethnic) and academic achievement?" The commonly held assumption is that there is something about the racial and ethnic identity of Black students that is inimical to academic achievement. This question has been the focus of countless dissertations, research studies, and commentaries. However, like many topics in academia, there is more disagreement than agreement on the exact nature of the relationship. Some researchers and scholars have found that the racial or ethnic identity of African American students is negatively related to academic achievement (e.g., Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Harper & Tuckman, 2006; McWhorter, 2000; Worrell, 2007). Other researchers and scholars have found that the racial or ethnic identity of African American students is or can be positively related to academic achievement and outcomes (Chavous et al., 2003; Cokley & Moore, 2007; Oyserman, Kimmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, & Hart-Johnson, 2003; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001). Still other researchers have found no relationship between racial or ethnic identity and academic achievement (Awad, 2007), a minimal positive relationship (Lockett & Harrell, 2003), or an indirect positive relationship (Cokley & Chapman, 2008).

It is no wonder that comments and observations made about Black identity and academic achievement are so divergent given that the research literature is wildly inconsistent. People clearly have their opinions about Black students, and have their opinions about how Black identity helps or harms academic achievement. As a researcher, I believe it is important to try to make sense of this equivocal literature in order to provide useful information that informs educators, administrators, and anyone who works directly with Black students and/or is concerned about the academic achievement of African American students. In the following sections, I will briefly review the evidence for (a) the negative influence of racial and ethnic identity on academic achievement, (b) the positive influence of racial and ethnic identity on academic achievement on academic achievement, (c) no influence of racial and ethnic identity on academic achievement, and (d) mixed/conditional influence of racial and ethnic identity

on academic achievement. I will then conclude by offering a synthesized analysis of this literature.

NEGATIVE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

In John Singleton's 1995 movie *Higher Learning*, a scene is shown where a Black female college student, Monet, is called a "Black bitch" by a White male. This occurs during an exchange on the phone as Monet is trying to protect her White female roommate who has been raped. Incensed, Monet goes to the room of Fudge, a pro-Black, Afrocentric, 6-year senior and apparent self-appointed source of Black consciousness for Black students. Fudge leads a group of Black males to the White fraternity house and, after identifying the White male who verbally disrespected Monet, drags him out of the fraternity house and makes him say the following: "I apologize, beautiful Black woman, mother of the earth, queen of the universe." Fudge can be considered the classic case of a Black student (usually male) who has a heightened sense of Black identity and Black consciousness; however, this does not necessarily translate into doing well in school. In fact, Fudge believes that school is a game that he has already mastered. He prides himself on not assimilating. At one point when students start to leave for class, he says "Y'all some trained Negros. As soon as you hear a bell you go running."

During my undergraduate years at Wake Forest University, I was an active member of the Black Student Alliance (BSA). The BSA was a politically active organization, and during that time period, South African apartheid was still in effect. The BSA was upset that Wake Forest had not divested from companies who had business dealings with apartheid South Africa. To protest Wake Forest's failure to divest, the BSA planned a demonstration in the cafeteria. Along with some White student allies, the plan was to have certain members of the BSA go to "random" White students eating and to forcefully pull them out of their seats and drag them out of the cafeteria. This was to demonstrate the political reality of Black South African citizens. I was completely enthralled by these types of Black-consciousness political activities. My Black consciousness was growing by leaps and bounds; however, my burgeoning Black consciousness did not translate into making better grades. This is a phenomenon that I've seen over the years with some Black students, especially Black male students. While I did not disidentify with the importance of academics, I certainly struggled with reconciling my increased Black identity and consciousness with my academic struggles.

This disparity in Black consciousness and academic performance was revealed in Ralph Johnson's (1993) dissertation entitled "Factors in the Academic Success of African American College Males." He found that African American male students who were deemed to be successful (GPA > 2.5) had significantly lower African self-consciousness (Mean = 206.40) than African American male

students who were deemed to be academically unsuccessful (GPA < 2.0) (Mean = 223.02). Johnson concluded that a strong African self-consciousness or Black identity was incongruent with the educational system.

It is important to more closely examine the published empirical studies that have found a negative relationship between racial or ethnic identity and academic achievement. A closer examination may reveal some insights about why a negative relationship was found. Below I review a representative sample of some of these studies, including some of the more highly cited studies in this area. These studies have generally been conducted with high school or college students.

High School Students

Witherspoon, Speight, and Thomas (1997) conducted a study with 86 African American high school students involved in an Upward Bound program at two predominantly White universities in the Midwest. There were 56 females and 30 males. Racial identity was measured using the shortened form of the *Racial Identity Attitude Scale* (RIAS) (Parham & Helms, 1981). The RIAS includes four subscales that coincide with Cross's Nigrescence theory: *Pre-Encounter*, *Encounter*, *Immersion/Emersion*, and *Internalization*.

Males reported significantly higher Immersion scores and lower GPAs than females. The authors found a negative correlation between Encounter scores and GPA as well as Immersion scores and GPA. Additional statistical analyses indicated that only Immersion scores negatively predicted GPA. Interestingly, the authors characterize their findings as demonstrating high school students with both (1) positive Black identity attitudes and good grades, and (2) pro-Black/anti-White attitudes and poor grades, in spite of the fact that there were only statistically significant negative correlations reported. The authors conclude that there were within-group differences among African American high school students regarding the ways that racial identity attitudes related to academic achievement.

In another quantitative study, Harper and Tuckman (2006) surveyed 289 African American high school students from three public high schools in a large, midwestern school district. The authors did not identify a breakdown of the sample by sex. The authors used a shortened version of the *Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity* (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) that included *Racial Centrality*, *Private Regard*, and *Public Regard* subscales. Academic achievement was measured by school-reported grades as verified by the high school guidance counselors.

The authors were able to statistically determine Black racial identity profiles of freshmen and seniors. The profiles included: *Idealized*, who were students

who had high levels of racial centrality, public regard, and private regard relative to the mean scores; *Buffering/Defensive*, who were students who had low levels of public regard and high levels of racial centrality and private regard relative to the mean scores; *Alienated*, who were students who had low levels of racial centrality, public regard, and private regard relative to the mean scores; and *Low Connectedness/High Affinity*, who were students who had high levels of private regard and low levels of both racial centrality and public regard.

Results indicated that among both freshmen and seniors, *Alienated* students had statistically higher grade point averages than *Idealized* students. Among the reasons offered by the authors to explain this finding (which was counter to their expectations) included the possibility that *Alienated* students may identify more with the White majority and may be disassociating from Black students they perceive negatively. Unfortunately, the authors did not offer clear reasons why the *Idealized* students would have lower grade point averages.

Worrell (2007) conducted a quantitative study involving 319 ethnically diverse high school students attending a summer program for academically talented students. The students consisted of 28 African Americans, 28 Hispanics, 171 Asian Americans, and 92 Whites. The overall sample consisted of 57.7% females; however, the breakdown of sex by ethnicity was not provided. The *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992) was used to measure ethnic identity. The MEIM includes two subscales that measure ethnic identity attitudes (i.e., ethnic behaviors, affirmation and belonging, and achievement) and other group orientation attitudes (willingness to interact with and learn about other ethnic groups). Academic achievement was measured via self-reported GPA by the students.

Worrell found that ethnic identity only significantly predicted GPA for African American students. Specifically, he found that ethnic identity was a statistically significant negative predictor, while other group orientation was a statistically significant positive predictor. Worrell concluded that the data support previous research and theorizing that African American students who were strongly identified with their ethnic group could develop an oppositional stance toward schools and the majority culture.

In a quantitative study, Cokley, McClain, Jones, and Johnson (2011) surveyed 96 African American students from an urban public high school in Houston, Texas. The sample consisted of 41 males and 55 females. Racial identity was measured using the *Racial Centrality* subscale (Sellers et al., 1997). Academic achievement was measured by school-reported grades as verified by the homeroom/English teacher. The results indicated that racial identity was a statistically significant negative predictor of GPA. The authors conclude that African American adolescents who have narrow conceptions of Blackness and racial stereotypes about what it means to be Black are at greater risk for lower academic achievement.

POSITIVE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Interestingly, it is much more difficult to find examples in popular culture of Black identity being explicitly and positively linked to academic achievement. No Black-themed movie that I reviewed explicitly addressed how being Black was consistent with high academic achievement. For example, the movie *Lean on Me* was set in an underperforming inner-city high school where Black, Latino/a and White students were all struggling academically. While the principal, Joe Clark, had high expectations for all the students, he never explicitly discussed how academic excellence and being Black are interconnected.

The movie *Higher Learning* follows the lives of an African American track star who struggles with academics (Malik Williams), along with a White male who is socially awkward and out of place and a White female who is very naïve and shy. While the movie showed Malik's growing Black consciousness, there were no explicit messages that linked Black consciousness with academic excellence. The primary message learned by Malik was to challenge and question Eurocentric education (even calling his Black professor an Uncle Tom) rather than mastering the education and then using it to advance his interests (i.e., the interests of Black people). This is the distinction Mwalimu Shujaa (2003) makes between education and schooling. Schooling essentially perpetuates and maintains the status quo for domestication, while education is the transmission of beliefs, values, and sensibilities that result in being able to determine what is in your interests, and in being able to distinguish your interests from the interests of others. While Malik appeared to move through the stages of Cross's Nigrescence model of racial identity, his identity as a Black man was never fully integrated with his identity as a student. In fact, his primary motivation for doing well in school appeared to have more to do with maintaining his track scholarship and eligibility than with being a Black man who should strive for academic excellence.

The movies *The Great Debaters* and *Akeela and the Bee* both showcased Black students who excelled in debating and spelling. In the case of *The Great Debaters*, there was clearly a racialized historic context, while race was never an issue explicitly brought up in *Akeela and the Bee*. Neither movie explicitly connected the students' Black identity to their academic accomplishments. Being consciously and proudly Black is never part of the narrative involving academic achievement in movie depictions of African American students. It is no wonder that conventional wisdom suggests that an emphasis on academic achievement is not part of Black culture. Depictions of African American student achievement in the movies seem to be more comfortably made when there is no obvious link to a strong racial identity.

It is only in the world of documentaries that you see attempts to link Black identity to academic achievement. The 2011 documentary *Black Lights* highlights the failure of many Chicago schools in promoting high academic

achievement among African American students. However, unlike the usual narrative of Black student failure and the disconnect between being consciously Black and being a strong student, *Black Lights* showcases African American students with strong Black identities. This is exemplified by one student saying, "I am a Black Light because I always strive for success." A recent CNN documentary on the achievement gap highlighted an African American male star athlete, Jawan Minor, who, like a few other African American students, was doing well in school. He was head of the Minority Achievement Committee, otherwise known as the MAC scholars. The MAC scholars are high-achieving seniors who mentor younger students. The messages about being Black and also being a high academic achiever were an important part of the documentary, even while the explicit linking of Black identity and academic achievement was more subtle.

It is against this backdrop that we review several empirical studies that found a positive relationship between racial or ethnic identity and academic achievement. A closer examination may reveal some insights about why a positive relationship was found. These studies have generally been conducted with middle school students and high school students.

Middle School Students

Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2003) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study involving 132 middle school African American students participating in an after-school enrichment program. The sample included 64 males and 68 females. Academic achievement was measured via students' self-reporting of their grades based on a 9-point scale (0 = mostly Fs; 1 = mostly Ds and Fs; 2 = mostly Ds; 3 = mostly Cs and Ds; 4 = mostly Cs; 5 = mostly Cs and Bs; 6 = mostly Bs; 7 = mostly As and Bs; 8 = mostly As). Racial identity was initially measured using a large sheet of paper divided into two large blocks labeled "me" and "not me." Students placed stickers with self-descriptors on the block that best described them as an African American. The self-descriptors represented the three dimensions of what the authors called "racial/ethnic identity" (REI): *Connectedness* (e.g., "member of my church"), *Achievement* (e.g., "work hard in school"), and *Awareness of Racism* (e.g., "stared at"). In a follow-up study, REI was measured by three items representing each of the three dimensions: *Connectedness* ("I feel close to others in my community"), *Awareness of Racism* ("Some people might have negative ideas about my abilities because I am Black"), and *Embedded Achievement* ("It is important for my family and community that I succeed in school"). The authors found that spring grades were predicted by significant interactions with gender; specifically, REI connectedness for boys and REI-embedded achievement for girls. The authors conclude that aspects of REI can promote more concern about school.

Yasui, Dorham, and Dishion (2004) conducted a quantitative study with a community sample of 159 successful and high-risk middle school adolescents. The sample included 82 African Americans and 77 European Americans, of which there were 92 females and 67 males. Students were considered successful if they had a GPA above 2.0, had no discipline issues, and had not failed a class. High risk was determined by use of the *Teacher Risk Scoring Index* (Soberman, 1994). Academic achievement was measured by grades for academic subjects obtained from school-based assessment measures. GPA was reported on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (D or lower) to 4 (A- to A). Ethnic identity was measured by the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (Phinney, 1992). Two subcomponents of ethnic identity were specifically examined: (a) affirmation and sense of belonging, and (b) ethnic identity achievement.

Ethnic identity was significantly and positively correlated with GPA for the African American adolescents. Additionally, lower levels of ethnic identity were highly associated with being identified as at risk, which, the authors suggested, indicates the importance of ethnic identity as a predictor of negative adjustment for African American adolescents. The authors conclude that ethnic identity is most important for ethnic minority youth who are in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts.

Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2006) conducted a quantitative longitudinal study involving 98 African American students and 41 Latino students from three low-income, urban Detroit schools. Data on the sex of the participants were not included. Academic achievement was measured via grade records obtained from the school or district. Racial/ethnic identity (REI) was measured by four items representing each of the three dimensions: *Connectedness* ("I feel part of the Black community"), *Awareness of Racism* ("Because I am Black, others may have negative expectations of me"), and *Embedded Achievement* ("It is important for my family and the Black community that I succeed in school").

The authors found that grades and REI changed linearly over time, such that at each time point in data collection, students who were high in REI Awareness of Racism had higher GPAs. Additionally, youth who were higher in both REI Connectedness and REI Embedded Achievement had higher GPAs. The authors conclude that there is a positive influence of REI content on academic outcomes.

High School Students

Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, and Fulmore (1994) conducted a quantitative study with a sample of 344 African American and White students attending public and Catholic high schools in a large northeastern city. There were 135 public school African American adolescents, 60 Catholic school African American adolescents, and 100 Catholic school White adolescents. The discrepancy in numbers was due to the researchers using the students'

self-description of their ethnicity rather than the school's description. For the entire sample, there were 69 males and 95 females from the public high school, and 89 males and 91 females from the Catholic school. Academic achievement was measured using the students' grades taken from their school records in three classes: English, math, and social studies. Ethnic identity was measured using the *Ethnic Identity Development* subscale of the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (MEIM) (Phinney, 1990).

The authors found that for the public school African American students, ethnic identity was positively correlated with GPA, and, when placed in a larger model of variables, also significantly predicted GPA and engagement in school. These findings were not replicated with the Catholic school African American or White students. The authors speculate that the expression of racial or ethnic identity in the Catholic setting may be discouraged compared to the public school setting. The authors conclude that more research is needed to understand the mechanisms through which ethnic identity impacts school performance and engagement.

MINIMAL OR NO INFLUENCE OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

High School Students

Chavous et al. (2003) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study involving 606 African American adolescents. The sample included 287 males and 319 females. The students were obtained from four public high schools (80% African American) in the Midwest (presumably Michigan, given the location of the authors). Students with GPAs of less than 3.0 were selected for the study. Academic achievement was obtained from school district records. Racial identity was measured using the *Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity* (Sellers et al., 1997) that included *Racial Centrality*, *Private Regard*, and *Public Regard* subscales.

A preliminary analysis found that students out of school had lower racial centrality and private regard than students still in school. The authors did not find any of the racial identity variables to be significantly correlated with 12th-grade GPA. The authors were able to statistically identify four racial identity profiles. The first profile was identified as *Buffering/Defensive*, which was characterized as students having positive group affiliation that was self-protective in light of having an awareness of racism. The second profile was identified as *Low Connectedness/High Affinity*, which was characterized as students having low race centrality, high private regard, and low public regard. These first two profiles both have positive beliefs about being Black, but race was not a significant part of their overall identity. The third profile was *Idealized*, which was characterized by students having higher-than-average scores across all three racial

identity dimensions. The fourth profile was *Alienated*, which was characterized by students having lower-than-average scores across all three racial identity dimensions. The authors also did not find any significant differences in GPA between the four racial identity profiles. The authors speculated that the failure to find relationships between racial identity and GPA was related to the developmental period of the students examined. Interestingly, the authors characterize the *Buffering/Defensive* group as having the highest academic achievement and attainment, but this appears to be based on having the highest percentage of students in school rather than on GPA.

College Students

Lockett and Harrell (2003) conducted a quantitative study with a sample of 128 African American students attending a historically Black university (HBU). The authors reported that 79% of the sample was female, which translates to about 101 females and 27 males. Academic achievement was measured via students' self-reported GPA. Racial identity was measured using the *Racial Identity Attitude Scale* (RIAS) (Helms & Parham, 1990). The RIAS consists of four subscales: *Pre-Encounter*, *Encounter*, *Immersion*, and *Internalization*.

The authors found that only *Internalization* attitudes were significantly predictive of GPA. However, additional analyses also indicated that the racial identity and GPA link was significantly reduced once self-esteem was taken into account. In other words, the unique effect of racial identity via *internalization* attitudes on GPA was lessened because of the impact of self-esteem. The authors conclude that the unique effect of racial identity on academic achievement is minimal, and that research in this area has been characterized by overinterpretation of the data.

Awad (2007) conducted a quantitative study with a sample of 313 African American college students. The first sample was used to predict GPA and consisted of 168 African American students. The second sample was used to predict Graduate Record Examination scores (GRE), consisted of 145 African American students, and included 32 men and 113 women. Academic achievement was measured via students' self-reported GPA, and a GRE verbal section was used. Racial identity was measured using the *Cross Racial Identity Scale* (CRIS) (Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). The CRIS is based on the revised version of Cross's *Nigrescence* theory (Cross & Vandiver, 2001) and contains five subscales: *Pre-Encounter Assimilation*, *Pre-Encounter Miseducation*, *Pre-Encounter Self-Hatred*, *Immersion-Emersion*, *Internalization Afrocentricity*, and *Internalization Multiculturalist*.

Awad found that none of the racial identity subscales were correlated with GPA or GRE scores. The racial identity subscales also were not predictive of GPA or GRE scores. She concluded that other variables such as academic

self-concept are more pertinent variables to predicting GPA than racial identity, which she suggested may be indirectly related to GPA by influencing variables like academic self-concept.

MIXED/CONDITIONAL INFLUENCE OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Middle School Students

Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, and Boyd (2009) conducted a quantitative study with 61 Black male middle school students, of which 29 students were involved in an eighth-grade mentoring program intervention. Thirty-two students did not receive the intervention. The program focused on racial identity development, academic identification, and academic performance for Black male students enrolled in a single-sex cluster. Academic achievement was measured via GPAs and standardized achievement test scores that were obtained from school records. Racial identity was measured using the *Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS)* (Helms & Parham, 1996). The RIAS consists of four subscales: *Pre-Encounter*, *Encounter*, *Immersion*, and *Internalization*.

The authors found that Internalization attitudes were positively predictive of GPA. Internalization attitudes were also positively predictive of the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) in Mathematics. Additionally, Internalization attitudes were positively predictive of the CMT in Reading while Immersion/Emersion attitudes were negatively predictive. The authors recommend interventions that foster cultural pride and collective unity in young Black men, such that academic success will not be seen as separate from who they need to be in their communities.

High School Students

In a longitudinal quantitative study conducted by Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001), 562 African American adolescents from four public middle schools in a metropolitan city in the Southeast were surveyed. The sample consisted of 394 boys and 168 girls from sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade classrooms. Academic achievement was measured by the students' national percentile scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Racial identity was measured using a modified version of the *Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS)* (Parham & Helms, 1985). The RIAS consists of four subscales: *Pre-Encounter*, *Encounter*, *Immersion*, and *Internalization*. The authors characterized the subscales as Eurocentric, Transitional, Reactive Afrocentrism, and Proactive Afrocentrism, respectively.

The authors found a negative correlation between Pre-Encounter scores and the Iowa achievement scores, and also a negative correlation between

Immersion scores and the Iowa achievement scores. However, they found evidence for a modest positive correlation between Encounter scores and the Iowa achievement scores, as well as Internalization scores and the Iowa achievement scores. The authors also found that low achievement was more associated with Pre-Encounter (i.e., Eurocentricity) scores, while high achievement was more associated with Internalization (i.e., low Eurocentricity). The authors conclude that their findings support the idea that high-achieving African American students do not identify with acting White values.

College Students

Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke (1998) conducted a quantitative study involving 248 African American college students. The sample included 163 students from a predominantly White public university (PWU) and 85 students from a historically Black private university (HBU). The authors reported that 70.6% of the sample was female, which translates to about 175 females and 73 males. Academic achievement was measured via students' self-reporting their GPA. Racial identity was measured using the *Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity* (Sellers et al., 1997). The subscales used from the MIBI included the four racial ideology subscales (*Nationalist*, *Oppressed Minority*, *Assimilation*, and *Humanist*) and the *Racial Centrality* subscale. There were differences in racial identity by school, with students at the PWU reporting higher *Assimilation* and *Humanist* scores but lower *Nationalist* scores compared to students at the HBU. *Assimilation* scores were negatively correlated with GPA, while no other dimensions of racial identity were correlated with GPA. An additional statistical analysis indicated that racial centrality was a positive predictor of GPA, while *Assimilation* scores and *Nationalist* scores were negatively associated with GPA. Furthermore, individuals for whom race was central had negative associations between *Nationalist* and *Assimilation* ideologies with GPA and a positive association between minority ideology and GPA. The authors conclude that racelessness does not appear to be an effective strategy for African American college students. Importantly, they also cite the work of Rowley et al. (1998) to emphasize that racial identity is not a panacea, and that racial identity should play only a relatively minor role in academic achievement in comparison to other factors such as motivation, innate ability, difficulty of grading, and course selection.

Cokley and Moore (2007) conducted a quantitative study that included 274 African American students. The participants included 216 women and 58 men. Academic achievement was measured via students' self-reported GPA. Ethnic identity was measured using the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992). Racial identity was also measured using the *Racial Centrality* subscale (Sellers et al., 1997).

Focusing on the impact of gender, the authors found ethnic identity and racial centrality were negatively correlated with GPA for men, while ethnic identity was positively correlated with GPA for women. An additional statistical analysis indicated that GPA increased for women with high ethnic identity, but decreased for men with high ethnic identity. The authors conclude that there is a gendered racial and ethnic identity (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003) and that African American males are impacted by a cool-pose culture (Majors & Billson, 1992) in which non-academically oriented activities play a more important role in identity and self-esteem than they do for African American females.

Interested in statistically testing a model of academic achievement using the data from the aforementioned study, my graduate student and I conducted another quantitative study with the same data set of 274 students (Cokley & Chapman, 2008). Two subscales were used from the MEIM: ethnic identity and other-group orientation (attitudes toward other ethnic groups). An aspect of racial identity, anti-White attitudes, was also measured using the Immersion-Emersion Anti-White subscale from the CRIS (Vandiver et al., 2002).

We found that other-group orientation was positively correlated with GPA, while anti-White attitudes were negatively correlated with GPA. Ethnic identity was not significantly correlated with GPA. In additional statistical analyses, we found that anti-White attitudes were significantly and negatively predictive of GPA, while ethnic identity was positively and indirectly related to GPA through academic self-concept. We also conducted additional statistical analyses and found that the model predicting academic achievement was statistically weaker when ethnic identity was eliminated. We concluded that even in an indirect role, ethnic identity may be more important for African American academic achievement than anti-White attitudes.

Elion, Wang, Slaney, and French (2012) conducted a quantitative study with a sample of 219 African American college students attending two large public universities from the mid-Atlantic and southern regions. The sample included 105 females and 114 males. Academic achievement was measured via students' self-reported GPA. Racial identity was measured using the *Cross Racial Identity Scale* (CRIS) (Vandiver et al., 2000). The CRIS measures the Expanded Nigrescence theory of William Cross (1991). The CRIS includes the following subscales: *Pre-Encounter Assimilation*, *Pre-Encounter Miseducation*, *Pre-Encounter Self-Hatred*, *Immersion/Emersion Anti-White*, *Internalization Afrocentric*, and *Internalization Multiculturalist Inclusive*.

While the primary purpose of this study was not to examine the relationship of racial identity and academic achievement, the authors reported results that included this data. The authors found that *Pre-Encounter Miseducation* was negatively correlated with GPA, while *Internalization Multiculturalist Inclusive* was positively correlated with GPA. The authors speculate that students in the *Miseducation* stage could struggle more with feelings of inferiority and inadequacy

that may be related to stereotype threat, while concluding that African American individuals with a more mature racial worldview (i.e., Multiculturalist Inclusive) also have higher standards. It is also notable that Immersion-Emersion Anti-White and Internalization Afrocentricity were negatively correlated with GPA (but not statistically significant).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

This brief review of quantitative empirical studies was not intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Indeed, I could have reviewed a number of qualitative, ethnographic, and mixed-methods studies that are significant but equally as equivocal in their findings and conclusions (e.g., Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009; Wright, 2011). The Fordham and Ogbu article in particular is influential in that it is largely responsible for introducing the "acting White" jargon into academic discourse. This article will be discussed more in depth in the next chapter.

It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the relationship between racial and ethnic identity and academic achievement. This brief review underscores the sometimes contradictory findings in the literature. Only a formal meta-analysis (i.e., a quantitative statistical analysis of many studies) would allow for more definitive conclusions to be drawn. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions may be drawn after careful analysis of this literature. First, it is inappropriate to make any global statements about the relationship between racial and ethnic identity and academic achievement. This is because most conceptualizations of racial and ethnic identity are multidimensional, with each dimension or component having general differences in racial worldviews, ideologies, and attitudes. It is these differences in racial worldviews, ideologies, and attitudes that are most likely to be differentially related to academic achievement.

Related to the previous point, one may tentatively conclude that aspects of racial or ethnic identity that either de-emphasize one's Black identity or internalize miseducated, stereotypical notions of one's Black identity are at risk to be negatively related to academic achievement (Cokley et al., 2011; Nasir et al., 2009). Not taking pride in being Black and/or believing the negative societal messages about being Black (e.g., not intelligent, gangsta, criminal, only good at sports, lazy, etc.) is indicative of a poor self-concept, which psychological research has linked to negative outcomes. Additionally, aspects of Black identity that emphasize an intense love of being Black that is inextricably coupled with White hostility or anti-White attitudes are also likely to be negatively related to academic achievement.

I draw this conclusion knowing that it will not set well with those individuals whose extreme versions of a pro-Black, anti-White mindset have sustained them in their activism and fight for social justice for Black people. Emotions that are associated with these attitudes include pride, rage (at White people and White

culture), and guilt (at ever having believed ideas that did not fully liberate Black people) (Cross, 1991). Cross characterized this Black militancy (and related ideological movements such as Black nationalism and Afrocentrism) as being impulsive and emotionally unstable. Furthermore, he characterized the cognitive styles of both Pre-Encounter and Internalization as being in control, logical and rational, while the cognitive style of Immersion-Emersion attitudes (characteristic of Black militants) as being dominated by cognitive dissonance and emotionality. Perhaps the emotional lability that characterizes pro-Black, anti-White attitudes interferes with the individual's ability to focus on academics. Psychological research has shown that negative emotions such as anger and anxiety are often negatively linked with academic achievement (Gumora & Arsenio, 2002; Valiente, Swanson, & Eisenberg, 2012). Another reason that attitudes related to Black militancy may be negatively related to academic achievement could be linked to personality traits. There is evidence that certain personality traits such as conscientiousness and openness to experience are positively predictive of academic outcomes (Nofle & Robins, 2007). Attitudes that characterize certain forms of Black militancy, particularly as related to attitudes toward White people and White culture, can probably be safely described as not being open to experiences with White people.

Finally, aspects of Black identity that embrace being Black and being connected to family and community and also being aware of racism, while also valuing and embracing multiculturalism and the experiences other racial and ethnic groups, are also more likely to be positively related to academic achievement. This is probably related to the previous observation that the personality trait openness to experience has been positively linked to academic outcomes. Additionally, rather than expend emotional energy on hating White people, this construction of Black identity is more "school-oriented and socially conscious" (Nasir et al., 2009, p. 92) and promotes academic identification and higher academic achievement (Cokley et al., 2011).

The third tentative conclusion to be drawn is that there are probably developmental differences that impact the relationship. Specifically, it appears that a positive relationship is more likely to occur among younger students (i.e., pre-high school). In other words, the academic achievement of younger students is more likely to increase as aspects of their Black identity increases. One possible reason is that younger students are less susceptible to conformity and peer pressure than early adolescents (Brown, Lohr, & McClenahan, 1986; Clasen & Brown, 1985). The pressures surrounding being popular and cool, while present with middle school students, is not as intense as with high school students. Younger students are also generally more identified with academics than adolescents (Osborne, 1999). Thus, it is possible that younger pre-adolescent African American students have had less exposure to the negative messages related to Black identity and academic achievement, and thus are more open to integrating academic achievement into their racial identity. High school students appear to

be the most vulnerable for having aspects of their Black identity be negatively linked to academic achievement. It would appear that special efforts need to be in place, in the form of changes in the type of curriculum taught and pedagogy, or having targeted cultural after-school enrichment programs, to counter the potentially negative effects of peer pressure. When students make the decision to go to college, they have already identified with school to a certain degree and can be assumed to have more positive attitudes toward academics. The exposure to Black-oriented student organizations and Black Studies or multicultural classes will increase the likelihood that students' racial and ethnic identity will be positively linked to their academic achievement. It is probably safe to say that those Black student organizations and classes that focus on Black pride and achievements rather than anti-White sentiments, as well as foster an appreciation for multiculturalism, will be more successful academically.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not point out some of the major limitations of this body of work. Virtually all of the studies are correlational in nature rather than experimental. Essentially, we are looking at associations between these variables. In other words, as racial or ethnic identity increases, academic achievement tends to either increase or decrease. However, there is a major methodological limitation that should be noted. Based on the research design of the studies, we cannot conclude that racial or ethnic identity *causes* academic achievement. Furthermore, the strength of the relationship between racial and ethnic identity and academic achievement (referred to by statisticians as *effect size*) in the reviewed studies is between small and medium. This underscores the point made by Rowley et al. (1998) when they stated that racial identity is not a panacea. Sellers et al. (1998) go on to state that even for students for whom race is a very important part of their identity, racial identity should play only a minor role in their academic achievement. In the final analysis, I agree with their statement, as the data appear to support that position. Instead of overinterpreting data to be consistent with whatever our ideological proclivities are, we should draw all conclusions strictly on what can be reasonably inferred from the best available research and data. Regarding the question "What is the relationship of racial and ethnic identity to academic achievement?" the best answer is simply "It depends on what aspect of racial and ethnic is being examined, what year in school is the student, what gender is the student, etc." There is no one all-encompassing, definitive answer, so any attempt to present it as such is naïve and disingenuous.

In the next chapter I explore some of the most provocative and controversial narratives about African American students related to the themes of acting White, victimhood, and Black anti-intellectualism. I demonstrate that many of the conclusions drawn about the psychology of African American students are strikingly not psychological at all. Rather, they are part of a larger web of criticisms that serves to perpetuate deficit notions of Black students and ultimately Black culture.