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### **Black Students and Academic Disidentification: Why Grades Do Not Tell the Entire Story**

The year 2007 marked the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School. To commemorate this historic event, the documentary *Little Rock Central High: 50 Years Later* was produced. The video, characterized as “provocative,” “sobering,” and “powerful” by various media outlets, examined the legacy of desegregation and some of the challenges that still face American education around the education of Black students. In one of the most sobering and sad scenes, a White teacher tells her students to raise their hand if they know someone in their family who has gone to jail. Most of the African American students raise their hands, with many laughing (perhaps because of how normative it was for them). She then asks how many of their friends have been killed. One female student says the following:

My uncle. It was gang related. He got shot from his bathroom all the way to his front yard. And my other uncle was also killed. In front of a grocery store.

The teacher clarifies “For drugs?” to which the student indicated yes. The student went on to explain:

And his cousin shot him. It was gang related.

Another male student shared the following:

I had a brother to get um. . . . he was, it was in the middle of a drug deal, and um . . . and he was um tied, beaten and burnt to death.

The young male student said this with what almost appeared to be a half smile on his face (although I’m sure it was not a smile). The teacher, with her hand clutched to her chest, gasps “Oh my God! Oh my God!” She calls on another female student, Jessica, who stated the following:

My friend that graduated from here last year this summer she was murdered in Southwest. Umm, she was stabbed multiple times. And he threw her in a dumpster.

Many of the Black students showcased in the documentary were clearly from poor and working-class families. Now juxtapose these previous responses to comments made by Brandon Love, who was the student body president and clearly from a more affluent family:

It kind of bothers me that Black kids come to school and we just come to kind of chill whereas the White kids come to get an education. You know they go on to do great things in life.

Another African American student riding with Brandon in his car agreed and made these observations:

"I believe that's true. . . . because Black people . . . All they wanna do is go to school, hangout, and play sports. I mean that's basically it."

The saddest story to me was about 18-year-old Antron Pearson. The viewers are introduced to Antron by his telling the interviewer that he has been kicked out of the house by his mother. Antron is an aspiring boxer who has completely disidentified from school. At one point one of his teachers, Shannah Ellender, is talking to him about his missed classes and telling him that he cannot miss any more classes. Ten or more unexcused absences means Antron will have to repeat the grade. After Antron leaves the room, Ms. Ellender tells the interviewer the following:

Antron, he can't read. He may read on a 3rd grade level. He's got a low F in Spanish 1. He's got a 16. Low F in Biology 1. He's got a 57 F in Drama. He has a zero in World History, F. Too many absences to pass the class at all. So he doesn't even have a shot at getting, at being able to pass these classes. Which means it's a waste of a semester. He'll have to retake all these classes which means he'll be a freshman a 9th grader again next year. And will be 18 years old.

Ms. Ellender goes on to talk about how depressing and frustrating it is because there are people trying to help Antron. The interviews with most of the White people show that there is a common belief that African American students do not work hard and do not value school. This belief is held not only by White people, as we see evidenced by the statements made by Brandon and his friend. The first few statements made by the students reveal young lives exposed to unspeakable violence. The nature, level, and frequency of violence disclosed by these young students make it perfectly understandable if their focus was less on school and more on survival.

In the case of Antron, he is an example of a student who has completely disidentified from school. He clearly is not invested in school as evidenced by him failing every class. One might assume that given his extremely poor academic

performance, he would have low self-esteem. However, the images that we see of him throughout the video tell a very different story. Antron is supremely confident in his boxing skills, and believes he is good enough to become a professional boxer one day. Judging how confident he appeared walking down the hall smiling and talking to students, Antron does not appear to suffer from low self-esteem. If anything, he appears to have high self-esteem, in spite of the fact that he is failing all his classes.

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between grades and self-esteem among African American students. In spite of lower grades, African American students maintain high self-esteem and academic self-concept. Stereotype threat is a phenomenon that involves a fear of confirming a stereotype in a domain, often academic, based on one's social identity (e.g., race or gender). Stereotype threat causes academic disidentification, which occurs when self-esteem becomes disconnected from academic achievement. Several reasons for academic disidentification are examined, including devaluing school and discounting academic feedback. I argue that academic disidentification is misunderstood as being a negative orientation to school and learning, and consequently contributes greatly to the perception of African American students being anti-intellectual.

## SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is one of the oldest topics in psychology and is a fundamental topic in the social sciences (Mruk, 2013). There are few outcomes where self-esteem is not implicated in some way. The most obvious implication of self-esteem involves mental health. For example, according to O'Brien, Bartoletti, and Leitzel (2006) (cited in Mruk, 2013), self-esteem is involved as a diagnostic criterion in almost 25 mental disorders listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). While many definitions for self-esteem exist, a useful definition that incorporates elements of different theoretical approaches is one's personal sense of competence and worthiness (Mruk, 2013).

Given the historical and contemporary experiences of racist oppression, it has long been assumed that African Americans would demonstrate lower self-esteem than European Americans. After all, if you are born into a world where you are constantly bombarded with messages about Black inferiority and Black people as problems, it seems reasonable to conclude that exposure to and internalization of those messages would result in African Americans having lower self-esteem. This assumption was seemingly supported by the early doll studies by Kenneth and Mamie Clark (Clark & Clark, 1947). These studies involved 253 Black children ranging in ages from 3 to 7. The purpose of the studies was to examine their preferences for a brown or white doll. In response to a request from the NAACP,

the Clarks conducted an additional study at Scott's Branch Elementary School among 16 Black children between the ages of 6 and 9. The children were asked to respond to the following seven prompts:

1. Show me the doll that you like best or that you would like to play with
2. Show me the doll that is the nice doll
3. Show me the doll that looks bad
4. Give me the doll that looks like a white child
5. Give me the doll that looks like a colored child
6. Give me the doll that looks like a Negro child
7. Give me the doll that looks like you

The Clarks found that 10 out of the 16 children chose the white doll as the one they liked best and the one they considered a nice doll. Eleven of the 16 children chose the brown doll as the doll that looked bad. The Clarks indicated that these results were consistent with research they had conducted on over 300 children, and concluded that Black children had internalized feelings of inferiority and self-hatred as early as the age of 6. They attributed this "self-hatred" ultimately to the effects of segregation.

The Clark doll studies are among several studies that have sought to ostensibly measure Black self-esteem through the use of various external stimuli including dolls, drawings, and photographs (Banks, 1976). In fact, it was Curtis Banks, an African American psychologist and former editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Black Psychology*, along with Joseph Baldwin, a prominent Afrocentric psychologist, who provided two of the most astute critiques of the literature on White preference in Blacks phenomenon. In Banks's (1976) examination of this body of literature, he found that among 21 investigations of this phenomenon, 2 (9%) clearly found support of White preference among Blacks, 4 (19%) found support of Black preference among Blacks, while 15 (71%) found inconsistent preferences or no preferences at all. Baldwin's (1979) criticisms of the racial preference literature included (1) limited empirical support, (2) conceptual imprecision in constructs such as Black self-concept, (3) experimenter effects (i.e., race of experimenter-influenced responses of Black participants), (4) failure to determine what the choice meant to the children, (5) the likelihood that Black dolls prior to the 1960s were probably novel stimuli, and (6) the failure to consider that some Black children may not have understood the meaning of the evaluative tasks (Baldwin, 1979; Banks, 1976). An additional limitation of the doll studies (and indeed most of the racial preference literature) is that while conclusions about self-esteem and self-concept were drawn, these constructs were not typically ever explicitly measured. Ultimately, the conclusions of Black self-hatred drawn from the study were challenged by Black psychologists for conceptual, empirical, and methodological reasons.

The limitations of the doll studies notwithstanding, the power of Clark's research and testimony was pivotal in the Supreme Court ultimately ruling that segregation "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect the childrens' hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). The racial preference studies were the foundation for thinking that Blacks collectively had low self-esteem, especially in comparison to Whites. However, two highly cited empirical studies challenge this assumption. In one study, Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of studies involving 261 Black and White comparisons of self-esteem. They found that Black children, adolescents, and young adults on average had higher self-esteem than their White counterparts. While the statistical effect size is small, it is nonetheless a consistent and notable finding that goes against conventional wisdom and traditional psychological theorizing regarding self-esteem and social status. In trying to explain why Blacks do not have lower self-esteem, Gray-Little and Hafdahl suggest that the social referents for Blacks are not Whites, but rather other Blacks. In other words, the self-esteem of Blacks is based on how Blacks compare themselves to other Blacks rather than to Whites. Additionally, they suggest other reasons that Blacks have higher self-esteem. One reason is because of a desire to emphasize their distinctiveness as a social group, which becomes associated with individual self-esteem. Another reason is because ethnic/racial identity is more salient for Blacks than for Whites, and also has a stronger relationship with self-esteem for Blacks than for Whites. They also found that the Black self-esteem advantage increases with age, and was also larger for general self-esteem than academic self-esteem. The authors concluded that the role of academic achievement in academic self-esteem differs by race, implicating the process of academic disidentification.

In another meta-analysis, Twenge and Crocker (2002) replicated and extended Gray-Little and Hafdahl's (2000) study by examining race differences in self-esteem among 712 sources of data. Similar to Gray-Little and Hafdahl's study, Twenge and Crocker found that Blacks had higher self-esteem than Whites, and this self-esteem advantage increased over time for Blacks. Blacks also had higher self-esteem than Asian Americans and Latino/a Americans. Also similar to Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000), Twenge and Crocker conclude that Black students are less likely to base their self-esteem on the opinions of other people. They recommend that researchers should stop examining questions about racial differences in self-esteem and instead ask which members of these groups have low or high self-esteem and why.

Based on these comprehensive reviews of the literature, it can be concluded that Black students do not exhibit a preference for Whites and do not suffer collectively from internalized racial self-hatred. Black students will typically exhibit

higher self-esteem than White students. Furthermore, it can be tentatively concluded that the basis of Black students' self-esteem will often be in comparison to other Black students rather than White students.

### ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT

A related construct to self-esteem is academic self-concept. Academic self-concept is how confident a student feels about her or his academic abilities. Academic self-concept is an important construct because it has consistently been positively correlated with grades (Awad, 2007; Cokley, 2000; Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997; Marsh & Martin, 2011; Reynolds, 1988; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982) as well as self-esteem (Awad, 2007; Marsh & O'Mara, 2008; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). Furthermore, academic self-concept has been found to have reciprocal effects on academic achievement and educational attainment, while self-esteem has been found to have virtually no effects (Marsh & Craven, 2006; Marsh & O'Mara, 2008). Several studies have also examined racial/ethnic differences in academic self-concept, with earlier studies finding that African American students have higher academic self-concepts than their White peers (Fulkerson, Furr, & Brown, 1983; Lay & Wakstein, 1985).

In a study comparing 159 French, 62 White, and 78 African American students in the seventh grade, Kurtz-Costes, Ehrlich, McCall, and Loridant (1995) found that African American students had higher academic self-concepts than both French and White students. Interestingly, African American students were more likely to attribute their academic success to ability, while French and White students were more likely to attribute their academic success to the amount of effort they exerted.

In a large study involving over 12,000 adolescents, Martinez and Dukes (1997) examined ethnic identity and academic self-concept. Not surprisingly, Black and Hispanic students had the highest ethnic identity, followed by Asian students. White and Native American students had the lowest ethnic identity. The authors found that African American students had lower academic self-concepts than White and Asian students, but higher academic self-concepts than Hispanics and Native Americans. They also found that ethnic identity was positively correlated with academic self-concept. This is also consistent with more recent research that has found both ethnic and racial identity to be positively correlated with academic self-concept (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Cokley & Moore, 2007) and academic efficacy (Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001).

Another study included approximately 1,500 African American and European American socioeconomically diverse students in elementary school to post-secondary school (Eccleston, Smyth, & Lopoo, 2010). The authors found that African American students had a more positive reading academic self-concept than European American students, but were similar in math academic

self-concept. Consistent with the aforementioned meta-analyses, the authors also found that the overall self-esteem of African American students was more positive than that of European American students.

Using a nationally representative and racially diverse sample of approximately 7,000 students in grades 7–12, Lehman (2012) found that African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. Furthermore, among African American students, he found that perceptions of prejudice and racial diversity of friendships were negatively correlated with academic self-concept, while racially homogeneous friendships (i.e., having mostly Black friends) was positively correlated with academic self-concept.

Findings regarding academic self-concept are generally consistent with findings about self-esteem. Studies typically report that African American students have higher academic self-concepts than White students.

### **STEREOTYPE THREAT**

In one of the most highly cited articles related to the academic performance of African American students, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson introduced the concept of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) into the academic literature, and later into the popular literature (Steele, 1999). Claude Steele had started work on stereotype threat among women during his time at Michigan and in collaboration with a graduate student, Steven Spencer (Steele, 2010). Later, after he moved to Stanford, he was joined by a postdoctoral student, Joshua Aronson, with whom he collaborated to apply stereotype threat to African American students. According to Steele and Aronson, stereotype threat is “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797).

Steele and Aronson conducted a series of experimental studies to test the existence of stereotype threat. In the first study, 114 Black and White students were assigned to experimental and control groups and given a 30-minute test from the verbal GRE (with preexisting SAT differences being statistically controlled for). For the stereotype threat condition, students were told that the test represented a diagnostic test of ability. For the non-stereotype threat condition, the test was described as a laboratory problem-solving task. In the other non-stereotype threat condition, students were told that the test is a difficult challenge. The results indicated that Black students in the stereotype threat condition performed worse than Black students in both non-stereotype threat conditions, and also performed worse than White students in the stereotype threat condition. In essence, when the test was presented as a test of ability, Black students performed worse than White students; however, when it was presented as non-diagnostic of ability, Black students performed as well as White students.

In the second study, only Black and White female students participated. They took the same test, but it was offered on a computer and they had only 25 minutes (compared to the 30 minutes in the first study). The results were similar to the first study. In addition, the Black female students in the stereotype threat condition tended to respond more slowly to the test items than the Black female students in the non-diagnostic condition (94 seconds versus 71 seconds) and White female students in the stereotype threat condition (73 seconds) and non-diagnostic condition (71 seconds).

In the third study, they were interested in whether stereotype threat actually activated racial stereotypes in the thinking and information processing of Black students. Similar to the first two studies, students were placed in two conditions, one stereotype threat condition and one non-stereotype condition. Students engaged in a word fragment completion test, where 12 out of 80 word fragments had a race-related construct or an image associated with an African American as possible solutions. For example, “\_\_ce” could be completed as “race,” “la\_\_” could be completed as “lazy,” “\_\_ack” could be completed as “black,” and “\_\_or” could be completed as “poor.” Students were instructed to spend no more than 15 seconds on each item. Black students in the stereotype condition were more likely to complete the word fragment with a race-related construct than Black students in the non-stereotype condition and White students in the stereotype threat condition. Students were also told to rate their preferences for a range of activities, which included activities that are stereotypically associated with African Americans (e.g., rap music, basketball). Black students in the stereotype threat condition were also the least likely to prefer activities that were stereotypically associated with African Americans when compared to Black students in the non-stereotype threat condition and White students in both conditions.

Steele and Aronson concluded that the instructions clearly played a role in arousing stereotype threat among the Black students in the first three studies. In their fourth and final study, they examined whether identifying race would be enough to arouse stereotype threat. Once again, Black and White students were placed in a stereotype threat condition and non-stereotype threat condition. In the stereotype threat condition, the last item of the demographic sheet asked students to indicate their race, while students in the non-stereotype threat condition did not have to indicate their race. Students took the test on paper and were given 25 minutes. As hypothesized by the authors, Black students in the stereotype threat condition performed worse than Blacks in the non-stereotype threat condition and Whites in the stereotype threat condition.

From this final study, Steele and Aronson concluded that even when a test is not presented as diagnostic of ability, priming racial identity (i.e., making race salient by having students indicate their race) was still powerful enough to negatively impact Black students' performance. In trying to make sense of the

findings, Steele and Aronson surmise that stereotype threat makes Black students less efficient in processing information. Students who were stereotype threatened "spent more time doing fewer items more inaccurately" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 809). They suggest that it is precisely stereotype threat that leads students to academic disidentification.

In writing this section, I have tried to recount instances where I have observed stereotype threat and its effects. You would think that in 16 years of teaching, I should be able to easily recall instances where stereotype threat was present and negatively affected my African American students (or me, for that matter). However, I struggled to think of specific instances. I realized that the nice experimental conditions of the social psychology laboratory were not translating into easily identifiable experiences as I had anticipated. Then I realized that the experiences were perhaps more subtle and less dramatic than the examples provided by Steele's research.

For example, when I first started teaching as a professor, I was 29 years old. Given my age and the fact that I had recently completed my PhD, I was concerned about appearing to be competent to undergraduate and graduate students. On the one hand, this can be seen as a common concern among all newly minted PhDs who go straight to graduate school after graduating college. I tried to project an air of authority and competence by wearing a coat and tie to school every day that I taught a class. However, I was also very concerned about how I communicated in class. I was extra attentive to the way that I talked, making sure that I was not violating any grammar rules (e.g., subject/verb agreement), not using Ebonics, and pronouncing words correctly. I was also very concerned about being able to answer questions correctly. These concerns took on a decidedly racial overtone because I did not want to be perceived as an incompetent and unqualified Black professor. I felt that I was "representing the race," so I needed to always speak properly and answer all questions correctly. On the occasion that I would misspeak, I never thought of it as simply students seeing me as an individual making a mistake. Instead, I always believed that students (especially White students) were judging me as less intelligent and seeing me as a product of affirmative action. In my mind, this is another manifestation of stereotype threat. While research studies have typically included a prompt that made race more salient (e.g., instructions regarding tests of ability or demographic forms indicating race), I believe that Steele (1997) was accurate in describing stereotype threat as "a threat in the air." In my case, and I suspect in the cases of many African American students, there did not need to be an explicit prompt to make race salient for me. Did this awareness or concern about race cause me to misspeak? According to the logic of stereotype threat, probably yes. I am less certain that this is the case; however, I am certain that I was concerned about not perpetuating racial stereotypes related to Blacks being less intelligent. Whether these types of preoccupations disrupt or undermine academic performance is a question for researchers to continue to examine. However, there is no doubt in my mind that stereotype threat is a part of the psychological apparatus or makeup of African American students that is important to understand.

There have been hundreds of published studies and dissertations on stereotype threat, with its effects having been well documented in the literature. Stereotype threat has been linked to high blood pressure (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, & Steele, 2001), lowered test performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995), lowered academic learning (Taylor & Walton, 2011), and impaired problem-solving (Carr & Steele, 2009) among Blacks; racial distancing behavior among Whites (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008); and aggression, unhealthy eating, and risky decision making among women (Inzlicht & Kang, 2010). The specific mechanisms that explain why stereotype threat disrupts academic performance include (a) a physiological stress response that impairs cognitive processing, (b) a tendency to actively monitor performance, and (c) attempts to regulate and suppress negative thoughts and emotions (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). Among the domains in which stereotype threat is believed to have an impact, attitudes toward school is most directly implicated in the characterization of Black students being anti-intellectual and not valuing school because of the process of academic disidentification.

### ACADEMIC DISIDENTIFICATION

According to Steele, one of the consequences of stereotype threat is disidentification with school, a concept first introduced in the literature by Jeremy Finn's discussion of school withdrawal and the failure of students to develop a sense of identification with school (1989). In fact, prior to introducing the idea of stereotype threat to the public, Claude Steele introduced the concept of academic disidentification in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Steele, 1992). In this article, Steele started off by briefly reviewing the litany of statistics and data that illustrate Black underachievement: lower grades at every grade level, higher dropout rate at every grade level, and a decrease in the number of PhDs awarded. Steele then briefly reviewed the common set of explanations used to explain Black underachievement. One by one, he rejected each explanation as being inadequate. Regarding socioeconomic status, where it is well documented that socioeconomic status is correlated with academic achievement (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982), Steele indicated that even middle-class Black students at wealthy schools still underperform compared to middle-class White students at the same schools. He also ruled out skills deficits, because even when Black students have comparable SAT scores (which he equates with measuring academic skills), they still underperform academically in comparison to White students. In addition, he ruled out the argument that Black American culture simply does not value education by pointing out that the results of many surveys indicate that Black students do value education highly, and often more than White students. Steele believed that while each of these explanations partially explain Black underachievement, each involved limitations. He believed that there was still something else involved.

He finally settled on a social psychological explanation that he called academic disidentification. Steele characterized disidentification as the process wherein self-esteem becomes disconnected from academic achievement. Years before the label of academic disidentification was applied to African American students, studies had reported that Black students were more likely to disconnect their self-esteem from academic achievement in comparison to White students (Demo & Parker, 1987; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972). To illustrate, Steele talked about his own graduate school experience where he conducted experiments with his advisor. He did the work because he wanted a PhD, but he acknowledged that he was not necessarily excited about the work and he had not fully internalized a social psychologist identity. However, over time, he began to gradually like the work, and he became genuinely excited about it. His excitement manifested in ways such as meeting deadlines, constantly wanting to talk about arcane theories, and becoming emotionally invested in the outcomes of his experiments. Steele indicated that these academic and intellectual activities were becoming a part of his self-esteem. In other words, he was becoming increasingly identified with academics. According to Steele, one overlooked factor in his becoming identified with academics was being treated as a valued person with good potential and constant reaffirmation.

*I am reminded of a recent intervention involving African American doctoral students in a graduate program. Everywhere that I have taught, ethnic minority students have eventually come to me to discuss their experiences in their graduate programs. I am not remarkable in this regard, as I believe this often happens with faculty of color who care about ethnic minority students. I addressed a group of faculty about my concerns regarding the experiences of African American students. The students had reported a series of negative incidents and racial microaggressions that was making their graduate experience very difficult, if not miserable. The students reported several overlapping concerns including lack of research opportunities, feeling invisible, feeling less invested in than their White peers, and not feeling supported or cared for. These concerns alone are difficult and would be enough to facilitate students becoming disidentified from their graduate studies. However, what made these students' experiences even more intolerable were their experiences of racial microaggressions. One student reported that during a presentation, a student supported early childhood programs that would take African American babies away from their families and place them with White families because research showed that White structure is better. The African American student indicated that she became very heated and argued from a researcher's perspective with the offending student. She characterized the professor as not saying much at all, and then during the break, asking a question regarding how she felt about Obama being elected as president. The student reported being nearly in tears from the sense of rage that she felt. Another incident was reported in which a student made the comment that if African American students did not listen to music, play sports, and dance so much, they would perform better on IQ tests. The professor did not respond*

the paradox of higher self-esteem among African American students in spite of having lower grades. While the paradoxical phenomenon has been identified in several studies reviewed, it is also important to better understand the reasons that might explain why the paradox exists. Two mechanisms have been proposed that account for the paradox: devaluing academic success and discounting academic feedback (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001).

### DEVALUING ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Devaluing academic success involves attitudes that minimize the importance of making good grades and doing well in school. If African American students devalue academic success, making good grades will obviously not be important to them. In spite of the characterization of Black students as devaluing academic success, there is very little empirical evidence to support this assertion. Published studies that have explicitly and quantitatively examined devaluing academic success among African American students do not generally support this notion. As Schmader, Major, and Gramzow (2001) state, there is much evidence that demonstrates African American students value school at least as much as White students, and often times more.

In one study, Voelkl (1997) had a sample of 181 African American students and 1,150 White 8th-grade students taken from 104 schools. The students were part of a longitudinal study, and completed a 16-item measure of identification with school that reflected belongingness to school as well as valuing school and school-related outcomes. Voelkl found that African American students had higher levels of identification with school than White students. Grades were not related to identification with school among African American students, but they were related among White students.

In another study involving 676 undergraduate students at UCLA, differences among disengagement processes were examined (Schmader et al., 2001). There were 184 African American students, 270 Latino students, and 222 White students. Devaluing academic success was measured using four items: "Being good at academics is an important part of who I am," "Doing well on intellectual tasks is very important to me," "Academic success is not very valuable to me," and "It usually doesn't matter to me one way or the other how I do in school." The first two items were reverse scored. There were no ethnic group differences in devaluing academic success.

An important detail in these studies is how devaluing academic success is measured. Differences in wording or emphasis could produce discrepant results. On the other hand, if differences in wording or emphasis produce similar results, more definitive conclusions may be drawn. In a previously discussed study, Eccleston, Smyth, and Lopoo (2010) also examined differences in valuing academics between African American and White students. Valuing academic

success was operationalized by two items that start off with the stem "for you being good in math is" and "for you being good in reading is." The response options ranged from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important). Two additional items addressed how useful math and reading were to them, with response options ranging from 1 (not at all useful) to 7 (very useful). Composite scores for valuing math and valuing reading were created. Eccleston et al. found that African American students were significantly higher in valuing both math and reading than White students. To further indirectly test the devaluing academics hypothesis, they examined whether math and reading self-concepts were predictive of self-esteem and found them both to be significantly predictive among African American and White students. The authors conclude that this data again do not support the hypothesis that African American students devalue academics.

Beyond examining mean group differences, it is also important to examine whether devaluing academic success is linked to GPA. The findings here are more equivocal. In one study with African American high school students, my colleagues and I found that devaluing academic success was not predictive of GPA (Cokley et al., 2011). However, in another study with African American college students, we found that devaluing academic success was predictive of GPA (Cokley & Chapman, 2008). However, when that data were disaggregated by gender, we found that devaluing academic success was correlated with GPA among African American females but not males (Cokley & Moore, 2007). It should be noted that the discrepancy in sample sizes (216 women, 58 men) may have contributed to the failure to find a significant relationship among men.

## DISCOUNTING ACADEMIC FEEDBACK

Another reason that contributes to academic disidentification is the discounting of academic feedback. African American students often find it difficult to totally trust feedback or evaluations about their academic competencies when there is mistrust of the evaluation tool (e.g., standardized tests) or the evaluator (e.g., White teacher). The mistrust of White evaluators has long been established in the literature. Curtis Banks and his colleagues found that African American participants were less likely to engage in behavioral change when negative feedback came from White evaluators than when they came from Black evaluators (Banks, Stitt, Curtis, & McQuater, 1977). They also found that Black evaluators were perceived as more objective than White evaluators.

Given racial dynamics around cultural mistrust, what happens when a White evaluator gives critical feedback to Black and White students? Two experimental studies by Cohen, Steele, and Ross (1999) were conducted to answer this question. In the first study, students were asked to write a letter of commendation about their favorite teacher for possible publication in an education journal.

## ACADEMIC MOTIVATION

The focus on stereotype threat, academic disidentification, devaluing academic success, and discounting academic feedback lead some observers to conclude that African American students have lower academic motivation than White students. Sandra Graham provides a comprehensive critique of the motivation literature regarding African Americans (Graham, 1994, 1997). She notes that the assumptions of African Americans as (1) lacking personality traits associated with achievement motivation, (2) being less likely to believe in internal or personal control of outcomes, and (3) having negative views of themselves because of lower academic achievement are not supported by empirical data.

Earlier, I discussed devaluing academic success and discounting academic feedback as mechanisms that allow African American students to maintain a high self-esteem in spite of lower academic performance. Another related mechanism is the attributions made by African American students to explain their lower academic performance. Van Laar (2000) conducted a longitudinal study where she found that African American students, like White students, were just as likely to make internal attributions about their success and failure as White students. In other words, when they do well or poorly African American students were just as likely to attribute their success or failure to ability and effort as White students. However, at the end of their first year, African American students began to make more external attributions about their failure than White students, and their expectations about future economic potential were lowered.

In an attempt to use diverse theoretical approaches to examine the academic motivation of African American students, I used self-determination theory given its popularity in the literature (Cokley, 2003). Self-determination theory proposes that human beings have three basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness that are essential for optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A basic assumption of self-determination theory is that all individuals have an innate need to be intrinsically motivated when their psychological needs are met.

Given the conventional wisdom that African American students have lowered academic motivation than White students, I conducted a study to test this assumption (Cokley, 2003). Using a sample of 394 African American students and 291 White students, I compared the motivation of both groups using the *Academic Motivation Scale* (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, & Brière, 1992). The *Academic Motivation Scale* measures both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as amotivation (i.e., the lack of motivation). I found that African American and White students had similar levels of intrinsic motivation; however, African American students had significantly higher levels of all three types of extrinsic motivation than White students. Additionally, I found that the racial composition of the school environment was an important factor. African