

Optimism in the Face of Despair: Black-White Differences in Beliefs About School as a Means for Upward Social Mobility*

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Objective. This study aims to provide a better understanding of how beliefs about the system of social mobility affect students' schooling outcomes. Previous studies reach conflicting conclusions because they conflate two forms of beliefs about social mobility (i.e., perceived value of school and perceived barriers despite schooling). *Methods.* The Maryland Adolescence Development In Context Study (MADICS) is used to examine black-white differences in beliefs about the value of school and barriers to upward mobility despite schooling and how these beliefs predict academic achievement and educational attainment. *Results.* The analyses show that relative to whites, blacks hold stronger beliefs in both the value of school and barriers to social mobility, and have greater affective attitudes toward schooling. However, belief in barriers to social mobility is not consequential for academic outcomes. *Conclusions.* Beliefs about upward mobility are mechanisms by which the opportunity structure influences individuals' schooling behaviors and making clear distinctions between various beliefs about the system of social mobility can refine the understanding of this link. This study suggests that individuals make nuanced distinctions about the role of schooling for upward mobility, each with separate effects on academic outcomes.

Despite the persistence of the black-white achievement gap—Hedges and Nowell (1999) project gap convergence could take as long as 50 years in reading and more than a century in math—numerous studies find that blacks have more favorable attitudes toward school than do whites (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Harris, 2006; Coleman et al., 1966; Patchen, 1982).¹ The inconsistency of blacks' greater pro-school attitudes

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¹The term "black" refers to people of African Diaspora, and to such populations that reside within the United States. It is important to note the distinction between "black" and "African American." To some, African Americans are a subgroup within a larger black community that includes first-generation immigrants and/or individuals who do not identify

and lower school achievement relative to whites—termed the “attitude-achievement paradox” by Mickelson (1990)—prompted Ogbu (1991:446) to suggest that black Americans’ greater pro-school attitudes merely reflect “wishful thinking . . . [because blacks] simply do not match their aspirations with effort.” Rather than focusing on pro-school attitudes, Ogbu suggests that since blacks’ experiences take place in an unfair opportunity structure that underrewards their educational endeavors, researchers should focus on blacks’ beliefs about upward mobility.

Despite numerous theories that attempt to explain racial differences in academic outcomes, only one draws on student perceptions about the prevailing system of social mobility: Ogbu’s (1978, 2003) cultural-ecological framework (oppositional culture theory or resistance model). The theory posits that investment in schooling is contingent on students’ belief that education will lead to improved life chances such as better jobs and higher wages, social status, and self-esteem. Therefore, perceptions of barriers to educational opportunities and future employment and earnings (i.e., job ceiling) trigger community forces characterized by a culture oppositional to mainstream goals, particularly educational achievement. These perceptions are often held by black Americans because they are subordinate minorities—groups historically targeted by exclusionary policies. Thus, blacks’ lower academic performance is attributed to their disinvestment from schooling resulting from their belief that the system of social mobility has been rooted in educational and occupational discrimination against blacks.

Perceptions about upward mobility form the crux of Ogbu’s framework, but researchers have not given this aspect of the theory much attention. Instead, scholars have focused on whether an oppositional culture of school resistance exists among blacks. Specifically, numerous studies have tested the “acting white” hypothesis—whether blacks experience greater social cost for high achievement than whites (e.g., Akom, 2003; Carter, 2005; Cook and Ludwig, 1997; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Harris, 2006; Horvat and Lewis, 2003; O’Conner, 1999; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005). Other studies have employed a wide range of indicators to measure students’ affective evaluations about academics (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Cook and Ludwig, 1997; Harris, 2006). Although Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) and Harris (2006) assess racial differences on the extent to which youths view education as a mechanism for upward mobility, they fail to consider youths’ views about barriers to becoming upwardly mobile. Given the lack of distinction between these beliefs about the system of social mobility—the value youths attribute to education and views regarding barriers—it is unclear if blacks hold more negative beliefs about the

as African American. However, previous studies typically employ the term “black” when racial comparisons are made on academic outcomes within the United States (e.g., black-white achievement gap). Therefore, I use the term black to remain consistent with previous literature.

opportunity structure than whites, and whether these beliefs offset affective schooling attitudes to drive poor achievement.

The lack of focus on different types of beliefs about the opportunity structure has led to an incomplete understanding of how perceptions about the system of social mobility affect schooling behaviors. This study outlines a conceptual distinction between different beliefs about the opportunity structure and assesses their importance for academic outcomes. Affective schooling attitudes are also considered. Thus, the goal of this study is to provide some clarity about which set of beliefs/attitudes are consequential for academic achievement and educational attainment and which should be de-emphasized. It is important to note that this study does *not* seek to test for the existence of an oppositional culture among blacks. Doing so would require racial comparisons across a wide range of academic characteristics, such as youths' schooling behaviors and general orientation toward academics, which has been done elsewhere (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Harris, 2006; Harris and Robinson, 2007). Rather, by operationalizing beliefs about upward mobility in the manner discussed by Ogbu (1978) and accounting for affective schooling attitudes, this study seeks to refine the understanding of how perceptions about the system of social mobility affect schooling.

Perceptions of the Opportunity Structure, Race, and Schooling

Racial differences in belief in the achievement ideology (i.e., education leads to status attainment) has been the dominant explanation for black-white differences in academic outcomes. However, the issue of whether blacks view education as a means for upward socioeconomic mobility is not straightforward (Cose, 1993; Hochschild, 1995; Feagin and Sikes, 1994). For example, although several studies document blacks' antagonistic views about "getting ahead" in the United States, they suggest that blacks who are most inclined to perceive barriers to advancement are those who have invested the most in schooling. Specifically, Cose (1993) and Feagin and Sikes (1994) document the perception of barriers among blacks who have already attained success both in schooling and in the labor market. Similarly, Hochschild (1995) shows that relative to whites and disadvantaged blacks, affluent blacks perceive more racial discrimination and greater barriers to success. Paradoxically, she shows belief in education and hard work as mechanisms for upward mobility is most strongly held by poor blacks. She notes that more poorly educated blacks than any other racial/class group express "a great deal" of confidence in schools despite their skepticism of other U.S. institutions. Thus, contrary to Ogbu's suggestion, these scholars note that blacks generally believe in the achievement ideology.

Since education is the primary mechanism for upward socioeconomic mobility, belief in the achievement ideology seems critical for academic

investment. However, previous research on the link between beliefs about the prevailing system of social mobility and individuals' schooling behavior is mixed. Survey-based inquiries show that students who believe in the achievement ideology experience academic successes, while those who challenge this belief do not (Ford and Harris, 1996; Mickelson, 1990). In contrast, recent studies show that blacks are capable of maintaining high academic orientation despite beliefs in structural barriers within the opportunity structure for members of their group (Akom, 2003; O'Conner, 1999; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005). Given the common finding in previous studies that blacks express greater pro-school attitudes than whites (e.g., Cook and Ludwig, 1997; Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002), further research is needed to reconcile these discrepant findings.

Mickelson (1990) argues that previous studies find that blacks have positive attitudes toward school despite low achievement because researchers do not distinguish between academic (i.e., abstract) and practical (i.e., concrete) attitudes. Whereas abstract attitudes (e.g., education is important) reflect dominant ideology regarding the ideal role of education, concrete attitudes are rooted in life experiences. She writes that "concrete attitudes shed needed light on the process by which the structure of opportunity (in terms of race and class) shapes academic achievement and thereby help explain why so many black students do not do well in school" (1990:58). Using data from high school seniors in the Los Angeles area, Mickelson finds that (1) abstract attitudes have no effect on grades, (2) concrete attitudes have a positive effect, and (3) blacks hold less positive concrete attitudes toward education than do whites, which she attributes to material realities they experience that "challenge the rhetoric of the American Dream" (1990:59).

Mickelson's research is important in identifying *which* attitudes serve as a link between society and the individual; however, several contradictions still remain regarding the role of beliefs about the opportunity structure in schooling. For example, why are blacks more likely than whites to pursue an academic rather than a vocational curriculum and to attend a four-year college rather than a two-year college net of socioeconomic factors (Hochschild 1995:160)? Similarly, why are poor black parents more likely than their Latino/a, Asian, and white counterparts to discuss their children's school experiences and plans, restrict television on school nights, set rules about grades, and help with homework (U.S. Department of Education, 1992)? These findings suggest that blacks do attribute value to schooling. However, previous studies also find that blacks' experiences in the labor force lead many of them to doubt the value of schooling (e.g., Cose, 1993; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Hochschild, 1995). Also, what should be made of blacks' greater pro-school (affective) attitudes? Mickelson's findings do *not* address the greater pro-school affective attitudes consistently found among blacks, which can still lead opponents to Ogbu's thesis to conclude that blacks do not actively resist education.

Distinguishing Between Beliefs, Considering Affective Attitudes

These contradictions remain because scholars have conflated two separate beliefs about upward mobility: *value of schooling* and *perceived barriers despite schooling*. The former concept refers to perceptions of the potential for schooling to improve one's life chances. This is similar to perceived returns to education, which is often the focus of studies on the achievement ideology. The latter belief—perceived barriers—refers to belief in the existence of barriers to upward mobility despite one's level of education. Neither concept is intended to capture students' liking of school (i.e., affective attitudes), which is often viewed as less consequential than beliefs about the opportunity structure.

Since Ogbu's model is the dominant theory linking societal conditions to individuals' schooling behaviors via beliefs, he may have inadvertently contributed to the lack of research that clearly delineates between these concepts. He often merged beliefs about the value of school and beliefs in barriers despite schooling into perceived returns to education. For instance, Ogbu (1991:53) writes that “[blacks] have come to view the inadequate and unequal reward of education as a part of the institutionalized discrimination structure which getting an education cannot eliminate.” Describing beliefs about the extent to which one will be rewarded (value of school) as part of the barriers schooling cannot overcome leaves no clear distinction between these concepts. Instead, they appear substantively equivalent; perceptions of low rewards must be accompanied by perceptions of high barriers. Thus, by finding that blacks perceive more barriers than whites, proponents of the resistance model assume they must perceive lower educational returns and therefore attribute less value to school. Similarly, by finding that blacks perceive greater educational returns, opponents of the resistance model disregard beliefs about barriers.

The failure to account for the diverse nature of people's beliefs is a critical deficit in previous studies for understanding how perceptions of the prevailing system of social mobility influence students' schooling behavior. Also, it is important for social scientists to consider beliefs and affective attitudes as conceptually and empirically distinct. Strategies for academic improvement if beliefs are more important for achievement (e.g., greater emphasis on the value of education) might differ from those suggested if attitudes are more important (e.g., incorporating material that students find more interesting into lesson plans).

Data

Data for this study come from the Maryland Adolescence Development In Context Study (MADICS), a longitudinal data set that contains a unique collection of measures on children (51 percent male, 49 percent female)

from Grade 7 through three years post high school. The sample was drawn from a county on the eastern seaboard of the United States and consists of 1,407 black and white families (66 and 34 percent, respectively). The sample was selected from approximately 5,000 adolescents who entered middle school in 1991 using a stratified sampling procedure designed to get proportional representations of families from each of the county's 23 middle schools. Thus, the socioeconomic background of the sample is varied and includes families from low-income urban neighborhoods, middle-class suburban neighborhoods, and rural farm-based neighborhoods. White families reported significantly higher incomes (\$50,000–54,999) than black families (\$40,000–44,999).

The MADICS consists of five waves collected when the youths were in Grade 7 ($N = 1,407$), 8 ($N = 1,004$), 11 ($N = 954$), one year post high school ($N = 832$), and three years post high school ($N = 853$). The current analysis uses Waves 1, 3, 4, and 5. In supplemental analyses not shown, blacks were *not* less likely to be retained than whites; the proportion of blacks and whites within the sample remains constant across waves. Also, most attrition occurs between Grades 7 and 8; only 3 percent of the sample is lost between Grades 8 and 11. Therefore, it is unlikely that sample attrition results from students dropping out of high school.

Although the MADICS was not designed to draw inferences to the national population of students, several reasons make it suitable for the current study. First, I am unaware of theoretical models positing that perceptions about the opportunity structure vary by geographic area. Second, previous studies that use the MADICS (Harris, 2006) yield similar conclusions to studies that use national data (i.e., Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Cook and Ludwig, 1997). Furthermore, the richness of measures and longitudinal design of the MADICS provide a good opportunity to make clear delineations between beliefs and affective attitudes and examine their effects on academic outcomes net of prior academic success. Finally, the MADICS contains measures used by Mickelson (1990, 2001), which allows for the use of measures on perceptions about the system of social mobility that are rooted in previous research.

Hypotheses and Analytic Plan

Previous research on racial differences in beliefs regarding the value of education is mixed. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) and Harris (2006) find black students have greater perceptions of educational returns than white students, which though similar to *value of schooling*, is not synonymous. Rather than measuring students' perceptions of educational returns in general, the measure of value of school in this study is intended to capture students' perceptions of the extent to which schooling can improve *their* life chances. Thus, it is unclear whether blacks will score higher than

whites on this outcome. In contrast, Mickelson argues that due to messages blacks' receive from parents, friends, and neighbors, "young blacks are not bewitched by the rhetoric of equal opportunity through education; they hear another side of the story at the dinner table" (1990:59). Mickelson (1990) and Ogbu (2003) find that blacks have greater perceptions of future barriers and they conflate these perceptions with perceived returns to education. No study has distinguished between these concepts. Although these findings appear contradictory, they might both have empirical basis; blacks may be making nuanced distinctions about education as a means for upward mobility and for attaining racial equality. Therefore, I assess the following hypothesis.

H_{1a}: Blacks perceive lower value from schooling than do whites.

H_{1b}: Blacks perceive greater barriers despite schooling than do whites.

Ogbu (1978) notes that expected gains from education (value of schooling) and perceptions about barriers to success with regard to future employment and earnings are important determinants of school performance. For example, Ogbu (1991:50) writes that "by denying minorities an opportunity to enter the labor market and to advance according to their educational qualifications and abilities and by denying them adequate wage rewards for their educational efforts, American society has probably discouraged minorities from investing their time and effort into the pursuit of education and the maximization of educational accomplishments." Although he discusses each type of belief (value of school and barriers despite school), he effectively merges them under the rubric of perceived returns to education. Since these beliefs might have separate effects, I also assess the following hypothesis.

H_{2a}: Students' beliefs about the value of school are positively associated with school performance and the odds of enrolling in college (i.e., academic outcomes).

H_{2b}: Students' beliefs about future barriers they might encounter despite their level of education are negatively associated with academic outcomes.

All analyses are net of three factors. First, analyses control for socioeconomic variables associated with race and the outcomes such as family income, parental education, family structure, and sex. Second, since pre high school achievement is likely to influence beliefs in high school, I include a model that controls for students' achievement prior to high school (Grade 7).² Finally, numerous scholars note that messages about education provided by family and friends are critical to beliefs and affective attitudes students

²In a study among blacks in elementary school, Tyson (2002) finds that despite beginning school very much engaged and achievement oriented, the negative attitudes of some black children reflect a desire to avoid further failure in school. This implies that schooling attitudes are part of a developmental rather than a cultural process. Specifically, schooling attitudes are partially determined by earlier experiences of academic success or failure.

develop about school (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Mickelson, 1990; Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown, 1992). Therefore, I include a vector consisting of messages about school received from family and friends. Also, to account for missing data, each regression model contains “missing information” measures—coded 0 if not missing and 1 if missing—for each nonrace predictor. Table 1 presents detailed information on the measures used in this study. Constructs comprised of multiple items are the weighted sum of the items within the scale.

It is important to note that *value of schooling* and *perceived barriers despite schooling* are not synonymous with abstract and concrete attitudes assessed by Mickelson (1990, 2001). The former measures are intended to capture students’ beliefs about *their* future experiences with the opportunity structure. Mickelson’s measure of abstract attitudes is more general than the value students believe *they* will receive from education. Similarly, Mickelson’s concrete attitudes were intended to partially capture the intergenerational transmission of oppositional culture—or how students are socialized with regard to the future payoff of school. Therefore, although measures in the current study are similar to those used by Mickelson (1990, 2001), they are used differently to reflect the aforementioned distinctions between beliefs and capture the socialization of these beliefs separately (i.e., messages from parents and peers).

Results

Table 2 contains findings for Hypothesis 1. It appears that black students simultaneously have a higher belief in the value of school and in barriers that schooling cannot overcome than do white students, even after controlling for background factors (see the first two models for each outcome). Although Model 3a indicates that students’ prior achievement positively influences beliefs in the *value of school* ($b = 0.212$), Model 3b shows that blacks’ lower school achievement prior to Grade 11 has no implication for racial differences in beliefs in barriers. Model 4a shows that students’ beliefs about the value of school are determined by messages they receive from parents and peers about the value of school ($b = 0.502$ and 0.103 , respectively). Similarly, Model 4b shows that students’ beliefs in barriers increase the more they receive messages from their parents about barriers ($b = 0.302$). However, belief in barriers decreases the more students receive parental messages about the value of school ($b = -0.084$) and the more positive the school culture is among their peers ($b = -0.076$). Basically, the findings contradict Hypothesis 1a and support Hypothesis 1b.

Table 3 contains results for Hypotheses 2a and 2b. Model 1a shows that messages from parents about the value of schooling and messages from peers significantly predict students’ achievement ($b = 0.088$ and 0.222 , respectively), although the effect of the former appears to be indirect through

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Descriptions for Variables Used in the Analysis: MADICS 1996

Variable Name	Description	Metric	Means (SD)			
			White	Black	Alpha	—
<i>Educational Outcomes</i>						
Achievement	Student GPA in Grade 11	0-4.0	3.04 (0.79)	2.82 (0.72)	—	—
College enrollment	Enrolled in college one year post high school	0 = No 1 = Yes	0.74 (0.44)	0.65 (0.48)	—	—
<i>Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Schooling</i>						
Perceived value of schooling	(a) I have to do well in school if I want to be a success in life. (b) Getting a good education is the best way to get ahead in life for the kids in my neighborhood. (c) Achievement and effort in school lead to job success later on. (d) Education really pays off in the future for people like me.	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree	4.06	4.16	0.812	0.812
Barriers despite schooling	People like me aren't treated fairly at work no matter how much education they have.	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree	(0.75) 2.39	(0.72) 2.91	—	—
Affect attitude toward school	(a) Most of my classes or subjects are boring. * (b) Homework is a waste of time. * (c) In general, you like school a lot. (d) Grades are very important to you.	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree	(0.90) 3.45	(0.94) 3.61	0.624	0.624

TABLE 1—continued

Variable Name	Description	Metric	Means (SD)		
			White	Black	Alpha
<i>Messages About Schooling</i>					
Parent message on value of schooling	My parents tell me that a good education is very important in order to get a good job.	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree	(0.74) 4.20	(0.65) 4.29	—
Parent message on barriers despite schooling	My parents say people like us are not always paid or promoted according to our education.	1 = Strongly disagree 5 = Strongly agree	(0.78) 2.82	(0.87) 3.20	—
Peer value on schooling	How many of the friends you spend most of your time with (a) do well in school? (b) plan to go to college? (c) like to discuss schoolwork or other intellectual things with you? (d) think it is important to work hard on schoolwork?	1 = None of them 5 = All of them	(0.88) 3.41	(0.97) 3.39	0.791
<i>Prior Achievement</i>					
Prior school performance	Student's GPA prior to high school (Grade 7)	0–4.0	(0.80) 3.37	(0.78) 3.11	—

*Item is reverse coded.

TABLE 2

Unstandardized Coefficients for Regressions of Beliefs on Race, Prior Achievement, Messages About School, and Background Factors

Independent Variables	Value of School				Barriers Despite Schooling			
	(1a)	(2a)	(3a)	(4a)	(1b)	(2b)	(3b)	(4b)
<i>Race</i>								
Black	0.103* (0.052)	0.144** (0.053)	0.187*** (0.054)	0.075 (0.044)	0.515*** (0.066)	0.484*** (0.068)	0.482*** (0.070)	0.403*** (0.067)
<i>Prior Achievement</i>								
Achievement (G7)	—	—	0.212*** (0.055)	0.068 (0.046)	—	—	-0.058 (0.072)	0.057 (0.069)
<i>Message About School</i>								
Parent (value)	—	—	—	0.502*** (0.024)	—	—	—	-0.084* (0.037)
Parent (barriers)	—	—	—	0.027 (0.021)	—	—	—	0.302*** (0.031)
Positive peer culture	—	—	—	0.103*** (0.028)	—	—	—	-0.076* (0.036)
<i>Background Factors</i>								
Family income	—	0.003 (0.008)	0.004 (0.008)	0.005 (0.006)	—	0.007 (0.010)	0.007 (0.010)	0.010 (0.009)
Parental education	—	0.014 (0.010)	0.007 (0.010)	-0.003 (0.008)	—	-0.029* (0.012)	-0.028* (0.013)	-0.025* (0.012)
Constant	4.059*** (0.042)	3.583*** (0.152)	2.981*** (0.216)	1.232*** (0.205)	2.388*** (0.053)	2.849*** (0.196)	3.004*** (0.280)	2.242*** (0.310)
R ²	0.005	0.053	0.072	0.405	0.066	0.076	0.078	0.179

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Models 2 through 4 also include controls for sex and family structure. Number of observations is 860 and 869 for the models predicting value of school and barriers despite schooling, respectively.

TABLE 3

Coefficients for Achievement (Unstandardized OLS) and College Enrollment (Logistic and Odds Ratios) Regressed on Messages About School, Beliefs and Attitudes Toward School, Prior Achievement, and Background Factors

Independent Variables	Achievement (Grade 11)			College Enrollment (1 Year Post H.S.)		
	(1a)	(2a)	(3a)	(1b)	(2b)	(3b)
<i>Messages About School</i>						
Parent—value	0.088** (0.030)	0.023 (0.036)	-0.036 (0.035)	0.219 (0.123)	-0.078 (0.162)	-0.115 (0.175)
Parent—barriers	-0.037 (0.026)	-0.036 (0.027)	-0.016 (0.026)	-0.282* (0.112)	-0.266* (0.122)	-0.219 (0.126)
Peer culture	0.222*** (0.034)	0.155*** (0.035)	0.128*** (0.034)	1.009*** (0.149)	0.856*** (0.158)	0.632*** (0.167)
<i>Beliefs and Attitudes</i>						
Value of schooling	—	0.183*** (0.044)	0.170*** (0.043)	—	0.510** (0.198)	0.420 (0.218)
Barriers	—	0.020 (0.027)	0.018 (0.027)	—	-0.069 (0.121)	-0.114 (0.125)
Affect toward school	—	0.176*** (0.040)	0.178*** (0.039)	—	0.461** (0.183)	0.351 (0.199)
<i>Prior Achievement</i>						
Grade 7 GPA	—	—	0.339*** (0.054)	—	—	1.154*** (0.261)
Grade 11 GPA	—	—	—	—	—	0.728*** (0.182)
<i>Background Factors</i>						
Black (whites omitted)	-0.142** (0.054)	-0.190*** (0.054)	-0.140** (0.054)	-0.075 (0.218)	-0.158 (0.228)	0.179 (0.249)
						1.881
						1.95

TABLE 3—continued

Independent Variables	Achievement (Grade 11)			College Enrollment (1 Year Post H.S.)		
	(1a)	(2a)	(3a)	(1b)	(2b)	(3b)
Family income	0.013 (0.008)	0.013 (0.007)	0.013 (0.007)	0.095*** (0.029)	0.097*** (0.030)	0.083*** (0.032)
Parental education	0.038*** (0.010)	0.036*** (0.010)	0.030** (0.010)	0.222*** (0.042)	0.241*** (0.043)	0.233*** (0.046)
Constant	1.130*** (0.220)	0.460 (0.243)	-0.400 (0.275)	-7.243*** (0.978)	-9.378*** (1.176)	-5.902*** (1.086)
R ²	0.183	0.240	0.276	174.23*** 12	201.43*** 18	250.25*** 22
Chi-square df						

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Models also include controls for sex and family structure. Number of observations is 789 and 666 for the models predicting *achievement* and *college enrollment*, respectively.

students own beliefs about the value of school (see Model 2a). More importantly, the next two models show that students' achievement is positively influenced by their beliefs about the value of school and their affect toward schooling and *not* by beliefs about future barriers they might encounter, even after controlling for prior achievement in Model 3a. The next three models provide both logit coefficients and odds ratios to predict college enrollment (results are discussed as the estimated effects on odds ratio). Model 1b shows that parental messages about barriers and peer culture affect college enrollment. While each unit increase in parental messages about barriers leads to a 24.6 percent decline in the odds of enrolling in college ($b = -0.282$ and odds ratio = 0.754 in Model 1b), each unit increase in peer culture leads students to be 2.7 times more likely to enroll in college ($b = 1.009$ and odds ratio = 2.742 in Model 1b). Model 2b suggests that while students' beliefs about the value of school and their affect toward school increase their odds of enrolling in college ($b = 0.510$ and 0.461 , respectively), their beliefs about barriers do not predict college enrollment. Finally, Model 3b indicates that the primary factors determining college enrollment are prior school achievement and messages from friends ($b = 0.632$). In sum, Hypothesis 2a is the only hypothesis supported; attributing positive value to schooling is important for students' academic achievement.³

Given that blacks' perceptions about the opportunity structure are viewed as a major factor in their poor school achievement, analyses that include whites may bias the findings toward not supporting Hypothesis 2b. Therefore, I repeat these analyses in Table 4 with models specified in a manner that allows the estimated effects of the predictors to be presented for each group.

$$\begin{aligned} Outcome = & \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Black}) + \beta_2(\text{White}^* \text{BEL/ATT}) \\ & + \beta_3(\text{Black}^* \text{BEL/ATT}) + \dots + \varepsilon \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Equation (1) provides separate estimates by race on whether the effect of beliefs and affective attitudes (BEL/ATT) on the academic outcomes for each group significantly differs from zero and *not* for blacks relative to whites; the difference between β_2 and β_3 is equivalent to the interaction term attained through traditional multiplicative specification.

Findings in Table 4 are similar to those in Table 3. Model 1a shows school achievement increases for both groups as they attribute more value to school ($b = 0.173$ and 0.179 for whites and blacks, respectively) and have greater affect toward schooling ($b = 0.232$ and 0.144 for whites and blacks, respectively). Beliefs about potential barriers have no impact on achievement

³In supplemental analysis not shown, relative to whites, blacks had significantly lower achievement ($b = -0.222$) and were only 64 percent as likely to be enrolled in college ($b = -0.443$) before controlling for background factors. Also, in order to account for possible collinearity between the messages about school vector and students' beliefs, I repeated the analysis in Table 3 excluding the messages about school measures. However, the findings were substantively the same.

TABLE 4

Coefficients for Achievement (Unstandardized OLS) and College Enrollment (Logistic and Odds Ratios) Regressed on Beliefs and Attitudes About School, Prior Achievement, and Background Factors by Race

Independent Variables	Achievement		College Enrollment (1 Year Post H.S.)			
	(1a)	(2a)	(1b)	Odds Ratio	(2b)	Odds Ratio
<i>Beliefs/Attitudes for Whites</i>						
Value of schooling	0.173** (0.062)	0.164** (0.060)	0.751** (0.272)	2.120	0.765** (0.301)	2.150
Barriers	0.047 (0.046)	0.035 (0.045)	-0.290 (0.203)	0.748	-0.369 (0.216)	0.692
Affect toward school	0.232*** (0.061)	0.234*** (0.059)	0.351 (0.266)	1.420	0.175 (0.298)	1.192
<i>Beliefs/Attitudes for Blacks</i>						
Value of schooling	0.179*** (0.051)	0.161*** (0.050)	0.372 (0.214)	1.450	0.236 (0.236)	1.266
Barriers	0.009 (0.033)	0.012 (0.032)	0.038 (0.139)	1.039	-0.002 (0.143)	0.998
Affect toward school	0.144** (0.047)	0.145** (0.046)	0.515** (0.197)	1.673	0.421* (0.213)	1.523
<i>Prior Achievement</i>						
Grade 7 GPA	—	0.339*** (0.055)	—	—	1.163*** (0.264)	3.200
Grade 11 GPA	—	—	—	—	0.739*** (0.186)	2.094
<i>Background Factors</i>						
Family income	0.013 (0.007)	0.014 (0.007)	0.093** (0.030)	1.097	0.077* (0.032)	1.080
Parental education	0.037*** (0.010)	0.031*** (0.010)	0.243*** (0.044)	1.275	0.235*** (0.046)	1.265
R^2	0.242	0.278				
Chi-square			204.74***		254.76***	
<i>df</i>			21		25	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Models also include controls for messages about school from parents and friends, sex, and family structure. Number of observations is 789 and 666 for the models predicting *achievement* and *college enrollment*, respectively.

for either group. In contrast, only belief about the value of school has an effect on college enrollment for whites ($b = 0.751$ in Model 1b); each unit increase in *value of school* increases their odds of enrolling in college by over 100 percent. For blacks, neither set of beliefs have an effect on their odds of enrolling in college. However, each unit increase in *affect toward school* leads to a 67 percent increase in their odds of enrolling in college. Thus, belief in barriers has no effect on college enrollment for either group. Finally, effects do not differ by race.

To determine whether these patterns remain consistent over time, I assess these relationships using college enrollment *three* years post high school in Table 5. Only *value of school* predicts college enrollment. This effect

TABLE 5

Logistic Coefficients and Odds Ratios for College Enrollment on Beliefs and Attitudes About School, Prior Achievement, and Background Factors

Independent Variables	College Enrollment 3 Years Post-High School					
	(1)	Odds Ratio	(2)	Odds Ratio	(3)	Odds Ratio
<i>Beliefs/Attitudes</i>	<i>All Students</i>		<i>All Students</i>		<i>For Whites</i>	
Value of schooling	0.578** (0.194)	1.782	0.409 (0.218)	1.505	0.834** (0.274)	2.303
Barriers	0.044 (0.118)	1.045	0.017 (0.122)	1.017	-0.288 (0.204)	0.750
Affect toward school	0.107 (0.165)	1.113	-0.165 (0.185)	0.848	-0.354 (0.254)	0.702
<i>Beliefs/Attitudes</i>					<i>For Blacks</i>	
Value of schooling	—		—		0.139 (0.236)	1.149 ^a
Barriers	—		—		0.177 (0.142)	1.193 ^a
Affect toward school	—		—		-0.079 (0.194)	0.924
Controls						
<i>Messages about School</i>						
Parents—value	-0.120 (0.163)	0.887	-0.057 (0.175)	0.944	-0.023 (0.177)	0.977
Parents—barriers	-0.163 (0.119)	0.849	-0.117 (0.124)	0.890	-0.105 (0.127)	0.900
Peer culture	0.696*** (0.151)	2.006	0.532*** (0.159)	1.703	0.515*** (0.161)	1.674
<i>Prior Achievement</i>						
Grade 7 GPA	—		1.015*** (0.257)	2.760	1.057*** (0.259)	2.878
Grade 11 GPA	—		0.939*** (0.184)	2.557	0.971*** (0.188)	2.641
Chi-square	154.82***		207.12***		216.35**	
<i>df</i>	18		22		25	

^aDenotes slope significantly differs from whites.

$p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Parameters are net of messages about school from parents and friends, family income, parental education, sex, and family structure. Number of observations is 668.

disappears once prior achievement is controlled in Model 2. The final model shows that *value of school* is the only significant belief/attitude for whites, while none of the beliefs/attitudes are significant for blacks. More importantly, belief in barriers has no effect on college enrollment for either group.

What evidence there is of differential effects by race indicates that belief in barriers hampers blacks less than whites.

Summary and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide a better understanding of how beliefs about the system of social mobility affect students' schooling behaviors. Although the findings support the link between perceptions about the system of social mobility and students' behaviors, the multidimensionality of beliefs suggests that the connection is complex. Specifically, blacks simultaneously attribute value to schooling and believe in barriers despite schooling, which is consistent with findings others have reported (e.g., Hochschild, 1995; Young, 1999). However, beliefs in barriers have no effect on schooling outcomes assessed in this study. Whereas the conceptual and analytic distinction of these dimensions of beliefs regarding the opportunity structure is revealing, this study yields a paradox among blacks similar to that addressed by Mickelson in 1990. Below, I discuss possible interpretations for blacks' greater belief in the value of schooling and the implications of the current findings for achievement research.

Is Blacks' Greater Belief in the Value of Schooling a Paradox?

The finding that blacks attribute more value to schooling than whites despite their lower school achievement reintroduces the paradox seemingly solved by Mickelson (1990). However, similar to the reasoning employed by Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998), it would be difficult to determine whether blacks are overestimating the value of schooling or whether whites are underestimating the value of schooling. One could ask the same question regarding whites: Why do they have lower pro-school beliefs/attitudes despite their higher levels of school achievement? Given that whites are often used as the reference group, outcomes for blacks are typically assessed *relative to* whites. As such, the inconsistency between beliefs/attitudes and school achievement among whites is overlooked while among blacks it is framed as a paradox. It is quite possible that blacks attribute greater value to schooling because they base their assessments on a reference group more disadvantaged than whites.

In a strict sense, the current findings would yield a paradox only if value of schooling represented the universe of factors that affect achievement, and its observed effect on achievement contravened expectations. However, this is not the case. Achievement is essentially a summary measure representing a collection of contributing effects from various factors, some of which are based on personal, home, and neighborhood characteristics. This point becomes easier to grasp if one considers that affinity for algebra does not

necessarily translate into an ability to derive statistical equations. Indeed, many spectator events (e.g., sporting events, operas, etc.) are comprised of audiences/fans lacking the necessary talent to be participants. Unfortunately, skills and quality of training are part of the equation, which, if not acquired early on, can compromise one's potential for success (Harris and Robinson, 2007). Schooling is a treatment that, for whatever reason, has differential effects by race as early as the first grade (Entwisle and Alexander, 1992; Fryer and Levitt, 2004). Farkas and colleagues find that most students who read below grade level by the end of the third grade read so far below grade level by middle and high school that they have difficulty with the curriculum (Farkas, 1993, 1996; Farkas et al., 1990). It seems unreasonable to expect that pro-school beliefs/attitudes alone can halt and/or reverse these trends by adolescence.

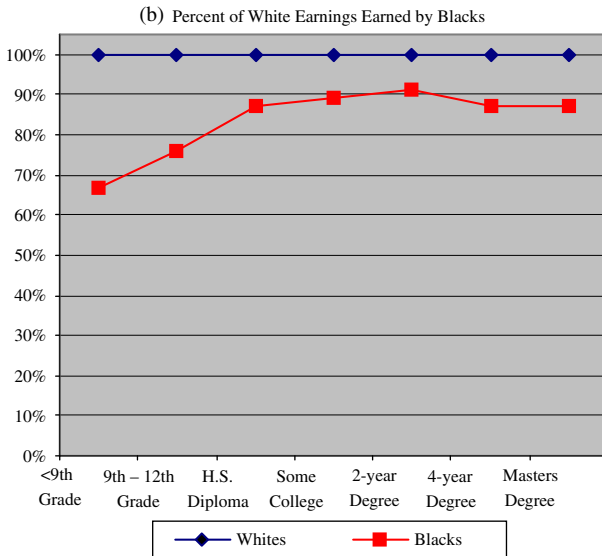
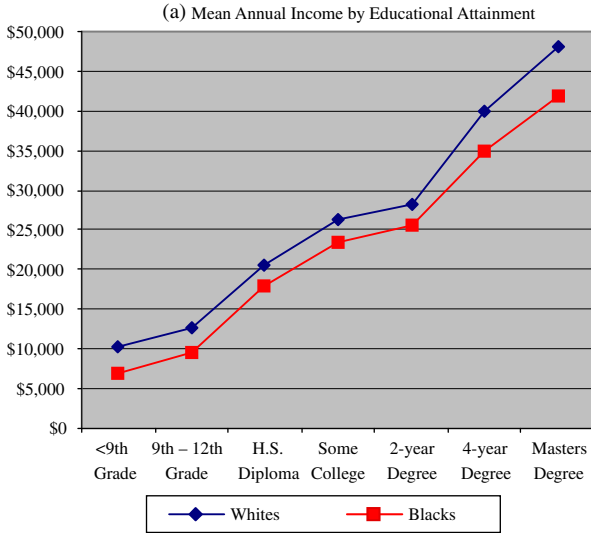
Blacks' beliefs and attitudes seem less paradoxical when one considers non-achievement-based academic outcomes. For example, net of SES, blacks are more likely than whites to pursue an academic rather than a vocational curriculum and to attend a four-year rather than a two-year college (Hochschild, 1995:160). More surprisingly, relative to poor Latino/a, Asian, and white parents, poor black parents are more likely to discuss their children's school experiences and plans, restrict television on school nights, set rules about grades, and help with homework (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Considering these outcomes brings blacks' greater belief in the value of schooling and affective attitudes into closer alignment with their behaviors.

Finally, blacks' greater pro-school beliefs and attitudes than those of whites should not be surprising. For blacks, symbols of success (e.g., prestigious educational pedigree, home ownership, etc.) are particularly critical to compensating for assumptions based on physical appearance, which generally translates into middle-class or affluent for whites and poor/working class or worse for blacks. More importantly, there was a time when blacks risked their lives for the pursuit of education, a situation whites never confronted. When considered in this context, it would be paradoxical if blacks had lower regard for schooling than whites. Similarly, blacks' greater belief in barriers is not surprising given that the American Dream remains elusive for blacks, who often express that they must work harder than whites to receive similar rewards (Cose, 1993; Hochschild, 1995). Therefore, blacks' beliefs about the role of schooling for upward mobility appear to be relatively accurate.

To provide some insight into the accuracy of blacks' beliefs about schooling, the relationship between the annual income of white and black Americans between the ages of 25 and 65 and educational attainment is shown in Figure 1a. Both whites and blacks experience increased earnings with each additional level of schooling. The increases in the slopes, which can be viewed as corresponding to the *value of school* measure, are virtually identical, indicating returns to education are similar for both groups. However,

FIGURE 1

Mean Annual Income for Wages and Salary by Educational Attainment for People Between the Ages of 25 and 65, 2000



SOURCE: Data are from the Current Population Survey Utilities: Annual Demographic and Income Supplement, March Files.

whites earn more than blacks at each level of schooling, which may reflect discrimination in the labor market. It is also possible that this wage gap results from group differences in knowledge and skills. Numerous studies show that the black-white gap in basic premarket skills remains a prominent cause of the racial wage gap (Farkas and Vicknair, 1996; Johnson and Neal, 1998; Murnane, Willett, and Levy, 1995). Nevertheless, Figure 1 suggests that there is some support for each of blacks' beliefs about the role of schooling for upward mobility, especially their belief that they will be better off with higher levels of educational attainment.

Although Figure 1a illustrates that the value of school is similar for both groups, the findings in Table 2 show that blacks attribute more value to schooling than do whites. Figure 1b provides support for this view; the percent of whites' income earned by blacks increases with educational attainment. For instance, while blacks who have less than nine years of schooling earn only 67 percent of the income earned by whites with similar years of education, blacks with a four-year college degree earn 87 percent of the income of their white counterparts. This pattern suggests that blacks' views about schooling are reasonably accurate.

Conclusion

Findings reported in this study highlight the importance for researchers studying the racial achievement gap to maintain conceptual clarity between different types of beliefs. The findings support Ogbu's thesis that beliefs are mechanisms by which the opportunity structure influences individuals' behavior. However, they illustrate that making clear distinctions between various beliefs about the system of social mobility can refine the understanding of this link. This study suggests that individuals make nuanced distinctions about the role of schooling for upward mobility, each with separate effects on academic outcomes.

Proponents of Ogbu's thesis argue that since blacks have lower achievement, their positive affective attitudes toward education should be disregarded and that their perceptions about barriers (i.e., job ceiling) are the driving force behind their school-related behaviors. However, this study shows that students' affective attitudes toward school are important for schooling behavior, even more so than belief in barriers. Specifically, whereas perceived value of schooling leads whites to pursue further schooling, blacks' liking of school is more central to their likelihood of enrolling in college immediately following high school. With regard to achievement, beliefs about the value of schooling have the same effect for both groups. Thus, beliefs about the value of school and affective attitudes can be useful predictors of black students' academic outcomes. Blacks' pro-school beliefs and attitudes suggest that their lower school achievement might result from racial variation in the quality of schools students attend and/or from racial vari-

ation in social, economic, and cultural capital (Lewis, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Lareau and Horvat, 1999). More importantly, it appears that students' beliefs in barriers are inconsequential for academic outcomes, which suggests that students do not allow negative perceptions about the opportunity structure to compromise their schooling.

It is important to note that belief in barriers in this study was not assessed with regard to race. The measure simply assessed whether respondents anticipate future barriers despite their educational attainment. It is possible that some respondents may have answered with gender in mind. However, the item was asked within the context of other race-related measures and the findings showed racial differences net of gender. Nevertheless, future efforts at data collection should provide better measures of anticipated barriers regarding the opportunity structure.

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