

**IS A RACELESS IDENTITY AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR
ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG BLACKS?**

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Angel L. Harris, Princeton University

Kris Marsh, University of Maryland College Park

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IS A RACELESS IDENTITY AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG BLACKS?

Abstract

Objective. Fordham (1988, 1996) notes that because the larger black community has a culture that is oppositional to mainstream American society, blacks who wish to maintain academic success and achieve upward socioeconomic mobility feel pressure to adopt a raceless identity. The purpose of this study is to examine whether a raceless identity leads to better educational outcomes for blacks in high school than does a non-raceless identity. *Methods.* Using data from the Maryland Adolescence Development In Context Study (MADICS), we create five profiles intended to capture blacks' connection to their race and determine whether racial/ethnic connections among blacks are associated with school achievement, educational aspirations, value attributed to schooling, or detachment from schooling. These links are assessed net of affective feelings about being black and beliefs about shared fate. *Results.* The findings are not consistent with the racelessness perspective. Specifically, blacks in the *race ambivalent* and *race similar* profiles have higher achievement and educational aspirations, and attribute more value to schooling and are less detached from schooling than are those in the *race neutral* profile. *Conclusion.* Prior studies have over-stated the extent to which racelessness helps achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), created by Congress in 1969 to regularly test nationally representative samples of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders (or children ages 9, 13, 17), demonstrate that black twelfth graders score lower than do white eighth graders in reading, math, United States history, and geography (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2003). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) note that a major reason blacks have relatively low school achievement is that their culture is antithetical to mainstream American society; specifically, the culture negatively sanctions those who attempt to perform well in school. They argue high-achieving blacks often choose between either adopting behaviors that reinforce black culture and compromise their achievement (e.g., reduce effort, use non-standard Black English or “Ebonics”) or risk having their black peers question their legitimacy as members of the black community and accuse them of “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Fordham (1988, 1996) suggests high achieving blacks typically employ a strategy of minimizing “their relationship to the black community and to the stigma attached to ‘blackness’” by adopting a raceless identity to pursue academic success and upward socioeconomic mobility (1988: 57).

In contrast, several researchers suggest that adopting a strong racial identity promotes academic success and educational attainment for blacks (e.g., Anderson, 1988; Edwards and Polite, 1992; Weinberg, 1977). In addition, Hemmings (1998) found that students displaying greater racial pride have fewer psychological problems. Fordham (1998: 81) even acknowledges that a raceless persona “is marked by conflict and ambivalence.” Arroyo and Zigler (1995) likewise suggest that distancing students from their culture breeds psychological problems. Thus, Hemmings (1998) and Arroyo and Zigler (1995) argue that emphasizing a positive racial and ethnic identity is related to positive psychological outcomes that can lead to academic success.

Findings by Edwards and Polite (1992) and Bowman and Howard (1985) suggest that a positive racial identity and awareness of current or potential racism and discrimination, particularly in education and employment, are important contributing factors to a positive achievement ethos among many blacks. According to O'Connor (1997), students aware of such injustices identify their "collective struggle" as the factor that leads them to continue to excel. Sanders (1997) finds that eighth-grade black students with a high awareness of racial discrimination respond to discrimination in ways that are conducive, rather than detrimental, to academic success. The child development literature suggests that ethnic identity has a protective function, enabling blacks to maintain positive school achievement and psychosocial health by diminishing the effects of discrimination (Chavous et al., 2003; Miller, 1999; Sanders, 1997; Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff, 2003). However, to our knowledge, no study has systematically assessed the effectiveness of racelessness as a strategy for maintaining an academic ethos.¹

Aspects of Fordham's framework, including fear of "acting white" and the need to separate oneself from an Ebonic-laden black culture, are considered gospel among many teachers in the classroom and have dominated discourse about the achievement gap in the popular media (e.g., Bill Cosby, John McWhorter, and Shelby Steele). While the acting white hypothesis has received considerable attention from researchers (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Carter 2005; Harris 2006; Horvat and Lewis 2003), there is scant empirical research of whether distancing oneself from the black community is an effective strategy for academic success. Moreover, some race scholars challenge both the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of Fordham's work (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dawson, 1994; Carter, 2005; Lewis, 2003; O'Connor, 1997). For these reasons, we argue that it is necessary and well overdue to critically examine and empirically test these underpinnings.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether a raceless identity leads to better educational outcomes for black adolescents than does a non-raceless identity. This study does *not* examine the “acting white” hypothesis, which proposes that good school performance is denigrated and labeled as acting white (e.g., Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005). Instead, we determine whether racial/ethnic connections among blacks are associated with school achievement, educational aspirations, value attributed to school, or detachment from schooling. These links are assessed net of affective feelings about being black and beliefs about shared fate (i.e., blacks’ beliefs about the implications that their success has for other blacks or the extent to which they benefit from the success of other blacks). After a brief description of how, as posited by Fordham (1988, 1996), the culture and collective consciousness of the black community lead some blacks who strive for academic success to employ racelessness as a strategy, we review the literature on the implications that a strong connection to race has for blacks’ schooling. We then test hypotheses derived from the racelessness perspective (Fordham 1988, 1996) and conclude with a discussion of how this study contributes to a better understanding of the role of race in the schooling of black Americans.

FICTIVE KINSHIP AND THE SCHOOLING OF BLACK YOUTHS

Fordham (1988, 1996) and Weis (1985) suggest that the black community’s role and culture in regard to education is a conduit for blacks’ school underachievement relative to whites. Fordham (1988, 1996) provides an anthropological concept useful for understanding blacks’ social identity and cultural frame of reference: fictive kinship. She describes fictive kinship as a kinship-like connection between a group of people within a given society, not related by blood or marriage but yet who maintain a sense of peoplehood or collective social

identity resulting from their similar social, political, and/or economic status. The term conveys “the idea of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘sisterhood’ of all Black Americans” (Fordham, 1988: 56).

Being black does not necessarily grant membership into the fictive kinship system. For instance, Fordham (1988: 56) states, “One can be black in color, but choose not to seek membership in the fictive kinship system. One can also be denied membership by the group because one’s behavior, attitudes, and activities are perceived as being at variance with those thought to be appropriate and group-specific, which are culturally patterned and serve to delineate ‘us’ from ‘them.’” She describes this as “the tendency for Black Americans to emphasize *group loyalty* in situations involving conflict or competition with Whites” (1988: 56). Thus, membership in the fictive kinship system is primarily determined by the larger black community’s judgment regarding whether an individual adequately practices the fundamental elements of “black culture.”

Fordham (1996: 248) notes, “High-achieving students find that commitment to the achievement ideology is contested, opposed, and frequently thwarted by the limitations endemic to membership in the Black community.” A useful framework for describing the black fictive kinship’s position regarding education is the oppositional culture theory (Ogbu, 1978, 2003). This theory posits that blacks have created a cultural norm of underachievement in response to inequitable education and discriminatory social and employment policies that they experience within the U.S. Additionally, black Americans view academic performance as futile and adopt an identity oppositional to the dominant culture, which includes a cultural frame of reference that does not value academic success (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1978, 2003). Fordham (1996) notes that school failure is a mechanism by which blacks demonstrate their distinctiveness from dominant “white” culture.

Because academic achievement is considered a “white” domain, blacks negotiate a social space that negatively sanctions high achievement, and academic success is equated with “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). However, several quantitative (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Cook and Ludwig, 1997; Harris 2006) and qualitative studies (e.g., Akom, 2003; Carter, 2005; O’Connor, 1997; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005) do not find a pervasive anti-schooling culture among blacks. Moreover, Sanfoka, Hurley, Allen, and Boykin (2005) find that student-assessed ratings for students who “act black” are significantly more favorable than those for students who “act white.” Marrayshow et al. (2005) administered psychological tests presenting various racialized scenarios to students aged 10 through 12: a black high-achiever with a white (or mainstream) cultural orientation and another with a black cultural orientation. They found that there was a clear preference for high-achievers to exhibit a black orientation.

Another reason given for blacks’ lower achievement is the cultural discontinuity between black families and the institutionalized structure of schools, which value cultural norms of “mainstream” white middle-class society. Fordham (1988, 1996) notes that the collective ethos held by the black fictive kinship system conflicts with the individualistic ethos sanctioned by the school context. She states that black children are forced to “unlearn or, at least, to modify their own culturally sanctioned interactional and behavioral styles and adopt those styles rewarded in the school context if they wish to achieve academic success” (1988: 55). Numerous studies show that blacks experience greater difficulty in converting cultural resources into cultural capital in schools (Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Lareau and Horvat (1999) find the possession and activation of capital (both social and cultural) in schools vary by race, which leads to group differences in being socially included in (e.g., behaviors recognized and legitimated) or excluded (e.g., marginalized and rebuffed) from the academic setting.

Lewis (2003) describes another way in which schools compromise the schooling experience of blacks. She notes that schools are racially coded spaces where racialization—the assignment of persons to racial categories with symbols, attributes, and other meanings viewed as primordial to those categories—occurs. She finds that racial categorization in schools is not a neutral or benign process but one imbued with power; racial boundaries are created as persons are simultaneously included and/or excluded from a range of resources and opportunities based on how they are labeled. Perceptions that the black fictive kinship system does not value schooling and of the cultural discontinuity between blacks and the structure of schools can result in pejorative symbols/meanings being attached to “blackness,” particularly in academic settings.

Numerous studies show the effect of this process (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Lewis, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; Tyson, 2002, 2003; Morris, 2005). Specifically, they find that school personnel place greater emphasis on regulating Black children’s behavior. For example, Ferguson (2000) finds that school personnel view the dress and behavior of black males as recalcitrant and oppositional and exert strict control over them. Similarly, Morris (2005) finds that, whereas white and Asian American children are viewed as nonthreatening, black children are considered dangerous and therefore face constant surveillance and greater discipline for behavioral infractions. In addition to poor achievement, school officials place strong emphasis on transforming many aspects of black children’s culture, which inadvertently communicates an inadequacy associated with “blackness” (Tyson, 2002, 2003). In sum, these studies show that “schools react to students based on perceptions of race and gender and use these concepts as a basis for specific patterns of regulation” (Morris, 2005: 28). As such, blacks who aspire for high achievement must find strategies for circumventing the adverse consequences associated with membership in the black fictive kinship system.

Establishing Cognitive Distance from the Fictive Kinship System: Becoming Raceless

Fordham (1988, 1996) posits that a strategy employed by blacks who wish to maintain academic success and achieve upward socioeconomic mobility is to distance themselves from the fictive kinship system. She notes that, in contrast to “students who seek to maintain their identification and affiliation with the indigenous culture, students who assimilate seek to maximize their success potential by minimizing their relationship to the Black community and to the stigma attached to ‘blackness’” (1988: 57). Fordham (1988, 1996) finds that this is typically accomplished through the adoption of a raceless identity, which she defines as a conscious or unconscious effort to disaffiliate from the black fictive kinship system.

A raceless identity is posited to be an important mechanism for blacks in academic settings to circumvent stereotype vulnerability (Spencer and Steele, 1992; Steele 1988)—the need to consistently disavow group-based negative feedback. Steele (1997) notes that increased reminders of barriers and stereotypes compromise academic performance. He refers to this as stereotype threat, which occurs when individuals fear that their behavior(s) may confirm stereotypes (often negative) about a group to which they belong. Steele and Aronson (1995) found that black college students whose race was not made salient outperformed those whose race was made salient on academic tasks. Thus, stereotype threat has important consequences for identity construction, making self-protection an important focus for blacks (Crocker and Major, 1989; Oyserman, Gant, and Ager, 1995). Becoming raceless and committing to the ideology of the dominant social system should diminish the adverse effects of persistent negative stereotypes about blacks and allow them to freely adopt and engage in mainstream cultural norms.

In contrast, research suggests that racelessness may be detrimental to psychological health. For example, while raceless students modulate their speech and behaviors and disaffiliate

from activities sanctioned by the fictive kinship system to gain approval from their teachers, they also experience increased psychological isolation and feelings of depression; they find themselves marginalized as a result of being rejected by their black peers and not fully accepted by their white peers (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1988, 1996; Tatum, 1992). As such, many high-achieving blacks perceive academic success as a pyrrhic victory (Fordham, 1988; Ogbu, 2003). They expend psychological resources “juggling their school and community personae in order to minimize the conflicts and anxieties generated by the need to interact with the various competing constituencies represented in the school context” (Fordham 1988: 80). The anxiety created by this psychological tug-of-war leads them to either sabotage (e.g., exert little effort, procrastinate) (Ford, 1996; Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu and Simmons, 1998) or camouflage their academic abilities (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). For blacks, high academic achievement and psychological stress are seen as inextricably commingled.

An Alternative Response: Feeling a Connection to Race

Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) note that identity negotiation for African American youth should involve the dual task of assembling a positive sense of self, while discrediting negative identities attributed to blacks. However, in contrast to becoming raceless, they posit that a sense of self as part of kin and community and interacting with the group are important components of African American identity that provide a sense of meaning and purpose. They tie the self to normative strategies for goal attainment, particularly school achievement. Therefore, in addition to discrediting negative stereotypes about the black community, it is important for blacks who seek academic success, coupled with positive psychological health, to maintain attachment to the fictive kinship system and associate positive meaning to this membership.

The literature on racial identity—the perception that one shares a common racial heritage with a group and the extent to which that group serves as a salient reference group—suggests that race plays an important role for high achieving blacks. Employing a developmental model of racial identity, which presumes that individuals move through various stages of racial identification and that these stages are hierarchical or that there are more mature stages than others, Smith (1989) argues that race creates a bond and feeling of peoplehood and that positive regard for one’s race is important to racial minorities’ psychological health. Similarly, Cross, Parham, and Helms (1991: 328) posit that racial identity serves as a mechanism “to defend and protect a person from psychological insults, and, where possible, to warn of impending psychological attacks that stem from having to live in a racist society.”

The pattern is similar for studies on racial identity from a multidimensional approach, which considers intensity on various dimensions of racial identification without an implicit or explicit presumption that individuals move through a progression from less to more mature degrees of racial identification. For example, Chavous et al. (2003) find that high racial centrality (i.e., importance of race to one’s self-definition), strong group pride, and a positive perception of society’s regard for blacks are related to positive academic beliefs and that a strong group connection is related to discrimination awareness in ways that promote academic success. Similarly, Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke (1998) find that ideologies de-emphasizing race (i.e., humanist) and emphasizing a connection to the mainstream (i.e., assimilation) are not associated with academic success among black college students.²

Several studies suggest that blacks with a positive racial/ethnic identity perform better in school because they maintain high self-esteem resulting from a superior ability to manage negative environments and deal with discrimination (Miller, 1999). For instance, Bowman and

Howard (1985) find that children whose parents practice positive racial socialization—convey the importance of ethnic pride, group affiliation, self-development, and an awareness of racial barriers and coping strategies—attain significantly higher grades than those not given these messages. Sanders (1997) finds that academically successful blacks express positive racial identities and that awareness of racism and discrimination promotes greater academic effort. Thus, whereas the racelessness perspective views race as a debilitating factor that inhibits academic success, the racial identity literature supports the contention that a positive racial identity is important for blacks’ academic success, regardless of whether racial identity is considered using developmental models or multidimensional approaches.³

Toward an Appropriate Empirical Assessment of Racelessness

Fordham notes that racelessness is a behavioral adaptation for circumventing the adverse consequences resulting from membership in the black fictive kinship system. However, this study does not address the direct notion of behavioral adaptation. We suggest that the phenomenon of racelessness is better captured through self-reporting rather than observation and interpretation of students’ behavior. Observational data requires researchers to interpret behavior and then make some broad assumptions about whether children are behaving in a raceless manner. By taking this approach, as Fordham did in her 1988 and 1996 studies, researchers would have to answer the question of what is considered raceless behavior. Ford, Harris, Webb, and Jones (1994) criticized the notion of racelessness by re-interpreting some of the same narratives from Fordham’s studies. They argue that Fordham “may have interpreted individual differences, self-expression, and so forth as raceless” (p. 23). We agree with these scholars that Fordham’s labeling discounts individual preferences and self-expression.

With survey data, scholars are able to determine how connected (or disconnected) students are to their race through their self-reported responses. This connectedness can serve as a clear indication of the absence or presence of racelessness. Thus, a self-reporting approach prevents social scientist from making large assumptions about behavior, especially something as challenging to visually observe as racial identity, and serves as an appropriate measure of racelessness. In sum, our use of survey data and educational outcomes beyond self-reported grades, including educational aspirations, value of schooling, and detachment from school, allows us to provide a more convincing test of whether racelessness is an effective strategy for academic success among blacks using several dimensions of educational outcomes. Specifically, because Fordham (1988) notes that a raceless identity is important for blacks who pursue academic success during adolescence, the current study examines whether a raceless identity is a more effective strategy for educational outcomes for black youth in high school than are non-raceless profiles.

METHODS: Data

Data for this study come from the Maryland Adolescence Development In Context Study (MADICS), a longitudinal research project at the University of Michigan that has a unique collection of measures on 1,480 adolescents (51% male and 49% female). The MADICS data were collected for the purpose of understanding the psychological determinants of behavior and developmental trajectories during adolescence. The research project's richness of measures and longitudinal aspect provide researchers with an opportunity to assess the link between academic outcomes and race connection, affect, and shared fate net of students' prior school achievement.

The sample was drawn from a county on the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. and consists of 1,407 black and white families (66% and 34%, respectively). Data were collected from the approximately 5,000 adolescents in the county who entered middle school during 1991 and were followed until they were three years removed from high school. The sample was selected using a stratified sampling procedure designed to attain proportional representations of families from each of the county's 23 junior high schools. As such, the socioeconomic backgrounds of the families are varied, as the sample includes families from neighborhoods in low-income urban areas, middle-class suburban areas, and rural farm-based areas. The pretax family income of the participants in 1990 was normally distributed around a mean of \$45,000-\$49,000 (range of \$5,000-\$75,000). The current analysis is conducted among blacks present in grades 11 and 7 ($n = 629$). It is important to note that most attrition occurred between grades 7 (n for blacks = 938) and 8 (n for blacks = 663); only five percent of the sample was lost between grades 8 and 11. This suggests that it is unlikely for sample attrition to be due to students dropping out of high school. Table 1 presents a detailed description of the measures used in this analysis.

[Table 1 about here]

Although the MADICS was not designed to draw inferences to the national population, we are unaware of theoretical models positing that the underlying mechanisms for a raceless identity, and its connections to academic engagement, vary by social class or geographic area (e.g., east-west, urban-suburban). The black communities' negative orientation toward schooling, which makes a raceless identity important for academic success, is attributed to the wider "black community" (for further discussion, see Tyson 2002: 1166-67). This is underscored by Fordham's (1988, 1996) assessment of her framework in a high school on the east coast.

Hypotheses and Analytic Plan

Hypothesis 1. Blacks with weak or no feelings toward being black have higher school achievement/aspirations than those who do not have weak or no feeling toward being black.

Because Fordham (1988) posits that racelessness is a strategy employed by black youths who wish to pursue academic success, racelessness should be associated with high academic achievement. We also include an assessment of whether raceless blacks have higher educational aspirations than do their non-raceless counterparts for two reasons. First, variations in individual aptitude may preclude some students, who give maximum effort and whose academic behaviors resemble those of high-achievers in many aspects of schooling, from being high-achievers themselves. Second, high educational aspirations reflect a desire for upward socioeconomic mobility, which is associated with the dominant society. Therefore, because racelessness is posited as a strategy for circumventing negative sanctioning for pursuing goals within a “white” domain, raceless blacks also should have higher educational aspirations.

We use two pairs of measures to create five profiles intended to capture blacks’ connection to their race. The first pair is intended to capture blacks’ feelings of similarity to other blacks: (1) I have a strong attachment to other black people and (2) being black is an important reflection of who I am. The second pair is intended to capture blacks’ feelings of dissimilarity to other blacks: (1) I consider myself quite different or unique from most [blacks] and (2) being black has little to do with how I feel about myself. Since our interest is in distinguishing between youth who affirm the measure from those who do not, each item is coded “1” if respondents affirm the measure (i.e., agree or strongly agree) and “0” if they do not (i.e., disagree, strongly disagree, or are undecided). The five race profiles are displayed in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

We are particularly interested in the four definitive profiles depicted in the corners of the cross-tabulation in Table 2. Specifically, these race profiles describe students who (1) do not affirm any measure (*race neutral or raceless*), (2) affirm both similarity measures and *neither* dissimilarity measure (*race similar*), (3) affirm both dissimilarity measures and *neither* similarity measure (*race dissimilar*), and (4) affirm both of the similarity and dissimilarity measures (*race ambivalent*). The final profile, *mild ambivalent*, includes all other possible combinations (i.e., those who affirm at least one of each type of measure or affirm only one of the four measures), as supplemental analysis reveals groups within this profile are relatively similar across outcomes.

We assess Hypothesis 1 by regressing *achievement* and *aspirations* on four profiles (*neutral* omitted), affective evaluations toward being black (i.e., *happy to be black* and *regret being black*), and beliefs about shared fate (i.e., extent to which their success helps other blacks and the success of other blacks help them).⁴ We control for background factors that may affect the outcomes, such as family income, parental education, family structure, gender, and students' prior school achievement/aspirations (grade 7). We run school fixed-effects models to account for the possible impact of school context. While MADICS does not contain school measures, it does contain a measure for school identification.

Hypothesis 2. Blacks in the *race neutral* profile attribute greater value to schooling/are less detached from schooling than those who do not have a race weak/neutral profile.

As discussed above, the oppositional culture theory (Ogbu 1978, 2003) describes the prevailing thought held by the blacks regarding upward socioeconomic mobility. Specifically, blacks believe they will experience barriers to success in future employment and earnings due to racial discrimination and structural inequalities. These beliefs lead them to put forth less effort and to have lower commitment to schoolwork. However, because racelessness is posited to be a

strategy by which blacks circumvent the black fictive kinship's counter-academic culture and negative sanctioning of academic success (Fordham 1988), blacks who are *not* raceless should perceive lower returns to education relative to their raceless counterparts and view academic performance as futile and doubt the value of schooling.

RESULTS

Table 3 contains the findings for Hypothesis 1. The findings for achievement are not consistent with the notion that a raceless identity is an effective strategy for academic success. Models 1 through 6 show that blacks in the *non-neutral* race profiles do not have lower achievement than do those in the race *neutral* profile. In contrast, blacks in the *ambivalent* and *similar* race profiles have higher achievement than those in the *neutral* profile. Those in the *mild ambivalent* and *dissimilar* profiles do not differ from their raceless counterparts. Models 2 and 3 show that, whereas a favorable affect toward being black is not related to achievement, blacks who report some regret about being black have lower school achievement than those who do not affirm this feeling ($b = -.176$). Models 4 and 5 show that while blacks who believe their successes help other blacks do not differ on achievement from those who do not affirm this belief, blacks who believe they benefit from the success of other blacks have greater achievement than those who do not hold this belief ($b = .194$ in Model 5). This explains the achievement advantage of the *ambivalent* and *similar* profiles. Finally, the full model does not lead to conclusions substantively different to the prior models (see Model 6).

[Table 3 about here]

Models 1' through 6' in Table 3 repeat the results of the previous analyses with educational aspirations as the outcome. Similar to those for achievement, the findings do not

show that raceless blacks have higher educational aspirations than those in the other profiles. Rather, Models 1' through 6' show that blacks in the non-neutral race profiles have higher aspirations than those in the race *neutral* profile. Also, whereas affective feelings toward being black are not related to educational aspirations, blacks who affirm the shared fate measures have higher educational aspirations than those who do not affirm these measures. The *non-neutral* race profiles have higher educational aspirations even after controlling for the affect and shared fate measures in Model 6,' which become non-significant due to multicollinearity.

Table 4 contains the results for Hypotheses 2. The findings show that blacks in the *mild-ambivalent*, *ambivalent*, and *similar* profiles attribute greater value to schooling than those in the race *neutral* profile. Students in the *dissimilar* profile do not differ from those in the *neutral* profile. Whereas Model 2 shows that blacks who are happy to be black attribute greater value to schooling ($b = .314$), which can also explain the significant advantage held by the *similar* profile, Model 3 shows that those who regret being black attribute less value to schooling ($b = -.475$). Both measures of shared fate are positively related to the value students attribute to school. Finally, only *regret being black* and *benefit from success of other blacks* remain significant in the full model (see Model 6). Simultaneously accounting for these factors yields a 50 percent decline in the advantage on the value attributed to schooling held by blacks in the *ambivalent* profile and a non-significant coefficient for those in the *similar* profile.

[Table 4 about here]

The results for *detachment from schooling* show that blacks in the race *ambivalent*, *dissimilar*, and *similar* profiles feel less detached from schooling than their counterparts in the race *weak/neutral* profile ($b = -.509$, $-.482$, and $-.421$, respectively). Additionally, relative to blacks who do not affirm the affective measures, blacks who are happy to be black feel less

detached from schooling ($b = -.379$ in Model 2'), while those who regret being black feel more detached from schooling ($b = .466$ in Model 3'). It appears that these feelings explain why blacks in the *similar* profile are less detached from school than are their raceless counterparts. Further, blacks who believe that they benefit from the success of other blacks feel less detached from schooling than do those who do not affirm this belief ($b = -.312$ in Model 5'). Finally, only the *dissimilar* profile remains less detached from schooling after controlling for all factors.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine whether blacks with a raceless identity—those with weak or no attachment to their race—have better educational outcomes than do blacks who do not have a raceless identity. Specifically, we examined whether the connection that blacks in high school have to their race is associated with school achievement, educational aspirations, value attributed to schooling, or detachment from schooling. In addition, we examined whether blacks' affective feelings toward their race and their beliefs about the extent to which their success helps other blacks or that they benefit from the success of other blacks have implications for the aforementioned outcomes. There are several noteworthy findings.

The findings do not show that racelessness is an effective strategy for achieving favorable academic outcomes among black youth. Blacks in the race *neutral* profile do not have higher achievement than do those in the other race profiles. Blacks in the *ambivalent* and *similar* profiles have higher achievement, educational aspirations, attribute more value to schooling, and are less detached from schooling than those in the race *neutral* profile. The findings also show that blacks' affective feelings toward their race and feelings of shared fate relate to the outcomes differently than is posited by the racelessness perspective. For example, blacks who are happy to

be black attribute more value to schooling and are less detached from school than those who are not happy to be black. Additionally, adolescents who regret being black have lower school achievement, attribute lower value to schooling, and are more detached from school than are those who do not regret being black. Finally, feelings of shared fate are positively associated with school achievement, educational aspirations, and value attributed to schooling and negatively related to detachment from school. These findings are consistent with several studies that find a positive or strong racial identity is associated with better academic outcomes (e.g., Bowman and Howard 1985; Edwards and Polite 1992; Sanders 1997; Sellers et al., 1998).

Several studies provide possible explanations for the patterns found in this study. McCreary, Slavin, and Berry (1996) find that blacks with high racial identity are more successful at coping with stress and have lower rates of participation in problem behaviors, both of which can be helpful in academic domains. Wong et al. (2003) find that high ethnic connectedness diminishes the adverse effect perceived discrimination has on blacks' self-competence, school achievement, perceptions of friends' positive school characteristics, and problem behaviors. Smith and Lalonde (2003) find that a strong affinity to race among blacks is psychologically protective, even within a Canadian context.

The meanings attached to identities are self-ascribed *and* designated by others (Gecas and Burke, 1995). Burke (1991) notes that individuals experience stress when inconsistency between self-ascribed and "other-ascribed" identities occurs. Racelessness is an attempt to take control of one's identity by resisting the other's altercasting; it is a disidentification from the black fictive kinship system (and problems endemic to the system) in an attempt to construct a positive identification of someone academically oriented. It can be described as a "Not Me," a self-disidentification enacted to resist identities imputed by others (McCall, 2003). However, the

current findings suggest racelessness operates in the same manner described by Pyke and Johnson (2003), who found that Asian American women who distanced themselves from the stigmatized image of Asian women as subservient reinforced the notion that Asian women are inferior. In contrast, rather than becoming raceless, blacks in the race *similar* profile seem to rehabilitate their black identity to include achievement orientation. This suggests it is possible for blacks to enact a “Not Me” identity that disidentifies with academic failure without compromising their identities as members of the black fictive kinship system.

Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995) provide a framework of identity development that accounts for the experiences of youth who must conceptualize plausible paths toward academic success in a context unfavorable to members of their group. They propose a triadic identity structure in which individuals connect the self to the group, find a path toward academic achievement as a group member, and make sense of stereotypes and structural limitations imposed by one’s group membership. Otherwise, academic success may be viewed as co-opted by the white middle class. Blacks in the *raceless* identity profile fare worse than those in the *ambivalent* and *similar* profiles on all outcomes in this study suggesting it is possible for blacks to maintain some connection to other blacks and have favorable academic characteristics. Research by Horvat and Lewis (2003) and Datnow and Cooper (1997) indicate that black peer groups are not monolithic; they allow space to affirm academic *and* racial identity.

It is important to note that our findings underestimate the importance of a positive racial identity for the academic success of black adolescents. Fordham (1988) argues that high achieving students may underreport their grades to avoid being labeled as higher achievers, to maintain an allegiance to the fictive kinship, and to avoid judgment by their peers. However, the racelessness perspective suggests that high achieving students adopt a raceless persona so that

they could freely pursue their academic interests. Instead, it is those students connected to the black fictive kinship system who should underreport their achievement to avoid the negative sanctioning from their peers. Therefore, any bias that exists from the use of self-reported grades should lean toward finding support for the racelessness framework. Since our findings suggest that black youth who feel connected to their race fare better than raceless youth on the outcomes assessed in this study, the current findings underestimate the importance of a positive racial identity for academic success.

Conclusion

It is important to note that although a strong racial identity appears to enhance schooling outcomes, a black nationalistic ideology, which emphasizes that the black experience is unique and that blacks should control their own destiny with minimal input from or contact with other groups, can be maladaptive. Studies by Sellers et al. (1998) and Oyserman et al. (2003) find that a more multicultural or minority identity—an ideology that emphasizes similarities between oppressed groups, recognition that one's in-group must overcome obstacles, and a positive connection to the in-group and larger society—is more adaptive for academic success.

The current findings suggest that having some racial conception of oneself is more helpful for schooling than is conceiving of oneself as raceless. Therefore, although sometimes contentious, it might be helpful to allow students to openly discuss race. Future research should explore the conditions under which the patterns observed in this study might differ. For example, do the observed patterns differ by gender? Is racelessness an effective strategy for other racial groups? Addressing these questions would further the literature on the role of racial identity in the schooling process.

ENDNOTES

1. Arroyo and Zigler (1995) assess race and achievement group differences in responses to a racelessness scale comprised of four components: achievement attitudes, impression management, alienation, and stereotypical beliefs. However, with the exception of the stereotype component (i.e., agree or disagree with societal stereotypes about blacks), the items are race neutral; they inquire about general attitudes toward the importance of school, students' concern for how they are perceived by other students, and the extent to which they feel alienated from their peers. As such, the racelessness scale used by Arroyo and Zigler does not assess the extent to which blacks feel a sense of connection to their race.
2. Racial identity models do not assume that a particular racial identity is optimal. For example, the multidimensional model of racial identity of Sellers, Smith et al. (1998) posits that the relative importance of racial identity varies across both individuals and social settings (salience from cues within the social context that determine the importance of given identities). In some cases, identity as good students may be more important than race.
3. For further discussion of developmental models of racial identity, see Davis, Aronson, and Salinas (2006). For further discussion on the multidimensional approach, see Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood and Zimmerman (2003). For a more in-depth discussion on the distinction between these models, see Marks et al. (2004).
4. Supplemental analysis reveals that the proportion of youth that responded to each outcome is similar across the race profiles. Therefore, the findings from this study are not an artifact of profile differences in under- or over reporting on the outcomes.

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

Variable Name	Description	Metric	Mean (SD)	Alpha
<i>Outcomes</i>				
Achievement	Self-reported cumulative GPA	0-4.0	2.81 (.72)	---
Educational Aspirations	If you could do exactly what you wanted, how far would you like to go in school?	1 = 8 th grade or less 9 = J.D., Ph.D., M.D.	7.75 (1.48)	---
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	4.15 (.72)	.793
Detachment from School	(a) Schooling is a waste of time. (b) I don't really care about schooling. (c) Schooling is not so important for kids like me.	1 = Strongly Disagree 5 = Strongly Agree	1.89 (.83)	.758
<i>Race Similarity</i>				
Attached	I have a strong attachment to other Black people.	0 = SD/D/Neither 1 = Agree/Strongly Agree	.63 (.48)	---
Reflection	Being Black is an important reflection of who I am.	0 = SD/D/Neither 1 = Agree/Strongly Agree	.66 (.47)	---
<i>Race Dissimilarity</i>				
Different	In dealing with other Blacks, I consider myself quite different and unique from most of them.	0 = SD/D/Neither 1 = Agree/Strongly Agree	.40 (.49)	---
Don't feel	Being Black has little to do with how I feel about myself.	0 = SD/D/Neither 1 = Agree/Strongly Agree	.42 (.49)	---
<i>Affect Toward Race</i>				
Happy to be	I am happy that I am Black.	0 = ~ Strongly Agree 1 = Strongly Agree	.68 (.47)	---
Regret	I often regret that I am Black.	0 = Strongly Disagree 1 = ~ Strongly Disagree	.24 (.43)	---
<i>Shared Fate</i>				
Success helps	It will help other Blacks if I am successful.	0 = SD/D/Neither 1 = Agree/Strongly Agree	.64 (.48)	---
Benefits	It helps me when other Black people are successful.	0 = SD/D/Neither 1 = Agree/Strongly Agree	.67 (.47)	---

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 2. Crosstabulation of Race Similarity and Race Dissimilarity

		Race Similarity Measures			Total
		Affirm None	Affirm One	Affirm Both	
Race Dissimilarity Measures	Affirm None	44 Neutral	66	122 Similar	232
	Affirm One	41	358 Mild Ambivalent 81	127	249
	Affirm Both	31 Dissimilar	43	50 Ambivalent	124
Total		116	190	299	605

Table 3. Unstandardized Coefficients for Achievement and Educational Aspirations on Race Profiles, Affect Toward Race, and Shared Fate

	Achievement ^a						Educational Aspirations ^b					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(1')	(2')	(3')	(4')	(5')	(6')
<i>Race Profile (Neutral Omitted)</i>												
Mild Ambiv.	.218 (.124)	.178 (.126)	.181 (.124)	.209 (.125)	.167 (.124)	.137 (.126)	.645** (.238)	.619** (.242)	.631** (.240)	.574* (.238)	.552* (.240)	.535* (.243)
Ambivalent	.377* (.160)	.315 (.164)	.358* (.159)	.357* (.162)	.272 (.163)	.263 (.165)	.874** (.309)	.833** (.317)	.866** (.310)	.739* (.312)	.691* (.317)	.665* (.323)
Dissimilar	.091 (.181)	.083 (.181)	.086 (.180)	.087 (.181)	.072 (.180)	.069 (.179)	.993** (.359)	.985** (.360)	.990** (.359)	.947** (.358)	.952** (.358)	.934** (.358)
Similar	.334* (.137)	.266 (.143)	.285* (.138)	.317* (.139)	.250 (.139)	.213 (.143)	1.063*** (.263)	1.017*** (.275)	1.043*** (.267)	.935*** (.267)	.909*** (.270)	.877** (.279)
<i>Affect</i>												
Happy	---	.116 (.069)	---	---	---	.015 (.078)	---	.080 (.139)	---	---	---	-.032 (.159)
Regret	---	---	-.176* (.073)	---	---	-.156* (.080)	---	---	-.067 (.147)	---	---	-.022 (.163)
<i>Shared Fate</i>												
Helps	---	---	---	.055 (.066)	---	-.052 (.073)	---	---	---	.319* (.131)	---	.230 (.147)
Benefit	---	---	---	---	.194** (.068)	.199** (.076)	---	---	---	---	.318* (.136)	.219 (.154)
Constant	.788** (.301)	.728* (.303)	.935** (.306)	.794** (.301)	.805** (.299)	.922** (.312)	4.475*** (.470)	4.439*** (.475)	4.524*** (.482)	4.449*** (.468)	4.423*** (.469)	4.451*** (.495)
<i>R</i> ²	.249	.253	.258	.250	.262	.271	.251	.251	.251	.260	.259	.263

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. The relative proportion of adolescents within each profile remains consistent across both set of analyses and are similar to that found in Table 2. All models are net of family income, parents' education, sex, family structure, and school attended.

^a Models are net of school achievement prior to high school. N = 484.

^b Models are net of educational aspirations prior to high school. N = 513.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ (Two-tailed)

Table 4. Unstandardized Coefficients for Value of Schooling and Detachment from Schooling on Race Profiles, Affect Toward Race, and Shared Fate

	Value of Schooling						Detachment From Schooling					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(1')	(2')	(3')	(4')	(5')	(6')
<i>Race Profile (Weak/Neutral Omitted)</i>												
Mild Ambiv.	.326** (.122)	.217 (.122)	.214 (.119)	.276* (.122)	.200 (.120)	.102 (.118)	-.271 (.141)	-.142 (.140)	-.166 (.138)	-.237 (.141)	-.176 (.141)	-.063 (.139)
Ambivalent	.590*** (.158)	.420** (.159)	.529*** (.152)	.502** (.159)	.355* (.157)	.304* (.155)	-.509** (.182)	-.303 (.183)	-.450** (.177)	-.447* (.184)	-.331 (.185)	-.242 (.183)
Dissimilar	.357 (.184)	.314 (.181)	.342 (.176)	.322 (.182)	.310 (.177)	.296 (.172)	-.482* (.212)	-.430* (.208)	-.468* (.206)	-.458* (.211)	-.445* (.209)	-.424* (.204)
Similar	.449*** (.135)	.262 (.139)	.301* (.132)	.364** (.137)	.254 (.134)	.120 (.134)	-.421** (.156)	-.195 (.160)	-.277 (.154)	-.362* (.158)	-.275 (.158)	-.103 (.159)
<i>Affect</i>												
Happy	---	.314*** (.070)	---	---	---	.063 (.076)	---	-.379*** (.080)	---	---	---	-.176* (.090)
Regret	---	---	-.475*** (.073)	---	---	-.401*** (.079)	---	---	.466*** (.084)	---	---	.359*** (.093)
<i>Shared Fate</i>												
Help	---	---	---	.214*** (.067)	---	-.003 (.071)	---	---	---	-.148 (.077)	---	.040 (.084)
Benefit	---	---	---	---	.415*** (.067)	.358*** (.074)	---	---	---	---	-.312*** (.079)	-.250** (.088)
Constant	3.031*** (.304)	2.877*** (.301)	3.403*** (.298)	3.059*** (.302)	3.042*** (.294)	3.323*** (.296)	3.248*** (.348)	3.452*** (.343)	2.908*** (.343)	3.230*** (.347)	3.238*** (.343)	3.078*** (.348)
R ²	.148	.181	.216	.165	.209	.264	.139	.176	.189	.145	.165	.214

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. All models are net of family income, parents' education, sex, family structure, prior school achievement, and school attended. Number of observations is 525 and 529 for *value of schooling* and *detachment from schooling*, respectively. The relative proportion of adolescents within each profile remains consistent across both set of analyses and are similar to that found in Table 2

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ (Two-tailed)