

Racial Pride and Religiosity among African American Boys: Implications for Academic Motivation and Achievement

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Abstract The persistent underachievement among African American boys has led to increased empirical inquiry, yet little research considers within-group variation in achievement nor positive youth characteristics that help explain positive achievement outcomes. This study conceptualized culturally-based factors (racial pride and religiosity) as adolescent assets that would promote African American boys' achievement and also enhance positive effects of other youth assets (positive educational utility beliefs) on achievement. Our sample included 158 adolescent boys ($M = 17.08$) from a large, socioeconomically diverse suburban community context. Accounting for demographic background variables, educational utility beliefs were positively associated with academic grade performance. A significant educational utility beliefs and racial pride interaction indicated a stronger, positive association of educational utility beliefs with grade performance among boys with higher racial pride relative to those with lower racial pride. Also, there was a stronger positive association between educational utility beliefs and grades for boys reporting lower religious importance, but boys endorsing both lower educational utility beliefs and religious importance were at highest risk for low grade performance. Overall results suggest the importance of

considering culturally-based factors in studying achievement motivation processes among ethnic minority adolescents.

Keywords Racial identity · Religiosity · Academic achievement · Adolescence

Introduction

Over the past 40 years, there has been significant gain in the educational attainment of African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Despite these gains, the picture remains particularly disheartening for Black boys. According to The 2010 Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males, the 2007/2008-graduation rate was 47% for Black males, with half of the states reporting Black male educational attainment below the national average. Despite increasing concern around Black male achievement, however, relatively little research has taken a within-group approach to studying Black boys' achievement motivation, and even less research has considered factors that promote their positive achievement.

In this study, we considered one aspect of Black boys' academic motivation—their educational utility beliefs. Specifically, we considered boys' perceptions of the utility of education for their future personal success and the association of these perceptions with their school performance. In addition, we were interested in how boys draw on individual assets related to their cultural backgrounds (i.e., racial pride and religiosity) to promote positive achievement. Specifically, we considered how these culturally-based adolescent assets may interact with other adolescent assets (educational utility beliefs) to promote their academic achievement. Our broader goal was to

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examine Black boys as a group at unique risk for decreased achievement motivation but also to take a strengths-based approach to understand factors that help support motivation and achievement for many, despite their risk status.

Achievement Motivation Values and Black Boys

Various achievement motivation frameworks emphasize how linking school to personal values and goals can promote students' sustained school engagement, higher academic aspirations, and higher achievement and persistence (e.g., Miller et al. 1999). The current study focuses on beliefs around the utility of schooling for future achievement and success. Research studies find that endorsing positive beliefs around the value and future payoff of education relates to higher grade performance, among other educational outcomes (Ford 1993; Hebert 1998; McClendon and Wigfield 1998). Scholars suggest several mechanisms linking educational utility beliefs and academic performance, for instance, positing that students with more positive educational utility beliefs are more likely to invest their time and efforts in school and to persist on academic tasks in the face of challenge (e.g., Ford 1993; McClendon and Wigfield 1998).

As such, educational utility beliefs are particularly relevant to the study of African American achievement. Scholars assert that historical and contemporary experiences of racial barriers to attainment through mainstream pathways (such as education) can lead to African American adolescents developing pessimistic views regarding the personal payoff of education for group members (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). As such, adolescents with such perceptions may be more likely to disconnect their personal identities from the academic domain, including devaluing the personal relevance of education and schooling (Ogbu 2004). In a seminal study, Mickelson (1990) explored the educational utility beliefs of African American adolescents, distinguishing adolescents' beliefs about the general value of education from their beliefs about the personal payoff of education (e.g., whether education ensures upward mobility for African Americans like them). Findings indicated that, while they generally endorsed the value of education, African American students' beliefs about the personal utility of education most strongly predicted their academic performance. More recent studies support these findings. For instance, Irving and Hudley (2008) reported that Black adolescents' oppositional achievement attitudes (e.g., "if you are Black going to school is a waste of time") were predictive of lower achievement. Eccleston et al. (2010) found that Black adolescents who personally valued reading and math had higher achievement outcomes. Thus, for African American adolescents, seeing the personal value and benefits of education is particularly important for

school engagement (e.g., Chavous et al. 2003). However, this group is particularly likely to experience racial and other social barriers that can negatively affect their educational values (e.g., Ceballo et al. 2004; Chavous et al. 2008).

African American boys may be particularly at risk for developing negative achievement values (e.g., Spencer et al. 1997). African American boys occupy a unique social status in the U.S., with evidence that this group is likely to experience a number of contextual risk factors as a function of both their racial and gender group memberships (Bonner et al. 2009; Spencer et al. 1997; Swanson et al. 2003). In the context of schooling, Black boys are particularly likely to be viewed in ways that reflect gendered racial stereotypes, i.e., as physically threatening, non-intellectual, endorsing low academic expectations (e.g., Weinstein et al. 2004), and experience more overt racial discrimination relative to Black girls (Chavous et al. 2008). In addition, Black boys are more likely to experience punitive treatment from teachers to other adults than other youth (e.g., Lewis et al. 2010; Skiba et al. 2002; Townsend 2000), despite a lack of evidence that Black boys are more likely than their racial and ethnic peers to be discipline problems in the classroom (e.g., Lewis et al. 2010). Thus, low expectations and negative treatment based on racial and gender stereotypes—along with the structural economic conditions that disproportionately affect African Americans—contribute to Black boys' lower academic performance relative to other adolescents' (e.g., Noguera 2003; Ross and Jackson 1991; Spencer et al. 1997).

The negative racial and gendered experiences may affect boys' educational utility values. Low expectations and negative treatment convey negative messages regarding the usefulness of schooling for boys' life outcomes. Also, Black boys' attempts to cope with personal devaluation and negative treatment may relate to their development of educational values. For instance, Swanson et al. (2003) reported that Black adolescent boys who perceived lower academic expectations from adults in their school contexts had higher bravado attitudes. This study is consistent with scholarship describing some Black boys' reactive responses to negative experiences (e.g., developing hypermasculine, bravado attitudes), particularly to those in public domains (Cunningham et al. 2003; Cunningham 1999; Spencer et al. 2004). This coping response may include minimizing the personal relevance of that domain (Graham et al. 1998; Osborne 1999), such as developing more pessimistic views of the value of education for personal success. While this coping response might be adaptive in some respects (e.g., allow for maintenance of self-concept, self-respect, and personal agency), it likely relates to lower school engagement and, subsequently, lower achievement (Chavous, et al. 2008; Swanson et al.

2003). Thus, a focus on educational values is a particularly important area of inquiry and potential point of intervention for African American boys.

Black Boys' Personal and Cultural Assets: School Utility Beliefs, Racial Pride and Religiosity

There has been increasing interest and inquiry around Black boys' risk for poor achievement, including individual and contextual factors that contribute to risk. While the unique risks and challenges that Black boys experience are important to highlight, many Black boys show a great deal of positive adaptation that often is unrecognized and unacknowledged (e.g., Byfield 2008). There has been relatively little focus on positive development among Black boys, including the personal and cultural assets many draw on to promote motivation and academic achievement. In considering Black boys' personal and culturally-based assets, we draw on resiliency theory (e.g., Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). Resilience theory is concerned with exposures to risk but focuses on strengths instead of deficits and understanding healthy development in spite of risk exposure. Youth assets are the positive factors that reside within the individual, such as competence, pro-social attitudes, and coping skills. From a risk and resilience perspective, we view positive educational utility beliefs as a personal youth asset that would promote Black boys' achievement outcomes, particularly given evidence that their normative ecological contexts often are characterized by academic risk—e.g., conveying direct and indirect messages to them about educational barriers and low expectations (e.g., Spencer et al. 1997). We view racial pride and religiosity as culturally-based youth assets that may directly promote achievement and enhance the positive effects of educational utility beliefs on achievement.

Racial Pride

In examining racial pride, we draw on frameworks from literatures on African American racial identity, defined as the significance of and meanings individuals attach to their racial group membership (Sellers et al. 1998). A primary developmental task for adolescents is the development of personal identity, and because of the salience of race in U.S. society, the development of a racial identity is important to the adaptation and adjustment of many ethnic minority adolescents (Spencer et al. 1997). Our conceptualization of racial pride is consistent with one aspect of Sellers' et al. (1998) racial identity model related to the meanings connected with individuals' racial identity—private regard, defined as individuals' affective feelings about their racial group membership, including awareness of and pride in the group's heritage and societal contributions. We focus on this

component of racial identity because a positive sense of one's racial group membership has been suggested to function as a psychological buffer against the negative effects of the broader society's negative view of African Americans (Rowley et al. 1998). As such, feelings of racial pride may be particularly relevant to Black boys in the context of education, a group particularly likely to be viewed and treated negatively in their academic settings.

Racial pride has been implicated in African American achievement motivation processes, directly and indirectly. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) posit that Black students' underachievement is due to the conflict between endorsing their group's cultural identity and the values associated with mainstream pathways to attainment (including schooling). According to their cultural-ecological framework, involuntary minority groups (like African Americans) are particularly likely to develop personal identities that do not include a focus on education, because those groups have experienced barriers to success in that domain. As a result of these barriers and exclusion from mainstream routes to mobility (e.g., educational attainment), youth may develop and embrace "oppositional identities", i.e., those that involved values outside of the academic domain. Based on this perspective, it would be expected that African American adolescents with a strong sense of racial group affiliation and pride would be more likely to devalue the school behaviors and attitudes associated with mainstream academic success, and subsequently show lower achievement than those with less racial group affiliation and pride.

While this is a prevalent and popular framework in the literature on African American achievement and underachievement, scholars increasingly note its limitations in describing accurately the strong historical value of education among many African American communities and its inability to account for variation in achievement outcomes among Black adolescents', particularly positive outcomes (e.g., O'Connor 1999; O'Connor et al. 2006; Smalls et al. 2007). In fact, more research studies suggest that awareness of and pride in African Americans' racial heritage (e.g., accomplishments, struggles for attainment) show direct, positive relationships with academic achievement outcomes among African American adolescents (e.g., Chavous et al. 2003; Rowley et al. 1998, Wong et al. 2003). For instance, Oyserman et al. (2001) found that urban African American middle school students who connected academic achievement to their racial group membership and heritage had higher academic self-efficacy beliefs than those who did not view achievement as part of their racial group identity. Similarly, in examinations of urban African American high school students, O'Connor (1999) and Nasir et al. (2009) distinguished between higher and lower achieving youth in that higher achieving students linked

their own academic motivation and persistence to awareness of and pride in African Americans' historical struggles to attain success. These findings are consistent with Smalls et al.'s (2007) "racial identity-as-promotive" perspective, which posits that pride in African Americans' heritage can enhance individuals' personal value for education, subsequently promoting academic engagements, efforts, and persistence that lead to positive achievement. In sum, despite the historically stigmatized status of African Americans, there is more research evidence from the literature suggesting the promotive effects of racial pride in relation to African American adolescent achievement.

These processes may be particularly important for Black males' achievement. Oyserman et al. (2003) present a framework describing "gendered racial identity" processes and their implications for achievement. The authors note that traditional male socialization encourages male autonomy, but in contexts without supportive resources and opportunities to succeed academically, autonomy socialization can reduce males' academic values and commitment because it facilitates their disengagement from contexts that emphasize the value of schooling (Allen 1992; Bowman 1992). Thus, for boys in high-risk contexts in particular (e.g., those within which prospects for advancement are low), having a strong connectedness to one's racial in-group—including an awareness of its history and traditions—may enhance males' achievement, because it provides a balance for traditional male gender socialization for autonomy. The authors found that African American boys who reported more connectedness to their racial identity group (e.g., community members) engaged in more pro-achievement behaviors and had better grade outcomes.

Other research studies support this line of reasoning. For instance, Chavous et al. (2008) reported that a sense of racial connectedness (centrality) played a strong direct and indirect role in predicting achievement values and performance for African American adolescent boys, while centrality was not similarly predictive for girls. The authors speculated that, because boys experienced more overt racial discrimination at school, having a strong connection to their racial identity may be particularly important as a source of affirmation and support, which are necessary for promoting and maintaining their achievement motivation. Mickelson and Greene (2006) found that Black adolescent boys who endorsed the belief that academic success was not a part of their personal identity showed lower achievement than those who viewed academic success as part of their personal identity. While these studies did not assess racial pride beliefs explicitly, they do raise the possibilities that (1) boys with more awareness and pride around their racial group membership would be more likely to hold positive motivational beliefs and show higher achievement than those with a weaker sense of group pride

and (2) a sense of racial pride might compensate for or enhance the positive effects of positive educational values on achievement among African American boys. As such, we would expect youth with both positive educational utility beliefs and high racial pride to show the highest academic achievement, beyond the individual effects of racial pride or educational utility beliefs.

Religiosity

We conceptualized religiosity as another adolescent culturally-based asset that could promote academic motivation and performance, an asset that involves the degree that individuals adhere to their religious values, beliefs, and practices and use them in their daily living. We focus on a behavioral indicator (church attendance) as well as the importance of religion in youths' day-to-day lives (religious importance) (e.g., Taylor et al. 2004). Collectively, psychological research literatures suggest the important role of religion in the lives of African Americans, including its function in relation to a variety of life outcomes (e.g., Mattis and Jagers 2001). The extent that religion is important to individuals' daily lives reflects religious faith as a source of support that individuals draw on and use to inform their other value systems. Historically, in many African American communities, the church has been involved actively in efforts to attain social mobility and equality for the group, including an emphasis on pro-education values (e.g., Loury 2004). Thus, religiosity may have particular relevance for African American adolescent achievement.

Scholarship on religiosity suggests that Black adolescents benefit from attending church because of the community support gained from these experiences (e.g., Herndon 2003; Saggio and Rendón 2004). Church attendance and other behaviors indicating religiosity also may signal youths' involvement in pro-social activities generally, as well as in structures that serve social monitoring functions (e.g., Good and Willoughby 2006; Mello and Worrell 2008), each of which has been linked to more positive academic motivation and achievement (e.g., Walker and Dixon 2002). In addition, having a strong connection to religious faith can provide a sense of purpose beyond that which might be offered by individuals' proximal contexts (Herndon 2003; Riggins et al. 2008). As such, for youth experiencing ecological risks in their day-to-day contexts in particular, religiosity may serve as a source of personal affirmation and encouragement in ways that promote educational persistence and achievement.

Indeed, several research studies link indicators of religiosity to academic achievement outcomes. Loury (2004) found that church attendance during adolescence

significantly increased African Americans' total years of schooling attained. Church attendance by urban youth also has been associated with higher rates of school attendance and labor force attachment (Freeman 1986). Even when controlling for socioeconomic status, Black adolescents' religious involvement (assessed by church attendance and participation in church activities) has been related to heightened educational expectations and higher standardized math and reading test scores (e.g., Elder and Conger 2000; Jeynes 1999; Regnerus 2000; Sanders 1998) and lower school drop out (Scharf 1998; Smith and Lalonde 2003). Both church attendance and religious importance beliefs have been related to African American adolescents' academic achievement motivation, such as intention to complete high school (Brown and Gary 1991; Glaser and Sacerdotem 2001; Jeynes 2003; Williams et al. 2002). Furthermore, Jeynes (1999) found that Black and Hispanic 11th graders who attended church more often and rated religion as important outperformed their counterparts on standardized measures of math, reading, science, and social studies. In addition to the direct effects on academic outcomes, the research literature also demonstrates the role of religious behaviors and beliefs in promoting academic achievement outcomes through decreasing behaviors related to lower achievement, such as substance use and risky behavior (e.g., Chandy et al. 1996; Milot and Ludden 2009; Regnerus 2000).

While existing scholarship suggests that religiosity may serve to promote positive achievement motivation and academic achievement, we suggest that religiosity can serve a complementary role with academic motivation in relationship to school achievement. For instance, as noted, our motivational construct of interest, educational utility beliefs, has been linked positively to school engagement outcomes across a number of studies of African American students. Educational utility beliefs tap into youths' optimism or pessimism about the future benefit of schooling to their lives. We posit that the positive effect of optimistic educational utility beliefs may be enhanced among youth who also draw on their religious faith, as it may serve as a source of motivation and purpose.

Taken together, the literature suggests the important role of adolescents' religious commitment in relationship to achievement motivation processes. Interestingly, the scholarship on religion and adolescents has included little consideration of gender and even less focus on Black boys specifically. Research indicates girls' and women's higher involvement in formal and informal religious activities relative to boys and men (Francis 1997; De Vaus and McAllister 1987; Gallup and Lindsay 1999; Sanders and Herting 2000). Sanders and Herting (2000) asserted that these gender differences in religious involvement also contributed to gender differences in achievement (favoring

girls), but the authors did not test this contention empirically. Byfield (2008) examined a group of academically successful Black male college students and found that most were religious and expressed that their religious beliefs helped them cope and persist in ways that influenced their achievement. Few research studies, however, examine gender variation in the impact of religiosity on adolescent achievement outcomes nor take a within-gender group approach to examining the role of religiosity in relationship to Black adolescent boys' achievement.

Study Aims

The present study sought to examine achievement processes among Black adolescent boys. A contribution of our study is its focus on positive development among African American boys, a group often characterized by risk and deficit attributes in developmental literatures. A related contribution is our examination of culturally-based adolescent assets (racial pride, religiosity) and how they function to promote adolescent boys' achievement. Based on previous literatures, we expected that African American adolescent boys with more positive educational utility beliefs would have higher grade performance than those with lower educational utility beliefs. Research has suggested the direct, positive associations of racial pride and religiosity indicators on Black adolescent achievement, which we also expect within our sample.

In our examination of relationships among educational beliefs, racial pride, and religiosity and their implications for academic achievement, we drew on resilience theory, which is concerned with the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). The literature reviewed suggests that Black boys—as a function of challenges in their normative contexts within schools and the broader society—may be particularly at risk for developing negative beliefs regarding the utility of education, and holding such beliefs are detrimental to their achievement. As such, one possibility we tested was that racial pride and religiosity variables functioned in ways consistent with one proposed model for understanding youth resilience, a compensatory model (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). A compensatory model would be represented “when a promotive factor counteracts or operates in an opposite direction of a risk factor” (p. 401). From an analytic perspective, the effect of the promotive factors (adolescent assets of racial pride and religiosity variables) would be independent of the effects of a risk factor. Thus, while we would expect that boys with lower educational utility beliefs would show lower school achievement, a compensatory model would suggest that

having higher racial pride, higher church attendance, or higher religious importance would help “compensate” for the potential effects of holding lower or higher educational utility beliefs on grade achievement.

A second possibility tested was that racial pride beliefs, church attendance, and religious importance would moderate the associations between educational utility beliefs and school grade performance, such that racial pride, church attendance and religious importance enhanced the positive effects of educational utility beliefs. This expectation would be consistent with the “protective-protective model” of resilience (Brook et al. 1986; Brook et al. 1989) whereby one youth asset (racial pride) enhances the positive effect of another asset (positive educational utility beliefs) for producing more positive academic outcomes than either factor alone. While this model does not involve the presence of a particular risk factor, Brook and colleagues (1986, 1989) assert that the model is appropriate when the two interacting promotive factors are studied in a population defined to be at risk for a particular negative outcome (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005), as is the case for African American boys and underachievement in school.

Method

The current study is part of a larger study, the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study (MADICS) conducted by Eccles, Sameroff, and colleagues. MADICS is a community-based longitudinal study, starting with 1,480 adolescents and their families in adolescents’ 7th grade year (61% African American, 35% European American). This sample is unique in several respects: It includes a large proportion of African American families who represent a range of income and family education levels, making it more possible to examine the independent impacts of family income, educational attainment, and racial group membership on development. The sample also is drawn from a county that includes several different ecological settings—including low income, high-risk urban neighborhoods; middle-class suburban neighborhoods; and rural, farm-based neighborhoods—thus providing ample variation in neighborhood characteristics.

Participants

The present study examines the fourth wave of the MADICS data set, in which adolescents’ were in their 11th grade school year. A total of 485 African American adolescent boys were in this wave. The final sample for the present study ($N = 158$) included adolescents with complete data for all study variables. The median household income level for the

sample adolescents’ was \$40,000–\$49,000 (range \$5,000–\$75,000), and the highest educational level of adolescents’ primary caregivers indicated that fewer than half had received a high school diploma and 12% had completed college. In addition, we included an indicator of household family structure based on parent/primary caregiver reported marital status (1 = married, 2 = widowed, 3 = separated, 4 = divorced, 5 = never married). Responses were coded as 0 = not married/non-2-parent household and 1 = married/2-parent household. To obtain the magnitude of differences between adolescents included and not included in the current sample, t -values and effect sizes, as reflected by Cohen’s d was utilized. T -test results indicated that African American boys ($N = 158$) included in the study did differ on background demographic variables from boys not included in the study. According to Cohen (1988), $d = .20$ can be interpreted as a small effect size, $d = .50$ as medium, and $d = .80$ as large. Adolescents’ included in the analyses tended to be younger ($M = 16.98$, $SD = .57$; $t = 3.692$, $p = .000$, $d = .40$). Grade point averages tended to be higher for adolescents ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .79$; $t = 2.163$, $p = .031$, $d = .25$) not included in the study in comparison to adolescents in the study ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .71$). Lastly, adolescents; ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .98$, $t = -2.408$, $p = .017$, $d = -.29$) not included in the study tended to have lower religious importance beliefs in comparison to adolescents ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .80$) included in the analyses. Detailed information about participants’ community and school contexts can be found at the study website: <http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/garp>.

Procedure

For the current study wave of 11th grade adolescents, the target adolescent and parent were individually interviewed for approximately 1 h each, and each filled out a 45-min, self-administered questionnaire. As often as possible, the race of the interviewer was matched to the race of the primary caregiver. In many cases, a secondary caregiver also was administered a questionnaire. During the youth survey administrations, adolescents’ parents were present in the home during interviewers’ visits. For both data collections, informed consent was obtained from both adolescents and parents.

Measures

Educational Utility Beliefs

Educational utility beliefs were measured using Mickelson’s (1990) abstract educational attitudes scale. The scale assessed youths’ personal views about education and the

opportunity structure for Black people like them, or the extent youth endorsed schooling as a means to personal success. The scale consisted of seven items, e.g., “Young Black people like me have a chance of making it if we do well in school” and “Education really pays off in the future for young Black people like me.” Adolescents’ answered items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very pessimistic) to a high of 5 (very optimistic). Responses were summed with higher mean scores indicating agreement with the dominant achievement ideology. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .81.

Racial Pride

To operationalize racial pride, we used youths’ self reported private regard beliefs, assessed with a shortened 4-item version of the Private Regard subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers et al. 1997). The items included: “I am happy that I am Black”, “I feel good about other Black people”, “Blacks have made advancements and accomplishments”, and “I often regret that I am Black.” Adolescents’ answered items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items were recoded and average scores calculated such that higher scores represented more positive private regard beliefs. Cronbach’s alpha for the subscale was .76.

Religiosity

We examined two indicators of boys’ religiosity: youth reported church attendance and religious importance. A *church attendance* variable was created from youth reports of church attendance over the past year. First, adolescents reported whether they had attended church or religious services at all in the past year (0 = no, 1 = yes). If youth responded “yes,” participants were directed to a follow-up item assessing frequency of attending church. Adolescents specified 1 = daily, 2 = weekly, 3 = monthly, and 4 = yearly. Items were recoded such that 0 = not at all, 1 = yearly, 2 = monthly, 3 = weekly, and 4 = daily. *Religious importance* was assessed using one item that asked participants how important religion is in the day-to-day life of their family. Responses ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very).

Grade Performance

Adolescents’ grade point averages (GPA) reflected their performances (based on school records) across core academic subjects from school records (e.g., English, math, science and social studies), with possible scores ranging from 0 to 4.0.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 provides descriptive information on mean scores for demographic and primary study variables. The mean grade point average (GPA) was a 2.86 on a 4.0 scale. On average, adolescents reported moderate racial pride scores, attending church on a regular basis, and high religious importance scores.

Correlational analyses indicated that demographic variables were not significantly associated with boys’ GPA. Educational utility beliefs were positively and significantly related to GPA ($r = .36, p < .010$). Contrary to expectations, there was no significant association between racial pride scores and GPA ($r = -.10, p > .05$). Furthermore, frequency of church attendance and religious importance were not significantly associated with grades (see Table 2).

Educational Utility Beliefs, Adolescent Assets, and Academic Performance

To test our primary study hypotheses, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, in which GPA was regressed on demographic background and primary predictor variables. Table 3 summarizes results from the analyses for grade performance. In each model, demographic variables were entered in block 1, and educational utility beliefs, racial pride, church attendance, and religious importance were entered in block 2. To examine whether racial pride, church attendance, and religious importance served as a compensatory or additive factors in the associations of educational utility beliefs and GPA, we created and entered three interaction terms in block 3—educational utility beliefs \times racial pride, educational utility beliefs \times frequency of church attendance, and educational utility beliefs \times religious importance. As recommended by Aiken and West (1991) when testing interaction effects, variables were centered prior to entering into regression models.

Table 1 Primary and background study variable means and standard deviations

	Min.	Max.	<i>M</i>	SD
Grade point average	0.00	4.00	2.86	0.75
Educational utility	1.00	5.00	3.88	0.67
Racial pride	1.00	5.00	2.42	0.44
Church attendance	0.00	4.00	2.16	1.10
Importance of religion	1.00	4.00	3.22	0.89
Youth age	15.52	19.86	17.08	0.60
Household income	1.00	16.00	9.48	4.31

Average household income is 9.48 approximately \$40,000 to \$49,999 per year (i.e., \$5,000 to \$75,000 per year)

Table 2 Primary study variable correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Youth age							
2. Household income	-.032						
3. Martial status	-.028	.514**					
4. Educational utility	-.094	.012	.016				
5. Racial pride	-.082	.120	.100	-.164*			
6. Church attendance	-.165*	.052	.092	.010	-.064		
7. Importance of religion	-.052	.045	.021	.103	.092	.427**	
8. Grade point average	-.115	.063	.139	.358**	-.091	.026	.080

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Significant interaction effects were examined by plotting the slope of grade point average regressed on educational utility beliefs estimated at selected conditional values ($M + 1$ SD and $M - 1$ SD) of racial pride, church attendance, or religious importance (Cohen and Cohen 1983).

The final GPA model was significant $F(9,148) = 3.567$, $p = .001$ (see Table 3). Martial status and parental education did not add significantly to variance in GPA

Table 3 Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting grade point average from educational utility beliefs, racial pride, and religious importance

	Grade point average		
	B	SE(B)	β
Step 1			
Martial status	-.04	.04	-.10
Parental education	.03	.03	.09
Step 2			
Martial status	-.04	.04	-.10
Parental education	.03	.02	.09
Educational utility beliefs	.34	.08	.32***
Racial pride	-.03	.14	-.01
Church attendance	.02	.08	.02
Religious importance	-.00	.07	-.00
Step 3			
Martial status	-.04	.04	-.10
Parental education	.01	.02	.05
Educational utility beliefs	.36	.08	.33***
Racial pride	.13	.16	.07
Church attendance	.01	.08	.01
Religious importance	-.00	.07	-.00
Utility \times racial pride	.43	.16	.26**
Utility \times church attendance	.05	.12	.03
Utility \times religious importance	-.28	.11	-.21*

Adjusted $R^2 = .01$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .10$ for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .06$ for Step 3

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

explained, and neither variable was significantly associated with GPA. Adding the educational utility beliefs, racial pride, church attendance, and religious importance variables at step 2 did contribute significantly to variance explained in GPA (increasing variance explained by 10%). Educational utility beliefs were significantly and positively related to GPA ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), but racial pride, church attendance, and religious importance were not significantly associated with GPA. Entering the interaction terms at step 3 did increase variance in GPA explained by 6%. Educational utility beliefs remained significant ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$), and there were significant interactions between educational utility beliefs and racial pride ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$) and educational utility beliefs and religious importance ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .05$).

Figures 1 and 2 was graphed using Modgraph software, which allows entry of statistical information obtained from the hierarchical regression analyses necessary for the graphical display of statistical interactions (Jose 2008). For the educational utility beliefs and racial pride interaction, our plot indicated a stronger, positive relationship between educational utility beliefs and GPA among boys with higher and moderate racial pride, relative to boys with lower racial pride scores (see Fig. 1). Our plot of the significant educational utility beliefs and religious importance interaction (Fig. 2) indicated a stronger, positive association between educational utility beliefs and GPA among boys reporting lower religious importance relative to those reporting moderate and high religious importance. The association between educational utility and GPA was non-significant among boys reporting the highest religious importance. Also, it is noteworthy that boys with lower educational utility and lower religious importance scores reported significantly lower GPAs than did boys with similarly low educational utility scores but who were higher in religious importance. Finally, among boys higher in educational utility beliefs, there was no significant difference in GPA across low, moderate, or higher religious importance levels.



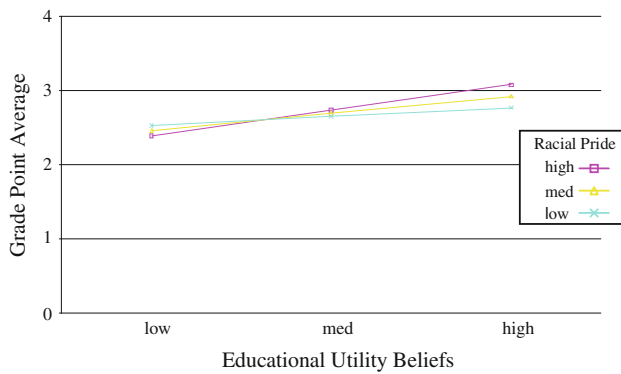


Fig. 1 Mean rating of GPA as a function of racial pride and educational utility beliefs

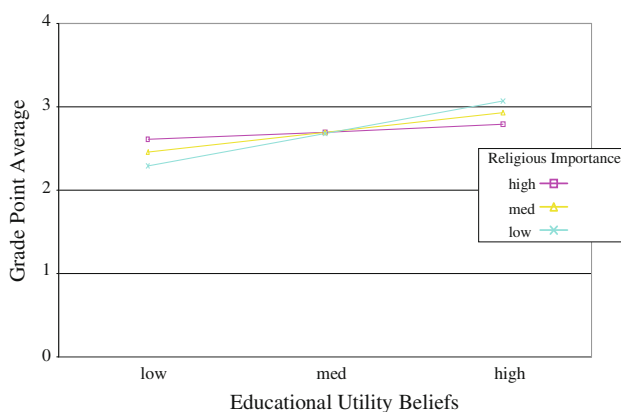


Fig. 2 Mean rating of GPA as a function of religious importance and educational utility beliefs

Discussion

The current study explored how individual-level cultural factors served as assets to promote grade performance among Black adolescent boys and enhance the effects of educational utility beliefs on performance. Prior research studies document the positive association between educational utility beliefs and achievement outcomes (e.g., Strayhorn 2009). Extant research literature also establishes a positive link between racial pride beliefs and academic outcomes (e.g., Chavous et al. 2003; Oyserman et al. 2001). Furthermore, there is research literature that links higher levels of religiosity—in terms of religious behaviors and beliefs—with positive academic outcomes (e.g., Brown and Gary 1991). The current study examines educational utility beliefs, racial pride (assessed as private regard beliefs), and religiosity indicators (church attendance and religious importance) and their associations with boys' grade performance.

As would be expected, adolescent boys' in our study reporting higher educational utility beliefs had higher grade

point averages. However, in contrast to prior studies, racial pride, church attendance, and religious importance were not predictive of grade performance. Perhaps the findings in the current study reflect our focus on boys only, as prior research with our study variables has tended to include samples of boys and girls, and most do not include gender comparisons or take within-gender approaches. Prior research studies focused on boys did not examine racial pride explicitly (e.g., Oyserman et al. 2003; Chavous et al. 2008), but instead focused on feelings of connectedness or group centrality. Also, it is possible that findings might differ if we considered achievement or achievement motivation outcomes examined in other studies (e.g., standardized tests, academic self-concept, school drop-out) (e.g., Chavous et al. 2003; Glanville et al. 2008; Jeynes 2003; Wong et al. 2003). This suggests the usefulness of taking a within-gender approach to consider processes unique to Black boys and the importance of considering how different types of race-related beliefs may relate to achievement outcomes and allows us to contribute to the empirical literature by underscoring the intersection of race and gender (Cole 2009).

While we found no direct associations of private regard and religiosity variables with grades, findings indicated significant interaction effects with educational utility beliefs. The resulting interaction effect of educational utility beliefs with racial pride in predicting academic performance indicated a stronger positive relationship between educational utility and grades for boys higher in racial pride beliefs in comparison to youth with lower levels of racial pride. Youth with the lowest educational utility beliefs, however, showed similarly low GPAs, regardless of their racial pride. These findings may provide some insight into the lack of direct association between racial pride and grade performance. Our study suggests that having negative beliefs about the future payoff of education is not beneficial to Black boys, and higher racial pride does not compensate for negative educational utility beliefs. However, the findings did support the Brook et al.'s (1986, 1989) "protective-protective" model of resiliency in that higher private regard seemed to enhance the positive association of educational utility beliefs with boys' academic achievement.

Study findings suggest a different pattern of relationships among educational utility beliefs, religiosity variables, and grade performance. No significant direct or interaction effects resulted for church attendance, while we found a significant educational utility beliefs and religious importance interaction effect. The findings suggest that the religious behaviors assessed were less relevant to boys' achievement than the reported daily importance of their religious faith. Thus, future work might explore more in-depth youth reports of how they draw on their religion in their daily lives.

Counter to our expectations, educational utility beliefs related to higher GPAs most strongly among boys reporting lower religious importance. Moreover, the relationship between the positive association of educational utility beliefs and GPA was weaker for boys with moderate religious importance. Also, the association was non-significant among those reporting the highest religious importance. However, it should be noted that boys reporting both low educational utility beliefs and low religious importance had the lowest GPAs relative to boys with similarly low educational utility beliefs but moderate and high religious importance.

Taken together, the results suggest that, while there was a stronger positive association between educational utility and GPA for boys lower in religious involvement, boys with both low educational utility beliefs and low religiosity were most academically at-risk. One possible interpretation is that having higher educational utility beliefs is particularly relevant in promoting higher achievement among boys who are lower in religious involvement. In other words, having optimistic views around the function of education for personal future success is even more necessary among boys who do not derive a sense of purpose from their religious faith in their day-to-day lives. Similarly, boys reporting both low educational utility and low religious importance (who had lowest GPAs) may reflect a group of boys who have fewer personal resources to draw on (i.e., they feel pessimistic about the role of school for their success and they do not have supports that come from drawing on religious faith in day-to-day family life), placing them at highest risk for low achievement.

Study Limitations and Considerations

This study contributes to literatures on achievement motivation processes among African American adolescent boys, which might aid in broader efforts to improve their educational outcomes. First, our study supports prior scholarship by highlighting the importance of educational utility beliefs in understanding academic achievement. Our study suggests that high educational utility beliefs functions as a crucial internal asset that promotes academic success.

The strengths of this study include our focus on within-group variation in Black boys; personal and cultural attributes and how these factors related to variation in boys' achievement outcomes.

Such a focus acknowledges the unique experiences and ecologies Black boys encounter in U.S. society as a function of their race and gender group memberships that warrant their examination in non-comparative study designs. The dearth of studies focusing on positive youth

assets and developmental outcomes among Black boys has resulted in insufficient knowledge regarding processes leading to positive achievement among this population. Furthermore, scholars such as Graham (1994) have long asserted the need for inclusion of race- and culture-related factors in examinations of achievement motivation processes among African Americans. Thus, another study contribution is our consideration of factors related to positive adjustment, including culturally-based attributes (racial pride and religious importance) that can promote achievement.

Although the study has a number of strengths, we note several study limitations. First, the church attendance and religious importance measures utilized in this study each was comprised of one item available in the study dataset. There are other existing scales measuring religious concepts focus on involvement, commitment, orientation, or attitudes towards aspects of religious services/activities (e.g., Pfeifer and Waelty 1995; Sethi and Seligman 1993) that were not available to the researchers. Future studies might consider using other indicators of religiosity. A more comprehensive measure of religiosity could provide a better understanding of variability in the types of activities and beliefs that African American adolescent boys draw on in their day-to-day lives. Second, while grade achievement is an important academic outcome, future work might consider other academic outcomes such as academic aspirations, academic self-concept, and academic behaviors such as drop out and persistence, as well as longer term academic attainment. Finally, the data were cross-sectional, in large part because our private regard measure was not available in prior data waves, and subsequent data waves occurred post-high school. Thus, our study design limits the ability to draw firm inferences about causal directions of the relationships found in this study. Longitudinal examinations of how these constructs function over time would provide unique information on the roles of racial pride, religiosity, and achievement motivation beliefs on Black boys' academic achievement.

Conclusions/Implications

Our study highlights the importance of examining attributes related to African American adolescent boys' achievement motivation beliefs as well as assets related to their cultural-ecological backgrounds in understanding their achievement processes. Despite our study's limitations, an important finding was that positive educational utility beliefs were strongly related to higher achievement among African American adolescent boys. Additionally, high racial group pride enhanced the positive benefits of holding optimistic educational utility beliefs. Thus,

programmatic and intervention efforts focused on boys might include ways to support and affirm their racial group identities. The findings highlight also how religiosity may be differentially relevant to boys' achievement processes. The findings suggest that high religious importance can compensate for low educational utility beliefs and high educational utility beliefs can compensate for low religious importance. However, boys with both pessimistic educational utility beliefs and lower religiosity may reflect a unique academic risk group—youth with fewer personal and cultural resources relative to other boys. The study's findings also raise questions about the nature of Black boys' achievement motivation that warrant further investigation and on which future research could build.

In conclusion, future research should continue to explore Black boys' individual and culturally-based assets rather than only highlighting deficits, including how and to what extent youth assets serve to promote their academic, social, and psychological development. Additionally, while it is important to understand Black boys' personal strengths and those they derive from their culture and communities that allow them to achieve despite contexts that may challenge or devalue them, it is critical to continue our focus on addressing the actual contextual conditions that promote or inhibit Black boys' educational utility beliefs and academic success.

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