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Predicting Positive Academic Intentions Among African American Males and Females

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George Warren Brown School of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Significant attention has been given to the educational shortcomings of African American students, especially compared to their white counterparts. By contrast, this study assesses positive predictors of educational success among 243 African-American high school sophomores. Because African American females typically have higher educational outcomes than their male peers, this study also examined these predictors by gender to better understand factors that may contribute to these differences. The study employed the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a conceptual framework and also examined students' self-perceptions in four domains: self-esteem, racial self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, and the importance of school completion to self. The results suggest that although most students in this study had positive prepositions towards school completion, females were more positively oriented towards academic success than males. The Theory of Planned Behavior proved to be a good conceptual model for predicting academic intentions among these youths. The amount of variance explained was significantly enhanced by the inclusion of students' self-perceptions. Gender differences were found only in the importance of attitudes to predict intentions to complete the school year. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Considerable attention has been given to the educational shortcomings of African American youth. We have learned that these youth are less likely to graduate from high school or to attend college than are white youth. We have also learned that females, in general, are doing better educationally than are their male counterparts (Hawkins, 1996). This is true for Whites, *Latinos*, and African Americans. Some are now convinced that males have actually lost out to girls educationally, and that educational gender imbalances may begin to affect American society negatively.

A higher percentage of African American females than males are graduating from high school and college, earning advanced degrees, and entering white collar professions (Carter & Wilson, 1993; Farley, 1984; Hawkins, 1996; US Bureau of the Census, 1990). The most recent figures on African Americans age 18-24 years indicate that there is now a six percentage point spread between the graduation rates of African American females and males: females have a high school graduation rate of 77.5 percent, while that of males is 71.4 percent (Wilds, 2000). Similarly, the college participation rates of African-American high school females are currently 43 percent compared to only 35 percent for African American males. These figures reflect an increase of 4 percent in college attendance since the 1990s for females, while indicating no change since this time for males. In fact, African Americans have a larger gender gap in college participation than do whites or Hispanics (Wilds, 2000).

Researchers believe differences in the educational outcomes of African American males and females have already begun to influence dynamics within the Black community negatively (Lichter, McLaughlin, Dephart & Landry, 1992, Mare, 1991; South, 1991; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Indications are that these educational disparities serve to place males at a disadvantage in the labor market (Farley, 1984; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). While African American females are making steadfast professional gains in our society, African American males are losing ground relative to them.

These differences in educational experiences and outcomes begin long before high school. As early as elementary school, African American boys are more often behind in school than their female peers (Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 1997). Boys at the elementary school level typically get lower grades than girls in reading and conduct (Entwisle & Hayduck, 1982; Alexander & Entwisle, 1988), and many more boys than girls fail a grade which has been strongly linked to dropping out of school later in life (Cairns, Cairns & Neckerman, 1989; US Bureau of the Census, 1992).

These educational disparities have implications for the later economic success and quality of life for African American men. Without a high school education, economic security is often not achieved (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). While a high school education does not guarantee a job, it increases the chances that the individual will be employed. In 1994, 72 percent of men with less than a high school diploma were employed compared to 90 percent of men with one to three years of college (US Bureau of the Census, 1995). In an increasingly service-oriented economy, *finishing high school and completing* a college education has become necessary for well paying jobs. *Given that fewer African American males than females graduate from high school, it is understandable that they would be less likely to attend or graduate from college*

which would qualify them for higher paying jobs. This puts them at a disadvantage both economically and socially.

The purpose of this study was to assess factors that *might* contribute to the positive *academic outcomes* of a cohort of African American youth. *Given the gender differences in academic outcomes that have been documented by others, and noted above, we were also interested in exploring possible gender differences in these factors.*

The factors that were examined included students' intention to complete the school year and their self perceptions in four domains. We elected to assess student intentions to complete the school year, as considerable prior research using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a conceptual model, has found individual intentions to be powerful predictors of future behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In this model, which is explained in greater detail in the next section, an individual's intentions are determined by their attitude toward the behavior, the social norms related to completing the behavior and their perceptions of the personal control they have over completing the behavior. All three of these determinants of intentions were examined..

Self perceptions were chosen because they are believed to be important and powerful dynamics at work during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Fordham, 1996). We thought it was important to assess the influence that students' self perceptions might exert on their intentions to complete school.. Hence in addition to the components of the Theory of Planned Behavior, we employed four measures of self-perceptions in our effort to predict students' intentions to complete the school year. The first self perception was self esteem. Following Rosenberg's (1979) definition, self-esteem refers to how individuals feel about themselves in a comprehensive, or global, manner.

The second self perception was racial self-esteem which was defined as how the individual feels about his or her racial group membership, or ethnic pride (Porter & Washington, 1979) Hughes and Demo (1989) report that racial self esteem as defined by Porter and Washington has been found to be an important factor in the self perception of African Americans. Academic self-efficacy was the third self perception examined and was defined as how the individual feels about his/her academic capabilities (Bachman, 1970; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). Finally, the fourth self perception, importance of school year completion to self, was an assessment of how important completing the current school year was to students' sense of who they were or their personal identity. Figure #1 portrays these variables and the relationships tested.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985, Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Beck & Ajzen, 1991) *served* as our major conceptual framework. According to this theory, the immediate predictor of *a behavior* is the *individual's* intention to carry out the behavior. An individual's intention to engage in a specific behavior is determined by three factors: (a) their attitude toward the behavior, (b) social norms related to the behavior, and (c) perceived personal control over completing the behavior. *According to the TPB, these three factors are believed to be sufficient to predict an individual's intentions to complete a behavior.*

However, some prior research suggests that different components may be more salient across different groups of subjects and when different behaviors are examined (Ajzen, 1991). Hence we *believed* that this model might provide insights into those factors that *might be contributing* to gender differentials in educational outcomes among African Americans.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has been employed in the prediction of a wide variety of behaviors (e.g., Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Ajzen, 1991; Reinecke, Schmidt, & Ajzen, 1996). *More importantly for our purposes, the theory* has been used successfully to examine academic decisions among a variety of student populations (Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987; Koballa, 1988; Norwich & Duncan, 1990; Norwich & Jaeger, 1989). In *all of* these studies, model components were found to be significant predictors of intentions to complete the behavior.

Attitude towards the behavior, *according to the TPB*, represents the individual's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior. The theory suggests that this attitude is formed through a consideration of the potential consequences of carrying out the behavior. If the behavior is expected to produce valued outcomes or to result in the avoidance of negative outcomes, the individual's attitude toward the behavior is more likely to be positive. In this study, we examined attitudes toward completing the school year.

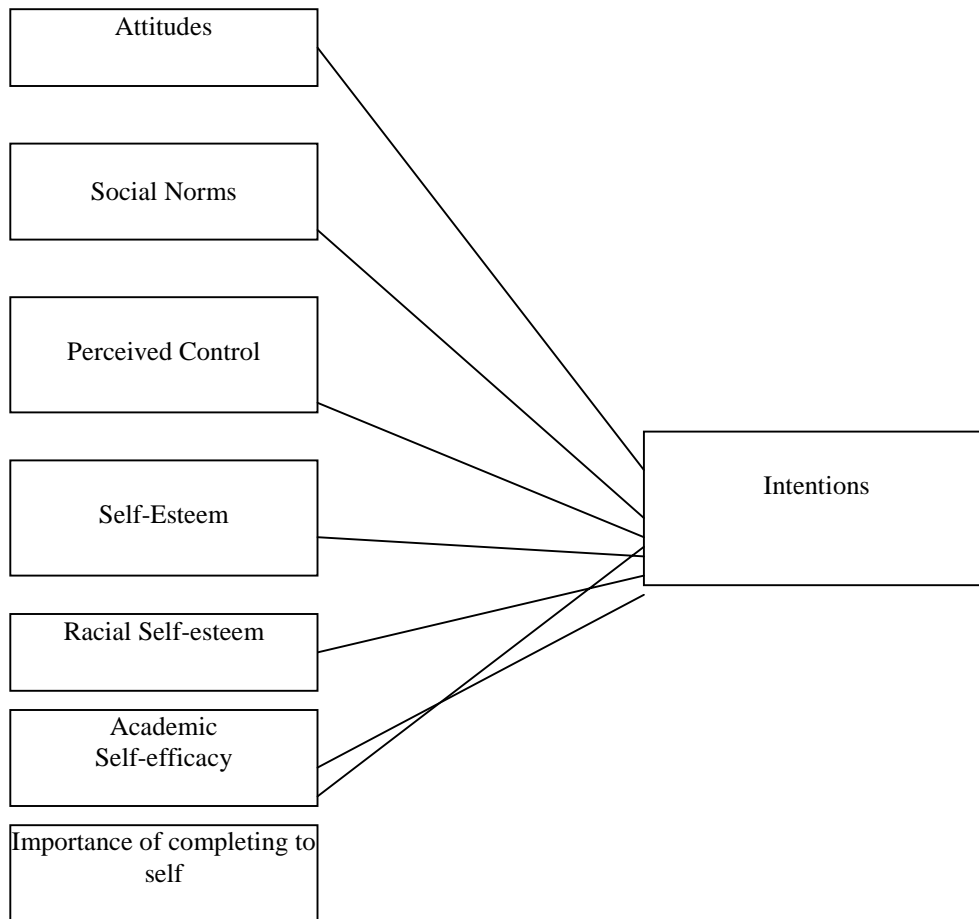
The TPB conceptualizes social norms as the influence of significant others' opinions about a behavior. These social referents might include family members, friends, and others relevant to the behavior being examined. The extent to which important others expect certain behaviors is believed to strengthen the person's intention to carry out these behaviors. Our study examined the influence of social norms on students' intentions to complete the school year.

Behavioral control in the TPB model reflects the individual's perceived ability to carry out the behavior. It represents his or her perceived ability to overcome obstacles that may hinder attempts to complete the behavior. In this study, students' perceived ability to overcome obstacles to completing the school year was examined.

The Theory of Planned Behavior has been developed over a long period of time. Early on, it was posited that the attitude and social norms components were sufficient to explain behavioral intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). However, more recent research efforts have found that other factors, e.g., perceived behavioral control, affect, moral values, and behavioral norms may add to our understanding of some behaviors (Ajzen, 1988; Triandis, 1980; Gorsuch & Ortberg, 1983; Grube, Morgan, & McGree, 1986). Still, other efforts have found evidence that self-identity also contributes to our understanding of behavioral intentions (Biddle, Bank, & Slaving 1987; Granberg & Holmberg, 1990). Hence, we elected to include four self-identity measures along with the three components of the TPB model. Each of these measures of self perceptions were employed in this effort to enhance our ability to predict the positive educational intentions of our cohort of African American students. Figure #1 portrays these variables and the relationships tested.

Finally, it should be noted that in this study only student intentions to complete the school year were assessed. The actual school year completion was not included due to the fact that many of our students were on and off the school roster, as some moved, transferred, and were just reported as “no longer in attendance”. Hence at the end of the academic year it was not possible to determine from school records with sufficient certainty which students were still in school attendance and which had transferred, moved, dropped, or were momentarily lost in the system.

(Figure 1)



Self-Perceptions

A significant relationship between self-perceptions and behavioral intentions, as defined in the Theory of Planned Behavior, has been found in a variety of circumstances (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992) and more specifically such a relationship has been observed to exist between a *self perceptions* and academic achievement (Hummel & Rosselli, 1983). Furthermore, perceptions of self have been found to be important precursors of school achievement in a variety of student groups (Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991; Lau & Leung, 1992, Midgeley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996). In fact, the relationship between self-perceptions and academic achievement among African American students has been noted at the preschool level (Justice, Lindsey, &

Morrow, 1999), middle school (Jordan, 1981) and high school levels (Gordon, 1995). Hence as significant numbers of African American youth continue to fall short academically, the importance of self perceptions has sustained the attention of those interested in improving their levels of academic performance (Crocker & Major, 1989; Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1996, Ogbu, 1988; Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995; Spencer, 1993).

Racial Self-Esteem and Self-Esteem

Most of us have now heard the expression "acting white" as it is sometimes used to describe perjoratively the academic strivings of African American students. In such instances, it is conjectured that their classmates interpret efforts of academic achievement as instances of imitating white behavior and thus, as a betrayal of black identity. Subsequently, some African American youth are believed to behave in "opposition" to these achievement oriented (white) behaviors, so that they might sustain a positive racial identity , *or high racial self esteem* (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, Ogbu, 1988; Fordham, 1996). Consistent with the "acting white" or oppositional culture argument, we might expect that those African American students who were high in racial self-esteem might reject academic strivings and as a result have lower intentions to finish the school year (Fordham & Ogbu, 1988) . Fordham (1996) suggests that black youth who reject academics may be employing whites as an anti-referent group and have subsequently "blacked out" behaviors thought to be engaged in by whites. Other research efforts have also suggested that black students are especially likely to be impacted by the conflict between racial identity and academic success (Porter & Washington, 1993). Hence, there is reason to believe that those students who identify most strongly with being African American, *that is, have the highest racial self esteem*, might reject what they perceive to be a "white" academic norm, such as earning good grades or completing high school.

However, there is considerable controversy on this point. Some researchers have found no evidence in support of the oppositional cultural argument, that is they observed no negative relationship between *racial self esteem* and academic outcomes (Ainsworth, Darnell & Downey, 1998; Witherspoon, Speight & Thomas, 1997), while others have found positive relationships between racial self-esteem and academic outcomes (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998). Hence, one of the goals of this study was to inspect the influence of a student's racial self-esteem on his or her intentions to complete the school year. But we also wanted to inspect the relationship between racial self-esteem and personal self-esteem, because, as some have suggested, individuals may differ in their personal and collective perceptions of self (Triandis, 1989; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Terry & White, 1995). For example, some students might be high on personal self-esteem, that is, have overall positive perceptions of themselves, but have less than favorable racial or group membership (collective) perceptions of themselves. Thus, with respect to racial self-esteem and self-esteem, we *not only* wanted to inspect their independent contributions to our students' intentions to complete the school year, but we also wanted to assess their relationship to each other for this group of students.

Self-Efficacy

While self-esteem has received attention with respect to its influence on behavior, so too has the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Young children are believed to have a sense of personal self-esteem, which describes how they feel about themselves in general. However, as they mature, they begin to recognize that they have personal strengths in some areas more than others, and develop a more specialized sense of self-esteem that is centered around their confidence in their ability to accomplish or achieve mastery in specific areas (Bandura, 1977; Rosenberg, et al., 1995). For example, the possession of high academic self-efficacy would suggest that a youth perceives him or her self as capable of performing well *academically independently of their overall sense of self esteem*. A previous research effort noted *this* relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic outcomes among poor, urban African-American high school students (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). Furthermore, in one study of urban African-American students that also looked at gender, Spencer and her colleagues (1993) found that academic self-efficacy was the most salient predictor of academic performance for both males and females. Hence, in this study, the influence of students' perceptions of academic self efficacy on *their* intentions to complete the school year was also of interest to us.

Importance to Self

Finally, when an achievement becomes part of a youth's identity, it facilitates the formation of goals in that area (Hummel & Rosselli, 1983). In other words, the more important a given goal is to the self-identity of a youth the more likely obtaining that goal ought be. Thus it is reasonable to expect that among those students for whom completing the school year was important to their personal identity, intentions to complete the school year would be greater. It was a goal of this *study* to assess this relationship.

Hypotheses

Based on our review of the literature related to the Theory of Planned Behavior and the relationship between self perceptions and academic intentions, the following hypotheses were made:

- 1) Intentions to complete the school year will be predicted by (a) positive attitudes, (b) strong social norms, and (c) perceived ability to overcome obstacles. Moreover each TPB component will account for a unique, significant proportion of the variance in intentions. An exploratory effort will be made to determine if the components of the TPB model predict differentially for girls and boys.
- 2) Self-esteem, academic self-efficacy and *the importance of school year completion to self* will each be positively related to intentions to complete the school year. An exploratory effort will be made to assess if racial self-esteem has a negative effect on intentions to complete the school year. An exploratory effort will also be made to determine if self-perceptions predict differentially for girls and boys.

METHOD

Participants

Study participants attended a large urban school in the midwest with a total enrollment of approximately 1200 students. The school was predominantly African American (99%). The sample consisted of 243 tenth grade students, who constituted approximately 80 percent of the total sophomore class. Participation in the study was optional for students. Some of the sophomore class chose not to participate. Some of the youth did not know about the study due to relatively high rates of absences from the school on any given day. Others failed to secure the written permission of a parent or guardian to participate.

Procedure

Youth were recruited with the assistance of a school guidance counselor who served as the primary liaison between students and the research team members. Students were told that the research project was interested in their attitudes toward school and school completion. They were asked to volunteer through their homeroom classes. Those students who volunteered to participate in the study were required to sign informed consent forms. Written consent was also obtained from each student's parent or legal guardian prior to participation.

The youth were surveyed in groups of 15 to 40 students. Because of the wide variability in reading levels, a research assistant read the items to the group while students followed along with their questionnaires. An additional research assistant was also present to assist those students who experienced difficulty in completing the materials. Research assistants who participated in the survey administration were African American. It took approximately one hour for students to complete the questionnaire. They were paid \$15 for their time and effort.

Measures

Questionnaires included items to measure demographic descriptors, the Theory of Planned Behavior components and self-perceptions. Demographic characteristics included gender, age, and family composition. Lunch subsidy status was also assessed (i.e., whether students received free or reduced price lunches). This measure was used as an indicator of low-income status.

The Theory of Planned Behavior components (*intentions, attitudes, social norms and perceptions of control*) were measured using a number of scales, which were developed according to guidelines described by Ajzen and his colleagues (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Ajzen, 1991).

Intention to complete school was measured with five items that assessed the degree to which students intended, would try, expected to, and were determined to complete the current school year. These items were answered using a seven point likert scale ranging from disagree very much (1) to agree very much (7). The responses to these five items were averaged for one scale score of intentions where higher numbers indicated stronger intentions to complete the school year. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .68.

Attitudes toward completing the current school year were measured with eight items that employed a semantic differential scale to measure how positively or negatively respondents viewed completing the current school year. On a seven-point scale, respondents indicated their ranking of whether they felt that completing the school year would be: rewarding to punishing, useful to useless, bad to good, harmful to beneficial, wise to foolish, unpleasant to pleasant, desirable to undesirable, and boring to exciting. Items were reversed scored when necessary to make positive responses coincide with higher values. Responses to these items were averaged to provide an overall attitude score. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .82.

Three items were used to assess students' perceptions of social norms toward school completion, that is, the amount of social support they believed they had to complete school. On a scale ranging from 1 (unlikely) to 7 (likely), respondents reported whether important others 1) thought that he/she should complete the current school year, 2) would be disappointed if he/she did not complete the current school year, and 3) expected him/her to complete the current school year. The responses to these three items were averaged to create a social norms indicator. The reliability coefficient for this scale was .67.

Perceived behavioral control over completing the school year was measured using three items. Responses were measured on a scale ranging from difficult/disagree (1) to easy/agree (7). The items assessed the students' perceptions of having control over staying in school, their ability to overcome obstacles to remaining in school and the extent to which the decision to complete school was up to them. An average of these responses was calculated to provide an overall measure of students' perceptions of control over completing the school year. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .68.

Self-esteem was measured with ten items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1979). Respondents rated their level of agreement with each item using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). An example of these items is "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." The responses to these items were also averaged to give an overall indication of global self-esteem. The reliability coefficient for this measure was .78.

The racial self-esteem measure (Hughes & Demo, 1989) consisted of 14 items, which were averaged. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement using a scale ranging from 1 (true) to 4 (not true at all). Respondents were asked how true they thought it was that "most Black people:" keep trying, love their families, are ashamed, are lazy, neglect their families, are trifling, are hardworking, do for others, give up easily, are weak, are proud of themselves, are honest, are selfish, and are strong. Items were reverse scored when necessary to make positive responses coincide with higher values. Reliability coefficient of this measure was .80.

Academic self-efficacy was measured with eight items. Three items were from the Bachman (1970) School Ability Self-concept Index. They were: 1) "How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with those in your grade in school?" 2) "How intelligent do you think you are compared to others your age?" and 3) "Compared to others your age, how important is it to you to be able to use your intelligence?" An additional five items were created by our research team and added to these to complete the scale. They were: 1) "How capable do you think you are of

getting good grades?", 2) "Compared to others your age, how much value do you place on getting good grades?" 3) "Compared to others your age, how satisfied are you with your grades?" 4) "How confident are you that you will be able to perform well in the future?" and 5) "Compared to others your age, to what extent do you really believe that if you work hard, you could improve your grades?" All of the items were measured on a seven point scale ranging from "far below average" (1) to "very much above average" (7). Cronbach's alpha for this eight-item scale was .89.

The importance of completing school to the identity of each student was assessed by a single item. The item read: "Completing the current school year is an important part of who I am." Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with this statement on a seven point scale from disagree very much (1) to agree very much (7).

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

One hundred and seven boys and 136 girls participated in this study (n=243). Of the 243 surveys, 202 had complete data and were used for this analysis. Students ranged in age from 15 to 18 years of age with a mean of 15.6 years. Fifty-eight percent of the students reported receiving a free or reduced-price lunch, an indication that their family's income was below or near the federal poverty standards.

The largest percentage of students (41%, n=99) reported residing in extended families consisting of one parent and other adult family members. Thirty-one percent of the respondents (n=75) indicated they resided with both biological parents while 28 percent of the youths (n=68) reported living with a single parent. All but two of these students lived with their biological mother. The percent of our sample receiving subsidized lunches and residing with both biological parents are similar to national demographics for African American youth (US Bureau of the Census, 1995).

Analysis

As can be seen in Table 1, a comparison of mean scores for males and females on the study variables revealed that the girls had significantly stronger intentions to complete the school year. They also had stronger attitudes toward completing the school year, reported stronger social norms to complete the school year and perceived greater personal control over their ability to complete the school year. The girls also had significantly greater academic self-efficacy and a greater sense that completing the school year was an important part of "who I am" compared to their male peers. There were no gender differences in the reported levels of either self-esteem or racial self-esteem.

Table 1:

Comparison of mean values of study variables for males and females

	Males Mean (SD)	Females Mean (SD)	n	t-value
Intention	6.09 (1.50)	6.51 (0.82)	201	-2.33*
Attitude	6.08 (1.09)	6.42 (0.75)	201	-2.45*
Social Norm	6.30 (1.34)	6.78 (0.63)	201	-2.93**
Perceived Control	5.45 (1.17)	6.00 (1.08)	201	-3.15**
Self-esteem	3.43 (0.41)	3.45 (0.41)	201	-0.19
Racial Self-esteem	3.19 (0.42)	3.22 (0.42)	201	-0.37
Academic Self-efficacy	5.25 (1.12)	5.65 (0.88)	201	-2.85**
Completing important to self	6.17 (1.54)	6.71 (0.99)	201	-2.81**

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$

Bivariate correlations between these measures were computed and are provided in Table 2. As can be seen, there exists considerable positive association among the variables of our study. As suggested by the Theory of Planned Behavior, the three theoretical predictors of intentions to complete school (attitudes, social norms, and perceived control) were positively and significantly correlated with each other and intentions to complete the school year. In addition, each of the self-perceptions variables was positively correlated to each of the others, and all but racial self-esteem were correlated with intentions to complete the school year.

Table 2:

Bivariate correlations of study variables (n=243)

	Mean (sd)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Intention	6.35 (1.16)	-							
2. Attitudes	6.28 (.91)	.48***	-						
3. Social Norms	6.59 (1.01)	.49***	.28***	-					
4. Perceived Control	5.75 (1.14)	.61***	.38***	.33***	-				
5. Self-esteem	3.44 (.41)	.26***	.19**	.05	.26***	-			
6. Racial self-esteem	3.21 (.42)	.05	.13	.19**	.04	.26***	-		
7. Academic self-efficacy	5.49 (.10)	.47***	.27***	.38***	.40***	.23**	.07	-	
8. Completing important to self	6.49 (1.26)	.55***	.26***	.42***	.42***	.11	.12	.41***	-

** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

The Theory of Planned Behavior model was tested for this sample of students using a series of regression equations. Initially, the three predictive variables of intention to complete school (attitudes, social norms, and perceived control) were entered in a regression equation. As hypothesized, each of the model components (attitudes, social norms, perceived control) contributed significantly and uniquely to the positive intention to complete school year for this group of African American students. Collectively, these three variables explained 52 percent of the variance of intention to complete school. Table 3 provides the regression coefficients for these analyses.

Table 3:

Regression coefficients for variables on Intention to complete the school year

	TPB		TPB + Self-perceptions	
	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
Attitude	.24***	.07	.22***	.07
Subjective Norms	.28***	.06	.20***	.06
Perceived Behavioral control	.43***	.06	.30***	.06
Global Self-esteem			.10*	.14
Racial Self-esteem			-.09	.14
Academic Self-efficacy			.10	.06
Completing Important self			.24***	.05
R ²	.52		.59	
Adjusted R ²	.51		.57	
R2 change			.07***	
F-value (df)	69.99*** (3, 196)		38.96*** (7, 192)	

* $p \leq .05$; *** $p \leq .001$

Next, the four self-perception variables were added to the equation. Collectively these variables added significantly to the variance explained by the TPB model (R^2 change = .07, $p \leq .001$) thus indicating that self perceptions are important in predicting student intentions to complete the school year. This finding is in agreement with those of others who have contended that the TPB may benefit from the inclusion of self perception measures (Biddle, Bank & Slavings, 1987; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992). Both self-esteem and importance of completing to self provided unique contributions in this equation. Academic self-efficacy approached but did not reach a significant level ($p = .06$). Racial self-esteem was not found to predict intentions negatively ($p = .09$). *Although we failed to find evidence in support of the oppositional culture argument, it is noteworthy that the racial self esteem measure was the only negative coefficient observed in our analyses.* The regression coefficients for this equation can also be found in Table 3.

To understand our observed bivariate gender differences better, we tested main effects and interactions for gender. First, the Theory of Planned Behavior variables were examined for gender differences. As can be seen in Table 4, both gender, and the interaction of gender and attitudes were significant. To analyze the interaction of these two variables, attitudes toward school completion were regressed on intentions to complete the school year for males and females separately. The results indicated that attitudes were a much stronger predictor for males ($B = .61, t = 6.82, p < .001$) than females ($B = .22, t = 2.45, p = .02$). Attitudes explained 37 percent of the variance in intentions to complete the school year for males, and only 5 percent for females.

Gender main effects and interactions with the self-perception variables were also examined for intentions to complete the school year. A main effect for gender was found ($B = 1.62, t = 2.61, p = .01$), but no interactions. This suggests that males and females in this sample have different levels of self-perceptions, as suggested by the t-tests reported above, but that the manner in which the self-perceptions influence intentions to complete the school year is the same for both groups.

Table 4:

Regression coefficients for gender main effects and interactions

	TPB	
	Beta	SE
Attitude	.07	.10
Subjective Norms	.10	.12
Perceived Behavioral Control	.42***	.07
Gender	1.78***	1.12
Gender*Attitude	1.09**	.14
Gender*Social Norm	.72	.14
Gender *Perceived Control	-.05	.11
R ²		.56
Adjusted R ²		.54
F-value		34.34***
(df)		(7, 192)

** p ≤ .01; *** p ≤ .001

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The educational outcomes of African American youth continue to be less than desirable. Moreover, a significant gender gap has also appeared in the performance of these youths. As a group, boys are doing less well across the board than are girls on such measures as grades and high school completion rates (*Hawkins, 1996*).

The goal of this study was to shed light on factors that contribute to the intentions of a cohort of African American youth to complete the existing school year, and to examine how these factors may predict differentially for girls and boys. It was our expectation that such an examination of predictors by gender might inform our understanding of the reasons for gender differences in academic outcomes among African American youth generally *and suggest gender specific areas for interventions*.

While the vast majority of both boys and girls in our study held favorable intentions to stay in school, girls were clearly more positive in their overall orientations towards school than were boys. Most notably, girls reported stronger intentions to complete the school year. They also reported more favorable attitudes towards school, higher levels of social support for completing the school year, and reported greater perceived control over their abilities to complete the school year. With respect to their self perceptions, girls also reported having higher levels of academic self efficacy, that is, greater faith in their academic abilities to succeed in school, and in addition they indicated that completing the school year was more important to their sense of self than did boys.

We employed as our conceptual model for this study the Theory of Planned Behavior. As hypothesized, each of the model components (attitudes, social norms, and perceived control) was a positive predictor of youths' intentions to complete *the* school year for this group of African American students. We did observe one major gender difference among the predictors employed in our study. The attitude component of the model, which represents our student's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of completing the school year, was a much stronger predictor *of intentions to complete the school year* for boys than girls. That is, having favorable attitudes towards school was significantly more important to boys who intended to remain in school than for girls. This suggests that "selling" the benefits and the importance of school completion may be differentially motivating for boys and girls. *Boys are more likely than girls to benefit from being provided with a significant expectation that positive outcomes will be a consequence of their continuation in school.* Hence, efforts aimed at increasing *the* retention rate of African American males should *explicitly identify the social, financial and personal* benefits of remaining in school.

As adolescence is a time of identity development in which youth begin to focus on and develop goals for their life (Erikson, 1968), we also wanted to assess the impact of students' self perceptions on their academic intentions. Many African American youth are believed to struggle to simultaneously sustain positive self-perceptions and favorable academic outcomes (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, Crocker & Major, 1989; Fordham, 1996). Hence personal self esteem, racial esteem, academic self-efficacy, and importance of school completion to self were inspected to assess their influence on these youths' intentions to complete the school year. Both personal self

esteem and *completing school is important to self* were found to be significant predictors of student intentions to stay in school. However, neither racial self-esteem nor academic self-efficacy proved to be significant in their effects on student intentions.

Of considerable interest to us was the possible influence of racial self-esteem on students' intentions to complete the school year. Specifically, we wanted to inspect for evidence of the oppositional cultural argument or what is also known as the "acting white" phenomenon. It has been suggested that some African American students may intentionally do poorly in school in the effort to retain a positive racial identity (*Fordham & Ogbu, 1986*). We were looking for a possible negative predictive relationship between racial self-esteem and intentions to complete the school year as a manifestation of this dynamic. We did not observe such a relationship. The phenomenon we are attempting to capture is undoubtedly a complex one. *Indeed, research and conversations with young people offer plausible explanations as to how a favorable view of one's ethnic group could have both positive and negative effects on academic achievement. Yet even though it is possible to suppose that most successful African Americans have positive racial self esteem, is still noteworthy that the coefficient for this variable, albeit marginal, was in the predicted negative direction.* It is possible that the oppositional behavior we have attempted to inspect may be operative for only a small subset of youth who do in fact adhere to the norms of a counter culture. Hence, the question may not be if an oppositional culture exists, but rather for which subgroup(s) of African American youth is it operative .

This study has a number of limitations. Clearly, it would have benefited from a larger sample size and perhaps too from students from more than one high school. Although these students appear to be demographically similar to national descriptors of African American youth, generalizations to other African American youth should be made with caution. These results suggest areas for further examination rather than definitive answers for all African American youth.

In addition, our measure of social norms asked students about the social support they received from "important others" without asking them to specify who these individuals were. It could be that those specific individuals or groups of adults or peers should be encouraged to provide stronger support for academic success. Although not statistically significant among this small sample, this is an area that warrants further investigation. It is possible that the type of social support received is important. Asking students to share more specific information in future research would allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of these interactions.

We are aware that having intentions to complete the school year and actually doing so may differ considerably. Many factors may contribute to school failure, e.g., discipline problems, excessive mobility, financial exigencies, changes in family structure, and pregnancy. The purpose of this study, which was conducted at the beginning of these students' sophomore year, was not to assess completion rates, but to inspect how students' (males and females) predispositions varied near the beginning of their high school careers, perhaps before many of the above perils have the opportunity to intervene. In short, we wanted to know what this group of African American students intended to do, or were motivated to do, if things were "up to them".

This group of African American students reported that they had both favorable levels of self-esteem and racial self-esteem. Moreover, these two self-perceptions (personal and collective) were not found to be negatively related. That is, students gave evidence of feeling positive about themselves in general as well as feeling positive about the racial group to which they belonged. This we felt was an important observation and one that was true for both girls and boys. In fact, the responses to these two perceptions of self were high with little variance. These positive psychological perceptions should be nurtured. However, from a research perspective, more variance in these measures is needed to avoid this ceiling effect. In addition, the use of alternative measures or scaling methodologies might result in greater variance in responses that would enhance our understanding of the relationship of these factors to school achievement.

Finally, these findings enhance our understanding of the importance of gender in school related attitudes and self-perceptions on student intentions to stay in school. This effort focused only on African American youth, but following this line of inquiry future research efforts might suggest ways to enhance the academic performance of all students, regardless of their gender or racial/ethnic background. However, we strongly encourage other research efforts of this type, specifically those that focus on understanding positive rather than solely negative attributes of African American youth.

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