

Working Papers

FACTORS INFLUENCING AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTHS' DECISIONS TO STAY IN SCHOOL

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Working Paper No. 98-3
1998

A subsequent version of this paper has been published as:

Davis, L.E., Johnson, S., Miller-Cribbs, J., Saunders, J. (2002). A Brief Report: Factors Influencing African American Youth Decisions to Stay in School. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 17 (3), 223-234.



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This research was funded by HHS, Maternal and Child Health grant #MCR-63-40.

Factors Influencing African American Youth Decisions to Stay in School

Abstract

Little attention has been given to the non-problematic development and positive life decisions of African American youth. This paper reports findings of 231 African American students. The goal of the study was to assess factors which contribute to their academic grade point averages and intentions to stay in school. The conceptual model employed in this study was the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) which contends that intentions to carryout a behavior is a function of Attitude towards the behavior, Social Normative support for undertaking the behavior, and the Perceived Control of being able to carry out the behavior. In addition to the TPB components, the contributions of self-esteem and racial self-esteem were also examined for their influence on academic strivings. The TPB model did predict well student's intentions to stay in school, but predicted less well student grade point averages. Self-esteem was also a significant predictor of intentions to stay in school, but was not a significant predictor of gpa. Racial self-esteem was observed to be only marginally significant, but as predicted, was negatively associated with student Intentions to stay in school. However racial self esteem was not observed to be a significant predictor of student gpa. Hence students with positive self-esteem, who have favorable attitudes towards school and perceive fewer barriers to completing school are most likely to do so. But, the negative association between racial self-esteem and academic intentions suggests that some African American youths may need be convinced that academic success is not an act of racial betrayal.

Introduction

Little attention has been given to assessing the normative, non-problematic, developmental experiences of African American youth (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Taylor, 1995; Stiffman and Davis, 1990). In particular, social scientists have been remiss in studying the positive educational decisions of these youth. To the surprise of many there has been a racial convergence in high school completion rates among blacks and whites. Still, significant numbers of Black youth continue to experience difficulty completing high school (Census Bureau Report Educational Attainment in the United States, 1997). The drop-out rate in many inner city schools is reported at 30-50% (LeCompte & Goebel, 1987; Hahn, 1987; Garibaldi, 1992). Moreover, many African American youth continue to earn lower grades and attain less education than whites (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Mickelson, 1990). A variety of factors are believed to contribute to the academic difficulties of African American students: teen pregnancy and behavioral problems (Williams, 1982; Elster, Ketterlinus, and Lamb 1990), poverty (Rumberger, 1983; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Entwisle and Alexander, 1996), and quality of school factors (Cippolone, 1986; Coleman, 1996; Davis & Jordan, 1994; Mills, Dunham & Alpert, 1988).

Clearly our limited knowledge of factors which contribute to African American youth making positive decisions to complete high school, suggest that these decisions have been taken for granted. However, given that the prospects for employment and life opportunities in many neighborhoods is so bleak, the question might be asked, “why do so many African American youth bother to graduate from high school at all?” Hence in contrast to asking the typical question as to “why so many drop out” one might instead ask, “why do the vast majority elect to complete school”? Such a question seems reasonable given that those who do graduate from high school earn, on average, little more than those who drop out (Children’ Defense Fund, 1987; Census Bureau Report Educational Attainment in the United States, 1997).

Specifically, there is insufficient understanding of how African American youth view the importance of staying in school. Nor is there adequate understanding of the extent to which the social support of others e.g. family and friends, is influential in sustaining their positive educational aspirations. Similarly little is known about their perceptions of barriers to their educational aspirations. Hence our goal here was to find answers to some of these questions by examining African American youth attitudes towards completing school, the importance of social support for completing school, and their perceptions of barriers to completing school. In addition, we wanted to examine how perceptions of their self-esteem and their perceptions of racial self-esteem influenced their educational efforts.

The Theory of Planned Behavior

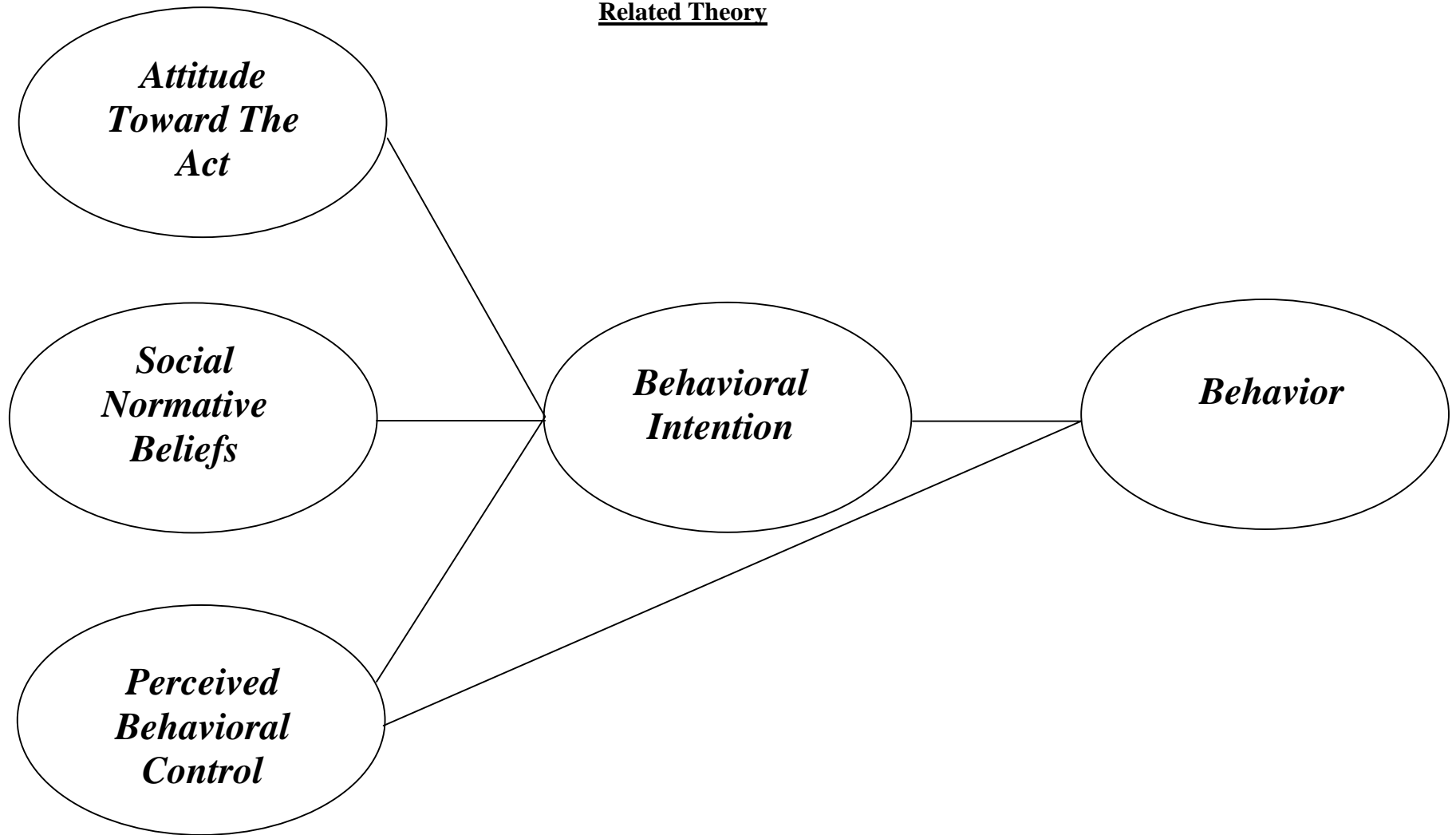
The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1985, 1987; Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Beck & Ajzen, 1991) represents the most compelling and well-established model for the prediction of intentional behavior. This theory has been used successfully to examine decisions closely related to those of interest in this effort. Academic decisions have been examined by Ajzen and Madden (1986), Carpenter and Fleishman (1987), Koballa (1988), Norwich and Duncan (1990), and

Norwich and Jaeger (1989). In each of these studies, the model components were found to provide substantial prediction of intentions and behaviors.

According to the TPB, the immediate predictor of behavior is the intention to carry out the behavior. Intention is determined by three other variables: (a) the attitude toward the behavior, (b) subjective norm, and (c) perceived behavioral control. The attitude toward the behavior represents the individual's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior e.g. intentions to complete high school. This attitude is formed through a consideration of the potential consequences of carrying out the behavior e.g. getting a good job or preparing the student for college. If the behavior is expected to produce valued outcomes or avoid negative outcomes, the individual's attitude toward the behavior is presumed to be more positive. The subjective norm reflects the influence of the perceived opinions of others and the motivation to comply with those social referents. To the extent important others think the individual should perform the behavior, and to the extent the individual is motivated to comply with those referents, the intention to carry out the behavior should be greater e.g. the student wants to comply with mom's wishes and mom thinks its important that he/she finishes. Finally, perceived behavioral control reflects the perceived difficulty of carrying out the behavior e.g. completing the school year will be easy or difficult. It represents the individual's perceived ability to overcome obstacles that may hinder behavioral attempts.

Figure 1. The Theory of Planned Behavior

Related Theory



Self Esteem and Racial Self-Esteem

Both self-esteem and racial self-esteem have received considerable attention in the study of Black youth development (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984; Gaa, Williams, & Johnson, 1981; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Murray, Smith, & West, 1989; Spencer, 1985; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Tashakkori & Thompson, 1990; Wade, Thompson, Tashakkori, & Valente, 1989). Of particular concern to those interested in the academic well being of African American youth has been the relationship between global self-esteem, racial self-esteem and academic outcomes. Actually, it has been the sometimes negative relationship among these constructs that has posed a conundrum for researchers and educators. Especially noteworthy has been the frequent observation of a negative relationship between racial self esteem and academic performance among these youth. Some (Ogbu, 1985; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986) have suggested that many black youth have turned against striving for academic excellence as part of their overall rejection of the dominant culture. For these youth, striving for academic excellence is a form of “acting white” and is perceived as betrayal of black culture. Fordham (1988, 1996) suggests that black youths may be employing whites as an anti-referent group and have subsequently “blackened out” behaviors perceived as white. However, it should be noted that there is still insufficient empirical support for the “oppositional cultural” argument and indeed some research efforts have found evidence that fails to support this hypothesis as it relates to African American students (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998). Still if the “intention to finish school and get good grades”, are perceived to be an instances of academic achievement and hence “acting white”, we might anticipate finding a negative relationship between a black student’s racial self-esteem and these academic behaviors.

Moreover there has also been an observed lack of agreement between global self-esteem and racial self-esteem (Hughes & Demo, 1989). That is, it seems that some Black students may have overall high self-esteem, but a low racial self esteem, e.g. feel poorly about their racial selves (Porter and Washington, 1979; 1989). This observation is inconsistent with Lewinian notions of self-concept development that the two (self and group identity) should be in agreement (Lewin, 1948). Not surprisingly, research findings indicating the reverse have been especially troubling to those interested in Black adolescent self-concept development (Cross 1987; Porter & Washington, 1979).

The purpose of these analyses is to inspect factors that contribute to African American youth academic efforts. Specifically, we predict that each of the components of the Theory of Planned Behavior: attitude, social norms (social support), and perceived control (the ability to overcome barriers) will be significant predictors of youth intentions to stay in school and of their grade point averages (GPA). In addition, we also hypothesize that student self-esteem will be positively related to student’s intentions to complete school and GPA, but that racial self-esteem will be negatively related to student intentions to complete school, and to GPA.

Method

Participants

This study utilized a large metropolitan midwestern city school with a total enrollment of approximately 1200 students. Our sample consisted of 231 African American ninth grade students (103 boys and 128 girls). This group constituted approximately 77% of the total freshmen class. The student body is virtually all African American (99%) with approximately equal numbers of males and females.

Procedure

Youth were recruited with the assistance of a school guidance counselor who served as primary liaison between students and the research team members. They were asked to volunteer through their homeroom classes. Even though the vast majority of students who were asked to participate in our study did so, many students simply failed to hear about our study e.g. on any given school day 15-20% of the student body was absent. This fact along with the failure or inability of some students to get a signed permission slip from their parent, or guardian served to reduce our obtaining an even higher percentage of this freshmen cohort. However all those students who did participate in the study were required to sign consent forms, as were their parents or legal guardians. Most students were surveyed in small groups of 15 to 40. A team of at least two African American graduate students served as research assistants and administered the surveys. Because of what we believed might be 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 had questions or experienced difficulty in completing the materials. Each questionnaire administration took approximately one hour to complete and participants were paid \$15 for their time.

Instrumentation

We collected demographic data in the effort to enhance our perspective of this population. Among the demographic data collected was gender, age, and family living arrangement e.g. living with two parent's, or other arrangement. We also obtained a lunch subsidy status of our students, i.e. students with family incomes above the poverty line paid full price for lunch while those students with family incomes at or below the poverty line received reduced or free lunches.

Four composite variables were constructed for testing the Theory of Planned Behavior model : Intention , Attitude, Social Norm, and Perceived Control:

Intention to complete school. This was measured by the mean scores of 5 items: I intend to complete the current school year, I will try to complete the current school year, I expect to complete the current school year, all things considered it is possible that I might not complete the current school year (reverse scored), and I am determined to complete the current school year. Each of these items employed a 7-point Likert scale ranging from disagree very much (1) to

agree very much (7). The reliability (coefficient alpha) of this composite measure of Intent was .56.

Attitude toward completing school. This measure consisted of 8 items that employed a semantic differential. These items in general asked the respondent about how positively or negatively they viewed completing the current school year. The selected items represent those most commonly used in the literature (e.g., Ajzen and Madden, 1986). On a 7-point scale respondents ranked whether or not 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. The reliability (coefficient alpha) of this measure was .84.

Subjective norm was measured by 3 items that assessed students' perceptions of how most people important to them would feel about their staying in school. On a scale ranging from unlikely (1) to likely (7), respondents reported whether most people who are important to them think that they should complete the current school year; would be disappointed if they did not complete the current school year; and expect them to complete the current school year. Reliability of this measure was .45.

Perceived behavioral control over completing the school year was measured using 4 items. On a scale ranging from difficult or disagree (1) to easy or agree (7), the items assessed the perceived difficulty of completing school, having control over staying in school, the perceived ability to overcome obstacles to remaining in school, and the extent to which the decision to stay in school is "up to the student." Reliability of this measure was .49.

Self-esteem was measured with 10 items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, e.g. "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others" (Rosenberg, 1979). Each item had a four point scale. Respondents rated their agreement with each stated item ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Reliability of this measure was .78.

Racial self-esteem was measured with 14 items (Hughes & Demo, 1989) that asked respondents to rank their agreement with each item based on a 4 point scale ranging from true to not true at all e.g. "most Black people: keep trying; are lazy; neglect their families." Reliability of this measure was .80.

Dependent variables

The dependent variables inspected are reported intention to complete school the year, which is a composite score of five items, and student's year-end grade point average (gpa).

RESULTS

Demographics

The students, all freshmen, were between fourteen and seventeen years of age, with a mean age of 14.5 yrs. The sample of African American youths utilized in these analyses appears to represent African American youth in general. For example, thirty-one percent of our sample indicated that they resided with both biological parents, twenty-eight percent reported living with a only one parent, and the remaining forty-one percent of our students report residing in a blended and extended family, or with relatives. The national figure on living arrangements for African American youth are: thirty-three percent live both parents and the remainder live in some form of extended or augmented family arrangement (Census Bureau, 1995a). Also the economic status of our students appears to be representative. For example, nationally forty-six percent of African American students live below the poverty line (Census Bureau, 1995a), while, fifty-two percent of our students received free lunch, thereby suggesting below poverty status. Hence at least on two important demographics, rates of poverty, and family living arrangement our students approximate African American youth nationally.

Bivariate Analyses

Table #1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the components of the Theory of Planned Behavior: Intentions, Attitude, Social Norm, Perceived Control, and for Self Esteem, Racial Self Esteem, and Grade Point Average. As can be observed student Intentions to complete school is significantly and positively correlated with all three components of the TPB model. Similarly the model components were also significantly and positively correlated with student GPA. Of note too is the fact that Global Self-esteem was significantly and positively correlated with the components of the TPB: Intentions, Attitude, Social Norm, and Perceived Control. Global Self-Esteem and Racial Self-Esteem were also themselves positively correlated. The high mean scores of both Global Self-Esteem and Racial Self-Esteem, and their positive association with each other, suggests that these students feel both favorable about themselves generally, and about the racial group to which they belong. Hence these findings suggest Lewinian consistency in the global self and racial self for this group of students.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

	<u>Correlations</u>						Mean	SD
	2	3	4	5	6	7		
1. Intention	.63*	.33*	.50*	.33*	.10	.40*	6.42	0.85
2. Attitude		.40*	.36*	.28*	.21*	.34*	6.13	0.91
3. Social Norm			.24*	.21*	.10	.17*	6.60	0.80
4. Perceived Control				.28*	.14*	.20*	5.60	1.09
5. Global Self Esteem					.30*	.11	3.34	0.46
6. Racial Self-Esteem						.06	3.18	0.43
7. GPA							1.83	1.00

Note. Degrees of freedom for individual correlations vary slightly due to missing data.
 *p<.05

Regression Analyses

Prediction of intentions to complete school . Multiple regression analyses were used to predict intentions to complete school from the TPB components (attitude, social norm, and perceived control), as well as from two additions to the model: self-esteem and racial self-esteem. First we entered the components from the TPB model, which were significant, (F=71.6 df=3, 226) p<.000, in predicting Intentions, explaining 48% of the variance, (see table #2). Significant predictors were attitude and perceived control. The most powerful predictor by far was Attitude. The Social Norms component of the TPB model did not, for these students, serve as a significant predictor of intentions to complete school. We then entered self-esteem variables (self esteem and racial-self) along with the TPB components. The addition of these two variables also produced a significant model (F=47.9 df=5,223) p<.000 and increased the variance explained to 52%. This increase in variance explained (R=.015), though small, (F=3.55 df=2,223 p<.05) was still significant. It is worth noting that the Theory of Planned Behavior asserts that the expanatory contributions of constructs such as self esteem will operate through its three components, hence making unnecessary adjunct components e.g. self-esteem, to the TPB model. Our analyses, not shown here, suggest that most of the effects of self-esteem are infact operating through the TPB components. However, by virtue of the fact that the TPB components did not explain all the variance suggests that the model is not completely sufficient. But indeed only the Global self-esteem measure was a significant predictor in the model (p<.01). In addition, the Racial Self-esteem measure was observed to be only marginally significant (p=.08), however, it was negatively related to the dependent variable as predicted.

Table 2

Beta Weights, F Scores, R , Adjusted R^2 , and R^2 of Predictor Variables on Intentions to Complete the School Year

Variable	Model I			Model II		
	B	β	F	B	β	F
Attitudes	.465	.469	83.140***	.474	.500	85.892***
Subjective normative belief	.062	.059		.078	.073	
Perceived behavioral control	.239	.307	35.653***	.212	.273	28.107***
Global self esteem				.226	.121	5.588*
Racial self esteem				-.171	-.086	3.094+
Intercept	1.820			1.590		
R^2	.488			.518		
Adjusted R^2	.481			.507		
R	.698			.720		

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$; + $p = .08$

Prediction of grade point average. The multiple regression analysis for grade point were similar to those for Intentions. However, as can be observed from table # 3, results from these analyses of GPA were in striking contrast to those for Intentions. The TPB model, though still significant, ($F= 10.7$, $df =3, 224$, $p<.001$) explained significantly less variance (12%). In these analyses only Attitudes was significant. We then proceeded to enter global self-esteem and racial self-esteem into the model. Although the model remained significant ($F=6.56,df=5,221$, $p<.001$), only attitude was a significant predictor. Neither global self-esteem, nor racial self-esteem significantly enhanced the variance explained in the prediction of student grade point averages.

Results suggest that elements of the Theory of Planned Behavior were successful in predicting student intention to stay in school with Attitude and Perceived Control both being significant and independent predictors. The component Social Norm, to our surprise, was not a significant predictor. The inclusion of global self-esteem was a significant enhancement, while racial self-esteem was only marginally significant. By comparison the TPB model even with our addition of self-esteem measures was significantly less successful in predicting student grade point averages than intentions to complete school.

Table 3

Beta Weights, F Scores, R , Adjusted R^2 , and R^2 of Predictor Variables on Grade Point Averager

Variable	Model I			Model II		
	B	β	F	B	β	F
Attitudes	.337	.302	17.990***	.350	.310	28.206***
Subjective normative belief	.033	.026		.050	.039	
Perceived behavioral control	.079	.085		.072	.078	
Global self esteem				-.016	-.007	
Racial self esteem				-.023	-.010	
Intercept	-.899			-.933		
R^2	.125			.129		
Adjusted R^2	.133			.110		
R	.354			.360		

*** $p < .001$

Summary and Discussion

Positive developmental behaviors of African American youth have received scant attention from social science researchers. In particular, little attention has been given to the positive academic decisions of these youths. This paper reports findings on 231 African American student's grade point averages and intentions to stay in school. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TBP) was employed as our conceptual model. The model predicted well student intentions to stay in school, explaining almost half the variance. Student's attitudes were clearly the most influential in their affects on student intentions to stay in school. That is, the more favorable were the attitudes of student's towards school, the greater were their intentions to complete school. The perception of the ability to overcome barriers was also a significant predictor students intentions to complete school. That is, the greater was their perception of their abilities to over come barriers related to their education the more positive were their intentions to stay in school.

We were surprised to find that the social network (social normative supports) of these youth was not a significant predictor of their intention to complete school. We had in candor expected "others" to be important contributors to the academic endeavors of this group of African American students. We would not be surprised if the group of "important others" e.g. parents, peers etc., might rotate during the high school experience, but again we were surprised that "social network" failed to prove significant at this time. Not shown in the analyses here is the fact that parents, rather than peers, was the most important group in the social network of these students. It is quite possible that "important groups" e.g. parents and peers, are at this time competing for influence and are, so to speak, canceling each other out. Or in other words, students are "not listening to anybody." This is potentially an important consideration as African American peer groups have sometimes demonstrated a detrimental influence on academic strivings (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

Also of concern to this research effort was an assessment of the relationship between African American students' self-esteem, both global and racial self-esteem, and their academic strivings. This relationship we viewed as important because the relationship between perceptions of self and academic efforts has been sometimes noted to be contradictory. Specially, some have observed what appears to be a negative relationship between racial-self and academic performance. In such instances it is believed that black youth have turned against achieving academic excellence due to their perception that the academic striving betrays their cultural heritage, and that those who practice this ideal are "acting white" (Ogbu, 1985; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1996). Albeit only marginally, we did indeed find some evidence of this phenomenon. That is, although there was a positive relationship between global self-esteem and intentions to complete school, the relationship between racial self-esteem and intentions to complete school was a negative one. In other words, those students who had more favorable racial self-esteem scores were found to have lower intentions to stay in school. This empirical observation, while only suggestive, is quite disturbing. It portends that some African American youth have come to view positive views of black people and academic achievement as oppositional. While our finding are not sufficiently robust to argue this point forcefully, they do warrant attention, by suggesting that some youths may need be convinced that it is not anti-black to strive for academic success nor is their academic success an act of racial betrayal.

Although grade point average would intuitively seem like a good outcome measure, it does not provide a particularly good conceptual fit with the design of the Theory of Planned Behavior measures in this study. Those measures were designed to assess perceptions and beliefs related to the outcome of completing the current school year. While academic difficulties may presage leaving school for many students, this may not be the case for all. Moreover a variety of factors such as ability, motivation, and type of classes taken, for example, contribute to a student's grade point average. Hence predicting grade point average may be intrinsically more difficult. In either event, it is clear that our efforts here were less successful in predicting an actual academic behavior, than an academic intention.

There are some important limitations to this study. First and foremost these data represent cross-sectional findings, which makes causal inferences tenuous. This is particularly true for intentions, which were measured at the same time as the other variables employed in this study. This problem exists for the prediction of grade point average as well. Although grade point averages were measured at the end of the academic year, they represent a measure of effort and talent and so contain features that could be affected by intentions. They could also be affected by abilities that have probably been present for some time, and are not likely to be under the influence of intentions. Clearly it is possible that students who have had years of academic success are more likely to state that they intend to complete school. Secondly there was only modest reliability for some of the TPB composite variables: intentions, subjective norm, and perceived control. This problem attenuates relationships and can distort the apparent predictive power of antecedents to intentions. We do recognize this as an important limitation of our study.

Still this study provides insights into which factors may be important to the academic success of African American students. It is clear that positive attitudes towards school and the belief that one has control over barriers associated with completing school are important. This study also suggests that African American student perceptions of self should remain an important consideration to their academic efforts. It appears that those African American youth with the strongest intentions to stay in school have good attitudes about school, a sense that they can overcome barriers associated with school, and a positive global attitude towards self. But some African American students appear to have ambivalence, if not conflict, about scholastic efforts and their racial identity as blacks. This later point suggests that programs which attempt to enhance the academic success of African American students should develop strategies to reduce potential student dissonance between being "black" and being good students.

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