Academic identification as a mediator of the relationship between parental socialization and academic achievement

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether academic identification, or one's psychological and emotional investment in academics, mediates the association between child-reported parental educational socialization and standardized achievement test scores among a predominantly ethnic minority sample of 367 urban middle school students. We predicted that academic identification would mediate the relationship between five forms of perceived parental academic socialization (future-oriented, teaching-oriented, effort-oriented, shame-oriented, and guilt-oriented) and achievement when controlling for prior achievement. We found confirmation for this effect among analyses involving *teaching, future, and guilt* forms of socialization. For *teaching,* this effect was not present for Black boys. Direct effects indicated that *teaching* and *future* socialization was inversely related to student achievement, but when mediated by academic identification it was positive. *Guilt* was only related to achievement through academic identification. Results suggest the importance of the manner in which parental educational socialization is engaged.

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1. Introduction

Academic identification, or how much students are emotionally invested in academic learning, has been found to be an important aspect of academic engagement and a correlate of academic achievement (Finn, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Strambler & Weinstein, 2010). Much attention has also been paid to academic identification with respect to ethnic minority students as it has been theorized to be a significant contributor to the ethnic achievement gap (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1991). Additionally, some empirical research has supported such theories in that it has found Black and Latino students to be less academically identified than White students (Cokley, 2002; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Morgan & Mehta, 2004; Osborne, 1995, 1997b; Wickline, 2003). Despite our growing knowledge of the importance of this construct, little is known about the factors that contribute to academic identification among this population. Given that much of what youth learn about the meaning and value of education is influenced by parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009), it seems relevant to question how parental social interactions play a role in the promotion of academic identification. The current study examines how various forms of educational parental socialization predict academic identification and how this in turn influences achievement among a diverse sample of middle school students.

1.1. Academic identification

In the field of psychological and educational research, the concept of academic identification has often been used to describe a psychological or emotional dimension of academic engagement (Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004; Strambler & Weinstein, 2010). Osborne and Jones (2011) define academic identification as, "Selectively valuing an academic domain as central to the self-concept." This concept is also in line with Steele's (1992) definition of academic *disidentifcation* as a low correlation between academic self-esteem and overall self-esteem. Both of these definitions assume that an academically identified student considers the academic domain to be an important component of their self-concept and self-worth. Thus, academic identification can generally be understood as one's level of investment in academics that consists of emotional (e.g. caring) and psychological (e.g. self-concept, self-esteem) dimensions. As Osborne (1997) and Osborne and Jones (2011) notes, this construct is theoretically distinct from academic self-concept which consists of students' self-evaluation of their academic skill. It also differs from academic self-esteem which is a specific component of overall self-esteem.

A motivational construct that is similar but distinct from academic identification is the attainment value subscale of Eccles and Wigfield's (1995, 2002) perceived task value. This measure concerns how important one believes an academic task is and how much it is worth pursuing. Attainment value and academic identification are similar in that they both involve perceived value of learning, but they differ in that academic identification places more of an emphasis on the importance of this value to one's sense

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of self. Accordingly, high attainment value (e.g. "It's important to me to do well in school") may not necessitate psychological and emotional investment (e.g. "Doing well in school is an important part of who I am") since students may value learning for various reasons, some, or all of which may not involve self-investment. For example, a student may value academics because she cares primarily about pleasing family members or teachers rather that it being a function of her own investment in academics.

Academic identification is an important link to academic achievement in so far as one's psychological investment in learning is linked to one's level of academic motivation and effort (Finn, 1989). Further, as it pertains to ethnic minorities, lack of academic identification has been theorized to be a contributing factor to the underperformance of ethnic minority students relative to Whites. For example, Steele (1997) theorized that in response to negative racial stereotypes about the intelligence of certain ethnic groups, members of these groups may begin to disengage their self-esteem from the domain of academics as a means of self-esteem protection. Osborne (1997b) has found empirical confirmation of this theory through a nationally representative longitudinal analysis of Black, Latino, and White students across 8th to 12th grades. The results suggest that of these students, Black boys were most disidentified as indicated by a low correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement.

Cokley, 2002 found similar results suggesting racial and gender differences as it pertains to disidentification among Black and White college students. In a cross-sectional study comparing Black and White underclassmen (freshmen and sophomores) to upperclassmen (juniors and seniors), Cokely examined disidentification as the correlation between academic self-concept and grade point average (GPA). Cokely found that while the association remained significant across upperclassmen and lowerclassmen for Black and Whites as a whole, only Black males demonstrated a non-significant association between self-concept and GPA as upperclassmen. Consistent with findings from older students, Graham, Taylor, and Hudley (1998) have found patterns of disidentification in a study of Black, Latino, and White middle schoolers (6th through 8th graders). The authors found that while White boys and girls and Black girls tended to most value their high achieving peers, Black and Latino boys least valued high achieving peers.

In summary, academic identification has been found to be an important factor for achievement and some evidence exists for ethnic and gender differences among youth. More specifically, ethnic minority boys appear to be particularly at risk of academic disidentification. However, what is lacking within the literature is an understanding of contributors to academic identification and how such contributors may lead to academic performance through academic identification. Further, it has yet to be examined how such indirect pathways to academic performance may differ for boys and girls. Although there currently exists a substantial body of research on how social phenomena such as stereotypes affect such outcomes, our understanding of more proximal social predictors remains underdeveloped. Since parents play a key role in the development of their children's views on academic education, improving our understanding of how the ways in which parents communicate with their children about schooling impacts academic identification and achievement would provide important information about how to promote youths' academic development.

1.2. Educational socialization

Educational socialization is an aspect of parental involvement with learning that concerns the messages parents convey to their children about education. Meta-analyses on this topic have found parental involvement, in general, to have a positive effect on student academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007). Of the parental involvement practices contributing to achievement, it has been found that socialization is one of the most powerful (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007). For example, Fan and Chen (2001) found that when compared to practices involving communication, supervision, and participation, parental educational aspirations had the strongest association with achievement among a general population of students. Jeynes (2007) found similar results among urban secondary students, in that parental expectations had the strongest association with achievement when compared to parental style and communication and that these results held across race/ethnicity. The most recent meta-analysis by Hill and Tyson (2009) among middle school students is also consistent with these results. These authors found that across 50 studies, practices involving educational socialization had the strongest association with achievement when compared to school and home-based involvement.

However, communicating expectations and aspirations are not the only socialization practices that might influence academic identification and achievement. Helping with schoolwork is another common practice in which parents engage and socialize their children to value academics. However, in Hill and Tyson's (2009) meta-analysis, they found that this practice was inconsistently associated with academic performance and in some cases was negatively linked with achievement. This begs the question as to what factors may account for such inconsistencies in these findings.

Other educational socialization practices might involve how much parents emphasize the role of effort in achievement. Research has shown that students who possess an effort-oriented approach to achievement, as opposed to an orientation focused on innate intelligence, tend to be more academically persistent and have higher academic performance (Dweck, 1999; Dweck, 2002). How much parents actively help their children with their school work may also influence this process as meta-analyses have found some support (albeit, mixed) for its link to achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007). Finally, educational socialization practices that elicit negative reactions such as shame and guilt may also be associated with academic identification and achievement (Mordkowitz & Ginsburg, 1987). While it may not be emotionally desirable for the child, concern over shaming one's parents when underperforming may act as a motivating factor for demonstrating high academic performance.

Although there is strong evidence for the importance of parental educational socialization on student outcomes, there is less knowledge about the mechanisms by which socialization influences achievement. Assuming that part of the goal of parents is to socialize their children to invest in learning, academic identification may be an important piece to this socialization process. One possible chain of events is that educational socialization impacts academic achievement through students' level of academic identification. If parents' messages of educational expectations and aspirations become adopted by their children, it is likely that their children will also become more invested in the endeavor of learning. This, in turn, may ultimately result in greater academic effort and involvement leading to higher achievement. Further, if it is the case that academic identification mediates the relationship between socialization and academic performance, is this mediation process the same or different with respect to ethnicity and gender? As far as we are aware, this question has yet to be examined.

1.3. The current study

The research reviewed above suggests that academic identification is important for achievement and that the educational messages students receive from their parents would be important predictors of academic identification. The current study tests whether academic identification mediates the relationship