Racial group regard, barrier socialization, and African American adolescents' engagement: Patterns and processes by gender

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined gendered processes via 1) profiles of racial barrier socialization, regard for one's racial group (private regard), and behavioral engagement and grades and, 2) gender and private regard as a moderator in the link between barrier messages and academic engagement outcomes. One-hundred and twenty-five African American adolescents (ages 10–14, $M = 12.39$, $SD = 1.07$) completed measures of socialization, private regard, grades and behavioral engagement. Latent Profile Analysis revealed a 2-cluster solution fit the data best - 1) *High Engagement-Race Salient* (HERS) cluster and 2) *Low Engagement-Non-Salient* cluster (LENS). Girls had higher representation in the HERS cluster. When private regard was examined as a moderator, girls' grades were unrelated to barrier socialization and private regard. In contrast, barrier socialization was associated with lower grades for low private regard boys. Findings are discussed in the context of gendered racial school contexts that African American youth must navigate to be academically successful.

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It is not unusual for academic motivation to decline during adolescence (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). While stage-environment fit theory discusses the role of mismatch between individual needs and resources of the social context on declines in adolescent academic motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993), the unique stressors that African American youth experience add further complexity to sustaining their school engagement (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Many African American parents warn their child about racism, a common stressor, in an effort to reduce the negative effects of discrimination on youth engagement (Hughes & Johnson, 2001; Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009). Parent messages that emphasize awareness of racial discrimination and how to cope with such experiences, define the term racial barrier socialization.

Additionally, adolescent beliefs about their membership in an ethnic minority group has been pointed to as a predictor of school motivation (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Chavous et al., 2003; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001). Studies have noted that parents' racial messages relate to the development of their child's racial attitudes (Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyên, & Sellers, 2009). However, as children mature and spend increased amounts of time apart from their parents, other sources become important in the development of their view of self. For example, neighbors, peers, teachers, media are just a few of the sources that may contradict or strengthen racial beliefs that youth developed from messages at home. Because girls' and boys' positive regard for their racial group does not occur in a vacuum of parent messages, it is important to examine the lens through which they are *interpreting* parents' racial messages. The benefits for youths' school engagement

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from a parent's message about preparing for discrimination may increase in the presence of a positive evaluation of his or her racial group. This evaluation has been coined private regard (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

Further, research notes distinct differences between the school experiences of African American boys and girls (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Much of the existing literature discusses gender differences across developmental tasks such as school engagement and parent socialization messages. For example, an analysis of the existing research suggests that males and females receive different frequencies of parent racial socialization during the adolescent years (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Thomas & Speight, 1999). Research has also reported gender differences in the protective function of racial identity attitudes for school engagement and perceived school importance (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009). Thus, the existing literature is replete with discussions on gender differences in these developmental markers. However, less attention has been devoted to understanding the gendered *patterns* through which racial socialization and positive regard for one's race, influence school engagement. For example, to date, no studies have examined how academic engagement and grades operate in concert with racial socialization and group regard across gender. Further, no studies have explored gender differences in the process through which racial group regard moderates the relation between barrier socialization and school engagement. In light of the gaps in the existing literature, the purpose of the present paper is to explore gendered patterns in the clustering of academic engagement, racial group regard, and barrier socialization. The study further examines whether this group regard lens moderates the link between barrier messages and engagement in a similar *process* for girls and boys. The use of both profile and variable-centered approaches will further address gaps in understanding gendered processes that promote academic engagement.

Racial barrier socialization and academic engagement

Academic engagement refers to attitudes that demonstrate an interest in the mastery of school-based learning as well as actual performance. The former, behavioral expressions of motivation in school have been coined behavioral academic engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). The latter, actual performance, has been examined as students' grades in school. Engagement is an important outcome to examine given its malleability (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) and its potential to shed light on the processes that lead to within group variation in ethnic minority students' schooling (Wong & Rowley, 2001).

One of the most widely discussed types of racial socialization is racial barrier messages, or messages that emphasize the existence of racism and strategies for coping (Coard & Sellers, 2005). Messages of this type have also been described as Preparation for Bias (Hughes et al., 2006), Alertness to Discrimination (Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2002), Racism Preparation (Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004), and Racial Barrier Awareness (Bowman & Howard, 1985). The present study is consistent with a conceptualization of barrier socialization as a parenting strategy that fosters the engagement of African American children. Barrier socialization has been linked to academic grades and motivation in school (Bowman & Howard, 1985). Moreover, it has been proposed to lessen vulnerability to the negative stereotypes about Blacks' academic abilities that may be related to Black adolescents' achievement (Hughes et al., 2006). In addition, racial barrier messages can reduce the likelihood that youth will self-blame or personalize discrimination experiences (Coard & Sellers, 2005). This is important in light of the research that has found that racial discrimination is strongly and negatively associated with academic engagement for adolescents of color (Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007; Wong et al., 2003).

Although barrier messages are conceptualized as fostering high engagement, some of the literature has found that an increase in barrier socialization is associated with lower grade point averages (Marshall, 1995; Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003). A potential explanation for the negative barrier-engagement link is that parents' preparation for racial barriers may be distressing to youth if they occur in isolation of a group-affirming lens. Hughes et al. (2006) suggested that barrier socialization might potentially result in decreased school engagement if these messages are not coupled with positive affirmations about their racial/ethnic group. Adolescents' evaluation of their racial group may explain the inconsistencies in the barrier-engagement link. A positive evaluation of their racial group may protect African American youth from distressing over preparation for racism (e.g., barrier socialization). Specifically, an adolescents' positive regard for Blacks may augment the positive association between barrier socialization and engagement. Consequently, an important source of variation in the link between parent racial socialization and academic engagement may be the adolescents' private regard.

Private regard and academic engagement

Recent racial identity frameworks have distinguished between affiliation with one's racial group and one's personal beliefs about their racial group (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI; Sellers et al., 1998) addresses the significance individuals place on race and their racial group beliefs. According to Quintana (2007), a strong advantage of the multidimensional model is that it does not assume a developmental hierarchy. Private regard, which is part of the regard dimension of the MMRI, is conceptualized as an individual's evaluation of, or feelings toward, their racial group (see Sellers et al., 1998 for a full overview of the model).

Private regard is a meaningful dimension to explore as a lens for barrier messages because these messages focus on preparation for discrimination *targeting one's group*. For instance, adolescents with positive feelings toward their racial group may be more receptive to their parents' efforts to inculcate messages about race-related barriers and less likely to internalize negative stereotypes that lead to diminished engagement in school. In this way, synergistic relations between private regard,