

# **A Preliminary Investigation of Academic Disidentification, Racial Identity, and Academic Achievement Among African American Adolescents**

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*The purpose of this study was to examine academic disidentification along with demographic and psychological factors related to the academic achievement of African American adolescents. Participants included 96 African American students (41 males, 55 females) in an urban high school setting located in the Southwest. Consistent with previous research, academic disidentification was determined by looking for an attenuation of the correlation between academic self-concept and grade point average (GPA) of male and female students. The relationship between academic self-concept and grade point average significantly decreased for African American males, while it significantly increased for African American females. Demographic factors included age and sex, while psychological factors included academic self-concept, devaluing academic success, and racial identity. Results of a hierarchical regression indicated that sex and academic self-concept were significant positive predictors of GPA, while age and racial identity were significant negative predictors, accounting for 50% variance. Academic self-concept was the strongest predictor of GPA. Implications of the results are discussed.*

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## **A Preliminary Examination of Academic Disidentification, Racial Identity, and Academic Achievement among African American Adolescents**

The underachievement of African American adolescents remains one of the most discussed and studied phenomena in education. Arguably, no other ethnic or racial group has received as much negative press about its educational struggles as African American students (Cokley, 2006). Much attention has been given to the achievement gap in secondary education with a particular focus on retention rates among African American students. Recent data indicates the average high school graduation rate for African American students is approximately 60%

compared to 80% of their European American counterparts (Aud, Fox, & KewelRamani, 2010). Even for those students who remain in high school, achievement disparities are apparent. Reflecting on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, Haycock, Jerald, and Huang (2001) noted that for those African American and Latino students who reach 12th grade, on average these 17-year-old students have the reading, mathematics, and science skills of a 13-year-old European American student. As such, it is not surprising that African American students do not attend college at the same rate as European American students. While the percentage of African Americans graduating high school and attending four-year colleges has increased within the past twenty years, 2008 statistics indicate that only 32% of African American 18 to 24-year-olds were enrolled in colleges or universities compared to 44% of their European American counterparts (Aud et al., 2010).

Reasons cited to explain African American adolescent academic underachievement are numerous and include psychological factors and processes such as differences in motivation and achievement values (Graham, 1994; Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998) and academic disidentification (Cokley, 2002, Osborne, 1997), dissonance between home and school (Tyler et al., 2010), poverty and substandard schools in low income areas (Kozol, 1991; McLaren, 2007; McLoyd, Aikens, & Burton, 2006; Spring, 2008), and cultural factors (e.g., oppositional identity) related to race and identity (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The latter reason has especially generated controversy around the question of whether there is something about racial identity that deters ethnic minority adolescents from high achievement. Additionally, a recent report by the Council of the Great City Schools, an advocacy group for urban public schools, characterized Black male achievement in particular as a “National Catastrophe” (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010). The purpose of the current study was to examine the effects of academic disidentification and factors such as academic self-concept and racial identity on the academic outcomes of a sample of African American adolescents in an urban high school setting.

### *Academic Disidentification*

Identification with academics has generally been described as the extent to which academic goals and accomplishments form the basis of an individual’s self-esteem (Osborne, 1999). Identification with academics has been determined to be an integral part of learning (Newmann, 1981). Theoretically, for students who are highly identified with academics, good academic performance is rewarding and poor academic performance is punishing. Thus, these students should be academically motivated as a function of seeking reward and protecting their self-esteem (Osborne, 1997).

However, academic performance is not intrinsically rewarding or punishing (Newman, 1981; Osborne, 2001). Academic disidentification has been described as the lack of a relationship between self-esteem and academic outcomes (Osborne, 1999). For the purposes of the current study and consistent with Cokley (2002), academic disidentification is specifically defined as the lack of a significant relation between a student’s view of his or her academic abilities in comparison to peers (i.e., academic self-concept) and the student’s academic outcomes (i.e., GPA). Essentially, it is a phenomenon in which one’s academic performance does not impact one’s self-views, as it does for those who are identified with academics. Thus, for students who are disidentified, academic performance will not highly impact their academic self-concept and these students will theoretically not be motivated to perform well academically (Osborne, 1997; Steele, 1992).

Given that the current study uses GPA as its measure of academic achievement, it is important to understand what a measure of GPA represents. Researchers have indicated there is a lack of clarity around the exact meaning of GPA due to various factors that go into the assignment of grades (Bowers, 2011; Cizek, 1995; Cross & Frary, 1999). Researchers suggest that while GPA reflects students’ knowledge and skills acquired via learning course-related material, cognitive

factors are also commonly considered in the assignment of student grades. Such factors include perceived effort, growth, perceived ability, perceived attitude, participation, attendance, and conduct (Brookhart, 1993; Klapp Lekholm & Cliffordson, 2009). For example, using a sample of high school students and teachers, Cross and Frary (1999) found approximately 40% of teachers reported taking conduct and attitude into consideration when assigning final grades, while 70% of students perceived that such variables were considered by teachers in assigning grades. Thus, GPA represents both cognitive and non-cognitive factors. As such, theoretically, academic disidentification might represent a difference in students' perceived academic abilities and teachers' perceptions of both students' academic achievement and cognitive factors, including effort, attitude, and conduct.

#### *Academic Disidentification and African Americans*

Research suggests that African American students are particularly vulnerable to academic disidentification. Several early studies reported lower correlations of academic achievement and self-esteem among African American students (Demo & Parker, 1987; Hare, 1977; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972). Although conventional wisdom suggests a relationship between academic performance and self-esteem should exist (Cokley, 2002), such early studies demonstrated that African American students maintained levels of self-esteem equivalent to their European American counterparts despite suffering from lower academic achievement. The literature has shown similar findings in more recent years (Graham, 1994; Osborne 1997, 1999, 2001; van Laar, 2000).

#### *Academic Disidentification and African American Males*

Research conducted by Osborne (1997, 2001) suggests two ideas important to understanding disidentification: 1) African American males are particularly likely to disidentify and 2) disidentification appears to occur over time. Research examining gender differences in disidentification prior to adolescence has failed to find that African American males differ from their female counterparts (McMillan, Frierson, & Campbell, 2011). In an analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, Osborne (1999) asserted that it appears all students generally begin their educational career identified with academics. However, it was not until adolescence that students exhibited disidentification. Osborne (1997, 1999) reported findings in two longitudinal studies that 8th grade students, regardless of race or gender were identified with academics, exhibiting a significant positive relation between self-esteem and academic outcomes. However, African American males' academic identification was markedly altered over time, with correlations starkly decreasing from .23 in grade 8 to -.02 in grade 12 (Osborne, 1997). On the other hand, the correlations of their female counterparts, European Americans and Latino students showed slight decreases, but remained significant. Similarly, Cokley (2002) found that African American college males' academic identification decreased from .52 as underclassmen to .174 as upperclassmen, while African American females, along with European American males and females, remained significantly identified academically. Such findings indicating that African American males' self-esteem and academic self-concept appeared to be virtually uninfluenced by academic outcomes points to the significance and importance of better understanding disidentification among African American males.

A question integral to academic disidentification research is what does this mechanism actually represent and what variables impact the phenomenon? Several researchers have hypothesized possible processes underlying the propensity of African American students' disidentification. Crocker and Major (1989) suggest that there are three possible reasons underlying this lack of relation between self-esteem and academic outcomes: 1) attributing negative outcomes to stigmatization, 2) devaluing outcomes on which the individual's group fares poorly or is perceived by others to fare poorly, and 3) making ingroup social comparisons to similarly stigmatized individuals rather than outgroup comparisons.

Building off of this line of thinking, Major and Schmader (1998) suggest that disidentification is the product of two possibilities: 1) reduction of the centrality or importance of the domain, similar to Crocker and Major's (1989) devaluing hypothesis or 2) discounting of the "diagnosticity," or validity, of their academic feedback and, as such, rejecting the feedback as an accurate indicator of their competency. Steele (1992) further suggested that anxiety induced by stereotype threat may lead to chronic academic disidentification, causing students to devalue academics as a self-protective mechanism. Devaluing academic success has been linked to lower grades and dropping out of school (Osborne, 1999). While a survey of the literature reveals the majority of the research has used a theoretical framework in line with Steele (1992), emphasizing the devaluing of the academic domain, research suggesting that African Americans devalue academics more than other racial-ethnic groups has, in fact, been mixed (Graham, 1994). While notions of African American students devaluing academic success remain popular, studies have found that African American students do not devalue academic success and school more than European American students (Cokley, 2003; Major & Schmader, 1998). Furthermore, there is evidence which suggests that African American students do not widely endorse attitudes that devalue academic success (Cokley & Chapman, 2008). These findings notwithstanding, it is reasonable to assume that insofar as African American students devalue academic success, their academic achievement will be lower.

Beyond devaluing academic success, several studies showing evidence of disidentification in African American students have also found significant relations between academic self-concept and global self-esteem, which were not statistically different from European American students (Cokley, 2002; Morgan & Mehta, 2004). Thus, self-beliefs about academics appear to equally influence general self-esteem for African Americans and European Americans. Academics, in and of itself, does not appear to be devalued, as students' own beliefs about their academic competence impacts their self-esteem. Relatedly, academic self-concept has been found in numerous studies to be an important predictor of academic achievement (Cokley, 2000; Cokley, 2002; Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Okeke et al., 2009). In fact, academic self-concept contributes to the prediction of academic achievement beyond what can be predicted by prior achievement and educational aspirations (Marsh, 1990; 1991). In spite of lower academic achievement in comparison to other ethnic groups, African American students maintain high levels of academic self-concept.

As mentioned earlier, using GPA as a measure of academic achievement in assessing academic disidentification includes teachers' assessment of both cognitive and noncognitive factors. One hypothesis regarding the mechanism underlying academic disidentification is in line with Major and Schmader's (1998) suggestion that such students might reject such feedback as an accurate indicator of their competency. Given that it appears many students perceive noncognitive factors as affecting assigned grades (Cross & Frary, 1999), those who disidentify with academics might be likely to perceive their grades as a misrepresentation of their abilities due to teachers' perceptions of their attitude and conduct. African American males might be particularly likely to experience this phenomenon. African American males have been reported to disproportionately receive conduct violations and suspension at school (Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2002). As such, it is possible that African American students are more likely to perceive that lowered grades may be due to perceived conduct and not their actual ability.

A body of existing research also suggests African American males are particularly likely to report negative teacher attitudes and behavior toward them (Marcus, Gross, & Seefeldt, 1991) and to perceive discrimination (Seaton, Caldwell, and Jackson, 2008; Stevenson et al., 2002). Further, a fairly large body of research suggests that teachers may, indeed, have different perceptions of African American males, as teachers have been reported to have lower expectations of African American males than females (Ross & Jackson, 1991; Wood, Kaplan,

& McLoyd, 2007). These factors might impact the extent to which African American male students believe GPA is an accurate representation of their abilities.

It is of note that to the authors' knowledge, prior to McMillan, Frierson, and Campbell's (2011) examination of academic disidentification, there is a gap in the literature in studies examining the phenomenon as defined as the attenuation of the relationship between academic self-concept and academic outcomes (i.e., the study to do so preceding McMillan et al. was published in 2004). One potential reason for such a gap is researchers' varying definitions of this phenomenon. Several studies have examined related variables or variables purported to underlie academic disidentification, such as disengagement (Cokley & Moore, 2007; Nussbaum & Steele, 2007) and devaluing academics (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Strambler & Weinstein, 2010). However, given that academic self-concept is such as a consistent and strong predictor of GPA, it seems particularly important to explicitly examine the attenuation of this relationship among African American male students.

### *Racial Identity*

Racial identity is the collective identity of a group of people who are socialized to think of themselves as a racial group (Helms & Cook, 1999). Racial identity is thought of as a multidimensional construct, and one of its dimensions has been conceptualized and operationalized as racial centrality (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Racial centrality is the degree to which race is a core part of an individual's identity and self-concept. Although it is commonly believed that having a strong racial identity is positively related to academic achievement, published studies have been inconclusive in their findings. Some studies have found a positive relationship between academic achievement and "racial-ethnic schemas" (Oyserman, Kimmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, & Hart-Johnson, 2003), ethnic identity, (Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004), and racial identity (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalina, 2001). Other studies have found a negative relationship between academic achievement and ethnic identity for academically-talented African American adolescents (Worrell, 2007), between certain racial identity attitudes and academic achievement (Spencer et al., 2001; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997), and between high levels of racial centrality and academic achievement (Harper & Tuckman, 2006). Still other studies have found no relationship between academic achievement and racial identity (Awad, 2007), ethnic identity (Guzman, Santiago-Rivera, & Hasse, 2005), or a minimal to very modest positive relationship (Lockett & Harrell, 2003). Finding a consistent relationship between racial/ethnic identity and academic achievement has proven to be elusive; however, it does appear that in the majority of the studies some type of relationship is found, whether positive or negative.

### *Purpose of the Study*

Based on the literature review, academic disidentification is an important yet relatively understudied phenomenon that appears to negatively impact the academic achievement of African American adolescents, especially males. Additional factors such as academic self-concept, devaluing academic success, and racial identity have also been demonstrated to impact academic achievement, albeit not necessarily in consistent ways. The purpose of this study was to provide further clarification on how these factors impact the academic achievement of African American adolescents in order to better understand how educators may intervene to help improve the academic outcomes of African American students.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

Participants included 96 African American high school students (41 males, 55 females) recruited from an urban public high school in Houston, Texas. There were 10 sophomores,

27 juniors, 58 seniors and 1 unidentified student. Using the online general power analysis program G-Power, power for the current study was calculated at .33. This means that there is 33% chance of finding an effect if there is really one to find. A much larger sample size of at least 260 would have yielded a power of .80, which is generally considered to be good statistical power. In spite of repeated attempts to increase the sample size with incentives, the yield was still less than optimal. The lower power combined with the small and likely biased sample size greatly reduces the generalizability of the results. Given the small sample, interpretation of the results were guided by focusing on the effect size. Effect sizes for multiple regressions are reported by  $R^2$  and standardized regression coefficients (i.e.,  $\beta$ ) (Trusty, Thompson, & Petrocelli, 2004). Participants ages ranged from 15 to 19 years old, with the average age being 17.33 (SD = 1.18). High School A opened in 1965, and has a student enrollment of 74% African American students and 24% Hispanic American students, and 1% European American students. Seventy-nine percent of the students are in the career and technical educational program, 18% are in special education programming, and 74% receive free or reduced lunch. Twenty percent of the students are in honors classes, and 92% percent of the school's population is considered at-risk. In the 2009–2010 school year, there were 549 in-school suspensions, 504 out of school suspensions, and 29 students were referred to an alternative behavioral program. On the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), a state wide standardized test, 90% of eleventh grade students passed the Reading section, and 85% of eleventh grade students passed the Mathematics section. Only 38.4% of the seniors took the SAT, a standardized college entrance exam, during the 2009–2010 school year. High School A has been referred to as a “dropout factory” because at least 40% of the freshman class does not make it to their senior year. For the past several years, High School A has been rated “Academically Unacceptable”, the lowest accountability rating by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

### *Instruments*

**Racial Centrality Scale (RCS).** Racial identity was measured using the RCS (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). The RCS is an eight-item scale developed to measure one of three stable dimensions of racial identity according to the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers et al., 1997). The other two stable dimensions, racial regard and racial ideology, were not examined in this study. The RCS uses a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and measures how much race is seen as being a core part of one's identity. A Cronbach's alpha of .70 has been reported (Cokley & Moore, 2007). In the present study a Cronbach's alpha of .55 was obtained.

Given the low Cronbach's alpha, a principal component analysis was conducted to determine if the RCS was being responded to as a single or multi-dimensional construct. The principal component analysis revealed two components with eigenvalues of 2.45 and 1.59, respectively. The first principal component consisted of all five positively worded items (e.g., “I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people”, and the second principal component consisted of the three negatively worded items such as, “Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself”). The positively worded items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .71, and the negatively worded items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .52. Research has shown that individuals respond differently to positively and negatively worded items (Taylor & Bowers, 1972), and that negatively worded items lower Cronbach alphas (Schriesheim & Hill, 1981). For the remainder of the analyses, the RCS was operationalized using the 5 positively worded items in order to have an acceptable Cronbach's alpha.

**Devaluing Academic Success Subscale (DASS).** (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998). This subscale is one of three used to assess dimensions of psychological disengagement (Major et al., 1998). The three processes of psychological disengagement include: devaluing academic success, disengagement from school, and discounting standardized test scores. Five

Likert-type items (e.g. “Doing well on intellectual tasks is very important to me,” and “It usually doesn’t matter to me one way or the other how I do in school”) are rated on a 7-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 7=Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate those students whose self-esteem is largely disconnected from their academic performance. Construct validity of the DASS has been reported through positive correlations with perceiving systematic injustice (Schmander et al., 2001). Schmander et al. (2001) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .87. In the present study a Cronbach’s alpha of .75 was obtained.

**Academic Self-Concept Scale (ASCS).** The 40-item scale assesses the academic component of a student’s general self-concept (Cokley, 2005). Items (e.g., “Being a student is a very rewarding experience,” “I sometimes feel like dropping out of school,” and “I feel that I am better than the average student”) are rated on a 4-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 4=Strongly Agree). Construct validity has been demonstrated through positive correlations with grade point average (Cokley, 2000; 2002). Reynolds (1988) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .92 with an ethnically varied sample, while a Cronbach’s alpha of .91 has been reported for a sample of African Americans (Cokley, 2003). In the present study a Cronbach’s alpha of .91 was obtained.

Demographic information included ethnicity, gender, age, high school classification (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.), and school-reported grade point average.

#### *Procedure*

The present study was granted full institutional review board approval by the co-authors’ institutions and the school district. High School A was selected because of the high percentage of African American students, and because one of the co-authors had a collegial relationship with the administrators at the campus. The principal of High School A submitted a letter of approval of the research project and the letter was included in the institutions’ and school district’s research proposals. After the co-authors were granted permission from their institution’s review boards and the school district’s review board to conduct the study, the principal of High School A informed parents and teachers of the research project through school communications, parent meetings, and teacher meetings.

Students were recruited in several ways to participate in the study. The co-author approached all sophomore, junior, and senior Homeroom and English teachers during the fall semester. Because the co-author made visits during the fall semester, freshmen students were not included in the survey because as new students they had not achieved a GPA. The co-author solicited volunteers for the survey during the student’s Homeroom and English class and distributed parental consent forms to interested students. Each student participant and parent was informed that students would be administered a survey packet that included a demographic form and three instruments. All instruments were paper and pencil based. The parent and student consent forms stated that participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary. The co-author returned the following day and distributed survey packets to students with completed parental consent forms. After the parental consent forms were collected by the co-author, the students completed the student consent form and the questionnaires during their Homeroom/English class period in the presence of the co-author. Teachers also distributed parental consent forms to interested students during their Homeroom/English classes. After students submitted completed parental consent forms to the teacher, the teacher gave students the survey packet which included the student consent form. The students completed the questionnaire packet during class in the presence of their teacher. Each Homeroom/English teacher verified the student’s GPA as they submitted their questionnaires. Students responded to the IRB approved questionnaires, and approximately 15 minutes were required to complete the questionnaires, which consisted of a total of 53 items. Lastly, the co-author made several visits to all of the summer school classes to recruit volunteers for the study. Summer school students who were 18 years or older completed the student consent form and the questionnaire packet in the presence of the co-author during class.

All students who participated in the study received classroom extra credit or a gift card ranging from \$25 to \$100. Parents and students were informed that participation in the study could cease at any time, and none of the participants' discontinued participation. Completed questionnaires of students who did not self-identify as Black or African-American were not included in the analysis.

## Results

One-way analyses of variance were conducted to examine gender differences in GPA, academic self-concept, devaluing academic success, and racial identity. Results indicated significant differences in GPA, with female students having higher GPAs than male students but no significant differences in academic self-concept, devaluing academic success, or racial identity. Table 1 includes descriptive information by gender for the study variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Information for Study Variables Disaggregated by Gender

Variable	Entire Sample				Males				Females				Possible Range
	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max	
1. GPA	2.48	.66	1.10	4.00	2.26	.58	1.10	3.40	2.66	.68	1.10	4.00	0 – 4
2. ASC	3.02	.38	2.23	3.83	3.00	.38	2.33	3.73	3.05	.68	2.23	3.83	1 – 4
3. DAS	2.03	.99	1.00	5.00	2.02	.84	1.00	4.40	2.04	1.10	1.00	5.00	1 – 5
4. RC	4.82	1.12	1.40	7.00	4.85	1.12	3.00	7.00	4.81	1.13	1.40	6.40	1 – 7

Note. N = 96. Males: n = 41. Females: n = 55. GPA = Grade Point Average. ASC = Academic Self-Concept. DAS = Devaluing Academic Success. RC = Racial Centrality.

Correlations were conducted among GPA, academic self-concept, devaluing academic success, and racial identity and are presented in Table 2. The correlations between grade point average and the psychological variables were moderate to strong (.50, -.29, and -.21 for academic self-concept, devaluing academic success, and racial identity, respectively). Academic disidentification was assessed by examining whether the correlation between academic self-concept and GPA was attenuated based on age (i.e., a median split of students lower and higher than the average age of the sample, 17.33). Table 3 shows that younger African American male students were strongly identified with academics, as evidenced by the magnitude of the correlation between academic self-concept and GPA ( $r = .87$ ); however, the correlation decreased for older African American males students ( $r = .30$ ). Younger African American female students were not as strongly identified with academics ( $r = .19$ ); however, the correlation significantly increased for older African American female students ( $r = .49$ ). It should be noted that the numbers of males and females reported in Table 3 differ slightly from what is reported in the text because of missing GPA and age data needed for the analysis.

Table 2: Correlations Between Grade Point Average, Academic Self-Concept, Devaluing Academic Success, and Racial Centrality

	<i>GPA</i>	<i>ASC</i>	<i>DAS</i>	<i>RC</i>
GPA	–	.50**	-.29**	-.21*
ASC		–	-.62**	.08
DAS			–	-.08
RC				–

Note. GPA = grade point average. ASC = academic self-concept. DAS = devaluing academic success. RC = racial centrality. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$



Table 3: Correlations Between Academic Self-Concept and Grade Point Average by Gender

Variable	Younger (<17.33 years)	Older (>17.33 years)
Academic Self-Concept and Grade Point Average		
Males (n = 10/29)	.87***	.30
Females (n = 21/28)	.19	.49**

Note. The first n represents the sample size for students younger than the mean age of the sample, 17.33 years old. The second n represents the sample size for students older than the mean age of the sample. Discrepant sample sizes reflect missing values. \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

To examine the variables that predicted GPA, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. In Step 1, gender and age accounted for a significant amount of variance,  $F(2, 84) = 25.05, p < .001$  (adjusted  $R^2 = .36$ ). Older students had lower GPAs than younger students ( $\beta = -.52, p < .001$ ), and females had higher GPAs than male students ( $\beta = .26, p .004$ ). In Step 2, the addition of academic self-concept ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) and devaluing academic success ( $\beta = .07, p > .05$ ) resulted in a significant change in  $R^2$  of .11 ( $p < .001$ ). Students with higher academic self-concepts had higher GPAs, while devaluing academic success had no relationship to GPA. In Step 3, the addition of racial identity resulted in a significant change in  $R^2$  of .03, ( $p < .05$ ). Students for whom race was more central had lower GPAs. The final model accounted for 48% of the variance, with academic self-concept being the strongest predictor of GPA followed closely by age, gender, and racial identity. Table 4 includes a summary of the regression analysis.

Thus, the results show that African American male students experienced academic disidentification while African American female students did not. For all students, academic self-concept was a positive predictor of GPA while age and racial identity were negative predictors of GPA.

**Discussion**

The primary purpose of the current study was to examine academic disidentification along with demographic and psychological variables as factors believed to impact the academic outcomes of African American adolescents. This study makes a contribution to the literature because it involves analyses that concurrently (1) examine the process of academic disidentification,

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Grade Point Average

Variable	B	Standard Error B	$\beta$	Adj. $R^2$
<b>Step 1</b>				.36
Gender	.32	.12	.24**	
Age	-.29	.05	-.52***	
<b>Step 2</b>				.47
Gender	.27	.11	.20**	
Age	-.23	.05	-.40***	
Academic Self-Concept	.67	.18	.38***	
Devaluing Academic Success	.02	.07	.02	
<b>Step 3</b>				.50
Gender	.27	.11	.20**	
Age	-.22	.05	-.40***	
Academic Self-Concept	.75	.18	.44***	
Devaluing Academic Success	.02	.07	.02	
Racial Centrality	-.11	.05	-.19*	

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

and (2) use the variables related to academic disidentification to predict GPA. This analytical approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the processes and factors affecting African American adolescents' academic achievement. Additionally, this study used the actual school record GPA rather than self-reported GPA. The use of self-reported GPA may result in the overestimation of actual GPA, particularly by students with lower GPAs and lesser ability (Kuncel, Crede, & Thomas, 2005). While some research has shown a relationship as high as .97 between self-reported GPA and official records (Cassady, 2001), it is advised that self-reported GPA data of African American students be used with caution (Zimmerman, Caldwell, & Bernat, 2002). Thus, the use of school record GPA rather than self-reported GPA is a strength of the study.

The results suggested that academic disidentification was present among the male students but not the female students. For the male students, the correlation between academic self-concept and GPA decreased sharply in magnitude and significance between younger and older students. For the female students, the correlation increased between younger and older students. These findings are consistent with previous studies of academic disidentification (Cokley, 2002, Osborne, 1997). The results of the regression analysis provide additional support for academic disidentification by showing a small to moderate effect size of gender ( $\beta = .20$ ) being predictive of GPA. This was not surprising given that females outperformed males by approximately .45 grade points. This finding is also consistent with previous studies examining gender differences in GPA (Cokley & Moore, 2007; Saunders, Davis, Williams, & Williams, 2004). Saunders et al. explain the gender differences in academic achievement by looking at the educational experiences males and females typically have. Generally, African American males view school as a more hostile environment because of instances of lowered academic performance, punishment for bad conduct, and increased likelihood of receiving corporal punishment. These negative experiences may cause African American males to experience psychological disengagement, academic disidentification, and increased frustration. On the other hand, African American females experience higher academic performance and are less likely to receive severe reprimands. These varied experiences are believed to set the tone for attitudes toward school in later years, especially high school. Research has also found that African American female students value high-achieving students more and have higher academic and educational aspirations and expectations than African American male students (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Mello & Swanson, 2007; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007) – a likely contributor to the disparity in academic achievement. Furthermore, the early educational experiences of African American males and females may play a significant role in gender differences in academic achievement, with male students getting reprimanded and disciplined more than female students (Gurian, 2006; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). More specifically, African American males experience disproportionately more school suspensions, expulsions, and special education placement (Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Townsend, 2000; Harry & Anderson, 1994). These well-documented findings pertaining to gender discrepancies underscore the importance of schools developing interventions that target the unique challenges and psychosocial developmental needs of African American male students.

The results also indicated a large effect size for age ( $\beta = -.40$ ) being a significant negative predictor of GPA. While not discussed as an explicit part of the academic disidentification process, it is implied by increasing grade levels that students are getting older. Thus, as students grow older, they become more disidentified with academics. So the question remains why do students become more disidentified as they grow older? One explanation may be related to the use of academic skills. There is evidence that high school students' use of academic skills declines with increased grade level (Slate, Jones, & Dawson, 1993). Another explanation may be related to motivation. Research has shown that students' intrinsic motivation (i.e., enjoyment of school related activities) is positively related to grades and standardized test scores, yet decreases from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005). Still another explanation may be found in the role of peers. A recent study found that older students report more negative

academic and social behaviors among their peer group than younger students (Masten, Juvonen, & Spaitzer, 2009). These findings suggest that schools need to be more proactive and perhaps more creative in later grade levels to keep older students engaged and enjoying school.

As expected, academic self-concept had a large effect size ( $\beta = .44$ ) and was significantly predictive of GPA. The relationship between academic self-concept and GPA is well-established, with academic self-concept being a consistently strong correlate and predictor of GPA. Students who feel confident about their academic abilities should be expected to have higher GPAs than students who feel less confident. However, questions remain concerning the causal ordering of academic self-concept and academic achievement. Specifically, does an increase in academic self-concept lead to higher academic achievement (Marsh, 1990), or does higher academic achievement lead to an increase in academic self-concept (Muijs, 1997), or is the relationship reciprocal (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008)?

Surprisingly, devaluing academic success did not significantly predict GPA, as evidenced by an effect size of almost 0 ( $\beta = .02$ ). The lack of a significant predictive relationship between devaluing academic success and GPA is inconsistent with previous findings (Cokley & Chapman, 2008). One explanation may be related to statistical power. The negative correlation was as expected; however, it was not statistically significant in the regression. Larger sample sizes increase statistical power, so it is possible that having a larger sample would have yielded a statistically significant relationship. In fact, in the previously cited study where devaluing academic success was a significant predictor, the sample size was  $N = 274$ . Also, similar to Cokley and Chapman, the mean devaluing academic success score ( $x = 2.04$ ) out of a possible total score of 7 indicates that this sample of African American adolescents did not on average endorse negative attitudes toward academic success.

Finally, given the equivocal findings in prior research regarding the relationship of racial identity to academic achievement, we were especially interested in whether, and how, racial identity might predict GPA. The results indicated that racial centrality was a negative predictor of GPA, as evidenced by a small to medium effect size ( $\beta = -.19$ ). This finding is consistent with previous studies examining ethnic identity and certain racial identity attitudes (Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Worrell, 2007; Spencer et al., 2001; Witherspoon et al., 1997) but at odds with other studies that report a positive relationship for ethnic identity (Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore, 1994; Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004) and racial identity (Chavous et al., 2003). There are several possible reasons for this finding. Okeke et al. (2009) found that for African American students with higher racial centrality, lower academic self-concept was associated with stronger endorsement of academic race stereotypes. Thus, a stronger racial identity might be associated with being more vulnerable to internalizing racial stereotypes that can compromise academic achievement. The negative relationship found in this sample may also be related to what Cokley (2005) identified as a racialized ethnic identity or what Spencer et al. referred to as a reactive Afrocentric identity. The students in this urban sample may live in environments (e.g., school, neighborhood, family) where they have received negative messages about White people and/or the dominant culture. The internalization of these negative messages can produce identities that are highly racialized and reactive, similar to what Fordham and Ogbu (1986) called an oppositional identity and that previous research has shown to be linked to negative academic outcomes. As discussed by Cokley (2005), this racialized identity is characterized by an endorsement of racial stereotypes and superficial Afrocentric beliefs. Thus, students with highly racialized identities are more apt to internalize beliefs related to academic achievement and "acting White" compared to students with non-racialized identities. We argue that the nature of racial identity largely determines what, if any, relationship exists with academic achievement. This is similar to the argument made by Oyserman et al. (2003), who state that aschematic and in-group only racial-ethnic self-schemas (RES) place ethnic minority students at risk of academic disengagement and poorer academic achievement, while dual

identity and minority identity RES can reduce the risk of academic disengagement and thus increase academic achievement. It is also consistent with recent research that has found that the different meanings of African American racial identity are differentially related to academic achievement ([Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009](#)).

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations of this study that should be noted. First, the small sample size of students from High School A ( $n = 96$ ) is a noteworthy limitation. Obtaining access to the high school was challenging, and encouraging students to complete and return surveys (even with incentives) was especially challenging. Nevertheless, future studies should include larger samples of African American students.

A second limitation is related to the use of a cross-sectional design, which does not allow causal interpretations to be made regarding the temporal and directional relations among variables. It can be argued that academic achievement “causes” or impacts academic self-concept and devaluing academic success. Additionally, our model assumes a one-way directional relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement, but recent research and the current thinking support the idea that a reciprocal relationship exists ([Marsh & O’Mara, 2008](#)).

### *Implications and Directions for Future Research*

Limitations notwithstanding, we believe this study makes an important contribution in understanding African American adolescent achievement. Interventions designed to improve the academic achievement of African American adolescents should not only target variables at the individual/micro level as identified in this study, but also at the macro level ([Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, & Haskins, 2010](#)). Future research should incorporate additional variables that address the perceptions of African American students’ educational experiences. One such variable could include perceptions of the quality of student-teacher interactions. Certain aspects of student-teacher interactions (e.g., approachability and caring attitude) have been found to be positively related to the GPAs of African American students ([Cokley et al., 2006](#)). Future studies should also incorporate multiple measures of racial identity that tap into the different meanings of African American identity held by adolescents. As previously noted, a cross-sectional design was a limitation of the current study. Future research utilizing a longitudinal methodology would provide the strongest measurement of the attenuation of the relation between ASC and GPA ([Cokley, 2002](#)). Thus, future research would benefit from collecting data when students are in their first-year and recollecting data in the fourth year of school. Further, one reason there might be a lack of clarity around the mechanisms underlying academic disidentification is that researchers have not explored, in a more in-depth manner, the lived experience of African Americans with respect to their academic experience. Qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups designed to understand fewer persons in greater depth, may be useful in exploring questions about the mechanisms underlying academic disidentification.

The results of this study further suggest that how African American adolescents conceptualize and understand their racial identities may be an important area on which to focus intervention efforts. Adolescents whose racial identities are largely shaped by racial stereotypes (e.g., thug or gangsta identity, [Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009](#)), antipathy toward the dominant White culture, and a narrow conception of “Blackness” will likely have more reactive racial identities that are at greater risk for academic disidentification and lower academic achievement. However, adolescents whose racial identities are “school-oriented and socially conscious” ([Nasir et al., p. 92](#)), reject racial stereotypes, are open to experiences with different cultures, and who hold a broader conception of “Blackness”, will have more nuanced and proactive racial identities that promote academic identification and higher academic achievement.

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