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**Defining Black Identity: A Literature Review of Academic Disidentification  
Theory And Its Potential Causality**



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**RESEARCH PAPER**

This section presents a framework of the major theories and studies about academic disidentification, along with some potential causes for it. Initially, the reader will be introduced, in greater depth, to informational and theoretical work about academic disidentification and academic identity. Second, the reader will be informed of the possible relationship between stereotype threat and academic disidentification. Third, the possible relationship between cool pose and academic disidentification will be discussed in greater depth, and finally, the possible relationship between a dearth of positive Black male role models and academic disidentification will be discussed. Academic Disidentification : An Introduction

According to Wickline (2003), academic disidentification is an ever-increasing problem in American society. Not much is known about how and why the potential causes of academic disidentification—stereotype threat, cool pose, and the dearth of positive Black male role models—affect inner-city Black males’ interest in academic work at the secondary level.

Osborne (1997) and Steele (1992) both mentioned, in their respective studies, that African American male students are at a heightened risk of failing to engage and associate with academia at all levels. According to Steele, limited academic engagement and achievement among these students manifest due to a culture of low expectations and support for Black male students. Academic engagement is defined as “students’ putting forth mental effort to achieve the knowledge and skills generally associated with the outcomes of formal schooling” (Wehlage, 1989, as cited in Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992).

African American male students tend to shift their interests and energies from academic work to non-academic work in an effort to maintain a positive sense of self. For example, a student who is good in a band but does not perform as well in academics will probably lower the level of importance placed on study and shift his or her sense of self-worth to the band (Adelabu, 2007). A lack of identification with academics has been shown to cause or contribute to poorer performance (Osborne, 1995).

According to Aronson (2002), disidentification occurs when one redefines the self- concept, such that a threatened domain no longer is used as a basis of self-esteem (e.g., Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995; Pellham & Swann, 1989; Steele, 1992). According to Howard (2003), adolescents become increasingly aware of their identities along racial, gender, and academic lines as they enter high school. Thus, for African American students, academic identities are difficult to separate from gender and racial identities. These students must negotiate the intrapersonal dynamics of dual cultures—personal and racial/ethnic culture with school culture. Welch and Hodges (1997) defined academic identity as, “a dimension of a larger, global self- concept and is central to academic performance and achievement motivation” (p.37).

Motivation is enhanced when students can see the relevance and utility of what they are expected to learn. For inner-city Black males, academic identity is also tied to one’s overall self- concept, or “the personal commitment to a standard of excellence, the willingness to persist in the challenge, struggle, excitement and disappointment intrinsic in the learning process” (White, 1984, p.121). Powell (1989) noted that the academic self-concept (i.e., identity) for inner-city Black males, among others, is directly linked to how well they develop prosocial strategies for coping with racism in schools, and how well they overcome obstacles to academic success. Empirical research has lent some support to the disidentification hypothesis, as Black males seem to identify less with school than White males. However, Steele (1992) noted that there remains much to be understood about the process of disidentification.

### Results from Previous Studies of Academic Disidentification

Gosa and Young (2007) noted that three decades of ethnographic research conducted by Ogbu and associates had documented how the adaptation of oppositional culture hinders the academic achievement of young inner-city Black males, among other groups. Gosa and Young also mentioned that oppositional symbolic beliefs represent appropriate Black attitudes and behaviors defined in opposition to those thought to be appropriate for Whites. Such beliefs include the interpretation of typical pro-schooling attitudes and behaviors (e.g., speaking “standard English” and studying hard), as symbolically wanting to be like “them” rather than “us.” Engaging in these activities is viewed pejoratively as “acting White.” (Gosa & Young, p 4)

According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), as cited by Gosa and Young (2007), when school achievement becomes racialized, Black males who want to pursue academic success have to copewith the burden of acting White by proving that they are still authentically Black (Fordham, 1996). Bratton & Lewis (2004) mentioned that the “acting White” hypothesis has postulated that some African American youths avoid social and academic achievement behaviors in order to evade the peer rejection and alienation that may befall them when they are accused of “actingWhite.” According to Bratton and Lewis (2004), Black teens’ conceptualization of “acting Black” provides no positive refuge for achievement constructs that these youths may embrace as their own. Bratton also noted that, when Black youths have a clear and constructive reference of group definitions, self-definitions and directives, it is likely that their tendency or need to conceptualize achievement in relationship to Whiteness will disappear.

According to Gosa and Young (2007), the emerging research on oppositional culture suggests that Black males may be more susceptible to adopting oppositional identities than Black females, because of pervasive inclinations to associate realistic and positive identifications with academic underachievement, rebellion, and popular culture, which are heavily infused with a “gangsta” mentality. Results from Hansford and Hattie’s (1982) meta-analysis of the relationship between self and academic achievement provides supportive evidence for the disidentification hypothesis. Although Hansford and Hattie were not specifically addressing this hypothesis, the correlation coefficients between various measures of self and academic performance provided for Black, White, and Hispanic students suggests greater academic disidentificationfor Blacks and Hispanics than for Whites (Griffin, 2002). However, it is not known how and why the potential and probable causes of academic disidentification affect

the academic interests of inner-city Black males more than inner-city males of different racial backgrounds.

As Griffin (2002) noted, the participation/identification model would predict that Black and Hispanic students are more likely to drop out of school than White and Asian students. Research confirms this; dropout rates are highest for Black and Hispanic students, with Hispanics demonstrating the highest rates of withdrawal (Gibson, 1991; Rumberger, 1987; Steinberg, Blinde, & Chan, 1984). Recent figures from the National Center for Educational Statistics show that Hispanics have, on average, an event dropout rate of 10.46% for 1994 through 1996, compared with 6.56% for Blacks and 4.26% for Whites (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Data were not reported for students of Asian descent.

Research by Osborne (1995, 1997) also demonstrated support, at least partially, for the academic disidentification hypothesis. Osborne (1995) found that correlations among a measure of self-esteem and measures of academic achievement declined from eighth to tenth grades for Blacks, and were much weaker for Black males than for Whites or Black females. In a second study, Osborne (1997) again examined correlations among measures of self-esteem and academic performance across a variety of content areas. As with the first study, Blacks showed a trend of disidentifying over time (specifically from eighth to twelfth grades), but this was especially pronounced for males. The correlations for Hispanics and Whites did not demonstrate any identifiable pattern over time.

Researchers such as Cross and Phagen-Smith (2001) had posited in previous studies that individuals developed different racial identity beliefs based upon the challenges at a specific point in their lives (Cross & Phagen-Smith, 1999). Mainstream identity theorists suggested that individuals enter adolescence with an unclear self-concept; the developmental process through which one takes ownership of the self-concept occurs because of self-exploration and self-reflection (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; as cited in Phinney, 1989). Phinney (1989) reconceptualized the Erikson/Marcia model of identity development to consider the unique manifestation of this process for different racial and ethnic minority groups.

According to Phinney (1989), individuals enter adolescence with poorly-developed racial identities, leading to an identity crisis period, during which time the challenges associated with racial or racial group membership are confronted; and assuming they are able to successfully resolve these challenges, they formulate a positive racial identity. In response to this rather limited view of Black racial identity development over the lifespan, Pellham and Swann (1989) introduced the term “nigrescence recycling,” which refers to the manner in

which an individual reconsiders his or her racial self-concept based upon the specific encounter episodes one experiences at different periods in life.

### **Academic Identity**

For inner-city Black males in particular, the struggle to assume a positive and productive identity has been persistent and disturbing for numerous researchers, including Osborne, Ogbu, and Gosa. Griffin (1996) noted that, the more one identifies with academics, the more salient academic outcomes became in shaping one's perceptions of self. This linkage suggests a positive relationship between academic identification and self-perception, and research has provided evidence for this relationship (e.g., Cohen, 1974; Gold & Mann, 1984; Hansford & Hattie, 1982).

According to Osborne (1995), young inner-city Black males, in particular, disidentified with academics over time, as the connection between their self-esteem with the task of learning declined over time. Osborne's contention was that students' not identifying with academics would have lower motivation to succeed because there is a minimal connection, if any, between academic outcomes and self-esteem—good performance is not rewarding, and lackluster performance is not punishing—leaving those who have disidentified with no forceful incentives to augment effort in academic pursuits.

Steele's (1992) concept of disidentification is the lack of a relationship between academic and global self-esteem, with the implication that there has been a relationship in the past. This is a particularly troubling phenomenon, as identification with academics has been discussed as an important factor in academic success (Finn, 1989; Steele, 1992).

Inner-city Black males, in particular, appear to place less importance upon academics than either Asian or White males when considered within the framework of the relationship between academic accomplishments and various global measures of self (Steele, 1992). To understand better what produces this discrepancy, it is important to determine which factors are associated with differential academic identification among these groups (Harper & Tuckman, 2006). Two possible explanations for this discrepancy are cultural inversion and stereotype threat (Harper & Tuckman), both of which are discussed below.

Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001), as cited in Harper & Tuckman (2006), asserted that African Americans pass through six periods in which they face unique challenges that precipitate the reconceptualization of one's racial identity: infancy and childhood, preadolescence, adolescence, late adolescence and early adulthood, adulthood, and adult identity refinement. The nigrescencerecycling, inspired by the period-specific trials that one faces, encourages the development of a racial identity that is enhanced by the periodic, context-specific re-

examination of what it means to be Black (Harper & Tuckman, 2006). In an effort to provide an integrated view of African American racial identity that reflects these components, Sellers (1993), as cited in Harper & Tuckman (2006), introduced the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI). The MMRI is based upon four assumptions:

First, Black racial identity is assumed to consist of both situationally determined and stable properties, as Harper & Tuckman (2006) mentioned. Some situations may encourage African Americans to define themselves with respect to racial group membership. But, in other situations, race may be substantially less salient, thus activating the other aspects of one's identity that Harper and Tuckman mentioned. However, at the same time, in situations perceived to be ambiguous, the extent to which race is a superordinate construct in one's self-concept will determine the manner in which one interprets seemingly neutral events with respect to racial connotations (Shelton & Sellers, 2000). Additionally, among African Americans, the regard with which one holds Blacks is thought to remain relatively stable over time (Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke 1998a).

Second, according to Harper and Young (2006), this model assumes that all individuals have a number of different hierarchically ordered identities. Third, the model assumes that an individual's perception of his or her racial identity is the most valid indicator of his or her racial identity, according to Harper and Young. This stands in stark contrast to early models of racial identity, which focus on behavioral indicators as a means to understand the self (i.e., Horwitz & Horwitz, 1939). Although the model does assume a correlation between race-related behaviors and racial self-concepts, it asserts that overt behavior is often constrained by contextual factors, while subjective self-perceptions differentiate affective and evaluative race judgments from other constructs and allow for the role of the individual in the construction of one's racial self-concept (Sellers et al., 1998a).

Lastly, as noted by Harper and Young (2006), the model assumes individual differences in perceptions of what it means to be an African American. While many stage models of Black racial identity propose an evolution from a "bad," underdeveloped racial identity to one that is "good," the MMRI does not issue judgment as to what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy racial identity (Sellers et al., 1998a). Instead, the model asserts that the efficacy of one's racial identity is dependent upon the demands of a particular environment.

Cross and Fhagen-Smith's (2001) and Harper and Young's (2006) findings suggest that students at different points in their high-school careers may construct qualitatively different views of Black racial identity, and that the racial identity of ninth-grade adolescents reflects a range of influences that differ significantly from those of the twelfth-grade students preparing



to enter adulthood. According to Scott (2003), as cited in Harper and Young (2006), early adolescents' Black racial identity may reflect low-racial centrality, as significance is placed on other aspects of the self-concept. By late adolescence/early adulthood, a period of examination and exploration may inspire the adoption of a Black racial identity in which race is the central construct. Further, while a young adolescent's relative inexperience in life prevents him or her from anticipating the multiple issues that relate to being classified as an African American, as one progresses through life, he or she is likely to acquire wisdom that contributes to the development of one's racial self-concept and racial self-esteem (Harper & Young, 2006). As such, the initial purpose of this study was to test for the replication of the four previously discovered racial identity profiles across grade levels.

With respect to the relationship between racial identity and academic outcomes, researchers generally hold one of two perspectives when attempting to understand achievement and achievement-related behaviors among African American students: One contends that Black racial identity impedes academic success, and the other asserts that Black racial identity facilitates achievement (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003). The models of the first perspective argue that African American youth come to recognize existing systemic barriers to their success, and subsequently distance themselves from behaviors that would ensure educational success. This is because of a belief that these behaviors are unlikely to lead to success and prosperity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1988).

Researchers who operate in his paradigm assert that African American students tend to devalue domains in which Blacks traditionally have been unsuccessful, thus protecting their self-esteem against failure (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Hughes & Demo, 1989). Because of (inaccurate) perceptions of a lack of academic ability among people of color, some African American students come to reject achievement-related attitudes and behaviors; as a result, the correlation between self-esteem and academic outcomes decreases steadily among African American students (especially males) over time (Osborne, 1997). Some African American students deliberately reject academic achievement as "acting White," instead choosing to play the role of class clown or adopting other modes of creative expression embraced more readily by their African American peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1990).

### **Ogbu's Cultural Inversion Theory and Academic Disidentification**

Ogbu (1992) explained that cultural inversion, or cultural opposition, occurs when members of a minority group adopt behaviors that directly contradict a specific, prominent aspect of

the dominant culture. Given that Black people have assimilated into the Anglo- dominant culture over long time periods, one can anticipate Ogbu's association of disidentification with cultural inversion. Griffin (2002) noted that, while cultural inversion may manifest for various reasons for some members of a given minority group, Ogbu argued that its origination can be understood by considering the voluntary and involuntary status of that group. Involuntary minorities may be typified by individuals who were conquered or relocated against their will, and who often do not hold the same positive expectations for their future as voluntary minorities, Griffin (2002) stated.

Ogbu (1990) identified two primary types of minorities. The immigrants who moved to the United States willingly for social advancement, such as better financial opportunities, education, and/or greater freedom, were called the immigrant minorities. This category consists of Jews, Koreans, South Americans, persons of Caribbean heritage, the Irish, and others. The second type is caste-like minorities, whose ancestors became Americans by way of discriminatory practices. The category consists of Blacks and Native Americans. According to Ogbu, caste-like minorities frequently perform poorly in school.

According to Ogbu (1990), as cited in Wickline (2003), Black adults, while verbally supporting education, often taught their children to devalue school by not securing jobs or wages commensurate with their education. Wickline (2003) mentioned that children also hear their parents and other adults talk about job frustrations, glass ceilings, unfair standardized tests, discrimination, and various societal barriers. According to Ogbu (1990), the involuntary minority students who adopt the behaviors and attitudes conducive to school success, those who use standard English, and those who behave according to the standard practices of the school are often accused by their peers of "acting White." Gosa and Young (2007) argued that Fordham and Ogbu's and Fordham's (1986) cultural ecological thesis posits that the poor academic achievement of Black youth can be attributed to the adoption of an oppositional collective identity. According to Fordham and Ogbu, Black youth who accept or adhere to adopting oppositional culture tend to sustain pejorative evaluations of the opportunity structure, and most importantly, associate doing well in school as "acting White."

### **Stereotype Threat and Academic Disidentification**

Howard (2003) mentioned that stereotype threat is a "social psychological predicament rooted in the prevailing image of African Americans as intellectually inferior" (p.807). This research informed the work of Steele (1997), who has shown that the most immediate effect of stereotype threat can be the anxiety that undermines academic performance, particularly for women and culturally diverse students. When women, African American, and Latino



undergraduate students were informed that members of their respective groups had not fared well on previous academic tasks, Steele found that these members did not perform well on varying cognitive tasks. It is my contention, as well as Howard's (2003), that Steele's research suggested that when students are mindful of negative stereotypes that exist about their group membership, and even as they try to combat such stereotypes, they still perform poorly. These findings underscore the prevailing thought that stereotype affects school performance, especially for those students from ethnic minority backgrounds (Howard, 2003).

According to Steele (1997), stereotype threat is a general threat not tied to the psychology of particular stigmatized groups. It affects the members of any group about whom there exists some generally-known negative stereotype (e.g., a grandfather who fears that any faltering of memory will confirm or expose him to stereotypes about the aged). Stereotype threat can be thought of as a subtype of the threat posed by negative reputations in general (Steele).

According to Steele (1997), the effort to overcome stereotype threat by disproving the stereotype—for example, by outperforming it in the case of academic work—can be daunting. As these stereotypes are widely disseminated throughout society, a personal exemption from them earned in one setting does not generalize to a new setting, where either one's reputation is not known, or where it has to be renegotiated against a new challenge (Steele, 1997).

Steele (1997) also wrote that the stereotypes considered in his work allege group-based limitations of ability that are often reinforced by the structural reality of increasingly small group representations at more advanced levels of the schooling domain. Thus, for group members working at these advanced levels, no amount of success up to that point can disprove the stereotype's relevance to their next, more advanced performance. For the advanced female math student who has been brilliant up to that point, any frustration she has at the frontier of her skills could confirm the gender-based limitation alleged in the stereotype. This would make this frontier, because she is so invested in it, a more threatening place than it is for the non-stereotyped. Thus, the work of dispelling stereotype threat through performance probably increases with the difficulty of work in the domain, and whatever exemption is gained has to be re-won at the next new proving ground (Steele).

Wickline (2003) mentioned that, in contrast to reflected appraisal theories that maintain self-views develop from how individuals think others see them (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934, 1962; as cited in Wickline, 2003), stereotype threat theory proposes that people do not need to believe or internalize stereotypes for them to be influential. Wickline, among other

researchers, has mentioned that evidence for the validity of stereotype threat came from numerous experimental studies (see Steele, 1997; and Aronson, 2002, for reviews).

As a result, stereotype threat manifests when one encounters a situation in which one's performance could validate the pejorative stereotype about one's group, and this threat may impair performance in the domain of interest. Steele (1992), as cited in Griffin (2002), has noted that certain stereotypes regarding academic performance appear to influence actual performance, and as a result, some minorities may have difficulty identifying with school. Several experiments have provided supportive evidence for the stereotype threat hypothesis. Steele and Aronson (1995), as cited in Griffin (2002), found that Black males, when placed in a diagnostic-testing situation that could confirm a racial stereotype about intellectual ability, performed at a lower level than Anglo males. However, when placed in a non-diagnostic testing situation, there was a similar performance between Black and Anglo males. In addition, Steele and Aronson found that, even when faced with non-diagnostic testing conditions, young inner-city Black males had lower scores than White males when all students were asked to identify their race immediately before taking the test, but Black and White males showed similar levels of performance when racial identity was not requested (Steele & Aronson).

Griffin (1996) noted, in sum, that Steele and Aronson (1995) found that when race was primed in some way, either indicating the test was diagnostic of one's ability or simply asking test takers to identify their race, then scores obtained by Black male participants were decreased relative to Whites. Salinas and Aronson (1998) obtained similar results for Hispanic males. According to Griffin's analyses of the aforementioned findings, besides academic performance, stereotype threat may also have other pejorative effects—or positive effects if the stereotype is positive—on facets related to the academic arena, such as student identification with academics and schooling.

In a work entitled, "Race and the Schooling of African Americans," Steele (1992) contended that, since pejorative stereotypes may corrupt self-perceptions, African American students may be susceptible to the stigma of performing poorly in school. Steele (1995) wrote that this could cause these individuals to activate the defensive mechanism of academic disidentification to protect their self-perceptions.

### **Relationship Between the Dearth of Positive Black Male Role Models and Academic Disidentifications**

Scholars such as Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998) concluded that the roles of parents and families in the education of students is vital and of great necessity. In Howard's (2003) study entitled, "A Tug of War for Our Minds: African American High School Students' Perceptions of their Academic Identities, and College Aspirations", one of the major findings was that students mentioned parents as one of the more powerful influences on their academic identities. According to Howard (2003), the students' frequent mentioning of parents as key players in the development of their academic identities is crucial for a number of reasons. It would appear to highlight the importance of parental involvement in their children's schooling.

Howard (2003) stated:

According to the findings from this study, although schools continue to have influential effects on youth, parents continue to play an important role in influencing academic identity. Secondly, the findings from this work also challenge prevailing myths that the parents of students in urban schools are not concerned about their children's educational pursuits. A number of the students helped to reiterate the fact that their parents cared deeply about helping them reach their academic goals. (p. 9)

In *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) mentioned that the at-risk factors associated with lower educational attainment and increased behavioral problems are single-parent households and very young mothers. More than 60% of Black children today live in households with only one parent, compared to 23% of White children, and more than a third of Black mothers have their first child when they are 18 or younger (Thernstrom & Thernstrom). Becoming a parent at such a young age not only limits the educational opportunities of the mother, but has been shown to have a negative impact on the child's educational success (McShepard, Goler, & Batson, 2007).

According to Rhodes (1994), role models, particularly one's parents, matter. How and why they do so is a major question in this study. Furthermore, parents' educational attainment affects students. In fact, the progeny of parents who are more educated tend to pursue and attain more schooling (Plug & Vijverberg, 2003). According to Jenkins (1995), the educational attainment of mothers has a positive and profound effect on school commitment. Studies suggest that role models are helpful to young inner-city Black males. According to Wilkins' (2005) research, young Black males expressed being profoundly affected by casual or short-term interactions with role models and advocates. This indicates the importance and need for positive guidance and encouragement throughout the academic careers.

The probability of an inner-city young Black male having a stable adult male role model in his life seems slim. When these young men turn to the schools, they find very few men there either. In 1995, McNergney and Herbert found that female teachers make up 70% of public and 78% of private school instructors, while, in the 1990s, 86% of elementary school teachers and 61% of middle school teachers were women. For example, in Palm Beach County, Florida, which in 1998 was the 15th largest school district in the nation, of 3,056 elementary school teachers, only 345 were male (Profile: Palm Beach County Schools, 1998).

Only slightly more than one-third of all Palm Beach County's school-based administrators are men. Respectable men from the Black community and mainstream society must step forward to fill vital role model positions for at-risk Black urban male youth, Shreffler concluded. Male teachers who are Black, White, and "other" are in the most opportune positions to do so, yet few Black men presently serve as teachers in inner-city schools (Shreffler, 2001).

Wilkins (2005) cited scholars who reaffirmed that the media images of Black men are heavily pejorative, bellicose, and skewed toward the criminal or the sensational (Gibbs, 1988; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Hilliard, 2002; Hoberman, 2000). Wilkins also cited researchers who mentioned that, due to the negatively prominent images presented, such perceptions become subconsciously affixed as the common standard for all Black males (Majors & Billson, 1992; Tatum, 1997; Wharton, 1988). This not only contributes to young Black males' having a narrow perception of their options, it reinforces some commonly-held beliefs of the general society (Hoberman). The effect of negative role models on Black male youth adds tremendously to their teachers' dilemmas.

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