

# Educational Utility, Racial Socialization and Academic Motivation in African American Adolescents

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## Abstract

Educational utility beliefs (i.e., the usefulness of formal education) and the effect of those beliefs on academic motivation were examined in African American students. We hypothesized that educational utility beliefs would be stable over time, and that youth with high utility beliefs would report adaptive attributions, strong classroom engagement, and higher achievement than peers. In addition, we examined concurrent relationships between racial socialization and utility beliefs. We hypothesized that preparation for bias socialization would be related to lower educational utility scores and that cultural pride socialization might either show no relationship or might be positively related to utility beliefs. Beliefs about the value of education were moderately stable from fifth to seventh grade. Seventh grade utility beliefs were positively related classroom engagement, positive attributions, and higher achievement. Both preparation for bias and cultural pride socialization were positively associated with young adolescents' beliefs about the importance of education.

## Introduction

In spite of marked gains in the past decades, African Americans still do not obtain the same levels of academic achievement and educational attainment as European American students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007). One explanation that has been proposed for this achievement gap is racial and ethnic differences in the extent to which students value education.

Although many studies have shown that African Americans value education as much as other groups of students (Crocker, Luhtanen, & Bouvrette, 2003; Graham, 1994), it has also been argued that perhaps African American students recognize that barriers in our society make education less valuable for the upward mobility of members of ethnic minority groups, who face glass ceilings and other forms of discrimination in the work place (Mickelson, 1990).

Utility beliefs may decrease across the transition to middle school as students enter racially diverse environments and become more aware of discrimination. A decrease in utility beliefs may be especially pronounced for boys, whose academic trajectories decline compared to those of girls across adolescence and young adulthood. Utility beliefs are probably influenced by parental racial socialization. An emphasis on racial pride might increase students' optimism about the value of education, whereas socialization that emphasizes preparation for bias may be related to decreased utility beliefs.

## Hypotheses

We tested the following hypotheses:

- We expected inter-individual stability yet declines in educational utility beliefs from fifth grade to seventh grade. Declines were especially expected for boys.
- Seventh grade utility beliefs were expected to be positively related to achievement, adaptive attributions, and classroom engagement.
- We anticipated that preparation for bias socialization would be negatively related and cultural pride socialization would be positively related to seventh grade educational utility scores.

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## Participants

Participants in the study were 299 African American 7th graders (174 girls, 126 boys) who also participated in the study when they were in 5th grade. In 5th grade, youth attended schools where the majority of students were African American. Middle schools ranged from 37% to 98% African American.

Mean age at 5th grade: 11.1 years old

Mean age at 7th grade: 13.0 years old

Median Household Income: \$20,000-29,000 yearly

Median Maternal Education: Some technical school

## Procedure

Consent was received from the participants and their parents. All data were obtained through questionnaires that were administered to the students at their schools. Parents and teachers received their questionnaires by mail. Each participant received an incentive after completion of the questionnaire.

## Measures

### Educational Utility Beliefs

Utility of education was measured with the Utility of Education for Blacks (UEB) scale adapted by Rowley (1997) from the abstract and concrete educational attitudes scales developed by Mickelson (1990). Due to reliability issues, only the Idealistic Educational Utility subscale (i.e., abstract values) was used. This scale reflects the view that a good education is rewarded with occupational mobility, success, and prestige without mention of inequities based on race (e.g., "Education is the key to success"). Reliability for the measure was .71.

### Classroom Engagement

Classroom engagement was measured with 15 items that Skinner and Belmont (1993) developed to assess classroom engagement and re-engagement after failure (e.g., "If I can't get a problem right the first time, I just keep trying"). For teacher reports, each item was reworded (i.e., "this student keeps trying" rather than "I keep trying"). Reliability of the measures were .80 and .92.

### Attributions

Attributions were assessed with 8 items for which students rated the reasons underlying their success and failure in four domains: math, science, writing, and language arts. Each item had three attribution possibilities (success/failure due to effort, ability, or teacher treatment), and the student rated the importance on a 4-point scale of each of the three in explaining their success/failure. For the current analyses, attributions of success to ability or effort and attributions of failure to lack of effort were averaged across the four academic domains to create a single aggregated score of adaptive attributions ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

### Racial Socialization

Race socialization was assessed with the Race Socialization Scale (Hughes & Chen, 1997). Parents reported how often they engaged in a particular behavior with the target child in the previous year (1 = Never; 5 = Very Often). The scale was divided into two subscales: racial pride (8 items,  $\alpha = .83$ ) and preparation for bias (9 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

### Academic Achievement

Students' scores on end-of-grade standardized tests for math and reading were obtained from school records. End of the year grades in science, math, English, and social studies were also obtained from school records.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
5th Grade Educational Utility Beliefs	4.00	.61	1.46	5.00
7th Grade Educational Utility Beliefs	3.74	.59	1.50	5.00
7th Grade Positive Attributions	2.86	.45	1.50	4.00
7th Grade Prep for Bias Socialization	2.82	.92	1.00	5.00
7th Grade Racial Pride Socialization	3.20	.88	1.13	5.00
7th Grade Classroom Engagement (child report)	3.36	.40	1.73	3.93
7th Grade Classroom Engagement (teacher report)	2.80	.74	1.00	4.00
7th Grade End of Year Grades	80.14	9.78	46.75	97.25
7th Grade Standardized LA Test Scores	257.17	10.07	158	279
7th Grade Standardized Math Test Scores	341.22	33.54	156	374

### Correlations of Major Variables with 7th Grade Utility Beliefs

	7th Grade Utility Beliefs
5th Grade Educational Utility Beliefs	.267*
7th Grade Positive Attributions	.340*
7th Grade Prep for Bias Socialization	.232*
7th Grade Racial Pride Socialization	.194*
7th Grade Classroom Engagement (child report)	.157*
7th Grade Classroom Engagement (teacher report)	.188*
7th Grade End of Year Grades	.178*
7th Grade Standardized LA Test Scores	.178*
7th Grade Standardized Math Test Scores	.014

\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.05$

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

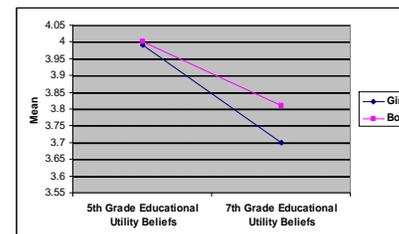
### Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting 7th Grade Utility Beliefs

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
<b>Step 1</b>			
Household Income	.00	.02	.00
Maternal Education	.02	.02	.06
5th Grade Utility	.29	.07	.27**
<b>Step 2</b>			
Household Income	.00	.02	.03
Maternal Education	.01	.02	.02
5th Grade Utility	.27	.07	.25**
Prep for Bias	.14	.06	.22*
Racial Pride	.03	.06	.05

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*  $p < .05$

### Change in Educational Utility Beliefs from 5th Grade to 7th Grade



## Results cont...

A repeated measures analysis of variance was used to test change from fifth to seventh grade and possible gender differences in change. Time was entered as the within subjects factor and gender as the between subjects factor. The within subjects factor of Time was significant, reflecting a decrease in utility beliefs for both boys and girls from fifth to seventh grade  $F(1,291) = 32.18, p < .01$ . The between subjects factor of Gender and the Time x Gender interaction were nonsignificant.

Regression analyses were used to test the other study hypotheses. Household income and maternal education were controlled in these analyses. As predicted, fifth grade educational utility was positively related to seventh grade educational utility youth.

Although parent racial socialization that focused on race pride was positively correlated with adolescents' education utility beliefs, this effect was nonsignificant in the regression analyses. Preparation for bias socialization was a positive predictor of seventh grade educational utility.

Seventh grade utility beliefs were positively related to teacher reports of classroom engagement ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ) as well as student reported classroom engagement ( $\beta = .19, p < .01$ ). Students with more positive educational utility beliefs were also more likely than peers to hold adaptive attributions about their school success ( $\beta = .34, p < .01$ ) and had higher school grades ( $\beta = .23, p < .01$ ) and language arts standardized test scores ( $\beta = .19, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

Consistent with theoretical predictions, beliefs in the value of education were related to both motivational and achievement variables in this sample of young African American adolescents: Youth who reported a stronger belief in the value of education held more positive attributions about the reasons for their school successes, had higher classroom engagement as reported by both students and teachers, and had higher achievement. However, beliefs about the value of education declined significantly across the transition to middle school. This decline occurred for both boys and girls. As African American youth move into more racially diverse settings and become more aware of discrimination, this awareness may lead to a decrease in the value of education, with accompanying decreases in achievement motivation.

Contrary to our hypotheses, race pride socialization was unrelated to utility beliefs in the regression analyses, and preparation for discrimination was positively related to utility beliefs. Parents who prepare their children for racism may also talk to their children about the importance of education as an avenue to upward mobility. Future research—particularly using qualitative methods—might investigate ways in which parents can prepare their children for discrimination while fostering a sense of agency and ability to overcome racial barriers rather than leading to decreased motivation and helpless behavior.

## References

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