

Cultural Expression and Black Students' Attitudes Toward High Achievers

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ABSTRACT. The authors of the present study have extended research by D. Marryshow that investigated African American students' attitudes toward 4 high achievers who differed in their approach to high achievement. D. Marryshow (1992) assessed students' *social* attitudes and perceptions of 4 high achievers with culturally distinct achievement orientations. In the present research, the authors assessed students' *academic* attitudes and perceptions of the same 4 high achievers. In addition, the present study includes Black children's predictions of their parents' and peers' attitudes toward these high achieving students. The results generally supported the authors' hypothesis that African American children would report a preference for students who achieve via attitudes and behaviors congruent with African American cultural values. The children also predicted that their parents and their Black peers would prefer these same African American culturally oriented high achievers. The findings suggest that Black children who prefer African American cultural modes of achievement may find themselves at odds with classroom demands geared toward learning in the mainstream cultural mode and thus may be at increased risk of academic failure.

Key words: achievement, African American, communalism, culture, education, learning orientation, *verve*

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT MANY MINORITY STUDENTS attain limited academic success in American schools. African Americans, in particular, consistently perform less well in school than their White counterparts do. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that African American students at

the ages of 9, 13, and 17 have scored lower than Whites on standardized tests of mathematics for three decades. Similar gaps between Black and White students are reported for reading scores (NCES, 2000). In addition, Kaufman, Klein, and Frase (1999) reported that nearly 10% more White than African American youths aged 18–24 complete requirements for graduation.

Scholars have struggled for decades to find a viable explanation for this persistent problem. Most recently, two competing explanations have emerged. One asserts that Black children's academic difficulties may be attributed to their attitudes toward education in general and toward high academic achievement in particular (Fordham, 1988, 1999; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). The other explanation attributes these academic difficulties to other things, among them, feelings of alienation that are the result of a complex interplay between culture, expectations, and learning outcomes (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin, 1986, 1995).

Ogbu (1986) argued that children's attitudes are the critical explanatory factor. He contended that African American youths come of age keenly aware of the limiting effects of job ceilings and other barriers to the upward mobility of Black people's material lives. Mickelson (1990) gave a similar argument, noting the paradox between abstract ideologies about education in America and the concrete reality of everyday living for African Americans. An awareness of this unjust reality, Ogbu suggested, leads many African Americans to view high academic achievement as a mainstream value that benefits White Americans and their reality. Fordham (1988, 1999) argued that Black Americans who express positive attitudes toward high achievement are perceived by their peers to be acting White or selling out. According to this scholarship, then, Black students develop understandably negative attitudes toward education, high achievement, and toward Black students who are high academic achievers.

Mickelson (1990) blamed abstract ideologies for Black students' poor performance. Ogbu (1986) and Fordham (1988, 1999) argued that material realities are to blame. However, Boykin considers the importance of culture and its presence in American systems of education. Boykin (1986, 1995) argued that pedagogy in the United States is founded on mainstream cultural ideals, and as such, it is set up to reward behaviors that are consistent with those precepts. Academic success is therefore contingent on the acceptance of these mainstream values,

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which are at times incongruent with the culturally rooted value systems that African American children learn at home and in their communities (Boykin & Allen, 2003). This reality creates a dynamic in which many African American children are chronically penalized for not expressing the values and behaviors promoted by the mainstream educational process. Moreover, they experience little confirmation for the academic value or relevance of the most salient aspects of their own cultural lives (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin, 1995; Boykin & Allen, 2003). Over time, this state of affairs, among other things, leads Black children to question their place in school. The resulting disconnect contributes to the development of negative perceptions of academic success as it is available to them in their mainstream classrooms.

According to Boykin's scholarship, then, the problem is not Black children's attitudes toward achievement in general but the failure of schools to embrace and reward a larger set of values and behaviors in the learning context. This perspective is supported by research on culture and learning outcomes. There is mounting evidence that when elements of African American culture are incorporated into learning tasks and contexts, Black children improve in performance, engagement, and motivation (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Allen & Butler, 1996; Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boykin & Allen, 1988; Boykin, Allen, & Davis, 1997; Boykin & Cunningham, 2001; Dill & Boykin, 2000; Hurley, 1999). If incorporating opportunities for culturally relevant expression into academic tasks enhances academic performance, it stands to reason that their absence may promote the negative attitudes toward schooling observed by Ogbu and others. For Black students to have negative attitudes toward the culturally alienating behaviors and values on which success in mainstream classrooms is contingent is something entirely different from Black children rejecting high achievement for its own sake.

Marryshow (1992) attempted to determine which of the two theories best predicted African American middle school children's attitudes toward high achievers. In that study, he had the children read scenarios describing four high achieving students and then respond to questions about the likelihood that they would seek out any of the four high-achieving students in a social setting. The four high achievers differed in the cultural themes underlying their achievement style. Two were described as exhibiting attitudes and behaviors consistent with one of two themes common in mainstream culture. The mainstream themes embedded in their description were individualism and competition. *Individualism* denotes the belief that individual effort leads to success; *competition* implies seeking superiority over others (Spence, 1985). Both of these cultural themes have been found to permeate the very fabric of American life, and subsequently, the American education system (Delpit, 1988; Triandis, 2001).

The two other high achieving students were described as exhibiting attitudes and behaviors consistent with one of two themes postulated to be cultivated in the cultural experience of many African American homes and communities, namely communalism and verve. *Communalism* is a form of collectivism and is

described as a cooperative and affiliative orientation. *Verve* refers to a special receptiveness to high levels of intense and variable stimulation. These two cultural themes are thought to have emerged from the social structure of West African cultures and have continued to be cultivated in the family and community experiences of many contemporary African Americans (Akbar, 1985; Boykin, 1995; Boykin & Allen, 2003).

Marryshow (1992) found that rather than reject all high achievers, Black children rejected only those who achieved via mainstream cultural modes. In Marryshow's study, the two high achievers who exhibited behaviors found within the home and community experiences of African Americans were rated significantly more socially desirable than were the two high achievers who exhibited mainstream cultural behavior, suggesting that Black children do not generally dislike academic high achievers as Fordham (1988) argued, but maintain positive attitudes toward high achievers who excel via attitudes and behaviors that are more congruent with their own culturally rooted value systems.

In the present study, we sought to extend Marryshow's (1992) findings in two important ways. First, we assessed students' academic attitudes, whereas Marryshow, in keeping with Ogbu (1986) and Fordham's (1988) relevant prior investigations, measured students' social attitudes toward high achievers. Academic attitudes would likely be as important or more important to academic achievement than social attitudes. Moreover, there is a distinct possibility that students could have different attitudes toward high-achieving peers in academic versus social settings.

Second, whereas Marryshow (1992) found that Black children do value academic success when it is achieved in ways that are congruent with their own values, we investigated family and peer group factors that may inform children's attitudes and perceptions. McGillicuddy-Delisi (1982) found a strong relationship between parental beliefs and child behavior. She concluded that the structure of a child's home environment, as well as subtle messages transmitted over many interactions, significantly influence the child to behave in a manner representative of significant others.

Boykin and Allen (2003) echoed this sentiment. They argued that family and community members play a significant role in the transmission of values early in a child's life. Cultural themes relevant to the natal culture of African Americans are encountered from birth, in the home, on the streets, and in other events and places in the community, including churches, shops, and social gatherings. Black children begin school with well-established attitudes and perceptions that are learned from these significant others during interactions with them in significant cultural settings. It should therefore be expected that children will consciously (or unconsciously) respond to the people and situations they encounter in school in ways that they believe their parents and peers would respond.

In the present study, we extended Marryshow's (1992) work by asking African American students about their own perceptions and to report their beliefs about their

parents' and peers' perceptions of the four high achievers. We predicted that, as in Marryshow's study examining attitudes in a social context, Black children would accept or reject high achievers depending on the mode of achievement attributed to them. In academic contexts, we predicted that our participating students would prefer high achievers whose success was the result of behaviors and attitudes consistent with themes in African American culture over those who achieved via mainstream cultural values. We further predicted that students' own responses would be congruent with choices they believed their peers or parents would make.

Method

Participants

For this study, we recruited 80 African American children (39 girls and 41 boys) ranging in age from 8 to 11 years (mean age of 10) from a suburban school in the southern United States. The children were bussed to the school from lower income Black communities and were eligible for the school's free or reduced-fee lunch program. The parents of the students, identified by the school's administrative staff as part of the target population, were contacted for informed consent. The students themselves also gave consent before participating. Students' responses were not available to any of the school staff or administration except in summary form.

Instruments

We administered the Learning Context Scenarios (LCS), a measure we developed to assess children's attitudes toward the four types of high achievers as well as their beliefs about their parents' and peers' attitudes toward the same four high-achieving students. The measure consists of four scenarios of approximately 90 words each that describe a high-achieving student with one of four orientations toward schooling and achievement. Two of the high achievers are described as exhibiting individualism or interpersonal competitiveness, behaviors and attitudes characteristic of mainstream cultural values. The individualism scenario contains descriptive statements such as "She feels she can do better on school assignments when she works independently . . . and enjoys school work better when she does it on her own." The interpersonal competitive scenario includes statements such as "He likes the challenge of competing for the highest grade and . . . he takes pride in being the only student who knows the answer."

The other two high achievers are described as exhibiting behaviors and attitudes that are congruent with the African American cultural values of communalism and verve. The communalism scenario includes phrases such as "She tries to share her ideas and materials with other students . . . and feels that she can learn many things by working with other students." The verve scenario describes

a high achieving student who "likes it when a lot of different activities are going on at the same time in the class and . . . would prefer to work on three or four different subjects (in an hour)."

The LCS includes three sets of six questions to be answered after reading a scenario. The first set of questions (C-Own) assess respondents' own attitudes toward the hypothetical achiever depicted. The child attitude questions ask specifically about how likely the child is to seek such a person out in various academic situations; for example, "Would you like John to be your study partner?" The second and third sets of questions are similar in content but assess children's predictions of their parents' (C-Parent) and peers' (C-Peer) perceptions of the same four high achievers. For example, a question from the perceptions of parents' attitudes questions asks "Would your parents like for John to be your study partner?" An item from the peers' attitudes set asks "Would your best friend like for John to be your study partner?" On this measure, yes responses are given a score of 2 and no responses are given a score of 1. The score for each set of questions is computed by summing responses across the six items and yields a score between 6 and 12.

In addition to raw scores, the child-attitude rating and the child-perception rating are viewed for their deviation from the mid-point of 9. Ratings above the mid-point indicate an acceptance of the individual depicted in the scenario, whereas ratings below the midpoint indicate a rejection of the depicted high achiever. Pilot administrations of the LCS using C-Own items among low-income African American children yielded internal consistency estimates of .71, .79, .78, and .82 for the communalism, verve, competition, and individualism scenarios, respectively.

Procedure

Each experimental session required approximately 20 min. We tested mixed-gender groups of 7 to 15 students in classrooms made available for this research. Students were excused from other classes to participate in the study. We asked the participants for consent and assured them that their responses would not be accessible to anyone other than the experimenters. We then asked them to read each scenario to themselves and to self-administer the 3 sets of questions. The students responded to scenarios describing high achievers of their own gender. The order of scenario presentation was counterbalanced to control for order effects. After the sessions, the students were debriefed, thanked, and escorted back to class.

Results

We generated alpha coefficients for responses to each of the question sets separately for each of the four scenarios. Children's own attitudes toward the high achieving students yielded alpha coefficients of .67, .68, .79, and .70 for the

interpersonal competitive, individualistic, verve, and communalism scenarios, respectively, and their beliefs about their parents' attitudes yielded alpha coefficients of .71, .64, .65, and .71, respectively. The children's beliefs about their peers' attitudes toward the four high achievers yielded alpha coefficients of .78, .70, .63, and .67 for the interpersonal competitive, individualistic, verve, and communalism scenarios, respectively.

We computed three 2×4 univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to assess differences in attitudes toward high achievers. Scores for each of the child's own (C-Own) attitudes, beliefs about parent attitudes (C-Parent), and beliefs about peer attitudes (C-Peer) were dependent measures in turn. Independent variables were gender and scenario orientation. We used Scheffé tests to make comparisons among specific means. There were no main or interaction effects of gender on LCS ratings in any of the analyses.

Table 1 contains the means for C-Own scores. These means indicate an overall endorsement of all four learning scenarios but a greater preference for verve and communal high achievers over both mainstream-oriented scenarios. An ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of scenario orientation on C-Own ratings, $F(3, 234) = 20.77, p < .0001$. That is, children rated the high achievers differently, depending on which cultural orientation was represented in their description. Post hoc comparisons showed that the children rated both the verve and the communalism high achievers significantly higher than either the interpersonal competitive or individualism achievers. Thus, they gave higher endorsement to the Afro-cultural achievers than to the mainstream achievers.

The finding for the C-Parent and C-Peer scores revealed a similar pattern of significance. The results of our second ANOVA indicated a main effect of scenario orientation on C-Parent ratings, $F(3, 234) = 13.41, p < .001$. The means are presented in Table 1. The pattern of significant differences among C-Parent ratings is identical to that for C-Own ratings. Post hoc analyses indicated significant

TABLE 1. Means: Learning Context Scenario (LCS) Ratings, by Cultural Orientation ($N = 80$)

Variable	Interpersonal competitive	Individualism	Verve	Communalism
Children (C-Own)	9.37 _{ab}	9.45 _{cd}	10.57 _{ac}	10.92 _{bd}
Parents (C-Parent)	9.67 _{ab}	9.82 _{cd}	10.48 _{ac}	10.87 _{bd}
Peers (C-Peer)	9.35 _{ab}	9.48 _{cd}	10.07 _{ac}	10.28 _{bd}

Note. Means that have the same subscript within a given row are significantly different from one another. This scale has a mid-point of 9 for rejection or acceptance of high achievers.

differences between the interpersonal competitive and communalism scenarios and the interpersonal competitive and verve scenarios. Significant differences were also found for the individualism scenario and the two Afro-cultural scenarios. Participants rated the student depicted in the verve and communalism scenarios significantly higher than they rated the student in the individualistic scenario. C-Parent ratings on the interpersonal competitive and individualism scenarios and between the communalism and verve scenarios were not different from each other.

Results of the third ANOVA indicated a main effect of scenario orientation on C-Peer ratings, $F(3, 234) = 6.74, p < .001$. The means for the peers' attitude ratings are also given in Table 1. Post hoc analyses indicated significant differences among them. Consistent with the two prior analyses, significant differences were found among the interpersonal competitive and communalism scenarios and the interpersonal competitive and verve scenarios.

TABLE 2. Correlations: C-Own Ratings, by Cultural Orientation ($N = 80$)

Variable	Interpersonal competitive	Individualism	Verve	Communalism
Interpersonal competitive	1.00			
Individualism	.43**	1.00		
Verve	.05	.11	1.00	
Communalism	-.003	.17	.30**	1.00

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3. Correlations: C-Parent Ratings, by Cultural Orientation ($N = 80$)

Variable	Interpersonal competitive	Individualism	Verve	Communalism
Interpersonal competitive	1.00			
Individualism	.45**	1.00		
Verve	.21	.10	1.00	
Communalism	.27*	.21	.36**	1.00

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 4. Correlations: C-Peer Ratings, by Cultural Orientation ($N = 80$)

Variable	Interpersonal competitive	Individualism	Verve	Communalism
Interpersonal competitive	1.00			
Individualism	.57**	1.00		
Verve	.14	.32**	1.00	
Communalism	.03	.15	.21	1.00

** $p < .01$.

Likewise, participants rated the student depicted in the verve and communalism scenarios significantly higher than they rated the student in the individualism scenario.

We completed Pearson correlation coefficients to determine the relationships among the children's attitudes toward the four high achievers. The coefficients were calculated for the total group ($N = 80$). Table 2 contains the correlation coefficients for C-Own ratings. As the table indicates, children's ratings of interpersonal competitive high achievers were positively correlated with their ratings of individualism high achievers ($r = .43$). Likewise, the children's ratings of verve high achievers were positively correlated with their ratings of communalism high achievers ($r = .30$). These correlations, mirrored in the C-Parent (Table 3) and C-Peer (Table 4) correlation analyses, indicate a clustering of attitudes around the cultural categories defined for this research.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to replicate and extend Marryshow's (1992) research, which found Black children accepting of their high achieving peers except when those peers' achievements reflected attitudes and behaviors incongruent with their own cultural orientations. Those cultural orientations are believed to be passed to them by parents and significant others in Black communities who intentionally guide them toward the development of attitudes and behaviors consistent with those valued in their cultural communities (Boykin, 1986). In this study, we investigated the extent to which Black children's own attitudes toward mainstream cultural and African American cultural values in the classroom are in fact reflections of that socialization process. Toward that end, Black children responded to questions about their own attitudes as well as their beliefs about their parents' and peers' attitudes toward four fictional high achieving students.

Although the children's ratings indicated an overall endorsement of high achievers with all four cultural orientations, the data were consistent with Marryshow's (1992) findings in that the children's ratings for the African American cultural high achievers were significantly more favorable than their ratings for the mainstream cultural high achievers. This same pattern held true for the students' predictions about how their parents and peers would rate the four high achievers. The children predicted that their parents and peers would also hold more favorable attitudes toward achievers with an African American cultural orientation than toward the mainstream cultural high achievers.

The fact that the mainstream orientation within the educational context of the classroom was not rejected differs from Marryshow's (1992) observation of social attitudes toward high achievers. This may indicate students' awareness of the rules that govern achievement in mainstream-dominated classrooms. In classrooms where mainstream learning orientations are the only ones sanctioned, at least in academic situations, Black children may believe it necessary to endorse them.

Another possible explanation for the difference is particular to the children observed. Marryshow (1992) studied low-income African American children attending a predominantly African American school in a low-income neighborhood. Our present study was conducted among low-income Black children, but they were bussed to a predominantly White school in a relatively affluent neighborhood. Bussing may have affected their responses; for example, they may be particularly sensitized to the cultural demands of their mainstream classrooms. Taken together, these studies suggest that Black children may find it necessary to endorse mainstream achievers in academic settings but may yet reject them in social situations.

One should note that students who indicate that they might seek out mainstream cultural high achievers in academic situations may or may not adapt their own attitudes and behavior to mainstream cultural values when faced with that choice in school. The present data do not address such questions. However, consistent underachievement among African American children may imply that many choose not to adapt. Overall, the findings are far more similar than different. Students showed a clear preference for the high achievers with African American cultural values.

As expected, children's own ratings for the two African American cultural orientations were positively correlated. Ratings for the two mainstream cultural orientations were also correlated. This is consistent with Marryshow's (1992) data and reinforces the idea that students perceived the cultural domains defined for this research as distinct. This lends support for Boykin's assertion that cultural factors are meaningful to students and relevant in classrooms.

The present study is useful in advancing our understanding about the subtleties related to Black children's perceptions of academic achievement. The findings contradict the notion that African American children wholly reject academic achievement, as suggested by Ogbu (1986) and others. These data instead

indicate that the cultural orientations that underlie high achievement moderate Black children's attitudes toward individual high achievers. The importance of these findings should not be understated, for they relate directly to the question of whether solving Black children's educational difficulties should best involve changing something about the children (their attitude toward achievement) or something about schools (the modes of achievement available there). This work contributes to the mounting evidence that the prevailing widespread preoccupation with changing Black children is misguided.

The findings reported here are amplified when considered alongside work that has demonstrated the learning benefits that children derive from being given the opportunity to work in culturally congruent contexts (Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boykin & Cunningham, 2001; Dill & Boykin, 2000; Hurley, Boykin, & Allen, in press). The present research adds to that work because it suggests that the performance benefits reported in those works are part of, and the product of, an intact culturally based value system that has meaning and integrity. Thus, children, aware of their preferences, can reflect on how those can be related to learning, achievement, and social development. Furthermore, to the extent that they are aware of the incompatibility between what they value and the values espoused by their teachers, these students' achievement or lack of achievement is likely a choice they make between maintaining the integrity of their cultural identity and succeeding in school.

More research is needed to fully understand the dynamic phenomena of culture as it is relevant to education. The present study is limited by its reliance on students' predictions of their parents' and peers' attitudes. On the one hand, we have argued that family and community members play a significant role in the transmission of the values from which children's attitudes are derived. As such, it may matter more what students believe are their parents' and peers' attitudes. At the same time, it is difficult to know how well students are able to manage the task of differentiating their own attitudes from those of their parents and peers. Boykin and Miller (1997) did report that students predicted differences between their teachers' attitudes and those of their parents. Nonetheless, it would be useful to compare student ratings with ratings made by the parents and peers themselves. Such a comparison would ensure that the congruence of attitudes and predictions of others' attitudes is not to some degree owing to measurement ambiguity. Such a comparison would also strengthen the argument that the cultural orientations under study are socially transmitted.

This work could also be enhanced by the inclusion of a comparison group of participants from mainstream culture. There is evidence that White students perform better in individualistic rather than communal (Hurley, 1999) and low (versus high) *verve* learning contexts (Bailey & Boykin, 2001). However, such a comparison would allow for the direct validation of a mainstream orientation as operationalized by testing whether White children are relatively more accepting of those modes of achievement.

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