

# The Construction of Black High-Achiever Identities in a Predominantly White High School

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*In this article, I examine how black students construct their racial and achievement self-concepts in a predominantly white high school to enact a black achiever identity. By listening to these students talk about the importance of race and achievement to their lives, I came to understand how racialized the task of achieving was for them even though they often deracialized the characteristics of an achiever. I suggest that these students do not maintain school success by simply having a strong racial self-concept or a strong achievement self-concept; rather, they discuss achieving in the context of being black or African American. For these students, being a black or African American achiever in a predominantly white high school means embodying racial group pride as well as having a critical understanding of how race and racism operate to potentially constrain one's success. It also means viewing achievement as a human, raceless trait that can be acquired by anyone. In their descriptions of themselves as black achievers, these students resist hegemonic notions that academic success is white property and cannot be attained by them. [self-concept, high achievers, black student achievement, achievement self-concept]*

For decades academic scholarship has focused on the underachievement of black students in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This discourse is important given the continuing academic disparities between many black and white youth; however, the conversation also perpetuates the dominant societal narrative that African Americans are inherently intellectually inferior to whites. In fact, scholars have suggested that researchers focus more attention on black student academic success as a way to counter negative societal messages about these students' intellectual ability (Fordham 2008; Perry 2003). The mainstream script on schooling in the United States often suggests that the cultural traits and behaviors necessary for academic success and success more broadly are white, middle-class behaviors. Thus, the task of achieving for nonwhite students becomes a racial (and social class) performance that is often equated with whiteness (Fordham 2008). For many students of color, these cultural traits and behaviors are in conflict with those typical to their racial or ethnic group.

In various school contexts these youth experience the irreconcilable conflict between embodying cultural behaviors akin to their racial or ethnic group and those deemed necessary for acquiring academic success. Behaving in opposition to the racial or ethnic group accepted cultural norms can be seen as rejecting group affiliation, and succeeding in school becomes adversarial to maintaining racial or ethnic group acceptance by one's peers. A large body of scholarship speaks to this dilemma and the negative effects it has on minority student achievement (e.g., Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Lee 1996; Lew 2006; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Ogbu 1991, 2003; Suárez-Orozco 1989); however, other scholarship highlights the strategies that black students employ to achieve in school when faced with this seemingly irreconcilable conflict. In

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fact many autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs have been written (e.g., Anson 1987; Cary 1991; Hunter-Gault 1993; Navarette 1993; Obama 2007; Rodriguez 1982) describing the experiences of students of color grappling with academic success as racial performance, the challenges of being and not being socially white, and respecting and retaining citizenship in one's racial group community while struggling for recognition in the dominant white society (Fordham 2008).

The growing body of literature on high-achieving students of color is expanding our understanding of these youth and the identities, ideologies, and behaviors they employ for school success in a variety of schooling contexts. Researchers have highlighted these students' expression of self in response to school social and structural arrangements and cultures that vary because of the effects of race, ethnicity, social class, and gender (e.g., Conchas 2006; Hemmings 1996; Lew 2006). Particularly, this newer body of work focuses on high achievers' ability to perform well in school and maintain their racial and ethnic identities. These students have developed ways to be "ethnic" and high-achievers simultaneously (P. Carter 2005; Flores-González 1999; Foley 1991). The development of this skill does not come without costs. In their early work, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) characterized one of the costs as "the burden of acting white." Although this hypothesis has been consistently misinterpreted by educational scholars (see Fordham 2008), its original meaning highlighted the overwhelming presence of whiteness in education and the overt nature of racism in the achievement process.

One way in which students of color reconcile "the irreconcilable conflict" is by using school success as a form of resistance. Scholars have defined this resistance in various ways in their work—"conformist resistance" (Fordham 2008; Yosso 2002), "positive resistance" (Valenzuela 1999), "prove them wrong" (Carter Andrews n.d.), "academic resilience" (Gayles 2005), and "transformational resistance" (Cammarota 2004). For example, Fordham argues that in its original construction "acting white" was a form of resistance in which black students performed whiteness as "an act of collective self-assertion, claiming as rights what has previously been reserved as privileges for Whites only" (2008:234). Fordham posited that succeeding academically by performing whiteness meant embracing cultural practices that were historically "treated as the prerogative of White Americans and declared off limits to enslaved Africans and their descendants." Other scholars defined resistance as succeeding in school to reject race and racism as structural barriers to students' upward mobility (Brayboy 2005; Carter 2008; Gayles 2005; O'Connor 1997; Sanders 1997; Yosso 2002). For some students of color, school success as a resistance strategy represents a commitment to maintaining a historically rooted ideology of racial uplift and thriving against all odds as a member of one's racial group. African American students who embody this characterization have been called race-conscious high achievers (Foster 2005).

Much of the research on student of color high academic performance has been conducted in public, urban school environments (Akom 2003; Cammarota 2004; P. Carter 2005; Conchas 2006; Flores-González 1999, 2002; Fordham 1996; Gayles 2005; Hemmings 1996; Lee 1996; Lew 2006; Mehan et al. 1994; O'Connor 1997; Sanders 1997); some studies focus on high-achieving youth of color in predominantly white, private or elite K-12, and postsecondary environments (Datnow and Cooper 1997; Foster 2003, 2005; Horvat and Antonio 1999; Tuit and Carter 2008; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 1991). Research in these varying school environments sheds light on how

high-achieving racial and ethnic minority youth construct and understand racial and achievement identities in relation to the sociocultural context in which they learn. This research illuminates the high-achiever profile for students of color as one that is not monolithic, because these identities develop differently in different school environments. Because we know this, examining the identities of high-achieving students of color in predominantly white public, suburban high schools is equally important. The literature in this area is scant (e.g., D. Carter 2005; Wells and Crain 1999). It is important to understand these students' experiences and identity constructions because nearly 30 percent of black students still attend predominantly white suburban public schools resulting from desegregation efforts in many large U.S. cities (Orfield 2001).

In this article, I examine how black students construct their racial and achievement self-concepts in a predominantly white high school to enact a black achiever identity. By listening to these students talk about the importance of race and achievement to their lives, I came to understand how racialized the task of achieving was for them even though they often deracialized the characteristics of an achiever. I suggest that these students do not maintain school success by simply having a strong racial self-concept or a strong achievement self-concept; rather, they discuss achieving in the context of being black or African American. For these students, being a black or African American achiever in a predominantly white high school means embodying racial group pride as well as having a critical understanding of how race and racism operate to potentially constrain one's success. It also means viewing achievement as a human, raceless trait that can be acquired by anyone. In their descriptions of themselves as black achievers, these students resist hegemonic notions that academic success is white property and cannot be attained by them.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### *Critical Race Theory and the African American Identity Schema*

Like other scholars, my writing about the school experiences of high-achieving black students is a conscious attempt to counter the hegemonic representations of black youth in society and mainstream academic discourse. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an important theoretical framework for this work, because one of its central tenets is that racism is endemic to society (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Scholars who have applied this argument to education posit that many educational inequities are rooted in racism. In my own work, an analysis of the role of race and racism in black students' identity construction and academic achievement is grounded in this tenet of CRT. Developed by legal scholars, another major tenet of CRT is the construct of whiteness as property (Harris 1993). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied this construct to education positing that the property function of whiteness in education has manifested itself in a variety of ways to the disenfranchisement of people of color (e.g., ability tracking in schools, funding inequities, etc.). Signithia Fordham's argument that obtaining academic success requires unconventional racial performance (i.e., acting white) for black students, underscores the notion that success is culturally constructed as the property (or right) of whites; hence, nonwhites are inherently excluded from having rights to success. In this article, black achievers rewrite constructions of success in their depictions of themselves; this rewriting is a

counternarrative (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Perry 2003) to the dominant narrative that high academic achievement is performing whiteness and success is white property. Another central tenet of CRT includes recognizing the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge (Matsuda et al. 1993). I suggest that these black students' depictions of their racial and achievement self-conceptions are sources of knowledge about the challenging task of achieving in predominantly white schools.

The African American Identity Schema developed by Oyserman and colleagues (1995) is also a useful framework for examining my study participants' constructions of black high-achiever identities. Oyserman and colleagues (1995) posit that connectedness to one's racial group, awareness of racism, and seeing oneself as succeeding as a racial group member (i.e., achievement as an African American) provides what is necessary to acquire school success. By conceptualizing achievement in this manner, youth will not experience contradiction and tension between achievement and identifying as black or African American. In this study, participants address all three aspects of the schema when describing their racial and achiever selves. For these students, success is not synonymous with whiteness, and achieving success is part of their identities as African Americans.

#### *Racial Self-Concept, Achievement Self-Concept, and School Behavior*

Connections between racial self-concept and school behavior have been examined by developmental psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. However, the body of scholarship that examines the qualitative significance and meaning of race to individuals is less comprehensive. Robert Sellers and his colleagues (1998a, 1998b) have qualitatively explored how individuals' beliefs regarding the meaning and significance of race inform the way in which they appraise and behave in specific situations. In the school context, higher racial salience might moderate the extent to which the individual's racial beliefs influence their interpretation of a specific event in school and his or her subsequent behavior in response to the event. Applying this rationale to my own work suggests that participants' attitudes about being black or African American and the significance that they attribute to identifying as such inform their maintenance of a positive racial identity and the behaviors they employ to maintain school success.<sup>2</sup> In this predominantly white high school in which participants perceive race serves to potentially limit their academic mobility, their positive attitudes about their racial group and expressed commitment to racial uplift motivate them to resist perceived racism and use academic achievement as an act of resistance.

Sellers and colleagues (1998b) developed the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) to determine the significance of race in the self-concepts of African Americans. The MMRI defines racial identity in African Americans as "the significance and qualitative meaning that individuals attribute to their membership within the Black racial group within their self-concepts" (Sellers et al. 1998b:23). This definition can be broken down into two questions: (1) How important is race in the individual's perception of self? (2) What does it mean to be a member of this racial group? An analysis of my data revealed students' beliefs about the significance and meaning of race in their lives was informed by their school experiences. Two of the MMRI dimensions—race centrality and racial regard—have shown relationships with

African American adolescents' social and educational outcomes (Chavous et al. 2003). These two dimensions were central to examining how participants defined themselves racially and the qualitative meaning they ascribed to membership in their racial group.

Racial centrality refers to the degree to which an individual values race as a core part of his or her self-concept (Chavous et al. 2003; Sellers et al. 1997).<sup>3</sup> Centrality is similar to Oyserman et al.'s notion of connectedness, in which black adolescents describe a sense of self as part of black familialism and kin networks. A sense of connectedness to the black community provides a sense of meaning and purpose and ties the self to strategies for school achievement. Higher racial centrality has been related to higher academic achievement (Ford and Harris 1997; Sellers et al. 1998a). Racial regard refers to "the extent to which individuals feel positively or negatively towards African Americans and their membership in that group" (Sellers et al. 1997:807). This dimension of the MMRI uncovers an individual's awareness of or beliefs about the existence of social and structural barriers to success (e.g., racism and racial discrimination) for one's group and informs how one situationally responds to these barriers in the school context. This component is also related to Oyserman et al.'s concept of connectedness in that individuals who feel positively about their membership in the racial group tend to have strong connections to kin networks in the group. Participants described valuing race as a core part of their self-concepts and expressed positive feelings toward African Americans and their membership in the racial group.

Academic self-concept is defined as an individual's attitudes and perceptions about his or her intellectual or academic abilities and skills (Cokley 2003; Lent et al. 1997). Studies indicate that academic self-concept is related to academic achievement for all students (Reynolds 1988; Witherspoon et al. 1997). Thus, when an individual sees himself as academically capable and when this idea is reinforced by supportive teachers and family members, the individual is more likely to want to do well in school (Cokley 2003). In this article, I use the term *achievement self-concept*, which is more inclusive of not just one's feeling and attitudes about their academic and intellectual abilities, but also about their ability to be successful more broadly. I adopt this term, because my participants did not define their ability to achieve and be successful in school based solely on grades or academic competence. In addition to the development of a strong racial self-concept, students in this study also embodied a strong achievement self-concept that helped them persist in school and develop adaptive strategies for navigating academic and nonacademic domains.<sup>4</sup> In my discussion of the data, I explore how study participants perceived of themselves as successful and how these perceptions were race neutral while the task of attaining success was race loaded.

## Methodology

The data presented here are part of a larger nine-month qualitative investigation of the behaviors of high-achieving black students in a predominantly white high school. I collected data from September 2003 to May 2004. I used the Three-Interview Series method (Seidman 1998) to conduct in-depth semistructured interviews with each participant. I conducted participant-observations in classrooms and observed student group meetings and school functions in which my participants were involved. I also

observed students in nonclassroom spaces in the school context to gain a better understanding of their daily school experiences. Additionally, I interviewed one teacher for each student. All interviews lasted from 60–90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

My interest in this research stems from my personal experiences as a high-achieving black woman who attended a predominantly white public high school, undergraduate institution, and two graduate institutions. I recognize that I brought specific theories, preconceptions, and values to this research based on my social location and schooling experiences. These preconceptions and values are specific to my attitudes and beliefs about the importance of a positive racial self-conception and not having to compromise that for academic success. I am aware of my assumptions regarding the strategies that African American students could use to be successful in school, and I made every effort to guard against these in my relationships with the participants and in my data analysis. I believe that my identity as a late-twenties, African American female with experience as a former high school math teacher and a schooling background that resembled aspects of the participants' backgrounds made it easier for me to develop trusting relationships with them. The students seemed very comfortable sharing their stories with me about their experiences at their high school during formal and informal conversations. Several participants stated that to them I represented an older sister with whom they could share some of the challenges of attending a predominantly white high school. In addition to conducting the formal research, I engaged in several phone conversations and informal school chats with participants about topics outside the scope of the study, for example what kinds of extracurricular activities I had been involved in while in college, how I decided on a college major, my experience being a member of a black sorority, and whether or not to attend a historically black college or university after high school. My "insider status" was an asset that I had to be constantly monitoring during the data collection and analysis process.<sup>5</sup>

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Categorizing (coding and thematic analysis) and contextualizing (narrative analysis and individual profiles) were used as analytic strategies to identify salient categories or themes (e.g., racial centrality, ethnic centrality, critical race consciousness, belief in self). I looked for emerging codes and themes first using an open coding process and then a more focused coding process (Emerson et al. 1995). I wrote analytic memos to help me synthesize initial thinking from participants' interviews. I also conducted multiple readings of my field notes and developed a code list from them. I utilized Atlas.ti (ver. 5) to assist me in grouping codes into larger themes and concepts. I created within-case matrices for each participant and developed narrative summaries from students' interviews. These were then used to build cross-case matrices in which I compared participants based on common themes across the data. These matrices helped me arrive at the concept of a black high-achiever identity based on these students' discussion of their conceptions of race and achievement.

To address issues of validity, I systematically emphasized evidence in my memos and narrative summaries by citing participants' words. I examined discrepant data against my working hypotheses to assess whether or not my developing theories should be modified and whether alternative understandings should be taken into consideration. I also conducted member checks by having participants review their transcripts. This helped ensure that I was accurately representing each participant.

## Independence High and the Study Participants

Independence High School is located in a predominantly white, upper-middle- and upper-class suburb outside a large east coast city. Of the 2,181 students attending in the 2003–04 academic year, approximately 81 percent were white, 6 percent African American, 4 percent Latino, and 9 percent other students. Of the 259 faculty members on staff at the time, less than 10 percent were teachers of color. Independence is well known for its academic program, and many students go on to highly reputable colleges and universities across the United States. As a matter of valuing diversity, the school has an Office of Human and Civil Rights (headed by an African American English teacher) that addresses issues of concern to students regarding equity and equality.

African American students attended the school as either district residents or participants of the voluntary busing program that allowed students from the inner city to attend predominantly white suburban schools neighboring the city. Of the nine students in my study, four were participants in the busing program. Five girls and four boys—ranging in age from 15–18—from low-income to medium-income families were selected to participate in this study (see Table 1). Students were selected for the study based on criteria including self-identification as black or African American and identification as a high achiever. They were considered high achievers based on a combination of grade point average, honor roll status, teacher recommendation, and participation in extracurricular activities.

Study participants spoke highly of Independence as a school with a good reputation. “Colleges look at this as a tough school, and a lot of the students that have graduated said that Independence is a lot more difficult than college” (Mike). Samantha was proud to be a student at Independence, because “this school is somewhat prestigious, and if I went up to someone and they asked me what school I went to and I said Independence High, they’d be like, ‘wow!’ You know, like, it’s, like students here are expected to be smart.” Rachel was particularly proud to be a student at Independence stating, “I think there’s a lot of opportunities and it’s extremely educational. Like, I’ve never been to a school that has so much focus on education like this—as well as sports, too.” Despite all of the positive feelings about Independence, participants also revealed the challenges attending this school. When describing her experience attending Independence, Kelis stated,

I’m tired of going to school in [the suburban town]. I’ve been in [the busing program] since kindergarten. I’m ready to leave. I’m physically, mentally, emotionally (giggled) tired. I can’t go to a majority White school no more. I can’t. I don’t think I’ll survive.

Aaron focused on how being the only black student in some of his classes affected him.

Sometimes I’ll just be sitting in class, and just, all of a sudden I notice all of the other students, they’re mostly White . . . I look around me and just see that mostly all the students are mainly White and I just feel that nervousness, kinda isolation.

These benefits and challenges to Independence as a predominantly white learning environment for these students informed how they constructed their racial and achievement identities.

Table 1.  
Demographic Data on Study Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Grade Level	Self-Reported Racial Identification	Household	GPA (on a 4.0 scale) <sup>a</sup>
Rodney	Male	17	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Mother, sister, niece	3.20
Derek	Male	18	12 <sup>th</sup>	African American and Puerto Rican	Grandmother, uncle, aunt	3.01
Rachel	Female	17	12 <sup>th</sup>	Mainly African American and also recognizes Cape Verdean and Haitian roots	Foster parents	3.11
Leslie	Female	15	10 <sup>th</sup>	Biracial (Black/White)	Mother, stepfather, brother	3.00
Kelis	Female	17	12 <sup>th</sup>	Black or West Indian	Mother and two sisters	3.00
Kimmy	Female	15	10 <sup>th</sup>	Black/African American and also recognizes West Indian roots	Mother, brother, mother's boyfriend	3.11
Mark	Male	17	12 <sup>th</sup>	Black/African American	Both parents and sister	2.89
Samantha	Female	16	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American and also recognizes Jamaican roots	Mother, stepfather, two sisters, two brothers	3.09
Aaron	Male	17	12 <sup>th</sup>	African American and also recognizes Haitian roots	Both biological parents and sister	3.22

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms. Ages and GPAs are accurate as of the beginning of the study.

<sup>a</sup>There were only 15 black students in the school who had a 3.2 or higher cumulative GPA. All of those students did not volunteer to participate in the study. To have an adequate sample, I extended participation to include black students with GPAs of 2.8–3.19 who also met my additional criteria for high achieving.



## Defining Racial Self-Conceptions

Students identified race as significant to how they defined themselves, and they had positive attitudes about identifying as black or African American. When asked to discuss the significance of race in their lives, several students described a critical race consciousness when describing race group pride and their perceptions of societal beliefs about blacks. These students demonstrated a critical understanding of the asymmetrical power relationships that exist between blacks and whites in the United States.

Derek indicated pride in his racial group when describing its significance and meaning. When identifying himself as black or African American, he stated,

It carries in itself a sense of pride that comes, um, as a result of the history. It [being black] also carries with it the burden of, that one chooses, which is trying to educate other people about, um, that struggle, and the burden it brings and puts on yourself. [DCA: And when you say burden what do you mean? What is the burden of being black to you?] Dealing with White privilege—not having that. Um, making people understand what, not only [that] White privilege is in a sense wrong, but that it is there. A lot of times it's not recognized by my generation as being there as a lot of things were recognized and talked about by older generations.

Derek acknowledges that the group legacy of resilience that brings him so much pride is the same legacy that underscores the unearned privileges that whites have utilized to oppress African Americans. Derek spoke further of the impact of white privilege and power on his view of educational opportunity.

I think going to school out here, you see it's the White kids who can get bad grades and not do well on SATs and go to Penn State and go to the University of Virginia and go to UMASS, but once they meet their quota for us—maybe one or two you gotta accept—and that's it. So that's part of the power.

Even though Derek's perception that colleges use quotas to racially diversify their student body was inaccurate, he alluded to a critical awareness that access to opportunities are affected by the racial hierarchy in this society, and slacking off academically has harsher consequences for his future educational pursuits, simply because he is black. This critical awareness of the role race played in potentially determining his future outcomes informed the way he decided to behaviorally respond in school so as to maintain success. Although Derek's racialized status as a black person in the United States is not always seen positively, he takes pride in his racial group affiliation based on the group's history of overcoming racial oppression. Through his comments related to white privilege and how it positions him as a black person as less powerful in this society, Derek expressed some understanding of the asymmetrical power relationships between people of color and whites in the United States. He recognized that as a member of a subdominant racial group in this society, he would experience discrimination but that would not deter him from achieving his goals.

Rodney shared similar positive feelings about racial pride when explaining why it was important for him to identify as African American.

Cause it, uhm, it shows something, like, I like being what I am. I think that, uh, like, my race is very strong, and I like associating myself with that. I mean, like, I'll announce it, you know? And I'll put it out there so, you know, they [white people] can, like, think what they want.

Rodney has positive feelings about his membership in the black race, as evidenced in his comment that he likes associating himself with the racial group. He alluded to the importance of identifying with his racial group, because the group is “strong,” given its history with oppression in this country (e.g., through slavery and other systemic processes). Rodney’s comments allude to his high regard for his racial group affiliation, as evidenced in his confidence to “announce it” wherever he goes.

Rachel also expressed the significance of race to her self-definition when discussing positive beliefs about her racial group and demonstrating a critical race consciousness about racial discrimination in the larger society.

DCA: So is race important to you? Is it an important part of your life?

Rachel: Yeah, it’s important . . . because it’s good to know where you come from and especially when—cuz society treats Black people different—or minorities in general, different. So it’s important to know where you come from. It’s important to know those things, because it affects your everyday life depending on your skin color. It really does. It’s important to me to identify with my race and to have that knowledge.

DCA: And how do you think being Black affects your everyday life?

R: Um . . . Just people look at you differently. I dunno. They just expect certain things from you. Like when I’m in stores and stuff like that, it’s the biggest thing. People are expecting me to steal. Or like are looking at me to see if I’m gonna steal. That’s one of the main things. It affects you.

Rachel perceives that she has a strong racial identity and talked specifically about her father’s role in nurturing her racial identity and teaching her about what it means to be black in the United States.

Cuz when I was little he used to, like, tell me all the time that I’m Black and I’m different from people and for me, I dunno, just I have to work hard because you know White people don’t think highly of Black people, you know? Stuff like that. . . . It’s kinda good cuz in a way I’m really, like, aware of the fact that I’m Black. . . . My dad has taught me a lot about my background. So I still know about my history and what it is—what it actually means to be Black. And I’m secure in my sense of self, I guess. I’m secure in my race and how smart I am. So if it happens that I’m stuck in an all-White school and all my friends are White, I’m still secure enough in my sense of self and in my background that I can still have all my friends and not lose myself.

Rachel articulated her beliefs about how society views members of her racial group. She characterized the “different” treatment of black people in society as being based on people’s assumptions and stereotypes (e.g., expectations to steal) about members of the racial group. However, her awareness of her racial group’s history and knowledge of racial prejudice and discrimination informed her impetus to prove wrong those assumptions and stereotypes and persist in school. She also internalized her father’s conveyance of the task of achievement as a racialized task. Her father typifies what Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) call a race-conscious parent. This type of parent strives to raise children who have a self-concept that not only gives high salience to race and black culture but also is aware of racial barriers to his or her success and develops strategies for resisting racism. Rachel’s father, in essence, is passing on a counternarrative about black achievement to Rachel. She articulated the racial realities that her father has instilled in her, partly from the standpoint that she will receive differentiated treatment in life (and possibly in her school) based on her skin color. Rachel sees achievement in the context of being black as evidenced in her statement,

"I'm secure in my race and how smart I am." She does not view achievement as characteristic of any particular racial group; however, the task of achieving is racialized for her given her father's influence and her school experiences.

Some students (e.g., Kelis, Aaron) described racial identity in racial terms, in ethnic terms, or using both sets of terms in the same sentence. This made it hard to understand whether students were equating ethnicity with racial groups and vice versa. Nonetheless, students' feelings toward their racial or ethnic group were positive, and they valued membership in these groups.<sup>6</sup> Understanding that they are racialized beings in the U.S. society and positively assessing what membership in a racial group means to them (even when they wanted to assert their ethnic identification) was one step toward constructing a racial or ethnic identity that facilitated school success. These students' racial self-concepts were informed by their critical awareness of racism in the larger society, as evidenced in their critical understanding of race and power as significant to their current and future social and economic outcomes. Additionally, they developed a perspective of self as succeeding as a member of their racial group.

### **Defining Achievement as Raceless and Race Loaded**

Participants' comments about achievement were racialized in some instances and deracialized in others. They struggled to describe achievement in racial and nonracial terms (see Pollock 2004 discussion of race wrestling). Although participants claimed to view being an achiever as a raceless construct, they racialized the task of achieving. These contradictions in their constructions of achievement served to academically motivate them and preserve their racial identities. Students were asked to define what it meant to be smart, successful, and a good student (as some indicators of an achiever identity) and whether any of these terms were part of their overall self-concept. When describing themselves as smart, students assessed themselves against how they defined the term—which didn't include racial references. For example, Kimmy described the notion of working hard as reflecting smartness.

Well anybody can be smart if they work hard. Grades don't really matter. You can be smart and not get good grades cuz you don't wanna work hard. I know a lotta people that are really smart. They're just lazy. They don't wanna try. They don't wanna, you know, do anything. To me, just cuz you get a "D" doesn't mean you're not as smart as the person who gets an "A." It's just how hard you wanna work if you wanna go anywhere in life. [DCA: Do you see yourself as a smart person?] Yes. I pretty much make good decisions in my life.

Kimmy described the importance of embodying a strong work ethic even when having the intellectual ability to perform well with minimal effort. For her, smartness was not defined solely based on intellect or maintaining high grades; an individual's willingness to demonstrate persistence is also necessary to increase current and future opportunities. In many ways, Kimmy viewed ability and effort as interrelated. She alluded to the idea that if an individual worked hard, the payoff could be high grades. Like Kimmy, Rodney also suggested good decision making as a smart character trait. When asked if he viewed himself as a smart person he stated, "I think I make, like, uh, I try to make smart decisions. I would judge it on that." Like Kimmy, Rodney believed that he made decisions that would positively affect him right now and in his future. Samantha also used the benchmark of good decision making for

defining smartness, suggesting that “to be smart is knowing how to make good decisions for your life, and . . . you know, good choices and things like that.”

These students valued making choices in their school careers (e.g., enrolling in upper-level courses, taking leadership roles in academic and social extracurriculars, participating in sports, etc.) that would afford them more opportunities later on in life. Rodney, Kimmy, and Samantha understood that careful decision making could be advantageous for them in the long run. This awareness of how one’s present performance could affect future outcomes is a characteristic that has been identified in other empirical research as associated with high-achieving black students (Hemmings 1996; Hwang et al. 2002). These students’ conceptions of smartness and view of themselves as smart people challenge traditional notions that define smartness as a genetic racial trait and solely based on academic and intellectual ability (Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Jensen 1969). Students’ definitions of smartness were not race specific and incorporated skills that can be learned and are not fixed. Rodney, Kimmy, and Samantha assessed their smartness on their ability to make sound decisions for their current and future life opportunities. Despite the varying conceptions of smartness, these students incorporated the concept into their self-definition and saw it as a positive trait that facilitated their school success.

Students’ definition for school success included getting good grades, feeling good about oneself, and setting goals. Although not popular in defining smartness and qualities of a good student, Kimmy, Rodney, Rachel, Kelis, and Mike stated maintaining good grades deemed them successful in school. Other students mentioned being goal oriented as an indicator of their school success. For example, Rodney talked about his determination to succeed and his positive future outlook.

I’m pretty determined. I have a lot of certain goals, and, like, these goals need to be met. And there’s, like, times when these goals need to be met. I’m kinda, like, a perfectionist, you know? Like I need stuff to happen just the way it needs to happen, and I really want to succeed in life.

Samantha echoed some of Rodney’s sentiments, stating “I set certain standards for myself and just meeting them—that makes me happy and I feel like I did something.” Both Rodney and Samantha described the need for achievement—the desire to do things well and to compete against a standard of excellence. This trait is characteristic of high-achieving students but often has not been associated with black students (Graham 1994). Thus, again these students defied the myth that black students lack personality traits pertinent to achievement behaviors and strivings. By setting goals for themselves, these students demonstrated positive future expectancy and expressed the self-accountability for their school and future success that is traditionally seen as characteristic of white, middle-class, high-achieving students (Hemmings 1996).

Lastly, students expressed a positive self-regard through their remarks indicating that they viewed themselves as successful students. Rodney stated, “I keep up pretty good grades . . . I have, like, friends, and I’m okay with who I am. . . . I’m not trying to change who I am. I’m not someone who’s uncomfortable with themselves. . . . I’m real cool with who I am right now.” Mike defined his success as spending “time away from schoolwork, and when I need to get some work done I do it. . . . I think my grades are good.” Kelis stated, “I dunno if I’ve been successful to other people, but yeah, for myself. I think I’m a good student. I think I get good grades.” Both boys

measured their success against their ability to maintain a healthy balance between academic and social demands. All three students expressed positive self-regard and self-satisfaction from maintaining good grades. These students' remarks alluded to high self-esteem and self-worth that facilitated the positive development of their achievement self-concept. By seeing themselves as smart, good, successful students, these participants demonstrated their positive identification with schooling and expressed a strong belief in their academic abilities, a positive self-concept, and high expectations for their future. They are self-aware and self-confident; their achievement self-conceptions debunk existing assumptions about black students' negative views of themselves as academic achievers.

Similar to constructions of smartness, students identified working hard and demonstrating effort as primary traits of themselves as good students. Kimmy stated "I work hard in school, try to get good grades." Aaron described himself as a good student and expressed a similar belief about the importance of effort.

A good student is a student that puts forth 100% effort at all times . . . does as much as they can to improve themselves in any particular subject, um . . . yeah. Just gives 100% effort and don't slack off. Um, do what you have to do I guess.

Working hard and demonstrating high effort appeared to be a recurring character trait in students' descriptions of their achievement self-concept. Kimmy and Aaron valued effort as part of their self-conceptions as good students. Contrary to the assumption that black students lack personality traits associated with academic motivation and academic-oriented behaviors, these students viewed effort as central to success, a personality trait that is traditionally characteristic of academically motivated students (Hemmings 1996). The belief that they are smart and good students underscored a strong sense of an achievement self-concept.

By seeing themselves as good students, these participants expressed the high value they placed on effort and persistence as part of their self-definition as achievers. Students believed that demonstrating maximum effort would help them achieve the goals they had been thinking about and planning for related to their future. In the aforementioned examples, participants deracialized their achievement self-conceptions in their descriptions of smartness and being good and successful students. They acknowledged their belief in these constructs as human traits that can be acquired by anyone.

### *The Task of Achieving as Race Loaded*

Although constructions of achievement were raceless, the task of achieving was race loaded for many of these students. For example, in classes where Derek perceived that he was positioned by his white peers to be the "race representative" on topics related to African Americans, he assumed the role and used it to empower and motivate himself although it was not a welcome responsibility.

In classes where I'm the representative of the race, it's a good pressure—on myself to do well. . . . Some people say that's too much pressure . . . "I always gotta be the spokesperson for the race." I'm just saying . . . it's just the pressure to succeed so people don't have preconceived notions.

Derek acknowledged that succeeding in some classroom situations means taking on the role of race expert. For him this is a welcome challenge to resist negative beliefs about his ability to be an achiever. Derek's classroom experiences facilitated a deeper development of his racial pride and critical race consciousness. He provided one final example of his critical awareness of social injustices in society that proved the task of achieving as race loaded. When asked if he felt like his culture was acknowledged in the school, he spoke about the poor representation or complete absence of the black experience in his textbooks. "It's not something that I'm gonna get upset about, because . . . um, it's not something I can change. I can't change the textbooks I use, but I can write my own someday." This statement evidenced the kind of political action Derek mentioned when talking about the burden to educate others about white privilege. As an act of social justice, Derek was prepared to take a stand against his racial group's (non)representation in school textbooks by being an active voice in creating different textbooks later on in his life. It is this kind of racial injustice and critical race consciousness that actually motivates Derek to enact change that will create better opportunities for black people in the future and enact behaviors that aid him in persisting in school and maintaining good grades so that he can compete with peers that he perceives already have an edge over him. Derek's attitude also reflected wanting to make a difference that will benefit a collective—the black community. In this way, he acknowledged his willingness to be associated with his racial group and his ability to be successful despite racism in his school curriculum.

Like Derek, Rodney described his critical awareness of racial differences in educational equity and access and how this racialized the task of achieving for him.

Rodney: There was this White kid who said he didn't believe in civil action. Like if a White kid and a Black kid get the same score on a test, and they're trying to get into college, it usually goes to the Black kid, right? That's civil rights. Civil action is like the action of civil rights. He said he didn't believe that. He said he shouldn't have to pay for what happened if he wasn't directly connected to that problem.

DCA: So you feel like this kid was just like, "Hey, that's not my problem."

R: [mimicking the white student] "I'm happy. Why should I have to ever worry about not getting into a college because of some other Black kid who probably had to struggle twice as hard as I had to?" I know all the White kids here have tutors. If I get the same grades as a White kid who had, like, two tutors—of course I should get more respect! I did that by myself, you know? I got parents who didn't even finish high school and they're trying to help me with my math homework. I do it myself. I stay after till five or six o'clock and get help from teachers.

Rodney perceives that he has to work "twice as hard" as his white counterparts for the same educational benefits (i.e., admission to college), simply because of the color of his skin. Like Derek, Rodney perceived racism to be a structural barrier to his educational mobility. In this instance, the task of achieving is race loaded for Rodney. Although many of the participants commented on achievement in raceless terms in some instances, they racialized achievement in other instances. This is a primary contradiction throughout the data indicating these students' complicated constructions of race as significant at certain times and insignificant at others. Rodney (and others) racialized the task of achieving (i.e., having to work twice as hard because of race) and deracialized constructions of achievement (i.e., anyone can be smart, a good student, and successful), both as a means of self-preservation and motivation. Thus, achievement was racial and nonracial for participants, at different times.

Derek and Rodney demonstrated a critical consciousness about race that highlights an awareness of burden and struggle to obtain the same opportunities as their white peers. Their remarks are similar to high-achieving black students in O'Connor's (1997) study of high-achieving black students in an urban high school and Foster's (2003, 2005) work with race-conscious high achievers in a predominately white university who also believed that they could succeed in school because so many African Americans before them had struggled to overcome racial inequities in the system. This concept of struggle appears to motivate students to perform at high levels in school to continue a legacy of achievement that has long existed within their race (Perry 2003). In the race to success, they realize that their racial status positions them as subdominant and likely losers at the starting line. However, the high value placed on being black as part of their self-definition, being proud to be black, and having a critical race consciousness helps these boys remain resilient to racism in school. For Derek and Rodney, the black struggle for equality and access in this country is something to be revered, and, hence, makes them feel good about being members of their racial group. For them, the struggle is itself a marker of success.

Like Derek and Rodney, Kimmy's expression of her racial group pride was also imbedded in achievement as race loaded.

Well, it's known for Black people to struggle and stuff, like, school and everything. And to me, I just feel as though I'm gonna be one of those Black people that's gonna make it and work hard and prove a lotta people wrong that Black people can achieve and do good in school.

Kimmy described racial group struggle and her motivation to counter group stereotypes. Her remarks mirror Oyserman et al.'s third component of the African American identity schema. She viewed achievement as a part of their black identities. She is determined to be successful (i.e., make it by working hard) to counter societal stereotypes that achievement is not a character trait that members of her racial group can possess. In this instance, Kimmy described achievement as a race-loaded concept. Rodney described his motivation to succeed as a burden that represents a collective success.

I gotta, like, get through this school. You know what I'm saying? Maybe that's not, like, as definite for some other kids, you know? I gotta get outta here. I gotta make it and I gotta succeed. I feel that's a burden. . . . It's just like, you know, maybe some people don't feel that all Black people really gotta, like, I'm not sayin' that I'm trying to move all Black people out of the ghettos, but, definitely I wanna make a difference. I don't wanna be an average guy who lives his whole life doing nothing, you know? I wanna succeed.

In this remark, achievement is racialized for Rodney based on other people's expectation for him. He internalizes these expectations as goals to meet. He desires to use his success to empower other members of his race who might be less fortunate than him.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

These students did not experience a tension between being black and being an achiever in their school context. The construction of strong racial self-conceptions

helped them acquire and enact achievement-oriented behaviors in school, because they understood that achievement did not have to be equated with whiteness, nor was it the sole property of whites. It was a human character trait that they could embody as blacks despite race and racism as potential barriers to their school success. Although these students viewed achievement as a human trait, the task of achieving was racialized for them. Thus, they constructed achievement in racial and nonracial terms. The interrelatedness of race and achievement as parts of these students' identities highlights the contradictions in their discussions of achievement in racial and nonracial terms. Achievement is racialized when students discussed achieving in the context of being black and deracialized when students described constructs such as smartness, being a good student, and being a successful student. There were motivating factors that facilitated these students' racialization and deracialization of achievement and their development of positive racial self-conceptions; however, the constraints of this article do not allow me to discuss these.<sup>7</sup>

The data presented here support and expand what we have learned in existing studies of high-achieving black students and other students of color. Student identities are constructed in relation to the sociocultural context in which students learn, which means there is no monolithic profile for the black high achiever. In this study, a predominantly white high school setting highlights race as salient in positive and negative ways for high-achieving black students. Perceptions of how race is operationalized in the learning context and in society inform students' construction of racial and achievement self-conceptions. These students maintain school success by having positive racial and achievement self-conceptions. They view being an achiever as raceless and race loaded. It is a part of their black identity. These students express a critical awareness of racial hierarchy and how race can serve as a barrier to their success. Based on Oyserman's framework for academic success for black students, these students possess race group pride, have a critical awareness of racism, and view themselves as succeeding members of their racial group. Race is significant to their achievement in that they are motivated to succeed as a matter of racial uplift and commitment to their race group. They also understand that access to opportunities is inherently unequal based on racial power dynamics in the United States. They are race-conscious achievers (Foster 2005).

Where this study expands our knowledge of high-achieving black students is in examining their experiences in a predominantly white public high school and exploring the qualitative meanings of race and achievement to their lives. This exploration helps us see that talking about race and achievement is complicated for adolescents. In one instance they assert that achievement is a human characteristic; however, based on their critical awareness of racism and their racialized experiences in school and life, they describe the task of achieving as racialized. This nuance should be further explored in future studies of high-achieving black students in a variety of school settings. Additionally, for some study participants from Caribbean or West Indian descent, the significance of ethnicity to their self-definition became important for understanding their racialized identity in a predominantly white high school. The complex nature in which students conflated these two constructs indicates that the process of racialization in the United States has implications for racial and ethnic identity formation for various members of the black diaspora (Pierre 2004). Because only two of my nine participants talked about ethnic identification in some detail, there is not enough data in this study to support claims of whether black students



from an African American background and those from a Caribbean or West Indian background might view race and achievement differently. What can be stated is that racial and ethnic self-conceptions played positive roles in students' maintenance of black high-achiever identities. This concept is understudied in the literature on high-achieving black students and would move the field in a direction to better understand the racialized experiences of black immigrant youth and how scholars in the field theorize and discuss ethnicity in relation to race.

Lastly, this study sheds light on some of the factors that inform the positive development of racial and achievement self-conceptions. These students' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors were not shaped in a vacuum. Their interactions with the school context (socially and structurally), family and community members, and the larger society informed the ways in which they thought about race, achievement, and their ability to become upwardly mobile. Implications of this work help us understand ways to construct school achievement as nonwhite property—hence, students of color do not end up equating doing well in school with “acting white.” Also, data from this study indirectly shed light on ways to help black students maintain school success without rejecting their racial or ethnic identities. Positive peer groups, structural mechanisms in school, supportive adults, and supportive family members are all critical to positive identity construction. Because of the society that we live in, the task of achieving might ultimately always be a race-loaded concept for many black youth, but getting students to understand achievement as a raceless concept has the potential to construct doing well in school as “cool” by many who currently view it as counter to their self-definition.

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## Notes

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1. In this article, I use the phrases “racial or ethnic minorities,” “youth of color,” and “racial and ethnic minorities” to refer to students of non-European or Caucasian descent. I also use “African American” and “black” interchangeably to refer to individuals of African descent through U.S. slavery and individuals of Caribbean descent.

2. In this article, I use “self-concept” and “self-definition” to refer to the beliefs or perceptions that one has of oneself. I see “identity” as being shaped by one’s self-perceptions and in reaction to the sociocultural context in which one exists. For me, identity is performed.

3. Participants were asked several questions related to racial centrality and private regard. (1) Is it important for you to identify or see yourself as \_\_\_\_\_? Why? Why not? (2) Is it important to you that others see you as \_\_\_\_\_? Why? Why not? (3) When you think of yourself as \_\_\_\_\_, what does that mean to you? (4) Do you feel like you have a strong racial identity? Why? Why not?

4. See my earlier work (D. Carter 2005) for a detailed description of the actual behaviors that students employed to maintain positive racial identities and academic success.

5. Although I believe my identity as a high-achieving black woman who had attended predominantly white schools was an asset, there were ways in which it also posed challenges to the data collection process. For a more detailed explanation of this see D. Carter 2005.

6. Although my data and existing literature indicates that ethnic identity (Jamaican, Haitian, etc.) may be significant to academic achievement, in this article I am only concentrating on the complexities of the racialization of identity. Ethnic centrality will be a future focus of my research.

7. For a detailed discussion of the motivating factors and support systems for these students, see D. Carter 2005.

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