Impact of learning orientation on African American children’s attitudes toward high-achieving peers

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This study examined Ogbu’s widely accepted thesis that African American students reject high academic achievement because they perceive its limited utility in a world where their upward mobility is constrained by racial discrimination. Boykin’s psychosocial integrity model contends that Black students value high achievement but that discrepancies between their formative cultural experiences and those imposed in school lead them to reject the modes of achievement available in classrooms. Ninety Black children completed a measure of attitudes toward students who achieve via mainstream or African American cultural values. Participants rejected the mainstream achievers and embraced the Afro-cultural achievers. Moreover, they expected their teachers to embrace the mainstream achievers and reject those who achieved through high-verve behavior. Results suggest that Boykin’s thesis is a needed refinement to Ogbu’s ideas. They indicate that Black children may reject not high achievement but some of the mainstream cultural values and behaviors on which success in mainstream classrooms is made contingent.

The important influence of students’ perceptions of schooling as a factor in their performance has been a consideration in psychological and educational scholarship for some time. The relationship of these factors to academic performance has been examined as an explanation for the disproportionately frequent school failure of African American students (Boykin, 1986; Fordham, 1988; Ogbu, 1986). Of particular note is the
body of research offered by John Ogbu (1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) and Signithia Fordham (1988, 1999). These authors have argued that school failure among African American students is the result of their understandably negative attitudes toward U.S. educational institutions and accompanying rejection of high achievement. This position is rooted in the idea that Black people are systematically denied full access to the mechanisms of socioeconomic mobility in the United States and as a result come to reject those publicly espoused routes to prosperity as irrelevant to their lives. There is some evidence to support this contention (Fordham, 1988; Ogbu & Simons, 1994). Fordham reported that Black students who expressed positive attitudes toward high achievement were criticized by their peers for “acting White” or “selling out” (1988, 1999). Ogbu and Simons reported that low-achieving African American students expressed negative attitudes toward their high-achieving peers. These works can be criticized for confounding attitudes toward high academic achievement with feelings about the system of values cultivated in the mainstream schooling process.

Boykin (1986, 1995) argues that the behaviors observed in the Ogbu and Fordham work may reflect not a rejection of high achievement per se but rather a rejection of the specific modes of academic success available in mainstream educational institutions. He notes that pedagogy in the United States is emphatically linked to mainstream values and is designed to reward behaviors that are consistent with them. Therefore, academic success is made contingent on assuming these mainstream values and behaviors. Boykin poses that for most European American children the culturally informed behavioral and cognitive styles of home and school are congruous, whereas for African American children the cultural modes of the school often are distinctly different from those they learn at home and in their communities (Boykin & Allen, 2003). Although some of these values and modes of behavior may not conform with the mainstream norms promoted in school, they are coherent, complex, and meaningful (see Boykin & Allen, 2003, for a discussion and review). Therefore, Boykin reasons that the negative attitudes toward high achievement observed among African American students may be the result of Black students’ resistance to the mainstream cultural demands of schooling rather than a show of disdain for academic achievement in general. Indeed, there is significant self-report evidence that academic achievement and educational attainment are important to African American students (Hill, 1997; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). Other empirical work has substantiated this contention by documenting improved achievement and more positive attitudes among African American students allowed to study in contexts designed to be more congruent with their natal cultural experiences (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Allen & Butler, 1996; Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boykin,

The resulting incongruity means that many African American children experience little confirmation for the value or academic relevance of salient aspects of their cultural lives (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin, 1995; Boykin & Allen, 2003). Over time, this state of affairs should be expected to contribute to the development of negative perceptions of academic success as defined in the context of mainstream classrooms. According to this scholarship, then, the problem is not Black children’s attitudes toward achievement in general but the failure of schools to embrace and reward a wider range of values and behaviors in learning contexts. If incorporating opportunities for culturally relevant expression in academic tasks enhances academic performance, it stands to reason that their absence may contribute to the negative attitudes toward schooling observed by Ogbu and others. That Black students may have negative attitudes toward the culturally alienating behaviors and values on which success in mainstream classrooms is contingent is entirely different from the suggestion that Black children reject high achievement in itself.

These two explanatory models agree that understandably negative attitudes toward schooling held by many African American students contribute to their educational difficulties. Substantial research also has documented the mediating effects of attitudes on achievement. The essential difference between these models then, is the question, Toward which specific elements of schooling are students’ negative attitudes directed? The current study examines these attitudes in a design that distinguishes students’ general attitudes toward high academic achievement from their attitudes toward the cultural demands associated with such achievement in school.

A study by Boykin et al. (in press) sought to investigate whether students’ attitudes toward high achievement would vary depending on the behaviors associated with it. To do this they operationalized high achievement in both mainstream and African American cultural modalities. They predicted and found different patterns of preference for African American and European American participants.

The mainstream modes investigated in the study were individualism and competition. These were chosen for study because their presence in the mainstream culture of schooling is actively and purposefully promoted and well documented. Triandis (2001) described individualism as an important cultural value in the United States. A central principle of individualism is that perseverance and individual effort lead to success and personal actualization. Individualism, said to be linked historically to the Puritan tradition, is explicitly promoted and maintained in American institutions. Boykin and Toms (1985) noted that individualism in vari-
ous forms is part of the ecology of education in the United States. Like individualism, competition is woven into nearly all aspects of mainstream America’s social fabric. It prioritizes seeking superiority over others and mastery over one’s environment as markers of personal actualization. According to Spence (1985), education in the United States is structured to reward students’ competitive impulses and to encourage each child to strive to be the best in his or her class. Such mainstream values are implicit in the daily operation of public and private institutions.

As connoted by the term *mainstream*, these values are regarded as the standard by which “normal” is measured. That they are culturally determined typically is not acknowledged. Nonetheless, strictly speaking, individualism and competition are cultural phenomena, and they are omnipresent in the ecology of schooling.

The African American cultural themes operationalized in the study were communalism and verve and are two of a number of themes that have been identified in the culture of African American people. They are borrowed from the work of scholars who describe them as a surviving link to the western African cultures from which the ancestors of many African American people were enslaved (Boykin, 1986, 1995; Akbar, 1985). Empirical research has linked the same themes to attitudes and behaviors among African American people (see Boykin & Allen, 2003, for a review of studies). Communalism is the form of collectivism found in African American culture and is characterized by an emphasis on group identity and an understanding of the interdependence between people that leads to a facility with and preference for collective action (Boykin, 1986). A number of studies have documented a communal orientation among African Americans (Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997; Ellison & Boykin, 1994; Jagers & Mock, 1995). Other researchers have reported gains by African American students in various forms of academic performance when communal learning procedures were implemented in classrooms (Dill & Boykin, 2000; Hurley, 1999; Jagers, 1992; Jagers & Boykin, 1988). The second theme, verve, describes a person’s preferred level of intensity and variability of sensate stimulation. According to Boykin, home and community life in African American culture is higher in such stimulation than is mainstream American culture. Boykin and Allen (2000) posited that home and community life in African American culture is marked by the presence of high levels of ambient stimulation and a notable changing, dynamic energy. This takes the form of multiple activities taking place concurrently in the same space, including overlapping conversations and music playing during other daily activities. The authors suggested that this pattern of heightened stimulation is continuously present in the home environments of many African American families and that it is integral to the cultural substrate of the home. They argued that this patterning
of stimulation in the formative experiences of Black children cultivates in them a special receptiveness to heightened variability and intensity of stimulation and a preference for environments that are high in verve. Like communalism, the verve construct has gained support in the empirical works of Boykin and his associates. They reported that Black students exhibit greater variability than White children on behavioral measures of verve and a preference for high-verve environments (see Boykin & Allen, 2000, for a review of the verve work). Research has also reported greater achievement on cognitive (Walton, 1997) and academic (Bailey & Watson, 1994) tasks among African American students allowed to work in high-verve learning contexts than those who worked in low-verve contexts.

In their 2004 study, Boykin and his associates had Black and White working-class fifth-grade students read scenarios depicting hypothetical classmates whose achievement style was consistent with individualism, competition, communalism, or verve. African American students were more accepting of the high achievers who approached achievement in the high-communal and high-verve scenarios than those who achieved via more individualistic or competitive means. However, White students tended to embrace the individualistic and competitive learners over the high-communal or high-verve achievers. The study supported the idea that students’ attitudes toward high academic achievement are linked to the cultural values underlying the achievement behaviors.

The present study sought to replicate that of Boykin et al. (2004) and extend it in order to address several unanswered questions. Perhaps the most important of these relates to claims made by the authors about African American culture based on students’ ethnicity and their relative endorsements of the different types of learners depicted in the scenarios. The study did not use any other measures of culture. Analogical data support such claims; for example, Tuck and Boykin (1989) found that Black and White children’s performance under high- and low-verve conditions correlated significantly with independent measures of home stimulation levels and an independent measure of verve preference. Still, the cultural claim made in the present line of investigation would be made stronger if related to independent measures of culture. The current investigation uses a behavioral measure of verve to examine those relationships.

Secondly, students in the Boykin et al. (2004) study were recruited from a town in the Southern United States. Indeed, many studies documenting the existence of themes such as communalism and verve in African American culture draw on sample populations in the South, leading some to suggest that claims about African American culture should be more appropriately labeled southern Black culture (Young, 1974). The current investigation was conducted with students in a Northeastern U.S. city. This was done to assess the regional generalizability of claims about culture.
Finally, in that 2004 study, the data clearly indicated which high achievers the students liked best. Just how these attitudes related to their perception of the relationship between the learners’ behavior and the culture of schooling was not explored. The empirical design did not support inferences about the students’ understanding, tacit or otherwise, of the cultural nature of schooling. The Obgu and Fordham research argues clearly that Black students disengage from school because they perceive high achievement as a White value that will not serve their future success. It seems that any refutation of these claims must explore not only students’ attitudes toward different types of high achievers but also their ideas about how school authorities perceive different approaches to learning. The children in this study were also asked to predict their teachers’ attitudes toward the four high-achieving students as a way to assess their tacit awareness of the relationship between their own and their school’s cultural values.

**EXPERIMENT**

**METHOD**

**Sample**

Ninety African American students ranging in age from 10 to 12 years participated in the study. They were divided equally by gender. All participants were recruited in a large northeastern city where they attended inner-city public schools. Participants were from lower-income families, as indicated by their participation in the school’s free and reduced-price lunch program.

**Instruments**

The children were administered two instruments: the Learning Context Scenario (LCS) and the Pathway Preference Measure (PPM).

The LCS is a measure developed to assess children’s attitudes toward four types of high achievers and their beliefs about their teachers’ attitudes toward the same four high-achieving students. The measure consists of four scenarios of approximately 90 words. Each scenario describes a high-achieving student who exhibits one of four orientations toward schooling and achievement. Two of the high achievers are described as exhibiting individualism or competitiveness, behaviors and attitudes characteristic of mainstream cultural values. The individualism scenario contains descriptions such as “She feels she can do better on school assignments when she works independently, and [she] . . . enjoys school work better when she does it on her own.” The competitive scenario includes descriptions 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 communalism and verve.
The communalism scenario includes descriptions such as “She tries to share her ideas and materials with other students, and [she] . . . 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 six questions to be answered after the participant reads a scenario. The first four questions (C-Own) assess respondents’ own attitudes toward the hypothetical achiever depicted. The child attitude questions ask how likely the child is to seek such a person out in various social situations (e.g., “If you were going to the park would you invite Linda?”). The two remaining questions are similar in content but assess children’s predictions of their teachers’ (C-Teachers) perceptions of the four high achievers (e.g., “Would your teacher like for you to eat lunch with Jamal at school?”). “Yes” responses are given a score of 1 and “no” responses are given a score of 0. The score for each set of questions is computed by summing responses across the six items and yields a score between 0 and 4 for the C-Own items and between 0 and 2 for the C-Teacher items. In addition to raw scores, the child attitude and the child perception ratings are viewed for their deviation from the midpoint of 2 for the C-Own items and the midpoint of 1 for C-Teacher items. Ratings above the midpoint indicate acceptance of the person depicted in the scenario, and ratings below the midpoint indicate rejection of the depicted high achiever. Pilot administrations of the LCS using similar C-Own items among low income African American children yielded internal consistency estimates of .67, .68, .79, and .70 for the competitive, individualistic, high-verage, and communal scenarios, respectively (Martin, 1994).

The PPM is a behavioral measure of students’ preference for variability. It consists of a multicomartment rectangular maze where school is the start box at one end of a rectangle and home is the destination box at the other end. Other compartments in the maze that can be entered during the hypothetical walk between school and home are labeled with places commonly found on the streets of neighborhoods such as a library, a park, and an ice cream store. The child is asked to trace on a given maze which way he or she would walk home after school each day of a given week. One blank maze is presented for each of the 5 days. The measure is designed to measure the variability in pathways the child will seek on his or her daily walk home. The nature of the stops is not analyzed; rather, seeking variability or tendency toward greater changeability is defined as how much of the map is covered on each hypothetical walk home from school and how many unique routes the child seeks out over the course of 5 days. A general variability score is obtained by counting the number of pathway compartment openings the child chooses to pass through on the way home from school each day. The greater the number of openings passed through, the greater the variability in the preferred route. The most direct route would entail passing through five openings and represents the lowest variability. The possible range of scores is varied because a child can cycle back through compartments. Average scores were computed by dividing the total number of pathway openings passed through over the 5 days by five. A verve unique score, which consists of counting the number of distinct pathway
openings crossed over the 5 days, was also computed. The score is obtained by a simple count of the number of new compartments passed through from day to day. Tuck and Boykin (1989) reported an interrater reliability coefficient of .998 for the scoring of the PPM.

Procedure

Participants were tested in gender heterogeneous groups of 7–15 in classrooms made available for this research. The PPM was administered first, followed by the LCS. Each student read and responded to questions about each of the four scenarios.

RESULTS

Responses to the questionnaire items of the LCS yielded alpha coefficients of .71, .79, .78, and .82 for the communalism, verve, competition, and individualism scenarios, respectively. Two $2 \times 4$ ANOVAs were used to assess differences in attitudes towards high achievers by gender and learning orientation type (individualistic, competitive, communal, or high-verve). In one analysis, the child attitude score was the dependent measure, and in the second analysis the child’s prediction of the teacher’s attitude was used as the dependent variable. Neither analysis yielded a significant main effect of gender on ratings. Both indicated significant main effects for type of learning orientation, $F(2, 264) = 33.84, p < .0001$, and $F(2, 264) = 7.45, p < .0001$, for C-Own and C-Teacher scores, respectively, indicating clear differences in students’ responses to the different scenarios.

Table 1 displays the means for the C-Own scores by the four learning orientation types. Post hoc analyses indicated that these scores were significantly higher for the high achievers who were described as communal than for the high achievers who were described as individualistic, competitive, or high-verve. This result indicates that the cooperatively oriented high achievers was most favored or that students were most willing to express their preference for communally oriented high achievers. In addition, child attitude scores for the high achievers who were described as high-verve were found to be significantly higher than scores for the high achievers who were described as individualistic or competitive. Thus,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competitive</th>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Communal</th>
<th>High-verve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.4$^a$</td>
<td>1.5$^b$</td>
<td>3.3$^{ab}$</td>
<td>2.4$^{ab}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means that have the same superscript within a given row differ at $p < .05$ in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison. These ratings have a midpoint of 2.
students were also willing to express a preference for the high achiever whose behavior was high-verve, but to a lesser degree than the communal high achiever. No difference was found for attitudes between the high achievers who were described as individualistic or competitive. Whereas average ratings for the high achievers who were described as individualistic and competitive fell below the midpoint, ratings for those described as communal and high-verve were above the midpoint. This finding suggests that the mainstream high achievers were generally rejected by participants, whereas the Afro-cultural high achievers were generally accepted.

Table 2 shows the means for the children’s predictions of teachers’ attitudes toward the four learning orientation types (C-Teacher). Children predicted that the teachers would have more favorable attitudes toward the high achievers who were described as communal than the high achievers who were described as individualistic or high-verve. It is noteworthy that C-Teacher scores fell above the midpoint of 1.0 for every learning type except the high achievers who were described as high-verve. The children indicated that their teachers would reject a high-verve high achiever.

Tables 3–6 display the results of correlation analyses computed to assess the relationships between C-Own scores, the relationships between C-Teacher scores, the relationships between C-Own and C-Teacher scores, and the relationships between LCS ratings and PPM scores.

As displayed in Table 3, the C-Own ratings for the individualistic learner and the competitive learner were positively correlated, but both were negatively correlated with attitudes towards the communal and high-verve learners. Ratings of the communal and high-verve learning orientations were also significantly positively correlated. This indicates that students rated communal and high-verve achievers similarly and the competitive and individualistic high achievers similarly but made a clear discrimination between the Afro-cultural and mainstream cultural achievers. The particularly strong correlation of ratings for the competitive and individualistic high achievers and the especially strong negative correlation between communal and individualistic high achievers is in keeping with the conceptual relationships between the variables and thereby adds to the validity of these measurements.

Table 2. Children’s mean predictions of teacher LCS ratings by cultural orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competitive</th>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Communal</th>
<th>High-verve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.2(^a)</td>
<td>1.5(^{ab})</td>
<td>0.89(^b)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Means that have the same superscript within a given row differ at *p* < .05 in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison. These ratings have a midpoint of 1.
Table 3. Correlations of children’s own ratings by cultural orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competitive</th>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Communal</th>
<th>High-verve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>−.51**</td>
<td>−.70**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-verve</td>
<td>−.31**</td>
<td>−.38**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* \( p < .05 \)  ** \( p < .01 \).

Table 4 shows an identical, if less robust pattern of correlations between the scores for the children’s predictions of teachers’ attitudes toward the four learning orientation types. That this was true despite the markedly different pattern among means for C-Own and C-Teacher ratings lends further credibility to the operationalization of these variables.

Table 5 displays the correlations between C-Own ratings and C-Teacher ratings by learning orientation. The pattern replicates that found in the mean ratings. C-Own and C-Teacher ratings were negatively correlated for the competitive, individualistic, and high-verve achievers but were positively correlated for the communal high achiever.

As displayed in Table 6, the PPM verve average score was positively correlated with children’s attitudes toward the high-verve high achiever. High scores on the PPM indicate greater variability in participants’ own behavior, so the correlation implies that students whose own behavior is higher in verve expressed a stronger preference for the high achievers whose attitudes and behavior were described as high in verve. The PPM unique score was negatively correlated with attitudes toward the high achievers who were described as individualistic and competitive but was positively correlated with those toward high achievers who were described as communal and high-verve. This result is similar to that for the PPM verve average score. The additional negative correlations indicate that students whose verve scores were higher were also more likely to reject the mainstream-oriented high achievers.

Table 4. Correlations of teacher ratings by cultural orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Competitive</th>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Communal</th>
<th>High-verve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>−.32**</td>
<td>−.33**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-verve</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>−.41**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* \( p < .05 \)  ** \( p < .01 \).
**DISCUSSION**

This study sought to assess student’s attitudes toward high-achieving students whose learning behaviors were more consistent with either a mainstream cultural orientation (individualistic and competitive) or with an Afro-cultural orientation (communal and high-verve). Toward this end, African American children read scenarios describing the behaviors of four fictional high achievers. Child attitude scores showed a clear preference for high achievers exhibiting the Afro-cultural over mainstream learning orientations. These findings challenge the explanations offered by Ogbu (1986) and Fordham (1999), both of which imply that African Americans frown on high academic achievement in general. Ogbu and Simons (1994) argued that involuntary minorities such as African Americans and many Hispanic groups harbor negative attitudes toward education and achievement as a response to their awareness of the limited opportunity afforded them via those avenues. Ogbu and Simons’s 1998 work seems to substantiate this claim by documenting the negative attitudes expressed toward high achievers by low-achieving Black students. In that work, however, the only achievement style presented was the standard model set by the mainstream school system. As in the study by Boykin et al. (2004), the present research indicates that when other high academic achievement options are present, children do not reject them all. Rather, children seem to accept the high-achieving students who exhibit behaviors and attitudes consistent with African American cultural values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher ratings</th>
<th>Competitive</th>
<th>Individualistic</th>
<th>Communal</th>
<th>High-verve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>−.20**</td>
<td>−.37**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>−.30**</td>
<td>−.34**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>−.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-verve</td>
<td>−.54**</td>
<td>−.54**</td>
<td>.51*</td>
<td>−.34**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  **p < .01.

**Table 5. Correlations of children’s own ratings with teacher ratings by cultural orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher ratings</th>
<th>Verve average</th>
<th>Verve unique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>−.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-verve</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  **p < .01.

**Table 6. Correlations of children’s own ratings with verve average and verve unique by cultural orientation**
Students felt that their teachers would be more accepting of the high achiever that they themselves had rejected. This finding is also consistent with the cultural discontinuity argument. Teachers play perhaps the greatest role in promoting mainstream values in school. That students as young as 10 years of age can reflect on the discrepancy between their own preferences and what is required by the institution is significant. This observation echoes Obgu’s and Fordham’s arguments that Black students disengage from school because they perceive high achievement as a White value but distinguishes values and behaviors they may reject as White from their feelings about high achievement in general.

That the students perceived the teacher to accept a communal learning orientation is not surprising given that cooperative learning models have been used and promoted in classrooms, albeit with mixed success, for some time (Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2001). The higher ratings may represent the combined effects of preference and their awareness of the social acceptability of this choice.

These interpretations are further supported by the correlation patterns. The more the children liked the Afro-cultural high achievers, the less they tended to like the mainstream individuals. This relationship was true of children’s predictions of teachers’ attitudes as well. Moreover, the more variability they expressed in their responses on the PPM, the more positive their endorsement of the high-verve high achiever. The consistency on these two measures suggests that their preferences were not theoretical or in response to social demands of any kind but rooted in their own behavioral tendencies. This means that in U.S. classrooms, which allow a limited range of “acceptable” learning orientations, many children will never see their own tendencies reflected in the pool of academically high-achieving role models. The correlation between communalism and verve supports Boykin’s contention that African American students’ preferences are not isolated but are part of a coherent and meaningful value system.

These data lend substantial support for Boykin’s psychosocial integrity model of African American students’ achievement attitudes. The findings suggest that Black students do not generally reject high achievement or have a general dislike toward all high achievers but maintain positive attitudes toward academic high achievers who excel in ways that are culturally familiar to them. The implication of this for educational practice is as daunting as it is encouraging. We may be encouraged if we conclude that African American children do, after all, value academic achievement when it is attainable in a mode that is familiar and acceptable. However, such a conclusion adds complexity to discussions of how to improve their achievement. Instead of wondering how to make African American students value achievement, we must at a minimum change the question “How do we get them to value the mode of achievement that is
promoted in mainstream classrooms?” We would do better to recognize that their culturally based orientations have psychosocial integrity, that they have meaning, and that they have practical value. We should be asking not how we can change the children to fit our concepts of education but how can we broaden educational practice so that children’s talents can be developed and directed.

There is much work yet to be done in understanding these phenomena, both at the conceptual level and operationally. Although these observations also lend credibility to Boykin’s (1986, 1995) suggestion that low achievement among African American children is attributable to cultural discontinuity between home and school environments, the design did not permit a true test of the claimed mediation. Future research must address this issue by including measures of academic performance.

This work lends additional support to the validity of Boykin’s psychosocial integrity model and more broadly to scholarship premised on the notion of a cohesive African American culture. Students in the Boykin et al. (2004) study were recruited from a town in the Southern United States. Indeed, many studies documenting the existence of themes such as communalism and verve in African American culture draw on sample populations in the South, leading some to suggest that claims about African American culture should be more appropriately labeled claims about Southern Black culture (Young, 1974). This raises questions of whether the effects obtained by Boykin and colleagues are more regionally or ethnically cultural. Participants in the current investigation were recruited in an urban community in the Northeastern United States. That the patterns of data in this sample were consistent with observations made in the South supports the contention that such themes transcend regional differences.

This research is also limited conceptually by the fact that only social attitudes were assessed. Questions remain regarding whether students’ academic attitudes are more affected by home-based cultural values or by the value system that the school aggressively seeks to impart to them. Future studies would do well to assess academic attitudes toward high achievers.

Notes

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