



## Race and risk behaviors: The mediating role of school bonding



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### ABSTRACT

This study tests the hypotheses that school bonding mediates the relationship between adolescents' racial background and key risk behaviors (substance use, failing grades, and fighting). Data sources include an epidemiological survey administered at 50 urban schools to 16,169 students, linked to information about school context (socioeconomic composition, attendance rate, and grade-level). Results indicate that school bonding partially mediates the relationship between race and risk behavior. Findings suggest that culturally responsive efforts to strengthen educational attachment, connection, commitment, and involvement among youth of color may reduce gaps in outcomes that are perceived to be distal from schooling. Further development and testing of multi-level interventions that increase school bonding among youth from non-dominant racial groups are needed.

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### 1. Introduction

Racial inequities in education are again prominent in the public eye, with renewed attention to the differential experiences of students of color in public schools. The recently passed *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015), which replaces *No Child Left Behind*, highlights the need to close racial gaps in test scores and school quality. For the first time, federal education policy requires states to include and disaggregate at least one “non-academic” indicator, such as climate or engagement, in their school performance frameworks. This continued emphasis of educational policy on reducing differential outcomes between White students and their peers of color reflects long-standing evidence that among the most profound disparities in adolescent developmental outcomes are those associated with racial status. Although economic disadvantage, inequitable distribution of school funding, and unequal access to healthcare explain some racial differences in behavioral health and academic achievement, disparities persist after accounting for these factors (Anyon, Ong, & Whitaker, 2014; Grubb, 2009; Lin & Harris, 2008; Priest et al., 2013). For example, quantitative measures of socioeconomic status fail to explain between 45% and 60% of the Black-White differences in test scores, and 20% of the White-Latino difference (Grubb, 2009). This unexplained variance has theoretically and empirically been linked to historical and contemporary structural racism, discrimination, and implicit bias; so much so that education leaders have argued that the term “achievement gap” should be reconceptualized as an “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008).

Although structural inequalities often appear intractable, promising interventions for minimizing disparities in adolescents' developmental outcomes have targeted the relationships between youth of color and educational institutions (Yeager, Walton, & Cohen, 2013). This work is supported by evidence of the role of school bonding in the reduction of risk behaviors across multiple behavioral and academic domains (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Monahan, Oesterle, Rhew, & Hawkins, 2014). There is strong evidence that school bonding is a general protective factor for all youth, but few studies have provided empirical support for claims that positive social bonds to school mediate racial group differences in problem behavior. We do not know whether underlying racial differences in school bonding partially account for racial disparities in risk behaviors. The breadth of research and theory indicating differential expectations and treatment of students of color in the American educational system warrants a consideration of the relationships between race, school bonding, and risk behaviors.

Bingham and Okagaki (2012) use the concepts of cultural discontinuity and ecologies to explain why students of color may report weaker attachment, commitment, involvement, and connection to school. Cultural ecology refers to the degree to which a school is perceived as discriminatory by different sub-groups, whereas the concept of cultural discontinuity captures differences in the implicit norms and expectations of educators and students from oppressed groups (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012). Evidence of hostile cultural ecologies and substantive cultural discontinuities may be a powerful mechanism driving racial disparities in school bonding and risk behaviors among school-age adolescents. An extensive body of observational, experimental, and qualitative studies have documented biased perceptions, differential treatment, and disparate experiences in schools based on student racial background (e.g. Chang & Sue, 2003; Ferguson, 2001; Mattison & Aber, 2007; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Okonofua &

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Eberhardt, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999). Black and Latino students are more likely to be the victims of the well-documented problem of lower teacher expectations, which can lead to disengagement and disconnection from school (Ferguson, 2001; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; Tyler & Boelter, 2008; Weinstein, 2002). The psychological concept of stereotype threat helps clarify how these biases lead to racial disparities in academic and behavioral outcomes, as individuals in stereotyped groups perform poorly, or withdraw from an activity, if a negative stereotype is triggered by some action or word (Steele, 2010).

Likewise, cultural mismatches between students, teachers, and administrators likely reduce school bonding and increase the likelihood that students will be pushed out of school (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). Examples of discontinuity include culturally unresponsive instruction, disagreements regarding appropriate behavior and consequences in school, and misunderstandings due to different norms around communication (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Lau et al., 2004; Monroe, 2006). These mismatches between students and school staff can lead to disengagement and disruptive or defiant behaviors that increase students' risk for exclusionary discipline consequences, academic failure, and delinquency (Fabelo et al., 2011; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Drawing on this literature indicating that racially hostile cultural ecologies and discontinuities may lead to racial gaps in achievement and healthy behavior, this study tests the hypotheses that 1) there are racial differences in school bonding and risk behaviors 2) school bonding mediates the relationship between student racial background and risk behaviors, and 3) the degree of mediation depends on the racial group and risk behavior of interest.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Social development model

The social development model (SDM) outlines how multilevel risk and protective factors work together to influence behavior across the lifespan (Catalano, Kosterman, Hawkins, Newcomb, & Abbott, 1996) (see Fig. 1). The SDM incorporates theories of social control (Hirschi, 1969), differential association (Matsueda, 1982), and social learning (Bandura, 1973) to conceptualize the relationships between learned behaviors, social influences, personal factors, and outcomes in adolescence (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). It specifies a pathway from individual characteristics to healthy behaviors that has multiple mediators: 1) opportunities, skills, and recognition; 2) bonding to prosocial institutions; and, 3) healthy beliefs and clear standards. Empirical evidence provides strong support for this approach to predicting young people's developmental pathways. For example, prosocial bonds directly impact youths' likelihood to engage in risk behaviors (Catalano et al., 1996; Hawkins et al., 1997), and indirectly effect individual academic and social skills (Williams, Ayer, Abbot, Hawkins, & Catalano, 1999). The current study examines whether one form of bonding to prosocial institutions (schools) mediates the direct effect of individual characteristics (race) on health behaviors (academic failure, delinquency and substance use).

## 3. Literature review

### 3.1. School bonding

There is now considerable research indicating that when youth are invested in their education and view school as a positive force in their life, they are less likely to engage in problem behaviors (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Payne, 2008). The relationship between students and schools has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, with terminology such as school bonding, engagement, connectedness, and climate. These terms are often used interchangeably and measured similarly by researchers. For example, school bonding and engagement both have behavioral and affective components (Finn & Voelkl, 1993) and are

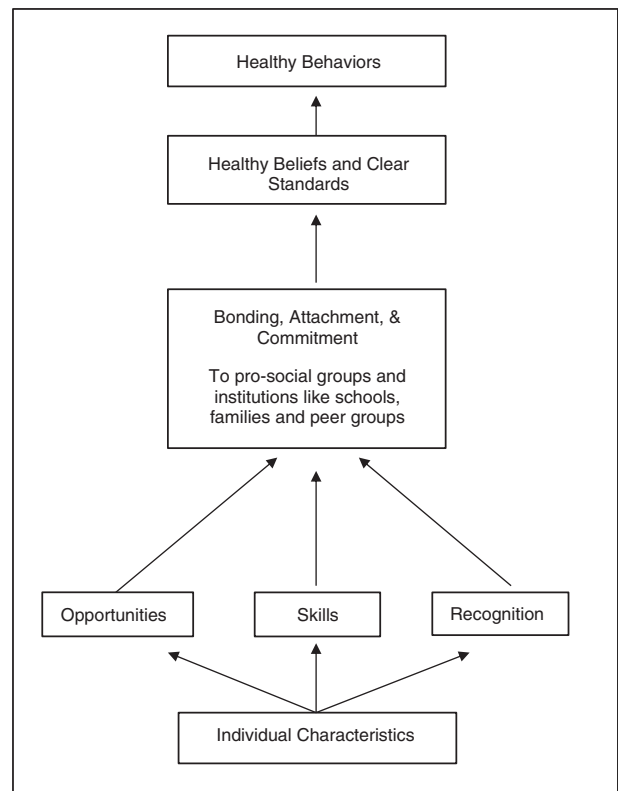


Fig. 1. The social development model.  
Created from Hawkins and Weis (1985).

assessed using parallel indicators, such as homework completion (Libbey, 2004). Regardless of how the concept is named or operationalized, there is strong evidence that students' relationships to school are powerful influences on their health behaviors.

This manuscript will employ the construct of school bonding as it is aligned with the SDM, our theoretical framework. The four most recognized dimensions of school bonding are attachment to school, connection to school personnel, educational commitment, and school involvement (Catalano et al., 2004; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Attachment to school refers to the degree that students feel positively about school overall. It is captured by feelings such as pride in one's school, a general sense of enjoyment about school, or the sense that school and classes are meaningful. Connection to school personnel involves students' affective relationships to teachers and other school adults. This could manifest in students' respect and admiration for school personnel, or their perception that teachers or administrators care about and encourage them. Educational commitment references students' willingness to prioritize school activities over others, both during and after school. Finally, school involvement reflects *how often* students engage in school activities.

Generally speaking, as a young person's sense of school bonding increases, their likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors decreases. For example, youth who report a positive school bonds are at lower risk for using or abusing alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana before the age of 21 (Catalano et al., 2004; Eggert, Thompson, Herting, Nicholas, & Dicker, 1994; Monahan et al., 2014; Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999; Williams et al., 1999). These results are echoed in systematic reviews of the influence of the school environment on adolescents' substance use, which found that school-level interventions (e.g. student-teacher relationships and school policies) can reduce students' substance use (Bonell et al., 2013; Fletcher, Bonell, & Hargreaves, 2008).

School bonding is also negatively associated with externalizing behaviors like juvenile delinquency and crime, internalizing behaviors such as depressive symptoms, and risk taking behaviors that can cause

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