



Psychological disengagement in elementary school among ethnic minority students

Michael J. Strambler^{a,*}, Rhona S. Weinstein^b

^a Department of Psychiatry, Yale University School of Medicine, United States

^b Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examined dimensions of psychological disengagement as predictors of achievement and teacher-rated behavioral engagement over the course of a school year among a sample of 111 African American and Latino children in 1st–5th grades at an urban elementary school. In addition, classroom and school contextual factors were investigated as predictors of psychological disengagement. Findings suggest that, on average, students exhibited moderate levels of academic devaluing and high levels of academic valuing. There were largely no grade differences for any constructs and African Americans had higher alternative identification than Latinos. Given equal prior achievement, greater alternative identification predicted lower behavioral engagement and only the devaluing of academics consistently predicted poorer outcomes on language arts and math scores. In contrast, academic valuing was not found to be predictive of behavioral engagement or achievement. The valuing of academics measure may reflect dominant societal views on academics (abstract attitudes) and the devaluing measures, more nuanced and personal views (concrete attitudes). Higher perceived negative teacher feedback predicted more devaluing of academics and at the level of a trend, greater perceived teacher care at a classroom level predicted less devaluing. Findings highlight the importance of proximal interactions between teachers and students in the link between psychological disengagement from learning and achievement among ethnic minority children.

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Introduction

Despite a large body of research on the achievement gap between ethnic minorities and Whites, inequities in achievement continue to be one of the United States' most intractable problems. Although the size of the gap has fluctuated over the years, the gap in math and reading achievement in 2005 did not significantly differ from the gap in 1990 for African American and Latino 4th and 8th graders (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Furthermore, the achievement gap is evident at school entry and persists over the course of schooling (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Research has explored various explanations of the gap including genetic, familial, social-economic, cultural, and factors within the school (McKown & Strambler, 2008). A developing area of research that spans psychological, social, and cultural explanations concerns whether or not students engage in or disengage from schooling. Evidence suggests that psychological disengagement from school and the social environments that influence it may play a role in the academic underperformance of ethnic minority students (Ogbu, 1991; Osborne, 1997; Steele, 1992).

Although there has been a growing body of research on psychological disengagement from learning, little is known about how it

operates in naturalistic school contexts and among pre-adolescent populations given that many of the studies have been conducted in laboratory settings and with adolescents and young adults. The purpose of this study is to shed new light on precursors to and the development of aspects of psychological disengagement in an elementary school population where 97% of the African American and Latino students live at or below the poverty line.

Psychological disengagement from school

Within the research literature, the terms *psychological engagement* and *emotional engagement* have been used interchangeably to refer to one of three aspects of academic engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007). These authors conceptualize academic engagement as a *meta-construct* consisting of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional/psychological domains. Behavioral engagement concerns students' level of school participation in learning tasks and school activities as well as rule following. Cognitive engagement reflects students' strategic learning, preference for challenging work, and interest in learning beyond the classroom. The emotional/psychological domain of engagement involves affective responses to school, that include school bonding or alienation, achievement valuing, degree of liking school, and identification. This is similar to what Finn (1989) has described as identification, consisting of students' sense of belonging to school and their valuing of school-related outcomes.

* Corresponding author. The Consultation Center, 389 Whitney Ave., New Haven, CT 06511, United States. Tel.: +1 203 789 7645; fax: +1 203 562 6355.

E-mail address: michael.strambler@yale.edu (M.J. Strambler).

Psychological disengagement and ethnic minority students

Whereas the academic engagement literature emphasizes the positive pole and focuses on elements of school participation as antecedents to engagement, the literature that addresses ethnic minority academic underperformance focuses on disengagement as a response to social, cultural, and historical conditions. One of the earliest theories of psychological disengagement was formulated by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Ogbu (1991), who asserted that the achievement gap is, in part, a result of responses to historical events and to the current social experiences of ethnic minorities. According to Ogbu (1991), one of the ways non-immigrant, or *involuntary* minorities have protected themselves from self-devaluation inflicted by the dominant group is through rejecting the values and behaviors of the dominant group and defining appropriate values of one's in-group. In some instances, this definition is in opposition to those of the dominant group and is theorized to promote group solidarity. Among African Americans, who have historically been denied quality education, this self-protective dynamic has resulted in some African Americans dismissing education as a *White thing*. This cultural definition translates into attitudes and behaviors which Ogbu referred to as a *low-effort syndrome*, of negative attitudes towards school, low academic engagement, and poor persistence at academic tasks. Furthermore, Ogbu contended that low effort contributes to a peer pressure among African Americans to devalue and appear disengaged from school.

Some theories describe psychological disengagement as a psychological response to stereotypes and bias. A substantial number of experimental studies have demonstrated the impact of negative stereotypes on depressing academic performance for African Americans and women college students—a process referred to as *stereotype threat* (Steele, 1992, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In addition to diminishing academic performance, Steele (1992) theorized that stereotype threat could lead to disidentification with school as a means to protect self-esteem against confirming the negative stereotype. Steele postulated that some African Americans may come to devalue academics by way of disassociation from the academic domain resulting in a disconnection between academic performance and their overall self-esteem. Other researchers have empirically tested the construct examining ethnic differences in disidentification as well as possible mechanisms of disidentification.

Some researchers have conceptualized academic disidentification as reflecting two types of disengagement; a chronic form and situational form of disengagement (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998; Nussbaum & Steele, 2007; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). In particular, disidentification is theorized to be a chronic form of psychological disengagement that adversely affects achievement through the *devaluing of academic performance* (“I don't care about doing well in math”). The other type of disengagement, called situational disengagement, is considered to be less chronic and involves *discounting of performance feedback* as a means of protecting self-esteem from stereotypes or perceived bias (i.e. “The teacher gave me a bad grade because he doesn't like me.”). However, this theory has yet to be examined in elementary school ethnic minority children.

Empirical evidence of psychological disengagement among minority students

Recent research suggests that some ethnic minority groups are more psychologically disengaged than Whites. For example, using the NELS data archives, a nationally representative longitudinal dataset focused on education, Osborne (1997) compared rates of psychological disengagement (defined as disidentification) among African American, White, and Latino students from 8th to 12th grades. Using the size of the correlation between self-esteem and achievement as the measure of psychological disengagement (that is, smaller correlations suggested less of a link between self-esteem and achievement),

Osborne found that African American boys were the only ethnic group that showed significant disidentification with academics over time. For this group, the correlation between self-esteem and achievement decreased from $r = .23$ in 8th grade to $r = -.02$ in 12th grade.

Some research suggests that attitudes towards education may be linked to psychological disengagement from learning. Mickelson (1990) conducted a study examining the link between achievement and concrete and abstract attitudes towards education among 1193 African American and White high school seniors. Abstract attitudes are defined as beliefs reflecting the dominant societal ideology about education (e.g., “Education is the key to success in the future.”), whereas concrete attitudes reflect personal aspects (e.g., “People in my family haven't been treated fairly at work no matter how much education they had.”). Mickelson found that African Americans endorsed more positive abstract attitudes than Whites but endorsed fewer positive concrete attitudes. Importantly, it was also found that *only* concrete attitudes predicted achievement for African Americans such that less endorsement of positive concrete attitudes predicted lower achievement. This association was not found for abstract attitudes suggesting that abstract and concrete beliefs function differently with regard to predicting achievement. It is possible that ethnic minority students also hold similar dual attitudes with regard to psychological disengagement. For example, abstract aspects of psychological engagement may reflect a more global importance of doing well in school whereas concrete aspects may reflect a more nuanced and personal perspective.

A study conducted by Rutter, Maughan, and Mortimore (2001) examined disengagement in terms of *discounting* the validity of academic outcomes and *devaluing* academic success among African American and Latino college students. In testing how beliefs about ethnic injustice and academic performance predict disengagement, the authors found that lower academic performance predicted devaluing among Latinos and that ethnic injustice predicted discounting for African Americans and Latinos. Although this study points to the importance of how perceived social dynamics might influence disengagement among young adults, it remains an open question as to whether similar factors predict disengagement in children. It is possible that even among younger children who are less aware of ethnic injustice, perceived injustice or bias related to academic ability may play a role in disengagement. For example, a study conducted by McKown and Weinstein (2003) found that African American and Latino students between the ages of 6 and 10, became aware of biased treatment earlier than Whites and Asians. Such studies suggest that young minority students' perceptions of their immediate (e.g., student–teacher interactions) and more distal (e.g., school) learning environments play a key role in their level of academic devaluing.

Gaps in the literature

Psychological disengagement among children

Although the research on psychological disengagement in general is expanding, few studies investigate this construct among elementary and middle school children. An exception is a study by Graham (2001) which examined psychological disengagement through an investigation of achievement values among 6th through 8th graders. Graham (2001) used a peer nomination procedure that asked children who they most admired, respected, and wanted to be like. The findings suggest that African American girls valued academic learning as indicated by their nomination preference for same-gender high-achieving peers. African American males, on the other hand, over-nominated low-achieving boys as peers whom they admired, respected, and wanted to be like, and further, they least valued high-achieving boys. In contrast to these results, in a similar study with 2nd to 4th graders, Graham (2001) found that all students valued same-gender high performing students.

Graham's study deepens our understanding of when and for whom psychological disengagement takes hold. However, this study only examined one aspect of disengagement—a general form of devaluing

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