



# Fitting in matters: markers of in-group belonging and academic outcomes

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# Racial identity matters

- Emerging research evidence across multiple samples points to the role of racial-ethnic identity in promoting academic success (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006) and engagement (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995).
- Research suggests an equally positive role for racial-ethnic identity for boys and girls (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007).

## But boys are doing worse

- Yet African American and Latino boys are much less likely to graduate on time than African American or Latino girls (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004).
- Why might this be?

## Boys value school success

- One possibility is that African American and Latino boys do not value school as much as African American and Latino girls.
- This possibility is not supported by the available evidence.
- Indeed, African American and Latino boys do value academic success—school is a central focus of their possible selves (Oyserman, Johnson, & Bybee, 2007).

# Connection is important

- Another possibility is that the components of racial-ethnic identity that matter most differ between boys and girls.
- There is some reason to believe that the social-connectedness aspect of racial-ethnic identity is more crucial for boys.

- Generally, whereas girls value personal relationships, connection to groups is particularly important to boys (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997).
- Boys are more likely than girls to use social group membership as the basis for self-definition (Grace & Cramer, 2003).

# M What about low-income African American and Latino boys?

- There is evidence that boys attain more academic benefit from feeling connected to their racial-ethnic in-group than girls do (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003)
- And evidence to suggest that boys' sense of racial-ethnic connection is vulnerable to neighborhood context effects.

- Boys, but not girls, report lower sense of racial-ethnic in-group connection when they live in economically deprived neighborhoods (Oyserman, Bybee, & Dai, 2006).
- Given the possibility that boys generally value group membership but that economic deprivation makes it harder for African American and Latino boys to feel a positive sense of in-group connection, is it easier for some boys to hold on to this sense of connection?

# Figuring out if you fit in

- How can African American and Latino boys figure out if they fit in?
- One way is to look like an in-group members, physical appearance, personal style in dress, mannerisms, speech
- Looking like an in-group member cues others and reduces concern about fitting in.
- Otherwise, boys are likely to try to act in ways they believe are in-group congruent behaviors.

# Figuring out if you fit in

- Doing well in school is not a private, one shot event. It involves mostly public behaviors that have to be engaged in repeatedly over time.
- When will boys find these public behaviors risky?
- Investigated the role of physical markers of in-group belonging, hypothesizing that these markers can buffer boys against academic risk.

# Markers of belonging

- Markers can provide evidence of fit with the in-group and allow for pursuit of personal goals (e.g., school success).
- Individuals who lack clear physical markers of belonging, are more likely than others to pursue belongingness through behaviors stereotyped as in-group traits.

# Markers are inclusion signals

- A number of literatures have used the term mark or marked in different ways.
- The stigma literature has used the word mark to mean blemish or flaw (Goffman, 1963).
- The linguistics literature has used the word marked to mean tagged or different from the main category.
- From an insider perspective, however, markers signal inclusion and belonging, rather than exclusion.



## If physical markers are lacking, may use behavioral markers

- A physical attribute studied among adolescent boys of low socioeconomic status (SES) is having a "baby face": those with a baby face are more likely to be involved in delinquent behavior than their equally attractive but more averagely mature-looking peers (Zebrowitz, et al., 1998).
- Perhaps baby-faced adolescent boys are trying to undermine the perception that they are childlike and not tough (Zebrowitz & Montepare, 1992).

## **M** Yet there is little research focused directly on markers of in-group belonging

- Speculated that no matter how they self-identify, boys who do not ‘look’ like an in-group member may be concerned that others will misperceive them and that their racial-ethnic identity may be continually challenged by in-group members suspicious of their heritage or belongingness, creating incentives for boys to focus energies on belonging, not on school.

## M Focused on low socioeconomic status neighborhoods

- Because poverty and racial-ethnic segregation go hand in hand.
- Segregated neighborhoods and schools basically mean that if one does not fit in with one's racial-ethnic group, there are unlikely to be many alternative social groups to belong to.

# The model

- Boys who do not believe that they have visible markers of social identity will attempt to engage in behaviors they see as characterizing the in-group.
- Whether or not they personally value school success, their efforts to fit in will put them at risk of disengaging from school and school-focused peers and of adopting behaviors that lead to problems in school.
- Grades, in-class behavior, and school engagement will suffer.

# Results

- Model tested with low-income African American and Latino teens in two studies.
- Results supported the model:
  - dark skin-tone was a protective factor for African American boys
  - and feeling that one ‘looks’ Latino was a protective factor for Latino boys.
- Mediation analyses suggest that the impact of markers of belongingness is via choice of peer group.



# African American boys and Social Acceptance

- As hypothesized, light skin tone was negatively related to perceived social acceptance. Youth with light skin tone felt significantly less accepted than those with dark skin tone and less accepted than those with medium skin tone.
- The negative effect of light skin tone on perceived social acceptance is more clear for boys.



# African American boys and academic outcomes

- As hypothesized, the effect of markers of inclusion (perceived skin tone) depended on gender.
- Effects of perceived skin tone were significant for boys.
- Lack of perceived markers (Light-skin-tone) was associated with lower felt efficacy for boys.
- Having a perceived marker (Dark-skin-tone) was associated with better grade point average for boys.

# Latino boys and academic outcomes

- Markers of in-group belonging were associated with boys', not girls', academic outcomes.
- Boys who reported “looking Latino” were significantly more *behaviorally* and *emotionally* engaged with school by teacher report and had better *grade point average* (school records).

- Boys and girls who self-perceived as “looking Latino”, did not differ significantly on any outcome variable – boys were not at risk.
- Boys and girls who self-perceived as not looking Latino, differed significantly on all three outcome variables – boys were at risk.
- “looking Latino” reduced risk for boys.



## Effects are mediated by social inclusion

- Boys who reported looking Latino, were more likely to choose school-focused peers (according to teacher report)
- Choosing school-focused peers mediated the relationship between this marker of in-group belonging and all of the academic outcomes.

# Physical markers of belonging

- Can help boys feel connected
- Need to promote connection so that, personal goals and social identity goals will be congruent.



# Personal and social identities may feel discordant

- Though education is valued
  - carrying out everyday behaviors to work toward the goal of college education or to reduce the chances of school failure
  - may feel like it conflicts with goals of fitting in with one's group
  - therefore not easily come to mind, feel effortful, not like the 'real' 'true' self

# Content of social identity matters

- Focused on racial-ethnic (e.g., Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995, JPSP; Oyserman, Kemmelmeier et al., 2003, SPQ) and gender (e.g., Sorensen & Oyserman, 2007) identities and making choices that produce school success.
- Content of these identities is relatively stable over time and has consistent impact on school success without intervention or social context change (e.g., Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006, Child Development)
- But content can change with a brief universal intervention (e.g., Oyserman, Byee, & Terry, 2006, JPSP),
  - Resulting in improved grades, attendance, in-class behavior, homework, and reduced risk of depressive symptoms



## Read more?

- <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/daphna.oyserman>