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Using Self-Determination Theory to Examine the Difference in Motivation of African American College Students and Students with other Ethnic Backgrounds

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship among academic self-concept, motivation and academic achievement among African American and other college students with different ethnicities. Self-Determination Theory is used as a framework to help understand college students' academic motivation. Existing research in this area has not tended to focus much on ethnicity; yet preliminary information suggests that associations among academic self-concept, motivation, and achievement of African American college students take distinct forms from other ethnic groups. This study uses the Academic Motivational Scale (Vallerand, 1989) to measure intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for college students, the Academic Self-Concept Scale (Reynolds, 1988) to measure self-concept, and self-reported GPAs to measure academic achievement. Data were collected using Qualtrics online surveying system. This research is intended to be beneficial for educators such that colleges can be structured in a way that meets the motivational needs of all ethnic students.

Keywords: *academic achievement, African American, college students, motivation, self-concept*

Many scholars, educators, and policy makers have raised serious questions about the wide achievement gap and achievement motivation among different ethnic groups of students. One group that has been of particular concern has been African Americans at all educational levels. According to a recent study, African American children in the U.S start school about one half of a standard deviation behind their White peers on standardized reading and mathematics tests (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). African American students represent one of the most academically at-risk populations in the United States today (Klaw, Rhodes & Fitzgerald, 2003), yet not enough measures have been taken in educational institutions and communities to help these students excel as much as their White counterparts. Motivational factors seem to be particularly neglected. For example, research has failed to address ways in which the motivational needs of African American college students may be met. Many researchers believe that a better understanding of the academic motivational processes of African American students will shed light on their persistent and often reported academic underachievements (Allen, 1988; Ford, 1996).

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationships among academic self-concept, motivation, and academic achievement among African American and college students from other ethnicities. Self-determination theory will be used as a framework to better understand African American college students' academic motivation. Existing research in this area has tended to focus on students without regard to their ethnicity, yet preliminary information suggests that associations among self-concept, academic motivation, and achievement in African American college students take distinct forms from those in European American or other ethnic students (Cokley, 2000; Cokley 2003). Nevertheless, very little research has been done on self-concept as it relates to motivation and achievement with African American students.

In this investigation, I examined these relationships (academic self-concept, academic achievement, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation) separately for students of different ethnic backgrounds and compared the outcomes of each association to those outcomes of African American students. Thus, this study contributes to literature on achievements and motivation of African Americans by examining the relationships between self-concept, academic motivation, and

academic achievement, and comparing these associations with comparable relationships in other groups.

The perspective of the Self-Determination Theory has not been thoroughly considered as a possible rationale for the unequal achievement gaps among African American students. Self-Determination Theory uses intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to help understand human drives. This investigation examines two specific research questions using Self-Determination Theory as its basis:

- 1) Do students from different ethnic backgrounds differ in motivation type, levels of academic self-concept, and academic achievement (GPA)?

Generally, the research suggests that extrinsic motivation is negatively related to achievement, but previous work has not adequately taken into account ethnic perspectives and experiences. The research on academic self-concept indicates that African American students generally have high scores regardless of achievement levels (Graham, 1994; van Laar 2000).

- 2) Do students from different ethnic backgrounds who are extrinsically motivated differ from those who are intrinsically motivated in academic achievement (GPA)?

Some evidence suggests that African American students might achieve at high levels in Predominately White Institutions (PWI) if they are extrinsically motivated because these motivations keep them on task and give them long-term goals (Cokley, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In this investigation, I examine these relationships (academic self-concept, academic achievement, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation) separately for students of different ethnic backgrounds and compare the associations to those outcomes of African American students. Demonstrating that individuals from different backgrounds may have dissimilar motivation types yet equivalent academic achievement is

useful in rejecting misconceptions of inferior and superior intellectuality between African American and other ethnic groups. Considering the possible difference in GPA between intrinsically and extrinsically motivated students is valuable in understanding which types of motivation are more effective for positive academic achievement. This information is particularly important because it may have implications for enhancing the academic performance rates in students.

This investigation focuses on the academic strengths of students rather than their weaknesses. Much research has been done focusing on the underachieving trend of young people especially within the African American population but little has been done on their actual achievements. More research is needed on this topic so researchers may better understand the motivational processes of African American students. A better understanding of the motivational processes of African American and other ethnic students will allow educators and policy makers to generate a community that is beneficial to the needs of all students. Thus, understanding factors that help contribute to the motivation of college students can be grounds for more successful experiences of a broader base of college students.

Several concepts and terms that are foundational to this perspective will be seen often throughout this study. The terms are as listed:

1. *intrinsic academic motivation*: engaging in academic behaviors for their own sake (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
2. *extrinsic academic motivation*: engaging in academic behaviors because they are seen as instrumental to achieving some goal (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
3. *amotivation*: students engage in academic behaviors with no explicit purpose in mind (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
4. *academic self-concept*: how someone thinks about or perceives him or herself academically. (McLeod, 2008).
5. *motivation*: a student's energy and drive to learn, work effectively, and achieve to their potential at school and the behaviors

that follow from this energy and drive (Martin, Marsh, and Debus 2001).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Recent publications from the U.S. Department of Education have indicated that between 1980 and 1999, the number of African Americans enrolled in college increased by over 70,000 and the number enrolled in professional schools increased by over 9,000 (“Vital Signs”, 2002). Even more recent data suggest that the college completion rate for African American students has increased by four percent within the last three years (Journal of Blacks, 2012).

Although African American college students continue to demonstrate a desire for education and their academic achievement rates have risen within the past decade, there is still a wide gap in graduation rates when compared to White students. Cokley (2000, 2003) has argued numerous times that the misconception of African Americans not valuing their education is an inaccurate assumption, and many other researchers have found inaccuracies in the purported racial differences in intelligence (Cokley, 2000; Graham, 1994). Although these assumptions have been dismissed by many researchers, a few recent proposals suggest the problem arises from cultural and environmental factors.

Several researchers have previously suggested that the under achievements of African American students can be attributed to “acting white.” Scholars like John McWhorter (2000) identify “acting white” with high academic achievement and learning for the sake of learning, also known as intrinsic motivation. McWhorter argues that African American students are indulged in being classified as victims to society because of their ancestral history as victims of slavery and discrimination. McWhorter contends that this victim philosophy is the result of African American students’ modest attempt to try harder academically when compared to other ethnic groups because they believe they are constant victims of discrimination and prejudice.

According to this view, African American students do not pursue intellectual activities and academic excellence because such behavior is associated with White culture. McWhorter’s findings are not only subjective but are a generalization of the African American culture as a whole. The common misconception that African American students are not motivated academically and that they devalue their education is the perception held by many and must be correctly addressed.

The long history of many Blacks valuing education discredits the misconception of African Americans at large not being motivated academically. After slavery, emancipated African Americans maintained a passion for education and by 1890, one third of Black children were attending schools (White & Cones, 1999). Historically Black Colleges and Universities were another venue African Americans used to pursue their education after the civil war (Allen, 2007). Even as time progressed so did African Americans’ passion for education which can be demonstrated through the accomplishments of historical figures such as Carter G. Woodson, Malcolm X, W.E.B. Du Bois, and our current president of the United States, Barrack Obama. These men demonstrated the passion for education that many African Americans still hold today.

There are large gaps in existing literature on motivation and academic achievement as it pertains to ethnicity. Research based on self-determination theory suggests that promoting greater self-determination, specifically intrinsic motivation, is related to more positive academic and psychological outcomes (Cokley, 2003). However, the manner in which various kinds of motivation are linked to academic achievement in African American students needs to be documented more thoroughly.

Self-Determination Theory: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Self-Determination Theory has proven useful in explaining the variation in students’ learning strategies, performance, and persistence (Deci &

Ryan, 2000). According to Deci and Ryan's (1985) work on self-determination theory humans are proactive, oriented towards growth, and competent. Based on this theory, motivation for a specific behavior is regulated by either internal choice or external force (Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011). In regards to academic motivation, self-determination theory has labeled 3 categories of motivation: intrinsic academic motivation, extrinsic academic motivation, and amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The specific type of motivation that is displayed depends on the situation.

Self-Determination Theory uses an important distinction to determine if behaviors are intentional or motivated. Motivated behavior can range from being self-determined where the locus of causality is internal, to being controlled where the locus of causality is external (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Self-determined behavior occurs when an individual makes choices or displays behavior that is not externally influenced, and this behavior is called intrinsic because it originates from the self. Controlled behavior is displayed when an individual's choices or behavior are a result of some external influence. This behavior is extrinsic because it originates outside of the self. Motivated actions are self-determined to the extent that they are engaged by choice and endorsed by one's sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991), whereas actions are controlled if they are inflicted by an interpersonal force. Previous studies on self-determined motivation are linked to various educational outcomes from elementary school to college (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991; Cokley, 2004). For example, a study measuring intrinsic motivation for subjects such as reading and math for junior high school students found significant positive correlations between intrinsic motivation and achievements (Gottfried, 1985). Studies by Haywood and Burke (1977) and Lloyd and Barenblatt (1984) have also found significant positive correlations between academic performance and intrinsic motivation. These studies have shown students who possess more self-determined forms of motivation are

more likely to stay in school and do well academically than those students with less self-determined motivation.

Intrinsic academic motivation involves engaging in academic behaviors for one's own sake (e.g. learning how to speak another language fluently because you admire the language of the culture) (Cokley, 2003). Extrinsic academic motivation involves engaging in academic behaviors because they are seen as instrumental to achieving some goal (Cokley, 2003). When students engage in academic behavior with no explicit purpose in mind, they are amotivated (Deci, 1991). Students who do not believe their behavior is linked to specific outcomes can be labeled as amotivated also. These different types of academic motivation have been linked to a variety of educational outcomes and personal adjustments (Deci, 2000.) For example, students who possess large amounts of intrinsic motivation are more likely to obtain a post-secondary education and enter a career field they are passionate about, while students who are possess larger levels of extrinsic motivation are less likely to complete a post-secondary education and more likely to find jobs that are unpleasing to their personal interest.

The research on associations between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and academic achievement has been conducted primarily with European American students or without regard to ethnic background. The little information that exists about motivation in African American students suggests that students may be more intrinsically motivated in HBCU's and that extrinsic motivation might be especially adaptive in certain settings because in coursework may not seem directly relevant to their cultural experiences (Cokley, 2003).

In conclusion, studies on Self-Determination Theory provide the understanding that greater self-determination (self-determined behavior), specifically intrinsic motivation, is linked to more positive academic outcomes. Many of these findings have been based on White populations so it is unclear if intrinsic and extrinsic motivations

have the same type of relationships with particular outcomes (academic self-concept, academic achievement) in African American populations.

Academic Self-concept and Motivation

Academic self-concept is defined as how a student views his or her academic ability when compared with other students (Cokley, 2000) and consists of attitudes, feelings, and perceptions about his or her academic skills (Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997). Academic self-concept is assumed to be related to motivation and achievement because students who have confidence in their academic abilities are believed to have better success and be more motivated (Graham, 1994, p. 57). Much research has focused on factors that contribute to better academic achievement but little attention has been focused on identifying factors that contribute to students having a positive academic self-concept. Three empirical studies (Cokley, 2000; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Graham, 1997) provide evidence that 1) a strong racial identity is valued by African American students, and 2) this strong racial identity is related to academic motivation and academic achievement. Academic self-concept can be enhanced in students who feel their environment is comforting and supportive to their education and development.

Having a high self-concept is one factor that may contribute to positive academic achievement. African American students often demonstrate higher levels of academic self-concept than their White counterparts (Graham, 1994; van Laar, 2000) but Graham (1994) points out that in several studies even low-achieving African American students report higher academic self-concept than higher-achieving White students. Previous studies have revealed African American students tend to have higher levels of academic self-concept when compared to White students (Graham, 1994). In several studies Graham found that low achieving African American students report higher levels of academic self-concept than higher achieving White students. These differences in academic self-concept may be attributed to how an individual processes their failures and success. Findings have shown African

American students do not internalize their failures as much as Whites and they do not devalue academic achievement (Graham, 1994). Studies have also found that there is no significant difference in self-concept between African American students who attend Predominately White Institutions (PWI) and African American students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Cokley, 2000; Parscarella & Terenzini, 1991). Cokley (2000) found both HBCU students and PWI students' academic self-concept increased as GPA increased, and students with higher GPAs had higher academic self-concept while students with lower GPAs had lower academic self-concepts.

Academic self-concept may be enhanced in students who feel their environment is comforting and supportive to their education and development. Fleming (1984) agrees for the significance of a supportive community as it enables the development of African American college students. Fleming points out Historically Black Colleges and Universities tend to do a better job at providing a supportive community for African American students compared to Predominately White Institutions but it would be incorrect to conclude that PWIs cannot provide a supportive connected community for Black students as well. A supportive environment offers opportunities for positive student-faculty interactions which ultimately play an important role in facilitating strong, positive academic self-concepts for African American students in both environments (Cokley, 2000).

Many researchers have investigated the achievement gap existing in different ethnic groups of students. Although the achievement gap is evident, there are other factors to take into consideration such as academic self-concept as it correlates to academic achievement. Having an understanding of each of these variables is crucial as they are few of the many factors that impact college student's success. To better understand African Americans motivational processes, it is important to understand how they view their academic self.

The Education Gap

Although African Americans continue to demonstrate a desire for education and enrollment rates have increased over the years, their enrollment and completion rates in higher education are distressingly low compared to other groups (Palmer & Maramba, 2010). In a study (Burchinal, 2011) that examined the achievement gap among White and Black students a substantial race and educational gap was present by 3 years of age, and furthermore, both family and school characteristics were related to the development, maintenance, and the widening of this racial achievement gap. The findings of this study suggest that Black children face more social risk demographically, experience more traditional parenting beliefs and practices, and attend lower

quality child care and schools than White children of the same low economic status (Burchinal, 2011). These disparities provide more evidence suggesting long term impacts of racial segregation and differential treatment.

Recent (2010) data on graduation rates from the university where this study has been conducted indicate an educational gap between African American students and other ethnic groups. Figure 1 represents 6-year graduation rates grouped by race and ethnicity. African American students account for the lowest graduation rate compared to all other ethnicities represented at the university. In order for this gap to be closed, a better understanding of the motivational processes of African American college students is needed.

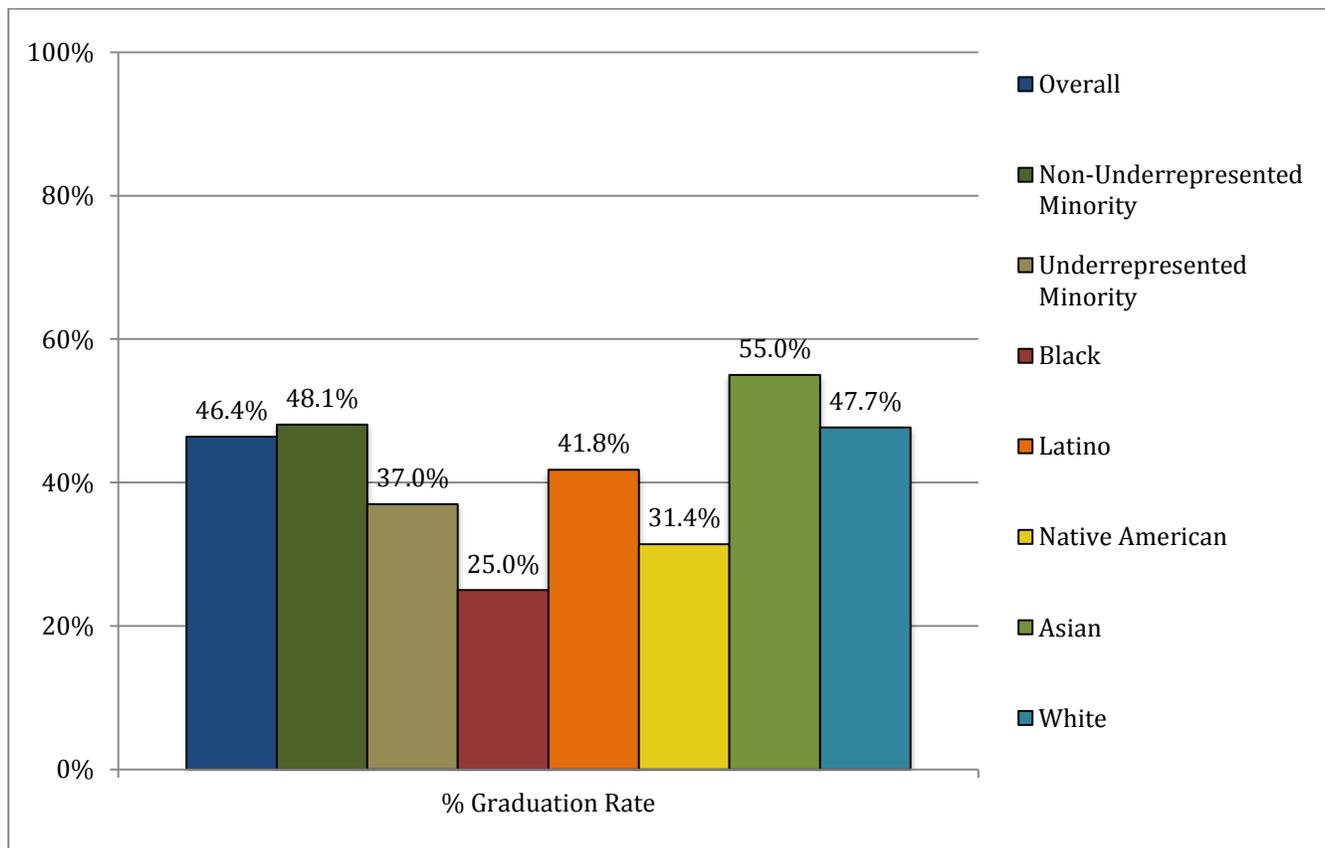


Figure 1. Six-year graduation rates at a Colorado university (College Results Online, 2009)

This study investigates the relationships among intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, amotivation, academic self-concept and academic

achievement. The model below (Figure 2) consists of motivation type (intrinsic, extrinsic amotivated), academic self-concept and academic

achievement. Consistent with previous research (Cokley, 2003), this structure proposes that motivation type and academic self-concept both contribute to academic achievement of students. Past research has found positive correlations between motivation types, self-concept and academic achievement. However, most of this work has been with European American students or without regard for ethnic background.

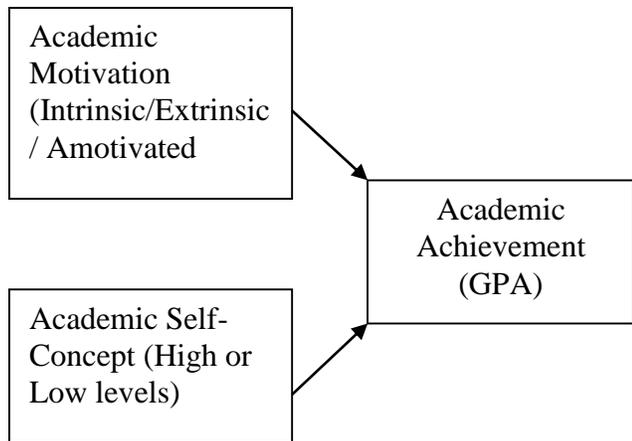


Figure 2. Model: Relationships among motivation, self-concept and academic achievement

METHOD

Participants

Data for this research were collected using quantitative methods. Self-report questionnaires were administered to 30-60 students attending a PWI in Colorado. African American students were over-sampled because they were vital to the findings of this study. All participants were at least 18 years of age and had completed at least one semester of college at the university.

Participants were initially contacted via email through several advisors who agreed to distribute a link to the questionnaires to students. Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and participants were able to decide to not be a part of the study at any time. *Table 1* shows a description of the frequencies by sex (male and female) of participants. *Table 2* shows the frequencies by ethnicity of participants.

**Table 1
Gender**

Male	Female
14	29

**Table 2
Ethnic Background**

Race/Ethnicity	Frequency
African American	19
Hispanic	9
Caucasian	9
Multi-ethnic	6

Materials

The Academic Motivational Scale (AMS) (Vallerand, Blais, Briere & Pelletier, 1989) was used to categorize student’s motivation as intrinsic or extrinsic. Three of the subscales reflect intrinsic motivation; Intrinsic Motivation To Know (IMTK), Intrinsic Motivation To Accomplish (IMTA), and Intrinsic Motivation To Experience Stimulation (IMTES); three reflect Identified Regulation (ID), Introjected Regulation (IN), and External Regulation (ER), and the seventh subscale is Amotivation (AM). The AMS consists of twenty-eight responses to the question, "Why do you go to college?" Participants chose from seven ratings (1 = Does not correspond at all; 7 = Corresponds exactly). The AMS uses a formula that gives scores for each participant ranging from -18(very little self-determination) to +18 (extreme self-determination). This score is called the self-determined index score and allows participants to be categorized as intrinsically, extrinsically or amotivated based on their responses.

Academic self-concept was measured using the Academic Self-Concept Scale (ASCS) (Reynolds, 1988). The ASCS is a Likert-scale type survey ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree and contains 40 questions. High scores indicate a more positive self-concept while

lower scored indicate a more negative self-concept.

Academic achievement and performance was identified through self-reported GPA's of participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

Three variables were used in this study: motivation (measured as intrinsic and extrinsic), self-concept, and GPA. These variables were used to examine this study's hypothesis that intrinsic motivation is positively related to GPA and higher levels of self-concept will be found in African American students regardless of their academic achievement levels.

A series of descriptive statistics were computed for each ethnic group and each variable. A MANOVA was created comparing each ethnic group on motivation and academic achievement (GPA). A chi-square was computed on the number of students from each ethnic group who were in low and high self-concept groups. A test was computed to compare intrinsic and extrinsic student GPAs.

The results section of this study is organized according to the research questions.

Research question 1: Do students from different ethnic backgrounds differ in motivation type, levels of academic self-concept, and academic achievement (GPA)?

For each of the four ethnic groups a series of Pearson correlations were computed and it was found that the self-determination index score was positively related to GPA for every ethnicity except for Caucasians. Table 3 represents motivation in terms of the Self-Determination index scores categorized by race and ethnicity. The higher the Self-Determination index score the more intrinsically motivated a student is while lower scores signifies more extrinsic motivation. Table 4 represents the mean scores for academic self-concept levels categorized as high or low for each ethnic group. A Pearson Chi-Square was computed for these groups and it was shown that these distributions were marginally significant, $\chi^2(3) = 7.451, p=.059$. Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviation for academic achievement (measured by GPA) for each ethnic group.

RESULTS

Table 3
Self-Determination Index Scores

Race/Ethnicity	Mean	Std. Deviation	Correlation with GPA and level of significance
African American	.5658	5.727	$r=.536, p<.05$
Caucasian	11.944	2.547	$r= -.151, p>.05$
Hispanic	7.902	3.286	$r=.743, p<.05$
Multi-ethnic	4.590	.8219	$r=.867, p<.05$

Table 4 (continued on next page)
Academic Self-Concept

Race/Ethnicity	High Academic Self-Concept	Low Academic Self-Concept
African American	17	2
% within Race/Ethnicity	89.5%	10.5%
Caucasian	5	4
% within Race/Ethnicity	55.6%	44.4%
Hispanic	9	0
% within Race/Ethnicity	100%	0%

Multi-ethnic	5	1
% within Race/Ethnicity	83.3%	16.7%

Table 5
Academic Achievement (measured by GPA)

Race/Ethnicity	Mean GPA	Std. Deviation
African American	2.71	0.772
Caucasian	3.62	0.242
Hispanic	3.39	0.521
Multi-ethnic	3.31	0.821

Research question 2: Do students from different ethnic backgrounds who are extrinsically motivated differ from those who are intrinsically motivated in terms of academic achievement (GPA)?

Table 6 shows the mean differences in academic achievement (measured using GPA) for students who were categorized as extrinsically motivated and students who were categorized as intrinsically motivated.

Table 6
Mean Differences in Academic Achievement Among Motivation Types

Motivation Type	N	Mean GPA	Std. Deviation
Extrinsic Academic Motivation	12	2.47	.692
Intrinsic Academic Motivation	31	3.38	.598

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study suggest significant within-group and between-group differences in regards to academic motivation among each ethnic group. African American and non-white students showed a strong correlation between GPA and motivation. Caucasians reported the highest levels of intrinsic motivation while all other ethnic groups reported different levels of extrinsic motivation. Because this study was conducted at a PWI, the environment could have had an effect on student’s motivation type. Caucasian students at this university may feel a strong sense of belonging and relatedness which could foster more intrinsic motivation in these students while non-white students may not feel a low sense of belonging and are unable to relate to their peers which can result in more extrinsic motivation. Students who are doing well

academically have some way found some relatedness which increased their intrinsic motivation.

Academic self-concept was divided into high and low levels. A Chi Square was conducted to determine where the ethnic groups differed in the proportion of individuals who were classified as having low or high levels of academic self-concept. African Americans, Hispanics and Multi-ethnic students reported high levels of academic self-concept and Caucasian students included a combination of individuals who were favorable and less positive about their academic self-concept. These distributed turned out to be marginally significant. Consistent with prior research, it was found that African American students maintain a high self-concept regardless of their academic achievement levels. Various reasoning’s have been recognized for this occurrence. A few attribution researchers

(Graham, 1994; van Laar, 2000) have suggested that African American students make external attributions (ex. they blame biased teachers) about their academic performance, which allows them to maintain a high academic self-concept despite their lower grades.

Academic achievement was measured using self-reported GPAs. Caucasians, Hispanics and Multi-ethnic groups held a GPA of 3.0 and above while African Americans held an average of 2.71. For this study academic self-concept was the weakest predictor for academic achievement among ethnic groups. Consistent with prior research, it was found students who possess extrinsic motivation have lower GPAs than those who possess intrinsic motivation. Interestingly, individual students possessed more intrinsic motivation than the ethnic group they were associated with as a whole.

IMPLICATIONS

This investigation is beneficial to the minor research that had been done on motivation as it pertains to ethnicity. It is important for researchers and educators to understand how self-concept affects academic performance so more schools may be structured in a way that meets the motivational needs of all ethnic backgrounds. This research may show the need to form more beneficial services on college campuses that will aid students in the formations of higher self-concepts and encourage students' to remain motivated academically. This investigation may help researchers better understand factors that are preventing the achievement gap from being closed.

For future implications, this model should be replicated with more diverse samples and tested against other credible models including replicating this study at a HBCU to compare the results and to determine if these same motivational processes differ or are consistent based on the type of institution. Furthermore, future research could compare the motivational processes of African American students who attend a highly selective university (i.e. Harvard

University) and students who attend a less selective university. This research should stimulate more studies to be done investigating the academic motivation and academic self-concept of African American students at all educational levels.

Practical implications for school counselors, professors, and cultural center directors can be implemented. As a professor, assignments can be constructed in a way that connects students to their cultural and ethnic background. Self-concept may be a protective factor and a great coping skill so it should be encouraged by school counselors, professors and cultural center directors especially in students who are struggling academically.

LIMITATIONS

There are several noteworthy limitations of this study. First, the use of self-reported GPAs rather than school-recorded GPAs could have impacted the actuality of academic achievement among ethnic groups. Students who self-report their GPAs tend to report more positive characteristics of themselves. It is unclear how the use of self-reported GPAs may have exactly affected the results of this study. Second, this study was conducted at a PWI so the sample was not very diverse. Lastly, this survey was distributed during finals weeks which is a highly stressful time for many students so the academic self-concept levels of student may not be accurate due to the level of stress students are under during finals week.

Without these limitations present, this study provides early models to assist educators, policy makers, and other researchers with the understanding of factors and processes that affect the academic motivation and academic self-concept of African American students.

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