COUNTERSTEREOTYPIC IDENTITY AMONG HIGH-ACHIEVING BLACK STUDENTS

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Introduction

This article examines how racial stereotypes affect achievement and identity formation among low income, urban Black adolescents. Specifically, the major question addressed is: how do high-achieving Black students succeed academically despite negative stereotypes of their intellectual abilities? Results indicate that high-achieving Black youth, compared to high achievers of other ethnicities, view intelligence as a more flexible as opposed to fixed entity and place greater salience on intellectual abilities. Additionally, high-achieving Black males place less salience on sports involvement than marginally-achieving Black males. Implications of these findings are discussed from a developmental psychology perspective.

Background

Racial stereotypes are readily apparent in numerous realms of American life and African Americans are the most visibly stereotyped racial group in the U.S. Many racial stereotypes center on human abilities such as intelligence, where Black Americans are stigmatized as innately inferior, and athletic prowess, where they are thought to naturally excel. Most research on racial stereotypes focuses on their formation and prevalence among White Americans. There has been less research on the impact of racial stereotypes on minority group members. The one major contribution in this area, research on *stereotype threat,* examines the immediate, situational effect of racial stereotypes. Previous studies in this area have shown that racial stereotypes can affect both scholastic and athletic performance (e.g., Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999). Nevertheless, there is a need for more research on the developmental impact of racial stereotypes with respect to identity formation and academic motivation.

Recent scholarship has begun to fill that void and bring developmental issues to light (e.g., Harpalani, 2005; Slaughter-Defoe, 2012; Pauker et al., 2016). Copping et al. (2013) found that Black and White children learn academic and sports stereotypes before adolescence, and Evans et. al. (2011) reported that early adolescent Black boys' views of racial stereotypes influenced their academic self-concepts. Okeke et al. (2009) found that for early adolescent Black boys and girls, belief in racial stereotypes was related to lower perceived academic competence, and that this effect increased when race was more salient to children's identities. These findings illustrate the impact of racial stereotypes on Black youths' psychological development.

Given this impact, one can posit that in order to maintain high academic self-concept and performance, Black youth may need to develop particular types of identities to counter negative racial stereotypes. Von Hippel, Hawkins, & Schooler (2001) reported that among both Black and White Americans, counterstereotypic performance was more salient to self-concept. In their study, among participants who performed well academically, Black Americans were more likely than White Americans to define their sense of self around intelligence, whereas among high-performing athletes, White Americans were more likely to define their sense of self around athletics. These findings suggest that counterstereotypic identity and performance within a stereotyped domain (such as intelligence for Black Americans) are related. If individuals defy racial stereotypes, such defiance is salient to their identities.

The current study further explores counterstereotypic identity and performance by examining beliefs about intelligence and salience of intellectual and athletic abilities among ethnically diverse high achieving and marginally achieving youth. The *counterstereotypic identity* hypothesis introduced here posits that individuals who defy stereotypes related to their group membership, such as high academic achieving Black students, employ specific beliefs and coping strategies related to the

domain in which they defy the stereotype (e.g., intellectual ability), resulting in greater identity salience for that domain. These coping and identity-related responses presumably help Black students demonstrate academic resilience.

Spencer's (1995) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), which highlights the linkages between coping and identity, was the overarching theoretical framework employed for this study (see Figure 1). PVEST consists of five components which delineate a model for individual human development. The first component, *net vulnerability level*, aims to capture the impact of context; it consists of risk contributors and protective factors. Risk contributors are factors that may predispose individuals for adverse outcomes, and these can be offset by appropriate protective factors. For African American youth, race itself—manifested through experiences of stereotypes— is a risk contributor and socialization strategies that may offset the effects of stereotypes serve as protective factors.

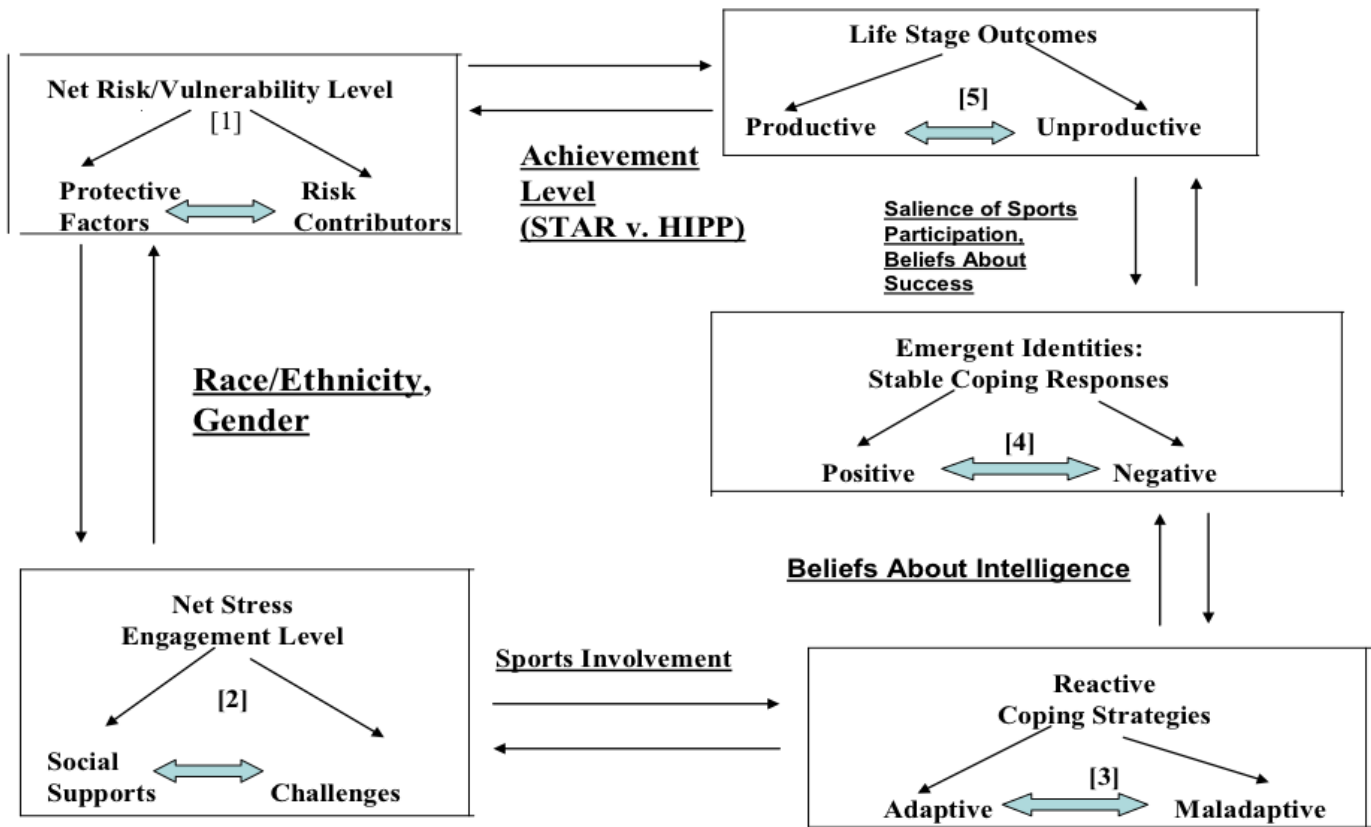Figure 1: Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems of Theory (PVEST)

Figure 1: Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)
(Spencer, 1995)

Net stress engagement refers to the actual experiences that challenge an individual's well being, along with the supports available to manage these experiences. These are essentially risks and protective factors that are manifested in everyday life. For example, not all youth of color encounter racial stereotypes in the same way or with the same salience. While such stereotypes are a risk factor they are experienced differently by gender and other factors, often dependent on available supports. This second component of PVEST reflects these nuanced experiences; it aims to link the broader risks associated with features such as race and gender with the large within-group individual variation in everyday experiences.

Encounters of stress facilitate *reactive coping strategies*, the third component of PVEST, which are employed to resolve dissonance-producing situations. Primary (reactive) coping processes are the immediate, psychological responses to experiences. In response to stressors and in conjunction with supports, reactive coping methods are employed to resolve dissonance-producing situations. Normative cognitive maturation makes awareness of dissonance acute and unavoidable.

Reactive coping responses include problem-solving strategies that youth employ to deal with stress and dissonance. One question broadly addressed here is how high achieving African American youth cope with negative stereotypes of their intellectual abilities.

Self-appraisal is a key factor in coping and identity, and how individuals view themselves depends on their perceptions of contextual conditions, expectations and processes. As youth employ various coping strategies, self-appraisal continues and strategies that produce desirable results for the ego are replicated. Coupled together, these yield *emergent identities*—the fourth component of PVEST. Emergent identities define how individuals view themselves within and between their various contexts of development (e.g. family, school, neighborhood) and may show stability over time and space. Another question addressed here is what is the relative salience of intellectual and academic identity for high achieving Black youth?

Identity lays the foundation for future perception, self-appraisal and behavior, such as goal seeking, as youth cope and engage with their environments in the pursuit of competence and self efficacy. *Life-stage outcomes* are the fifth component of PVEST. Productive outcomes include school achievement, self-esteem, and good health. Academic resilience—high achievement in spite of negative racial stereotypes—is the key outcome of interest here.

Research Design

Data were drawn from a longitudinal study of academic resilience among low-income (meeting federal poverty guidelines) public high school students in a large Northeastern city. The sample included two groups: a high achieving (A/B grade average) group ("STAR"), and a marginally achieving (C/D grade average) comparison group ("HIPP").[1] Participants completed annual psychological assessment surveys for this study and data from the baseline ($n = 779$) and first follow-up ($n = 638$) surveys were analyzed. Mean age of the participants at the time of the baseline survey was 15.4 years (± 1.2). The racial/ethnic composition of the baseline sample was: STAR – 46% Black, 21% Asian, 13% Latina/o, 10% White, and 10% Other/Unknown; HIPP – 73% Black, 4% Asian, 22% Latina/o, 3% White, and 13% Other/Unknown. Both the STAR and HIPP samples included a larger percentage of female students, but there were no significant gender differences in the results except where noted.

Methods and Analysis

The Beliefs About Intelligence (BAI) scale (Dweck, 1999) was administered in both the baseline and first follow-up surveys. The BAI assesses the degree to which respondents believe intelligence is a fixed or malleable trait; it provides a measure of academic self-efficacy, or belief that one can perform adequately and cope adaptively with new intellectual challenges. This measure contains six items, each scored on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Factor analyses of the BAI yielded one factor six item solutions for both the baseline and first follow-up administrations. Subsequent to factor analysis, raw scores of student responses for each subscale were standardized by conversion to area T conversion scores. For the baseline survey, the mean standardized BAI score was 48.2, the standard deviation was 9.7 and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.78. For the first follow-up survey, the mean standardized BAI score was 48.0, the standard deviation was 9.9 and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.81.
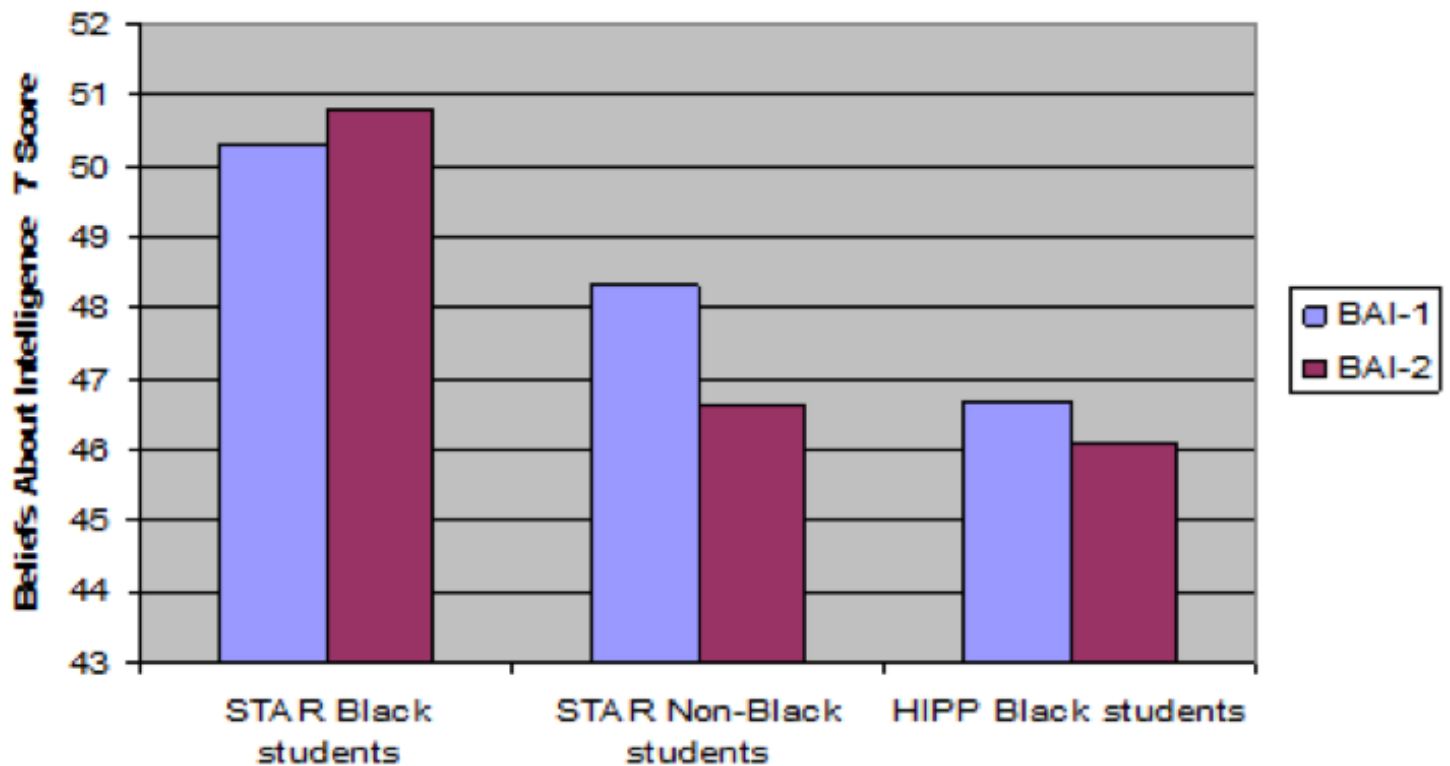
Other measures included several individual items related to students' beliefs about success. Using a five-point Likert scale (0 to 4), respondents rated the importance of various items, denoting attributes such as studying hard and being rich, for attaining success. (Flanagan, 1998). The item of interest here is "Being smart or intelligent" ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 0.95$). Additionally, a different component of this study utilized the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Full scaling and analyses for the AIMS are available elsewhere (Harpalani, 2005). Here, the findings of interest involve the Salience of Sports Participation (SSP) subscale, a standardized four item with a seven-point Likert scale measure ($M = 34.0$; $SD = 27.0$, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient = 0.87) which assesses the importance of sports involvement to an individual's identity and sense of competence. Both the "Being smart or intelligent" item and the SSP subscale were included only in the first follow-up survey.

For each measure, least squares ANOVA was used to compare various race/achievement level groups. One set of analyses compared three groups: STAR (high achieving) Black students, STAR non-Black students and HIPP (marginally achieving) Black students; HIPP non-Black students were not included here due to small sample size. A second set of analyses included only STAR (high achieving) students, who were classified by one of five racial/ethnic categories (Black, Asian, White, Latina/o, Other/Unknown).

Results

The first analysis was a 3x2 least squares ANOVA with the baseline Beliefs About Intelligence scale (BAI-1) as the dependent variable and race/achievement level (3 levels – HIPP Black students, STAR Black student, STAR non-Black students) and gender as class variables. This model (see Table 1) yielded a main effect for race/achievement level. STAR Black students ($LSM = 50.3$) scored significantly higher than HIPP Black students ($LSM = 46.7$; $p = .0005$ using Fisher's LSD) and STAR non-Black students ($LSM = 48.3$; $p = .03$), indicating that the former demonstrated more flexible views of intelligence. This analysis was repeated for the first follow-up Beliefs About Intelligence scale (BAI-2) (see Table 2), with an identical main effect for race/achievement level. STAR Black students ($LSM = 50.8$) scored significantly higher than HIPP Black students ($LSM = 46.1$; $p < .0001$ using Fisher's LSD) and STAR non-Black students ($LSM = 46.6$; $p < .0001$). Figure 2 illustrates these results, which lend support to the counterstereotypic identity hypothesis.

Figure 2: Differences in beliefs about intelligence scale scores by race/achievement levels
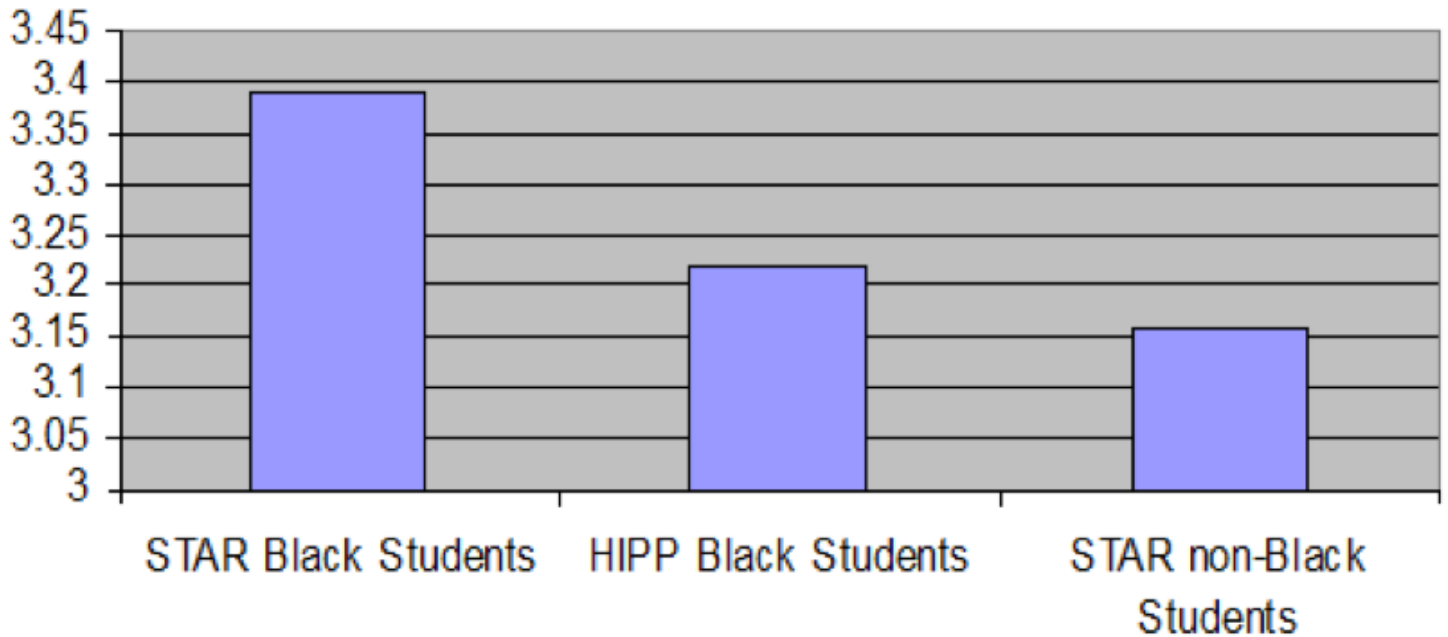

To further elucidate racial/ethnic differences within the STAR (high achieving) sample, a 5x2 least squares ANOVA was performed on the BAI-1 and BAI-2 with race/ethnicity (5 levels – Black, Asian, White, Latina/o, Other/Unknown) as independent variables. Both models showed main effects for race/ethnicity. In the BAI-1 model ($F = 2.39$; $p = .01$, $r^2 = 0.042$), Black students had a least squares mean of 50.3, significantly higher than Asian students ($LSM = 46.6$; $p < .002$). Similarly, BAI-2 model ($F = 3.22$; $p = .0009$, $r^2 = 0.067$), Black students had a least squares mean of 50.8, significantly higher than Asian students ($LSM = 44.5$; $p < 0.0001$), Latina/o students ($LSM = 47.7$; $p < .05$), and Other/Unknown students ($LSM = 47.4$; $p < .05$). The results for BAI-1 and BAI-2 in the high achieving (STAR) sample are also consistent with the counterstereotypic identity hypothesis.

Results for the beliefs about success item, "Being smart or intelligent," also supported the counterstereotypic identity hypothesis. As shown in Figure 3, STAR Black students rated "Being smart or intelligent" ($LSM = 3.39$) as more important for success in America than did other STAR students ($LSM = 3.16$, $p < .02$ using Fisher's LSD; HIPP Black students did not differ significantly from either group). Moreover, the STAR (high achieving) Black and non-Black groups did not differ on other items related to academic achievement, such as "Studying Hard" (although they did score significantly higher on these items than the HIPP (marginally achieving) group). This suggests that the difference between high achieving Black and non-Black students is specifically manifested in the salience of intellectual abilities—the most stereotyped domain—and not a general phenomenon
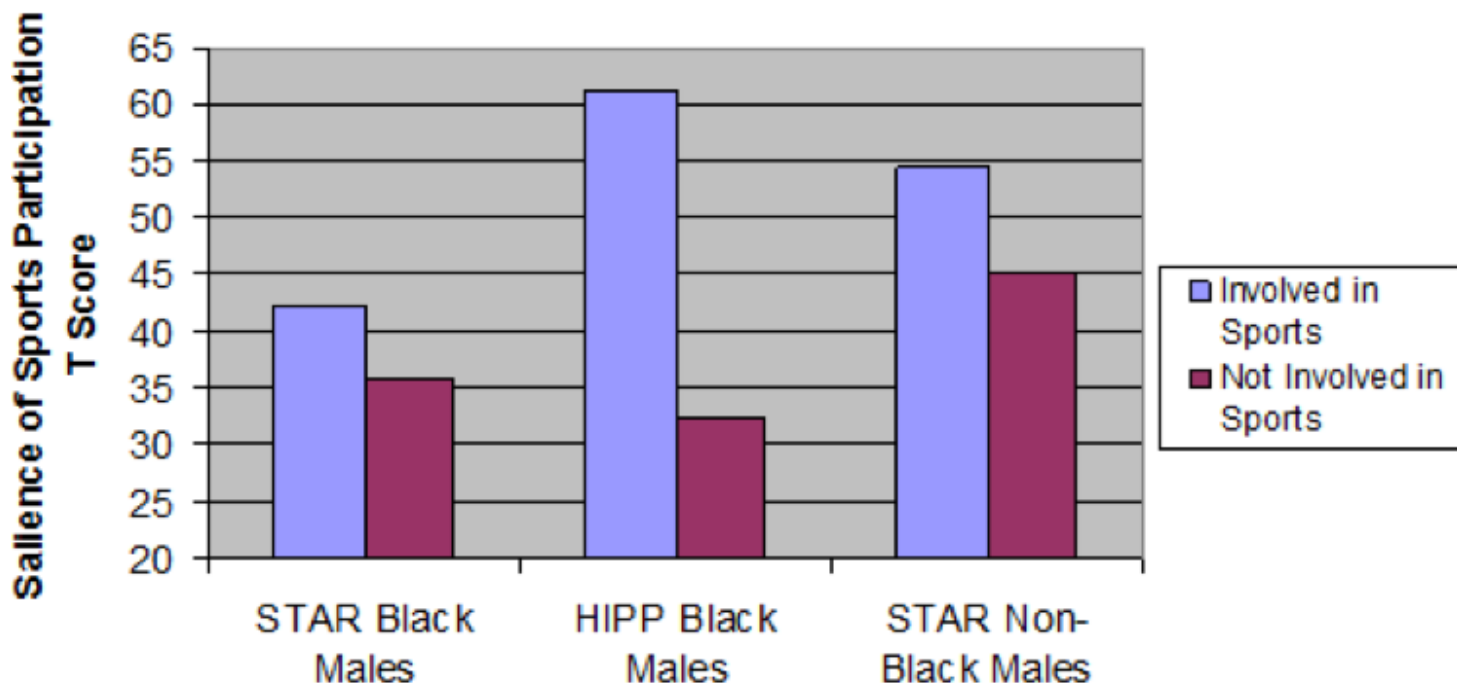
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related to beliefs about academic effort. These results are consistent with the findings of Von Hippel, Hawkins and Schooler (2001) and augment the case for counterstereotypic coping and identity processes.

Figure 3: Ratings of the importance of "Being smart or intelligent" as a means to success in America

Additionally, for males in the sample, the results for the Salience of Sports Participation (SSP) subscale provided support for the counterstereotypic identity hypothesis. Figure 4 shows that for STAR males (particularly STAR Black males), sports involvement did not have much identity salience; there were no significant differences in SSP scores by sports involvement. In contrast, for HIPP Black males, there was a large effect for sports involvement; those who were involved in sports ($M = 61.2$) scored much higher ($p < .0001$) than those who were not ($M = 32.5$). This finding indicates that high achieving males, in contrast to their marginally achieving peers, do not place salience on sports involvement—perhaps because academic/intellectual prowess is more important to them. Also, within the high achieving group, STAR Black males also scored lower (though not significantly) on SSP than STAR White, Asian, Latino and Other/Unknown males. These results are consistent with the counterstereotypic identity hypothesis for males (females generally showed much lower salience for sports participation than males regardless of race/achievement level).

Figure 4: Differences in salience of sports participation by race/achievement level and sports involvement for males

Discussion

The pattern of results reported here from the BAI, SSP and the "Being Smart or Intelligent" item, all support the counterstereotypic identity hypothesis. Taken together, they suggest that high achieving Black youth employ counterstereotypic adaptive coping strategies, such as adopting flexible views of intelligence, in order to negotiate racial stereotypes in academic settings, and that these strategies help determine identity salience and sense of competence for these youth.

Of particular interest is the relationship between counterstereotypic identity and resilience. From a developmental perspective, counterstereotypic identity during adolescence is an extension of earlier processes during middle and late childhood. During this period, Black children with Afrocentric attitudes show higher self esteem and greater resilience than those with Eurocentric preferences (Spencer, 1982, 1984); Afrocentricity may serve as a protective factor for these children, allowing them to cope effectively with negative messages about Blackness.

As children begin to learn more complex ideas about race, including stereotypes regarding intellectual and athletic endeavors, they also engage Erikson's (1950/1963) fourth stage of Industry vs. Inferiority. Demonstration of competence becomes a central developmental task and counterstereotypic identity may help older children and adolescents cope with racial stereotypes, as they negotiate their own sense of competence and identity.

Further study is necessary to elucidate these phenomena. Do more flexible views of intelligence follow or precede the demonstration of academic competence? Is it particular to low income urban Black youth who are high achievers or is this coping strategy also present among more affluent Black youth at elite private high schools? How do these groups fare academically as they transition from adolescence to adulthood, and how does the specific college setting impact their success? Given their flexible views of intelligence, are the high achieving Black youth from low income urban backgrounds as vulnerable to stereotype threats as their more affluent counterparts at elite universities. Future empirical work is necessary to shed light on these questions.

Nevertheless, one potential application is the use of direct counterstereotypic strategies in educational interventions, particularly those designed to close the Black-White achievement gap. In fact, Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002) have designed an intervention that reduces stereotype threat among Black college students by teaching them to view intelligence as a flexible entity. Similar interventions could be designed for adolescents, and hopefully these interventions would serve to negate messages of Black intellectual inferiority and promote academic resilience.

[1] STAR stands for Success Through Academic Resilience. HIPP stands for Health Information Providers and Promoters, denoting an after-school program in which the marginally achieving students participated.

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Appendix:

Table 1: Least Squares ANOVA for the Baseline Beliefs About Intelligence scale: Race/Achievement Level and Gender as Independent Variables

Source	*df*	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	*F* value	*p*
Model	5	1373.02	274.60	2.94	.01
Error	693	64770.27	93.46		
Corrected Total	698	66143.29			
Source		Type III Sum of Squares	Mean Square	*F* value	*p*

Source	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F value	p
Race/Achievement Level	2	1175.81	587.91	6.29	.002
Gender	1	152.93	152.93	1.64	.20
Race/Achievement x Gender	2	410.44	205.22	2.20	.11

Note: R-square for this model = .021. Race/Achievement Level included three levels: marginally achieving (HIPP) Black students, high achieving (STAR) Black students, and high achieving (STAR) non-Black students.

Table 2: Least Squares ANOVA for the First Follow-up Beliefs About Intelligence scale: Race/Achievement Level and Gender as Independent Variables

Source	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F value	p
Model	5	2506.42	501.28	5.39	< .0001
Error	567	52703.81	92.95		
Corrected Total	572	55210.23			
Source		**Type III Sum of Squares**	**Mean Square**	**F value**	**p**
Race/Achievement Level	2	2089.79	1044.90	11.24	< .0001
Gender	1	55.43	55.43	.60	.44
Race/Achievement x Gender	2	3.39	1.69	.02	.98

Note: R-square for this model = .045. Race/Achievement Level included three levels: marginally achieving (HIPP) Black students, high achieving (STAR) Black students, and high achieving (STAR) non-Black students.