

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACIAL ETHNIC IDENTITY AS A DETERMINANT OF POSSIBLE SELVES AND GOAL ORIENTATION OF AFRICAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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**ABSTRACT:** *Many students often fall short of their goals despite their great aspirations to academic achievement. One of the factors to this impediment especially among the Africans increasingly arriving in the United States is segregation which impairs racial-ethnic identity evoking stigma. This minority group is however yet to be studied probably by sheer ignorance or because of their racial homogenization with African Americans. Indeed this conflation ignores the vast socio-cultural and historical differences. This paper examines the relationship between racial-ethnic identity as a determinant of possible selves and goal orientation of African undergraduate students in the United States. The paper thus intends to identify the manner in which racial-ethnicity shapes what goals the African students in the US set for themselves. A sample of 204 students was conveniently drawn from undergraduate programs in four schools (two from Alabama and two from Georgia) in the Southeast United States. The students comprised black African undergraduate students irrespective of their immigration statuses. Using goal orientation Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS) and Racial-Ethnic Identity Assessment (REIA) data was collected after which was subjected to descriptive and multiple regression methods for analysis. The study found out that there is no relationship between racial ethnic identity and goal orientations.*

**KEYWORDS:** Goal Orientation, Racial-Ethnic Identity, Immigrants, African Undergraduate Students, United States, Multiple identities.

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### INTRODUCTION

There has been a steady flow of African immigrants into the United States especially since the Hart-Cellar immigration act (also known as the family unification and refugee law) that saw removal of racial and national barriers in the US (Ludden, 1995). This however has not been adequately documented posing a challenge of lack of literature on these immigrants. Attributed to this could be mainly the conflation of Africans with African Americans. This conflation continues even with the demonstrated historical and socio-cultural differences in literature (Ogbu, 1983; Munoz, & Ortega, 1997; Buriel, 2012).

An explicit difference between African immigrants and African-Americans is the distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities (Ogbu 1983). Ogbu posited that African immigrants are voluntary immigrants; persons who emigrated from their host country more or less by choice. Voluntary immigrants generally have an ‘instrumental’ approach to their host society and their institutions. That is, they hold the society and their institutions as valuable and useful. Ogbu also pointed out that African-Americans are involuntary immigrants; persons whose minority position is a result of historical subjection after conquest or forced migration (i.e., descendants of slaves). Involuntary immigrants tend to have an oppositional approach to their society and its institutions (Ogbu, 1991).

According to Ogbu (1991), instrumental and oppositional approaches translate into marked differences in the perception of academic institutions. Persons with an instrumental approach to society (African immigrants) generally have higher expectations about the importance of education than involuntary minorities and view schools as sites where they learn and develop skills that promote their economic advancement and thus become high academic achievers. Persons with an oppositional approach to society (African-Americans) tend to be more aware of the racial discrepancies and believe that a high educational status might not necessarily lead to acceptance into American society. As a result, African-Americans do not trust or view schools as opportunity sites, and experience a significantly greater amount of persistent academic failure as compared to voluntary groups.

Although Takyi (2002) includes education as a reason for African immigration to the United States, he does not describe the educational experiences of Africans during their studies in the United States. One potential reason for this omission is the categorical methods of the U.S. Census Bureau—African Immigrants are not separated from African-Americans. Such categorization makes it difficult to identify and study African immigrants. This is supported by claims by Chidima (2003) that the American society does not make a clear distinction between the African ethnic identity and the African-American racial identity.

## LITERATURE UNDERPINNING

### Racial Ethnic Identity

Focusing on African undergraduate students in the United States, there is evidence of foreign students facing more adjustment problems in relation to universities in host countries than do their native counterparts (Goyol, 2002; Kuo, 2014). According to Verghese (2002) a typical scenario numerous experienced in most America's higher institutions of learning is that of a professor who comes into a class and speaks in a language that the African student have a fair degree of mastery, this forcing the student to intently and intensely (Mori, 2000) focus. A question directed to such a student demanding a rapid response sends a message of horror and paralysis to the student making them unable to think thus are left behind in most cases without knowledge of what the Professor was even teaching.

Like other immigrants to the United States, African students earn a living through traditional entry-level employment: domestic service, yard-work, factory work, gas pumping, home-health aiding and security guarding among others. When these kinds of jobs are compounded with the demands of attending school, it makes for quite a difficult life. Physical difficulties may even dwarf the psychosocial problems these students have to deal with. One of the tasks immigrants face in assimilating in the United States is learning how to classify themselves in the American racial classification scheme (Walters, 2000). In a society where people are defined racially, economically, ethnically and linguistically, most of these immigrants juggle with multiple identities. The African immigrants have to negotiate the problem of identity. They must negotiate new identities that can no longer depend on the security of nationality and ethnicity but may neither be exactly African America. Although universities across the United States and the Census Bureau continue to lump all people of African descent together as black or African American, there are differences in self identities.

The presentation of the self as an autonomous independent identity has been criticized as giving short shrift to the context within which identities are constructed (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995). Ethnic identity is an important way in which identities are constructed. Tajfel (1981) defined ethnic identity as that part of an individual's self concept that derives from his or her knowledge of his or her membership in a social or ethnic group or groups together with a value and emotional significance attached to that membership.

Most undergraduate students are adolescents. This is a period where, according to Erikson (1968, cited in Blakemore (2008), teens are looking for their self identity, specifically in the future (possible selves). Racial ethnic identity is part of this process. Phinney (1996) contended that there are at least three aspects of ethnicity that may account for its psychological importance: (1) the cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors that distinguish ethnic groups (2) the subjective sense of ethnic group membership (i.e., ethnic identity) that is held by group members and (3) the experiences associated with minority status, including powerlessness, discrimination and prejudice.

Pegg and Plybon (2005) examined the psychometric qualities of two subscales of the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM): Ethnic Identity Exploration and Ethnic Identity Commitment. They used cross sectional data of a larger study that had assessed the impact of a cultural intervention to examine the possibility of an enhanced ethnic identity and related cultural constructs to prevent or delay the use of drugs and risky sexual behaviors. A total of 134 African Americans girls were used for the study. They found psychometric support for the two subscales accordingly.

Erikson (1968) viewed the identity structure as a goal-oriented configuration of identity elements created not only through the interaction of the individual and society but also through multiple cultural goals that guide child rearing practices. The literature on the self and the future suggests the inherent great desire to have the future in view. But because knowing the future is impossible, Oyserman & Markus (1993) argued that adolescents seek identity from the behavior and attainments of similar others as well as from their own current behaviors and skills. These social activities added to the racial or ethnic identity combine to become the future selves. Greene and DeBacker (2004) posited that schools are a powerful socio-cultural context that can encourage students to envision futures that are not constrained by race/ethnicity or other stereotypes.

Some social identities like ethnicity develop throughout the lifespan due to the impact of reference groups in their formation (Leonard, 1995). Further, Leonard indicated that the reference groups provide three things with respect to social identities. First, they provide a determination of the profile traits, competencies, and values for a particular social identity. Secondly, they provide an establishment and communication of the relative value and status of various social roles or identities. Thirdly, they act as a basis of social feedback regarding one's level of these traits, competencies, and values. Peers are significant reference groups among adolescents.

Racial-ethnic identity has been linked to academic competence. Oyserman, Harrison and Bybee (2001) found on their "embedded achievement" component (which focuses on the extent that academic achievement is viewed as integral to or embedded into one's racial-ethnic group), that by defining academic achievement as an in-group-defining trait or value can serve to focus attention and motivation on ways to learn, do well and succeed. This bolsters academic efficacy by making achievement a function of in-group membership. Kao (2000) reported similar

findings when she undertook a study to examine how group images affect self perception. She argued that vivid stereotype images of ethnic groups formed a reference point constructing success among ethnic young people. This, in turn, informs their goal orientation whether to approach or to avoid.

Bagley and Copeland (1994) examined the African and African American graduate students' racial identity and personal problem-solving strategies. They found no significant differences in the coping ability of students from these two groups. They, however, found differences in racial identities among the groups. They postulated that these differences had implications for cross-cultural counseling.

Racial-ethnic identity was seen as gendered by Oyserman, Bybee and Terry (2003) for two reasons. First because racial stereotypes were gendered; and secondly because socialization practices were gendered. Phinney (1996) examined commonalities across various models of racial ethnic identity development and proposed a three stage progression. He summarized the various models posited by researchers for minority identity development as shown in Table 1:

**Table 1. Phinney's Summary of Marcia's Ego Identity Statuses (Top) and proposed Stages of Ethnic Identity (bottom)**

<b>Marcia 1966</b>	<b>Diffusion Identity</b>	<b>Foreclosure Identity</b>	<b>Crisis Identity*</b>	<b>Moratorium Identity</b>	<b>Achievement Identity</b>
<b>Cross 1978</b>		Pre- Encounter	Encounter	Internalization	<b>Internalization</b>
<b>Kim 1981</b>		White identified	Awakening to social political awareness	Redirect to Asian American consciousness	<b>Incorporation</b>
<b>Atkinson, Morten &amp; Sue 1993</b>		Conformity: Preference of values of dominant culture	Dissonance: Questioning and challenging old attitudes	Resistance and immersion: Rejection of dominant culture	<b>Synergistic articulation and awareness</b>
<b>Phinney 1989</b>		<b>Unexplained ethnic identity: Lack of exploration of ethnicity: Diffusion or foreclosure</b>	<b>Ethnic identity search (Moratorium)</b>	<b>Ethnic identity search (Moratorium)</b>	<b>Achieved ethnic identity clear, confident sense of own ethnicity</b>

\*Identity crisis is not one of Marcia's original four statuses.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is founded on a study that was carried out in the Spring Semester of 2007 on African undergraduate students living in the United States. The target population involved undergraduate students who were African and within the Spring semester in the year 2007 and 2006. The students ought to have both their parents born in Africa and had to be willing to participate in the study. The study focused only on Black African undergraduate students, a

very specific subset of the population. The sample combined the first generation and second generation Kenyan groups. A total sample of 204 students was therefore conveniently drawn from undergraduate programs in four schools (two from Alabama and two from Georgia) in the Southeast United States. It is conceivable that there would be differences in racial ethnic identities and goal orientations between these two groups considering their different cultural generational environments. In undertaking the study, the author adopted goal orientation Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS) and Racial- Ethnic Identity Assessment (REIA) through which data was collected. Data analysis of the collected data was done by descriptive and multiple regression methods.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The growth of the African immigrant population in the United States, the conflation of African-American and African immigrant populations, and the limited educational research on African immigrants was the impetus for this study. To address this gap in educational research, this study identifies racial-ethnic identity as one of the motivational characteristics of African immigrants in setting up their educational goals. This study in particular sought to measure the possible selves of students looking at their racial ethnicity in relation to academic goal orientation of undergraduate African immigrant students.

A study by Oyserman and her colleagues (1995, 1998, 2002, 2004) found possible selves, whether they used a simple count of the number of expected or feared possible selves or, they used balanced possible selves, to have means with a wide range of possible selves from 0.42 to 3.23. Findings from the current study fall within this range. Although findings fall within this range, the range is quite wide considering that possible selves are calculated on a four point scale. More research is needed to understand these varied responses. For example, a study of African American and Latino students, Oyserman et al. (2002) reported a mean of 3.10 for balanced possible selves, considerably higher than the balanced possible selves reported in this study. It is not clear whether this discrepancy represents cultural differences or problems with the way African students.

Studies about the racial ethnic identity of African Americans and Latinos (Oyserman et al., 2001, 2003, 2006 ) indicate means, standard deviations and Cronbach alphas with the following ranges: connectedness ( $M = 4.13$  to  $4.15$ ;  $SD = .70$  to  $.79$ ;  $\alpha = .74$  to  $.78$ ), awareness of racism ( $M = 3.46$  to  $3.75$ ;  $SD = .60$  to  $.71$ ;  $\alpha = .62$  to  $.81$ ), and embedded achievement ( $M = 3.69$  to  $3.75$ ;  $SD = .71$  to  $.88$ ;  $\alpha = .58$  to  $.65$ ). The means obtained in this study were slightly higher for connectedness and embedded achievement (see Table 2). This may be explained by the previous findings of Africans as collectivists and African Americans as more individualists. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), the collectivists are motivated toward strengthening connectedness to others, whereas individualists are motivated toward self expression and independence. Hui and Triandis (1986) viewed individualism as “the subordination of the goals of the collectivists to individual goals, and a sense of independence and lack of concern for others,” (p.244-245) whereas they viewed collectivism as a grouping of a diverse array of beliefs and behaviors that: consider the implications of one’s own decisions and/or actions for other people, share material resources, share non-material resources, are susceptible to social influence, have self presentation and lacework, share outcomes and have feelings of involvement in others’ lives.



The means also revealed lower values in the students' awareness of racism. This may explain the differences between African Americans' view of racism from those of their African counterparts. Whereas Africans may view American Whites as different, they may not view them as former slave masters or even colonizers as they would the British. It is also notable that Kenya is predominantly Black; therefore, the students' awareness of racism may not be as high as that of African Americans who are constantly faced with the question of racial-ethnic identity. It is possible that if there were students from South Africa or Zimbabwe, which were colonized for a longer period of time, and whose white populations are higher, these values would have been skewed differently (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach alphas of Possible Selves, Goal orientation and Racial Ethnic Identity**

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Dependent Variable			
Possible Selves	1.55	.98	N/A
Possible Selves Exp. total	2.54	1.09	N/A
Possible Selves Avoid. total	2.24	1.16	N/A
Independent Variables			
A. Goal Orientation			
Mastery Orientation	4.72	.45	.796
Performance Approach	2.57	1.05	.821
Performance Avoidance	2.72	1.24	.829
B. Racial Ethnic Identity			
Connectedness	4.53	.62	.744
Connectedness total	18.11	2.49	N/A
Embedded Achievement	4.55	.54	.534
Embedded Achievement total	18.21	2.15	N/A
Awareness of Racism	2.96	.87	.573
Awareness of Racism total	11.75	3.44	N/A

*Possible Selves and Interactions between Goal Orientation and Racial Ethnic Identity*

A four step hierarchical regression was used to examine whether the relationship between possible selves and goal orientation varied by racial ethnic identity. Steps one through three were identical steps used to produce the model in Table 3.

**Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Demographic, Racial Ethnic Identity, and Goal Orientation Variables Predicting Possible Selves**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				
Length of Stay in US	.45	.09	.36**	
Four Year University	.37	.14	.19**	
Step 2				
Length of Stay in US	.45	.09	.36**	
Four Year University	.37	.14	.19**	
Connectedness	-.04	.14	-.03	
Embedded Achievement	.02	.16	.01	
Awareness of Racism	-.01	.08	-.00	
Gender	.06	.14	.03	
				.002
Step 3				
Length of Stay in US	.46	.09	.37**	
Four Year University	.40	.14	.21**	
Connectedness	-.14	.14	-.09	
Embedded Achievement	.04	.16	.02	
Awareness of Racism	.02	.08	.02	
Gender	.08	.14	.04	
Mastery Orientation	.47	.17	.21**	
Perform. Approach Orientation	.06	.09	.06	
Perform. Avoid. Orientation	-.06	.07	-.07	
				.043*

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ;

Step 1:  $R^2 = .167$ ,  $F(2,167) = 16.699$ ,  $p = .000$

Step 2:  $R^2 = .168$ ,  $F(6,163) = 5.492$ ,  $p = .000$

Step 3:  $R^2 = .211$ ,  $F(9,160) = 4.748$ ,  $p = .000$

The fourth step regressed possible selves on the cross products of racial ethnic identity and goal orientation variables. No main effects were found which indicated that there were no interactions between racial ethnic identity and goal orientations on possible selves (see Table 4). This was consistent with Aloyse-Young, Henningan and Leong's (2001) finding among junior high school Anglo and Hispanic American youth. In that study they found no racial interactions. The findings, however, differ from Garcia *et al.* (1993) finding that patterns of possible selves varied by ethnicity.

**Table 4. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Demographic, Gender, Racial Ethnic Identity, Goal Orientation, and Cross-Products of Racial Ethnic Identity and Goal Orientation Variables Predicting Possible Selves**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Steps 1 through 3 (See Table 10)				
Step 4				
Length of Stay In the US	.47	.09	.38**	
Four Year University	.36	.14	.18*	
Connectedness	1.28	1.34	.80	
Embedded Achievement	-1.25	2.14	-.69*	
Awareness of Racism	-2.02	.97	-1.8	
Gender	.03	.14	.01	
Mastery Goal Orientation	.03	1.73	.02	
Perf. Approach Goal Orientation	-.61	1.13	-.65	
Perf. Avoidance Goal Orientation	-1.10	.88	-1.39	
Cross Prod. of Con. & Mastery GO	-.37	.27	-1.46	
Cross Prod. Of Con.& Perf. Approach	.18	.19	.96	
Cross Prod.of Con. & Perf. Avoid. GO	-.05	.14	-.30	
Cross Prod. Of Emb. Achiev.& Mastery GO	.22	.42	.77	
Cross Prod. of Emb. Achiev. & Perf. App. GO	-.17	.23	-.90	
Cross Prod. of Emb.Achiev.& Perf. Avoid.GO	.29	.18	1.79	
Cross Prod. of Aware. of racism & Mastery	.32	.20	1.40	
Cross Prod. of Aware. of racism & Perf. App.	.21	.11	.86	
Cross Prod. of Aware. of racism & Perf. Av.	-.02	.09	-.09	
				.067

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ;

Step1:  $R^2 = .167$ ,  $F(2, 167) = 16.699$ ,  $p = .000$

Step 2:  $R^2 = .168$ ,  $F(6, 163) = 5.492$ ,  $p = .000$

Step 3:  $R^2 = .211$ ,  $F(9, 160) = 4.748$ ,  $p = .000$

Step 4:  $R^2 = .278$ ,  $F(18, 151) = 3.225$ ,  $p = .000$

The results of the study suggest that racial ethnic identity had no relationship with the number of balanced possible selves. This finding contrasts the research of Oyserman, et al., (1995,



2003, 2006) whose study showed a positive relationship between African Americans and whites and also Kao's (2000) study with a sample taken from Latinos, Asian Americans and African Americans which indicated that that Asian American students are resilient to academic disengagement. On the other hand, Ogbu (1987) argued that in response to the dominant culture's influence, immigrant minorities do not believe that discrimination is permanent or institutionalized and thus try to accommodate it.

## CONCLUSION

The study found no main effects in the regression of possible selves on the cross products of racial ethnic identity and goal orientation. This indicates that the relationship between possible selves and goal orientation does not vary by racial ethnicity among African undergraduate students in the United States.

## Future Research

A potential limitation is that Africans, irrespective of their countries of origin were lumped together in this study: an assumption that a uniform culture exists in the whole of Africa which is seemingly contradictory to respecting cultural differences. However, for the purposes of the study, a certain degree of generalization is inevitable. It is my hope that future studies will be done looking at different countries in Africa.

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