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Exploring the process by which positive racial identity develops and influences academic performance in Black youth: Implications for social work

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**ABSTRACT**

Although racial-ethnic socialization and racial-ethnic identity interlink to influence youth’s developmental outcomes, the extant research has tended to investigate these constructs and their effect on youths’ outcomes separately. We therefore used path analysis to investigate the interrelationships between prominent racial-ethnic socialization and racial-ethnic identity constructs in one model to ascertain whether when considered simultaneously they have direct and/or mediated effect associations with the academic performance of African-American youths. Participants were drawn from the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study. Findings reveal that parenting practices that expose youths to racial/cultural heritage of African-Americans, in tandem with those that alert youths to potential discrimination and strategies to respond, may influence youths’ racial-ethnic identity domains. These racial-ethnic identity domains in turn shape one another in a complex way to positively predict academic performance. Implications for social work research and practice are discussed.

**KEYWORDS**

Academic achievement; African-American youth; racial-ethnic identity; racial-ethnic socialization and school social work

**Introduction**

There is a well-documented racialized terrain in K–12 education, whereby African-American youths tend to be disproportionately exposed to teachers with fewer qualifications, schools with fewer resources, higher rates of disciplinary actions, overrepresentation in lower-level courses, school-based discrimination, and negative intellectual stereotypes, all of which in most cases can occur regardless of demonstrated ability or educational history (Abulkadiroglu, Angrist, & Pathak, 2014; Diamond & Huguley, 2011; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Kelly, 2009; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). These disparate experiences undermine biopsychosocial adjustment and, subsequently, the academic success of African-American youths (Brody et al., 2006; Huynh & Fuligni, 2010).
In navigating these racialized contexts, African-American parents employ race-based parenting practices (racial-ethnic socialization) to shape youths’ racial-ethnic identity beliefs, the subjective meaning ascribed to race-ethnicity in one’s conceptualization of the self (Hughes et al., 2006; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). These racial-ethnic identity beliefs are in turn expected to help ensure the optimal psychological, emotional, and physical health of African-American youths in racially adverse contexts (Hughes et al., 2006; Spencer, 1999). Although distinct conceptually, racial-ethnic socialization (RES) and racial-ethnic identity (REI) are inseparable and mutually related in practice (Hughes, Watford, & Del Toro, 2016). However, analytically the extant research has typically treated them separately when considering culturally relevant protective factors in the development of African-American children and youths (Jones & Neblett, 2016). In addition, explorations of the subdomains of RES and REI have generally focused on the independent effects of their various subconstructs, although emerging evidence suggests these various subdimensions work together to influence children’s developmental outcomes, including academic performance (Hughes et al., 2016). These limitations in the current research substantially undermine the field’s ability to understand the nuances involved in how racial-ethnic socialization and identity interact to affect the educational outcomes of African-American youths. Consequently, the field’s capacity to inform best practices that support African-American youth development is severely truncated, particularly in the context of social work practice (Teasley, 2004).

In response, the current study aims to generate knowledge to address this dearth in social work literature related to RES, REI, and Black children’s development by using path analysis to examine how prominent racial-ethnic socialization and racial-ethnic identity subdomains interrelate over time to influence youths’ academic performance. In the process, we also assess the degree to which subconstructs of RES have distinct effects on youths’ performance independent of racial-ethnic identity mediations. In this article, we first review the extant literature on the links among racial-ethnic socialization, racial-ethnic identity, and academic performance among Black youths. Next, we review the relationship between REI and academic performance specifically, with particular attention to the limited studies where racial-ethnic identity has analytically been included as a mediator for RES effects. We then present the research methodology, followed by our findings and discussion.
Background

**Racial-ethnic socialization, racial-ethnic identity, and academic performance**

**Racial-ethnic socialization and racial-ethnic identity**

As noted earlier, racial-ethnic socialization approaches are commonly employed by African-American parents to instill prosocial and resilient identity formations in the face of racially marginalizing social and institutional experiences. Across studies, there is substantial support for the notion that various domains of RES individually and differentially influence the subdomains of REI (French & Coleman, 2013; Neblett, Chavous, Nguyên, & Sellers, 2009; Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). For example, French and Coleman (2013) investigated the association between four dimensions of parents’ race-related messages to children including cultural socialization, preparation for bias, egalitarian, and promotion of mistrust, and four dimensions of racial identity beliefs such as humanist, assimilationist, oppressed, and nationalist. Using a sample of 89 African-American college students, they observed that higher degrees of cultural socialization experiences were associated with higher senses of same-race belonging and collective efficacy, as well as lower degrees of humanist ideology. Conversely, they also found that higher egalitarian socialization was associated with higher humanist ideology, but lower nationalist ideology. Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, and Chen (2009) observed that youths who received messages related to pride in African-Americans’ family and racial heritage were associated with positive private regard. Similarly, Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, and West-Bey (2009) observed that racial heritage was positively and significantly associated with a sense of connectedness to, and positive evaluation of, their ethnic group among Black sixth graders. In Tang, McLoyd, and Hallman (2016), youths who received frequent racial pride messages in combination with strategies for dealing with potential incidents of discrimination were more likely to view race as important to them. Overall, these and many other studies demonstrate direct effects of individual racial-ethnic socialization domains on specific racial-ethnic identity constructs, although few studies examine the simultaneous effects of subdomains across both the identity and socialization metaconstructs.

**Racial-ethnic socialization and academic performance**

Although it has been theorized that racial-ethnic socialization can directly affect African-American youths’ academic performance, findings to date are mixed. A number of studies have found direct positive links between racial-ethnic socialization and academic performance, including across both global and subdomain conceptualizations (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Friend, Hunter, & Fletcher, 2011; Neblett et al., 2009; Wang & Huguley, 2012). Specifically, Friend and colleagues (2011) and Bowman and Howard (1985) found that preparation for bias messages were linked to higher grades in school, while Neblett and
colleagues (2009) found similar effects among Black males for racial-ethnic socialization practices emphasizing self-worth. However, several other studies have found null for the association between key racial-ethnic socialization constructs and academic performance (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Cooper & Smalls, 2010; Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009; Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003) while at least one study has reported a negative association between racial/cultural heritage socialization and academic performance specifically (Neblett, 2006). Thus, overall across studies, findings on the direct effects of racial-ethnic socialization on academic performance have been equivocal.

One dynamic that may contribute to this lack of clarity is the fact that few inquiries have simultaneously estimated the effects of multiple subdomains of racial-ethnic socialization on performance. It may well be due to suppressor effects that accounting for one subdimension may bring clarity to the discrete effects of another. Only a handful of studies make such simultaneous estimations. Such studies do in fact find wide variation in the effects of specific racial-ethnic socialization subdimensions on academic performance. Brown, Linver, Evans, and Degennaro (2009), for example, found that parents’ teachings on African-American heritage and cultural values were both independently associated with students’ grades in school, although the effects were in opposite directions. Cultural values were positively associated with performance, while heritage held a negative association. Similarly, Neblett (2006) observed that independent of family background characteristics and of each other, while parents’ indirect racial socialization practices (e.g., attending cultural events, buying Black toys, etc.) were positively associated with GPA, explicit racial pride messages from parents were associated with lower grades. Finally, Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, and Nickerson (2002) found that racial environments in the home were positively related to higher test scores, while parents’ explicit pride messages were unrelated to achievement outcomes. Across studies, then, there is emerging evidence that individual subconstructs of RES are differentially related to achievement when their independent effects are examined simultaneously, although these findings need further corroboration and specification. Moreover, as is discussed later, the lack of attention to the potentially mediating effects of identity constructs may also be limiting the clarity around how racial-ethnic socialization may affect academic performance for African-American youths.

**Racial-ethnic identity and academic performance**

While monolithic demographic indicators are most often used to capture race and ethnicity in research, racial-ethnic identity scholarship has documented wide variation in African-Americans’ self-perceptions of racial-ethnic identity meaning. Scholars have therefore created measures that capture both the relevance and substance of what racial identity holds for this group. Sellers and colleagues (1998) identified and psychometrically validated three prominent subdimensions of racial identity: (a) centrality, or the level of importance an individual ascribes to
his or her racial group membership; (b) regard, which is one’s own (private) or one’s perceived sense of society’s (public) feelings toward one’s own racial group; and (c) ideology, the meaning one attributes to one’s racial group membership. Racial ideology is further delineated into four distinct orientations: (a) a nationalist philosophy, which prioritizes connectedness and a commitment to collective efforts with others of the same race; (b) an oppressed minority philosophy, which stresses the shared oppression experiences among multiple peoples of color in the United States; (c) an assimilationist philosophy, which emphasizes the need for African-Americans to adopt the mainstream Eurocentric culture; and (d) a humanist philosophy, which stresses the common humanity of all human beings (Sellers et al., 1998, pp. 27–28).

This multidimensionality suggests that African-Americans’ racial-ethnic identity development potentially entails experimentation with the multiple aspects of their racial-ethnic group membership (Hughes et al., 2016). Moreover, scholars have noted that in a race-conscious society such as the United States where Blacks may be stereotyped as criminal and intellectually inferior, positive racial identity development is a process that seeks to change and replace the negative narratives with positive ones, such as excelling academically (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Smalls et al., 2007; Spencer, 1999; Worrell, 2006). According to this perspective, Blacks who recognize the value of education as a tool for liberation, racial uplift, and appreciation of historical legacy are likely to perform better in school settings (Byrd & Chavous, 2012). Thus, to the degree that youths are exposed to racial-ethnic socialization practices that connect education to Black identity beliefs in a positive light, youths are likely to hold stronger orientations toward higher academic achievement.

Despite these robust theoretical underpinnings, research linking African-American youths’ racial-ethnic identity to actual academic performance has not been without conflicting results. Although several studies have contended that stronger racial identity across multiple domains fosters higher academic achievement (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Sellers, Chavous & Cook, 1998; Gordon et al., 2009; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), others have found that more intense racial-ethnic identities pose a risk to higher achievement among Black youths (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Irving & Hudley, 2008). Theoretically, these negative findings are attributed to the interplay between identity belief subconstructs. Specifically, the combination of low public regard beliefs and a simultaneous strong personal group identification can present risks for one’s self-esteem, which in turn undermines academic performance (Hughes, Kiecolt, Keith, & Demo, 2015; Jones, 2000; Patterson, 2015; Steele, 1997). This racial identity-risk perspective contends that to protect the self-esteem, individuals are perversely incentivized to disengage from a domain where the stigmatized status of the group is particularly salient, such as school performance (Cokley, 2002; Osborne, 1997; see also Fordham & Ogbu,
With disengagement from the academic domain, affected youths are less likely to value the norms and behaviors that are required and consistent with educational engagement. Thus, disengagement sets in motion factors to diminish achievement for the group.

Such a pattern of effects can only be tested through structural analyses, although to date very few studies have tested the viability of these sequential processes. This dearth of structural examinations dovetails with another gap in the racial-ethnic socialization literature, whereby largely absent from the studies of the relationship between racial socialization and academic performance is empirical attention to the role of racial-ethnic identity as a mediator. Given the established links between RES and REI, as well as limited evidence of both RES associations with REI and academic performance, it is possible that REI mediates the links between RES and academic performance (Hughes et al., 2006) and does so in a process that requires attention to the discrete subdomains of both metaconstructs.

Although recent study explored the interrelationships among REI dimensions (see Hughes, Del Toro, & Way, 2017), currently, no known studies actually test this system of relationships among RES, REI, and academic performance in one model using path analysis or other structural approaches. Several studies have, however, investigated the mediation role of some of the subconstructs of REI in the relationship between RES and other developmental outcomes. These studies have found significant racial identity mediations in the effects of racial-ethnic socialization on self-esteem, academic persistence, and prosocial behaviors (Davis, Smith-Bynum, Saleem, Francois, & Lambert, 2017; Murry et al., 2009; Murry, Berkel, Simons, Simons, & Gibbons, 2014). As such, research that estimates the interrelated processes among racial-ethnic socialization, racial-ethnic identity, and academic performance is overdue. This line of inquiry has the potential to shed much needed light on the development processes by which racial-ethnic parenting practices and racial-ethnic identity domains interact to influence academic performance among African-American youths.

Accordingly, the current study aims to generate knowledge on these interrelationships with the purpose of informing the school and family support contexts within the social work field. Such findings could potentially support culturally tailored processes that can be leveraged to advance high academic achievement among African-American youths. We hypothesized based on the extant literature that (a) the subconstructs of RES (racial/cultural heritage and preparation for bias) will have independent effects on African-American youths’ academic performance controlling for the mediation effects of the racial identity domains and (b) the subconstructs of RES will be uniquely associated with the various domains of the racial identity construct, which in turn will each directly predict academic performance. See Figure 1 for a visual model of the hypothesized relationships.
Participants came from the Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study (MADICS), a majority African-American longitudinal study of adolescent and caregiver dyads designed to investigate the influence of contexts on youths, and to examine successful pathways through adolescence into young adulthood (Eccles, 2010). The current study included only Black participants (n = 904), who make up 61% of the total sample size (N = 1,482). Data were collected through face-to-face and self-administered interviews. Data that form the basis of this study were from Wave 3, and were collected in the summer following eighth grade when youths were transitioning into ninth grade (mean age was 14.5), and Wave 4, which corresponds to the summer following eleventh grade (mean age was 17.4). Independent racial-ethnic socialization variables from Wave 3 were used to predict identity and achievement outcomes in Wave 4.

Measures

Racial/cultural heritage

Racial/cultural heritage was assessed using a composite score of four items that asked parents the frequency with which they engage youths in conversations and activities that instill in them pride and importance of their race (alpha = .72). Sample questions include How often do you participate in community activities with people of your racial background? and How often does [child] study the traditions of or about being [his/her] race? Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always.
**Preparation for bias**

Preparation for bias was measured using a composite score of seven items that captured parents’ endorsements of specific strategies conveyed to their child in the face of discrimination (alpha = .87). The overarching predictor question was “How often do you suggest to your eighth grader that good ways to deal with racial discrimination he or she may face are…” Example responses include *Do better than everyone else in school* and *Not blame herself or himself when experiencing discrimination*. The items were scored on a five-point scale assessing how often they engage in each specific strategy, ranging from 1 = almost never to 5 = daily.

**Racial centrality**

Racial centrality was captured by a composite of three items that captured the extent to which youths view their race to be central or important to their overall development (alpha = .75). Examples include *How important is your racial or ethnic background to the daily life of your family?* and *How important is it for you to know about your racial or ethnic background?* Responses were coded on a four-point scale that ranged from 1 = not at all important to 4 = very important.

**Private regard**

Youths’ positive or negative feelings toward their own racial group were captured by a composite score of seven items that assess youths’ evaluation of their Black race membership (alpha = .77). Sample questions include: *I am happy that I am Black* and *I feel good about other Black people*. Participants indicated the extent to which each statement was true on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

**Racial belonging**

Youths’ sense of racial belonging was assessed using a composite of four items asking them how true statements were that pertained to their feelings of inclusion in the Black racial group (alpha = .75). Examples include *I have a close community of friends because of my race/ethnicity* and *People of my race/ethnicity are very supportive of each other*. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = not all true of me to 5 = extremely true of me.

**Covariates**

**Academic performance**

Youths’ academic performance was indicated by students’ grade point average (GPA) at Wave 3 (rising ninth-grade summer) and Wave 4 (eleventh grade). Wave 3 GPA was taken from school record data and used as a control variable for prior performance. GPA at Wave 4 was obtained through
students’ self-report and used as an outcome variable. Both indicators are measured on a standard 4.0 GPA scale.

**Family income**

Family income was assessed by the primary caregiver’s self-reported income taken in a base-year question that asked *From all sources of income, tell me your total family income before taxes.* Responses were coded on a 21-anchor range scale of $5,000 increments, beginning with *Under $5,000* and ending with *More than $100,000.*

**Parent/caregiver education level**

Primary caregiver’s education level was also assessed via a self-reported item from a primary caregiver base-year survey question that asked *What is the highest grade of school you have completed?* The responses were then coded along a 22-point scale beginning with first grade to postsecondary degree completion (see Table 1).

**Analytic strategy**

Descriptive statistics and correlations were first examined for racial-ethnic socialization, racial identity, and students’ performance. Next, we investigated the research questions using path analysis. Identification of significant direct pathways as well as effects decomposition analyses were examined to estimate both the direct and indirect effects between parameters in the model. Individual pathways were considered significant if regression coefficients probabilities were below the .05 critical alpha-level. Overall model fit was assessed using model chi-square, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). Model fit indices guided theoretically tenable model re-specifications where appropriate. Missing data were addressed using multiple imputation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Variable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial/cultural heritage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation for bias</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial centrality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private regard</td>
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<td>Parent education</td>
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<td>8th-grade GPA</td>
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<td>Belonging</td>
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<td>Family income</td>
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<td>11th-grade GPA</td>
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Results

Correlations reveal significant associations among the study’s variables of interest in uncontrolled conditions. Racial/cultural heritage socialization was positively and significantly related to two identity constructs: youth private regard ($r = .10, p < .0001$) and racial centrality ($r = .23, p < .0001$). However, it was negatively related to eleventh-grade academic performance ($r = -.07, p < .01$). Preparation for bias was positively and significantly related to one identity construct: youths’ racial belonging ($r = .11, p < .0001$). Yet it was negatively related to private regard ($r = -.12, p < .0001$), and to eleventh-grade GPA ($r = -.08, p < .01$). Furthermore, private regard was positively and significantly related to youths’ racial belonging ($r = .21, p < .0001$), racial centrality ($r = .18, p < .0001$), and eleventh-grade GPA ($r = .08, p < .01$). In addition, youths’ racial belonging was significantly and positively related to racial centrality ($r = .20, p < .0001$). Racial centrality was significantly and negatively related to eleventh-grade GPA ($r = -.11, p < .0001$). Regarding the RES subconstructs, preparation for bias was positively, but marginally, related to racial/cultural heritage socialization messages ($r = .05, p = .06$).

Model fit

Inspection of the path analysis for the original proposed model indicated a poor fit, $\chi^2 (12, N = 1,361) = 219.87, p < .0000, CFI = .536, TLI = .005, RMSEA (90% CI) = .113 (1.00, .126)$. Information from the modification indices suggested that unaccounted-for interrelations between racial identity subdimensions were causing the model to account for too little variance in the underlying structure. Accordingly, theoretically tenable direct paths were added from racial belonging to racial centrality, and from both racial belonging and racial centrality to private regard (Sellers et al., 1998; Worrell, 2006). In addition, direct paths from the covariates (parent education, family income, and youth’s past performance) were added to the racial identity subdomains. From the ecological model that informs the social work person-in-environment perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), these paths accounted for distal racially socializing factors that likely affect identity above and beyond the effects of socialization processes that are specific to parents. These additional path inclusions improved the fitness of the model to acceptable levels $\chi^2 (4, N = 1,361) = 6.36, p = .174, CFI = .99, TLI = .96, RMSEA (90% CI) = 0.02 (0.00, .050; see Figure 2). The overall model accounted for 20% ($R^2 = .20$) of the variability in African-American youth academic performance.
Direct and indirect effects

As can be seen in Figure 2, the path analysis revealed that independent of the effects of preparation for bias, and sociodemographic covariates, parents racial/cultural socialization practices positively and significantly predict racial centrality ($\beta = .19, p < .0001$), as well as youths’ positive private regard for the Black racial group ($\beta = .10, p < .0001$). Meanwhile, parents’ preparation for bias messages are independently and positively predictive of youths’ sense of racial belonging ($\beta = .11, p < .0001$), but are negatively associated with private regard ($\beta = -.13, p < .0001$), and trending toward a negative association with racial centrality ($\beta = -.05, p = .08$). The model also demonstrated how the various dimensions of the racial-ethnic identity work sequentially, with racial belonging predicting both racial centrality ($\beta = .19, p < .0001$) and private regard ($\beta = .18, p < .0001$). Thus, racial belonging was particularly influential within identity subdomain interplay. Racial centrality also predicted private regard ($\beta = .11, p < .0001$), and thus in the process serving as an additional, indirect means by which belonging predicts regard as well. Next, the findings show that independent of each other private regard and racial centrality significantly predicted performance in GPA, albeit in different directions. Private regard was positively associated with grades ($\beta = .10, p < .0001$), while centrality, independent of other identity subdomains, was a negative predictor ($\beta = -.13, p < .0001$). Racial belonging did not directly predict academic performance independent of other identity constructs.
Similarly, results also suggest that independent of racial identity mediations, and sociodemographic factors, racial/cultural socialization directly but negatively predicts students’ GPA over time ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .004$), while preparation for bias has no significant direct effect independent of identity mediations.

**Discussion**

Although racial-ethnic socialization and racial-ethnic identity intersect to influence youths’ developmental outcomes (Hughes et al., 2016), the extant research has tended to investigate these constructs and their effect on youths’ outcomes separately (Jones & Neblett, 2016). We therefore used path analysis to investigate the interrelationships among RES, REI, and academic performance in one model to ascertain whether when considered simultaneously they have direct and/or mediated associations with the academic performance of African-American youths. Based on previous findings, we hypothesized that the subconstructs of RES (racial/cultural and preparation for bias socialization) would have effects on academic performance that were both direct and independent of racial-ethnic identity as well as effects that were mediated by REI domains. This hypothesis was partially supported. As can be observed in Figure 2, controlling for REI mediations, family background, and youth’s previous performance, racial/cultural socialization was significantly but negatively linked to students’ performance two years later. Preparation for bias had no direct effect independent of covariates and racial-ethnic identity mediations. On the surface the direct-effect findings here contradict previous research suggesting positive and direct links between academic performance and both preparation for bias (Bowman & Howard, 1985) and racial/cultural heritage socialization (Wang & Huguley, 2012). However, these prior studies did not account for the mediation effects of REI. The current findings thus suggest that such positive effects of racial-ethnic socialization on academic performance are likely mechanized by way of racial-ethnic identity mediations.

Our second and third aims were to examine whether, when considered simultaneously, RES subconstructs independently relate to the various racial-ethnic identity domains, and whether the racial-ethnic identity subdimensions themselves in turn uniquely predict African-American youths’ academic performance. Based on the extant research, we hypothesized that the subconstructs of RES would be positively and uniquely associated with the various subdomains of racial-ethnic identity, and that the racial-ethnic identity domains would in turn individually positively predict academic performance independent of prior achievement and sociodemographic background. The results partially support these hypotheses. First, RES subconstructs do distinctively predict REI dimensions, but in some
unexpected ways. As seen in Figure 2, as predicted, racial/cultural socialization positively and significantly predicts private regard and racial centrality independent of preparation for bias and key covariates. However, while preparation for bias does positively predict racial belonging, it was negatively linked to private regard and racial centrality independent of racial/cultural socialization effects and the interrelationships between identity subdomains. These findings suggest that parents’ efforts to communicate and expose youths to racial history, heritage, and cultural practices lead Black youths to have a positive evaluation of themselves and view their race to be relevant to their self-concept. The findings also indicate that parenting practices related to preparation for bias, when out of step with racial/cultural heritage socialization and identity processes, may lead youths to view themselves as less valuable and their race as less relevant to who they are.

Decomposition analyses suggest, however, that preparation for bias indirectly predicts racial centrality and private regard positively by way of its effect on racial belonging. Given racial/cultural heritage’s strong direct effect on private regard, these results are consistent with previous findings in suggesting that both racial/cultural heritage and preparation for bias play a role in the development of a positive racial-ethnic identity in African-American youths (Hughes et al., 2006; Stevenson, 1995). In investigating the independent effects of these racial-ethnic identity dimensions on student performance, the results suggest that independent of each other only private regard is positively predictive of performance, while racial centrality negatively predicts performance and racial belonging has no direct positive link with performance independently. These findings are in fact consistent with prior theory suggesting that strong racial identities and belongings that are not grounded in positive self-affirming racial beliefs may be negatively associated with academic outcomes (Cokley, 2002; Osborne, 1997). It is likely that a more integrated racial-ethnic identity that is established around not only strong identity importance beliefs, but also a simultaneously positive view of the Black racial group, holds the greatest promise for higher academic performance. Similarly, the negative direct effects of racial socialization indicators on racial-ethnic identity and academic outcomes may be attributable to combined, rather than sequential, effects. As noted later, determining such integrated effects requires a set of interaction model analyses that was beyond the scope of the current study. Nevertheless, these findings provide unique insights into the specific ways that racial-ethnic socialization, racial-ethnic identity, and their various components are highly interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and inseparable in analyses of how they individually promote high academic achievement (Hughes et al., 2016).
Limitations

There are some important limitations to this study. First, we relied on only parents’ report of the RES practices, and it is possible that youths’ perceptions of their parents’ socialization practices may differ from parents’ self-reported practices in ways that have implications for achievement outcomes. Future studies should certainly examine similar models from youths’ perspectives. In addition, because the data here are from parent reports, they are generally specific to racial-ethnic socialization in the family context. It is likely, however, that African-American youths are exposed to and affected by racial-ethnic socializing experiences that hold significance for racial-ethnic identity development outside of the family (e.g., peers, school, media, community contexts, etc.; Harper, 2013). Future work should seek to examine the simultaneous effects of racial-ethnic socialization stimuli from multiple sources. In addition, as noted earlier, while the model here examines the independent and sequential effects of racial-ethnic socialization and racial-ethnic identity constructs on performance, it is likely that statistical interaction effects between subconstructs also play an important role in how these subdimensions interrelate to predict academic performance. While it was beyond the scope of this current study to explore interactions across pathways, future structural analyses should test multiple specifications of theoretically tenable models with both direct sequential effects and theoretically grounded interaction effects between racial-ethnic socialization and identity subconstructs. Finally, given the narrow geographic scope of these data, the findings here may not generalize to all current settings of development for African-American youths in the United States. Future studies should examine these issues across geographies and in nationally representative samples to assess the degree to which these experiences are similar across the various ecological contexts in which African-American youths develop.

Implications for social work research and practice

Despite the limitations just discussed, the findings of the current study have important implications for social work research and practice. For social work researchers, the findings suggest that positive REI development entails race-based socialization content, structures, and processes (Schachter & Rich, 2011). Therefore, social work researchers need to investigate the ways by which racial identity contents are generated and transmitted. Furthermore, Black youths seem to be actively involved in co-constructing and enacting the constructed self at any given time to adapt to the contextual demands that surround them (Nasir, 2011; Spencer, 1999). Social work research is needed to understand the processes by which REI structures are configured, reconfigured, and maintained to influence African-American youths’ psychosocial
adjustments and functioning across different domains of life, including education. In terms of practice, the findings indicate that social workers can help to create contexts that foster higher academic performance among African-American youths if they utilize and advocate for racial-ethnic socialization approaches, and the subsequent positive racial-ethnic identity development in their engagement with educators, families, and youths themselves. More specifically, practitioners can advocate for the incorporation of racial heritage discussion and strategies for responding to discrimination in school curricula, after-school programs, and behavior intervention plans with youths. In addition, social workers working with African-American youths can draw on racial-ethnic socialization and subsequent positive racial identity to engage youths and their families in a therapeutic relationship for improved well-being (Boyd-Franklin, 2003).

Conclusion

The findings reveal that race-based practices that highlight the racial/cultural heritage of African-Americans in tandem with those that alert youths to potential discrimination and strategies to respond may potentially influence youths’ racial-ethnic identity domains. Subsequently, these racial-ethnic identity domains in turn shape one another in complex ways, leading to an integrated racial self that predicts GPA. Per the standards for cultural competence for competent social work practice with minority populations (National Association of Social Workers [NASW,] 2015), social workers will increase competency to advance educational justice with Black youths by developing and applying knowledge and skills related to the positive racial-ethnic identity development, its content, and process in African-American families.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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