

Is There A Place for Me? Role Models and Academic Identity among White Students and Students of Color

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Role models have long been thought to play an important role in young peoples' development. The present study explores the ways that race- and gender-matched role models can provide young people with a greater sense of the opportunities available to them in the world. A longitudinal study of young adolescents (N = 80) revealed that students who reported having at least one race- and gender-matched role model at the beginning of the study performed better academically up to 24 months later, reported more achievement-oriented goals, enjoyed achievement-relevant activities to a greater degree, thought more about their futures, and looked up to adults rather than peers more often than did students without a race- and gender-matched role model. These effects held only for race- and gender-matched role models—not for non-matched role models. Finally, the results held irrespective of the educational achievements of the specific role model. Data are discussed in terms of their implications for our understanding of the ways that young people become invested in academic pursuits and the means by which we might be able to assist goal development among young people.

Social scientists have long noted the importance of role models in psychological development and in the development of young people's goals and aspirations (see, e.g., Cooley, 1982; Freud, 1949/1969; James, 1892/1962; Mead, 1934; Skinner, 1971; Stryker, 1980). However, most psychological research on the topic has focused on role models' importance as sources of information about *how to behave* (see, e.g., Bandura, 1986) or as sources of support and guidance as mentors (e.g., Echevarria, 1998; Reiz, McNabb, & Stephen, 1997). However, race- and gender-matched role models also provide concrete information to young people regarding what is possible for them as members of specific social groups (Griffiths, 1995; Robst, et al., 1996; Sumrall, 1995). Young people learn the racial and gendered structuring of the culture in which they live by noting the race and gender of adults in different professional positions. The presence or absence of like others in different social positions implicitly conveys information to young people about the possibilities for their futures.

In this paper, I argue that the structure of young people's internalized representations of the opportunities available to them in adulthood are based, in part, on their understanding of the racialized and gendered structuring of society. These representations of opportunity are correspondingly encoded in the identities they form in adolescence, and this has enormous implications for students' educational aspirations and achievements. Put simply, young people pursue only that which they can imagine as possible (Fordham, 1998; Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998; Markus & Nurius 1986; Ogbu, 1991). It is critical that we understand those aspects of the social and cultural context which frame students' sense of opportunity and effect differences in students' commitment to their education and to the pursuit of educational goals. The present study presents an empirical investigation of the implications of race- and gender-matched role models for the developing self-concepts of young adolescents of color and their educational outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS OF ROLE MODELS FOR IDENTITY AND GOAL DEVELOPMENT

Theories of adolescent development have long focused on the centrality of identity development during this period (see, e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Erikson, 1950, 1968; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Harter, 1999; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1999). With their newfound capacity to reflect on themselves and their futures, adolescents pay careful attention to the world around them for information about who they might become (Harter, 1999; Ruble, 1983). Consequently, the availability of race- and gender-matched role models is likely to be especially critical at this time. As young people become increasingly aware of how they fit into a larger social context, race- and gender-matched role models can provide invaluable information to address concerns they may have about whether society has a place for them.

Race- and gender-matched persons in desirable positions are suggestive of possibilities for adolescents in a way that nonmatched role models can never be. First, and perhaps most importantly, matched role models provide clear messages about the opportunities available not to *people generally* but to members of one's own social group. All young people know that *some people* grow up to become physicians, but race and gender-matched physicians provide young people with the information that "people like me" sometimes grow up to become physicians.

Second, race- and gender-matched role models are likely to provide information of particular relevance to members of one's own group, information that nonmatched role models are unlikely to provide. Watching a male physician might provide a young girl with information about "physician behavior," but he is not able to provide additional information that

might be of special interest to her—such as how other people respond to a woman in that position or how a woman might balance the demands of personal and professional life.

Finally, people have been shown to think about themselves and others in terms of prototypes of “kinds” of people (Cantor & Mischel, 1977, 1979) or social identities (Gollwitzer & Kirchhof, 1998; Schlenker, Britt, & Pennington, 1996); and they create narratives in which to understand themselves and their identity (McAdams, 1999). To the extent that the particular role models available shape our prototypes of the persons filling different kinds of occupational roles, race- and gender-matched role models should facilitate the adoption of corresponding possible selves or identities towards which we are then more likely to work (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985; Niedenthal & Mordkoff, 1991; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995).

IMPORTANCE OF THE CONTENT OF ROLE MODELS VERSUS THEIR AVAILABILITY

Although much attention has been paid to the importance of role models for providing young people with information about how to behave, this may not, in fact, be their most important function. More than anything else, race- and gender-matched role models may provide young people with a sense of having a place of value and importance in the future (Fordham, 1998; Ogbu, 1991; Taylor, Casten, Flickenger, & Roberts, 1994, but cf. Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). Just as Marshall McLuhan (1967) argued that the *content* of television may not be the key to understanding its impact when he said that “the medium is the message,” the *content* of a young person’s role models may be less important than their availability and their similarity to the adolescent. I argue that it is the *presence* or *absence* of images of race- and gender-matched models filling socially desirable roles, rather than the specific content of those images, that is critical for young people’s developing sense of self.

Race- and gender-matched role models focus a young person’s attention on the future and suggest opportunities available to him or her independent of the nature of the activities in which the role model engages. Similar others in desirable positions may enable young people to construct their own images of themselves in similar contexts, helping them to generate not only the thought “if he (or she) can do that, maybe I can too,” but also “if he (or she) can do that, maybe people like me can do any number of different things.” For example, young people who fixate on individual athletes or musicians may learn more about strategies for turning hard work into successful outcomes than about how to run the 100-yard dash or play the guitar. Athletic or musical role models may seem unlikely to lead

young people to pursue academic goals. However, by modeling confidence, success, and the potential of “people like me,” they may, in fact, accomplish just that for some young people. Role models model more than just roles—they also model specific aspects of desirable roles such as wealth, social respect, and intelligence, as well as psychological constructs such as the importance of striving towards one’s goals. In this way, I argue that race- and gender-matched role models in positions young people find desirable will increase young people’s investment in achievement generally, not just their investment in achieving the goals being modeled.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The present data are from a longitudinal study of 12–14-year-olds. Materials consist of four waves of data collected from a young adolescent sample over a period of 2 years (see Table 1). In the first wave, students reported on themselves, their goals and aspirations, and indirectly provided information about the role models available to them. In the second, students reported about activities they found enjoyable and described their idols in a series of daily diaries. In the third, students’ teachers provided evaluations of their personality, performance, and academic potential. Finally, the fourth wave of data collection consisted of a parent interview that took place the following year. Parents were asked about their perceptions of their child’s experiences in school and current academic grades. Data for the present study come from the first, second, and fourth waves of data collection.

Two hypotheses form the core of this study. The first hypothesis to be tested is that that young adolescents with *at least one* race- and gender-

Table 1. Study time line

Year	Month(s)	Data Collected	Variables Included in Assessment
Year 1	January	Student Questionnaire	Role model assessment Self-generated life task listings Normative life task appraisals Rating of parent interest in schoolwork Social network diagram
	March	Student Diaries	Open-ended descriptions of “good” events Student description of idol
	June	Teacher Evaluations	Assessments of student interest and motivation
Year 2	April to October	Parent Interviews	Assessment of students’ academic performance

matched role model at the start of the study will show increased interest in achievement and higher levels of academic performance. The second hypothesis is that these relationships will depend more on the match between participants and available role models than on the content of the role model.

METHODS

Participants

Participants ($N = 80$; 47 female, 33 male) came from four different classrooms in three different schools in an ethnically diverse city in New England. Roughly half ($n = 35$) of the sample are students of color. Of these, 20 are Hispanic Americans (primarily Puerto Rican immigrants or of Puerto Rican descent), 7 are African Americans, 5 are Asian American (South Vietnamese refugees), and three checked more than one ethnic grouping. One student did not indicate his ethnic background. Students at these schools come primarily from working- and middle-class families.

Measures

An overview of the time line of the study with information about data collected at each phase is presented in Table 1. Every effort was made to include all 80 students in every phase of the data collection. Nevertheless, some attrition did occur, particularly among students who were in the 7th grade at the time the study began.¹ The measures and the participation rates for each are described below.

Questionnaire

Early in the spring semester, students completed a questionnaire during school hours. The questionnaire consisted of several open- and closed-ended measures designed to tap their thoughts and feelings about five major life domains—school, family, friendships/peers, athletic or artistic pursuits, and themselves. Those utilized in the present study are described below.

Ethnic identification. Students identified their ethnic background by examining the following list and checking any and all groups that applied to them: (a) White or European American, (b) Black or African American, (c) Asian American, (d) Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, or (e) Other (for which students were asked to provide additional information—none, however, checked

this category). From these reports, students were classified into two groups for purposes of analyzing these data: (a) White (those who checked *only* the White/European American box) or (b) students of color (those who checked at least one of the other ethnic groupings). This dual classification was made for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical point of view, although the experiences of students of color who are members of different ethnic groups are distinct in many important ways (see Friedman, 1995), there are also experiences which people of color share. It is these shared experiences that provide the focus of this study. Practically, although it would undoubtedly be interesting to examine different ethnic groups separately in future work, the sample size in this study does not permit such analyses here.

Life task listing. Students were asked to list any goals they had in the following manner:

Sometimes, young people like yourself have goals that they are working towards. For example, a beginning college student might have some goals such as “Getting good grades, doing well at schoolwork,” “Making friends and getting along with other people”; and “Being on my own (without my family).” These goals can be about anything—yourself, your schoolwork, your friends, athletics, dance—anything you can think of. Please list any goals you might have.

Participants listed an average of three life tasks, which, for purposes of this study, were then coded by an undergraduate research assistant into the following three categories: (a) educational or professional goals (e.g., “to go to college,” “to be a teacher,” “to get a job and be successful”), (b) social goals (e.g., “I also want to make a lot of friends,” “to be a good daughter,” “making my family a happy one”), and (c) performance or athletic goals (e.g., “good basketball player,” “to win the Merit Scholarship Competition for violin next year,” “singing-rap”). A random 20% of students’ listings were also coded by the author, and interrater reliability was .84.

Career goals. In a series of questions, students were asked about what they would like to be when they grow up. This section began with the statement:

Sometimes young people feel that they know what they would like to be when they grow up, sometimes they have no idea what they would like to be, and sometimes they feel confused because there are so many different things that they would like to be when they grow up that they can’t imagine choosing just one.

This was followed by a question about whether they ever thought about what they want to be when they grow up (yes or no) and space for them to write down “*all* the things you would like to be when you grow up, even if you never thought about it before.” They were given more instructions to indicate that these goals could include both those that are rare (e.g., President of the United States) and those that are more common. Fifteen percent ($n = 12$) of the students completing this questionnaire chose not to respond to this section. This was by far the largest group that chose not to answer any particular question or set of questions in the entire questionnaire, and I suspect that this is meaningful. It is worth noting that 8 of the 12 (67%) who chose not to complete this section were students of color (and one more was the student who did not report information about ethnicity), which represents a disproportionate percentage of the sample ($\chi^2 = 9.31, p < .01$). The students who did complete this question ($n = 68$) typically listed an average of three possible jobs ($M = 3.09, SD = 2.42$) in a wide range of categories from the everyday to the glamorous (e.g., “rap singer,” “nurse,” “roofer” “basketball player,” “scientist”).

Role models. Following the free listing, students were asked to go back and make some notations on the list. First, they were asked to circle the job that represented their “*favorite* thing to be”. Next, they were asked to put a star next to anything on the list if they personally knew someone who performed that job. Finally, they were asked to put a second star next to any jobs in which at least one person they personally knew in that career is the same race and sex as themselves. Examples were given throughout to help students understand the procedure, and students found the task relatively easy to do.

For purposes of this study, role models were defined as persons (a) participants knew (b) of the same race and gender as themselves who (c) were noted by the student as doing something on their personal list of possible career goals.² That is, students were identified as having a race- and gender-matched role model on the basis of knowing someone of the same race and gender employed in at least one of the occupations they listed as “something they would like to be when they grow up”—concretely, if an occupation had two stars next to it.

Coding of role models. The education required by students’ role models was noted and coded into two categories: (a) those not requiring a college education (e.g., rap singer, roofer, hairstylist) and (b) those requiring a college education (e.g., teacher, doctor, lawyer). In cases in which a person noted that they had more than one race- and gender-matched role model available to them, the higher status profession prevailed. Two females were the only students whose sole race- and gender-matched model filled a *social*

rather than an *occupational* role (i.e., mother). Although interesting, their responses were excluded from these analyses, as there was no clear way to assess whether or not the response “being a mother” indicated the need for a college education or not.

Diary Study

Later that same semester, students were invited to participate in a diary study. Sixth-grade participants were paid \$7.00 for their time. The 7th-graders’ teacher and principal at the middle school objected to paying students for participation, so they were compensated by means of a pizza party instead. Of the 80 students from the original study invited to participate, 51 of the 6th-graders (98%) and 25 of the 7th-graders (89%) agreed to participate and returned parent permission slips. Participating students completed two- to three-page, semistructured nightly diaries for a period of 8 (7th-graders) or 9 (6th-graders) days. In these diaries, students wrote open-ended answers to a rotating set of questions that asked about experiences at school, with family, and with friends.

Students varied in the number of diaries they actually completed and turned in—and again this differed by grade. Sixth-graders were extremely conscientious in their participation. They completed an average of 8.29 diaries over the 9-day period, with 39 of the 51 students (76%) completing all 9 days. Seventh-graders, in contrast, completed fewer diaries on average (6.44 out of a possible 8 total diary days), and a smaller percentage (11 of the 25, or 44%) completed all 8 days’ worth of content-based diaries. The less reliable participation of 7th-graders resulted from both the structure of the middle school environment (making it less likely that teachers reminded students daily about their diaries) and in part because the compensation they were offered (a pizza party) was less attractive. The portions of the diaries relevant to this study are described below.

Good events. On 4 of the 10 days, students were asked to think about all the things that happened that day that were especially fun or nice in some way and describe the “most fun thing that happened” that day. Raters noted to which domain the event was related (school, family, friends, activity, or sport or miscellaneous other). Only those students who completed diaries all 4 of the days in which this question was asked ($n = 52$) were included in these analyses.

Idol. On one of the diary days, students were asked to name and describe someone they wished they could be more like. For the present study, the author noted whether the idol listed was an adult or a peer.

Parent Interviews

Parent interviews focused on parents' perceptions of their child's experiences in school, including how these experiences have changed over time. For purposes of the present study, parents were also asked to provide students' most recent report card grades in math, science, English/language arts, art, music, and physical education. Parents were also asked to provide a more subjective measure of their child's performance on a five-point scale (1 = very poor to 5 = excellent).

Attempts were made to contact the parent(s) of all 80 of the original study participants. Of these, 30 families could not be located. Two more families were unable to complete the interview as the parents spoke no English and no Vietnamese translator was available. Of the remaining 48 families, 40 provided interviews, 3 refused for personal reasons, and the remaining 5 families agreed to be interviewed in principal, though it proved impossible to arrange in practice (e.g., multiple missed appointments, often coupled with a lack of phone that made rescheduling difficult). In all, the response rate was 50%, and the refusal/incomplete interview rate was 17%.

RESULTS

AVAILABILITY OF ROLE MODELS

The first part of the analyses of these data focused on the nature and availability of role models to white students and students of color. Table 2 provides information on the role models available to participants in the study and role models' educational backgrounds. A critical assumption guiding this research was that students of color would report having fewer race- and gender-matched role models available to them, and this assumption was, in fact, supported. About half of the students in this sample reported at least one race- and gender-matched role model. However, whereas most white students reported having race- and gender-matched role models available to them, a majority of students of color did not.

Codings of students' race- and gender-matched role models were analyzed to examine differences in the professional status of race- and gender-matched role models available to white students and students of color. In general, proportionally fewer of the race- and gender-matched role models reported by students of color were in occupations requiring a college education ($\chi^2 = 3.74, p < .05$). It is important to keep this pattern in mind when examining data on the relationship between the availability of a race- and gender-matched role model and students' motivation for academic achievement. If students of color with a matched (but not necessarily college-

Table 2. Characteristics of role models reported by students

Number of Students Who Report Having a Role Model, Both Matched and Nonmatched			
	Role Model	No Role Model	
White students	29	14	
Students of color	20	16	
$\chi^2 = 1.175, ns$			
The Presence or Absence of Race- and Gender-Matched Role Models			
	Matched	Nonmatched	None
White students	25	4	14
Students of color	10	10	16
$\chi^2 = 8.58, p \leq .01$			
Educational Status of Race- and Gender-Matched Role Models			
	No College	College Required	
White students	4	19	
Students of color	5	5	
$\chi^2 = 3.74, p < .05$			

educated) role model demonstrate a propensity to invest in academic achievement to the same degree as their White peers (who typically do have college-educated matched role models), this will provide some support for the hypothesis that the *match* is more important for predicting an investment in achievement than is the *content* of that role model.

Effects of the Availability of a Role Model

The focus of this manuscript is race- and gender-matched role models and the special role that matched role models play in adolescent identity development. As a consequence, hypothesis-testing will entail a two-stage process: First, students with nonmatched role models will be compared to those with no role model at all, to ensure that, as hypothesized, there are no differences between these two groups. Next, given no differences between students with non-matched role models and those with no role model at all, these two groups will be collapsed and contrasted with students with race- and gender-matched role models. In each case, it is hypothesized that students with at least one race- and gender-matched role model will show greater investment in achievement than their peers without such a role model.

Achievement Focus

It was hypothesized that young adolescents with *at least one* race- and gender-matched role model at the start of the study would show increased interest in achievement (Hypothesis I), as evidenced by their (a) demonstrating better academic performance in future assessments, (b) reporting more achievement-oriented goals, (c) enjoying achievement-relevant activities more, (d) being more likely to think about the future and their plans or their place in it, and (e) being more likely to report adults rather than peers as idols relative to their peers without matched role models. I also hypothesize that these relationships will depend more on the match between participants and available role models than on the content of the role model (Hypothesis II), as evidenced by (a) the fact that the findings will hold only for those young people with race- and gender-*matched* role models—*not* for those with nonmatched role models and (b) that the positive relationships will hold independent of the *content* of the particular role model reported by a student (i.e., the student will be more academically motivated *even if* the role model does not have an academic background).

Academic performance. Students with race- and gender-matched role models were hypothesized to be more academically focused and thus achieve more than their peers without such role models. To test this hypothesis, reports of students' performance 18 to 24 months after the study began were examined. Students' grades were given a numerical value, with higher numbers reflecting higher grades (1 = F, 3 = D, 6 = C, 9 = B, 12 = A—intermediate values represent +’s and -’s). As expected, one-way ANOVA’s showed no differences in grades between those students with nonmatched role models and those without any role model ($F < 1$, ns). Collapsing those who reported a nonmatched role model or no role model and comparing them to students with race- and gender-matched role models, however, revealed the predicted pattern: Students with matched role models were performing better academically than those without 14 to 18 months after the role model assessment took place [Matched: $M = 8.89$ —B+’s; Nonmatched: $M = 7.15$ —B-’s; $F(1,35) = 4.05$, $p \leq .05$]. Moreover, this pattern was true for both White students and students of color; no interaction of race and presence of role model was found [$F(1, 33) = 1.46$, ns].

Performance and role model content. The second hypothesis examined in this study was that the mere *presence* of race- and gender-matched role models is more important than the *content* of those models. That is, it was expected that the educational achievements of role models would not be predictive of students' later performance, and this was indeed the case.

There was no difference in students' later academic performance as a function of whether or not the race- and gender-matched role models they reported were college-educated ($F < 1$, ns).

Goals. It was also hypothesized that the greater investment in achievement pursuits on the part of students with race- and gender-matched role models would be seen in their self-reports of the goals they were working towards (coded, as described above, (a) educational and professional, (b) social, or (c) performance/athletic goals). Students with race- and gender-matched role models were expected to report more goals in the "educational or professional" category than students without matched role models, and this hypothesis was supported. Initial one-way ANOVA's revealed no differences in the overall number of goals reported by White students and students of color ($F < 1$, ns). Similarly, one-way ANOVA's comparing students with *nonmatched* role models to those *without* role models showed no differences between the two groups in the number of educational or professional goals they reported. (F 's < 1 , ns). Consequently, these two groups were collapsed to form the group of participants without race- and gender-matched role models; and they were compared to those with race- and gender-matched role models in subsequent analyses.

Comparisons of those students with and without matched role models revealed the predicted pattern and can be seen in Table 3. Those *with* matched role models (see columns 1 and 3 in Table 3) reported significantly more goals overall and particularly more educational and professional goals than did their peers without them (see columns 2 and 4). Moreover, a two-way race (White vs. students of color) \times role model (matched vs. nonmatched or none) ANOVA on the number of goals students reported revealed that this pattern—more goals among students with matched role models—was stronger for students of color than for White students.

"Good" events. On 4 of the 10 diary days, students were asked to "describe something good that happened today." The content codings of these descriptions were analyzed to test the prediction that students with a race- and gender-matched role model would report more "good events" in the achievement-relevant categories of schoolwork and organized extracurricular activities (such as dance lessons or organized sports) than would their peers without matched role models.

Preliminary analyses confirmed that, as predicted, there were no differences in the number of achievement-relevant events reported by students with non-matched role models and those with no role models (F 's $< 1 - 2.57$, ns). Thus, these two groups were again collapsed and subsequent analyses were performed to compare students with race- and gender-

Table 3. Number of goals reported by students as a function of the availability of role models

	White Students		Students of Color		Interaction Effect		Main Effect	
	Matched Role Model	Non-matched or No Role Model	Matched Role Model	Non-Matched or No Role Model				
Goals	<i>n</i> = 23	<i>n</i> = 18	<i>n</i> = 8	<i>n</i> = 20	<i>F</i> (1, 65)	<i>p</i> ≤ .05	<i>F</i> (1,65)	<i>p</i> ≤ .05
Educational and Professional	2.26	1.79	3.50	1.75	2.86	.05	8.87	.01
Social Performance/	.48	.11	.38	.30	<1	ns	1.23	ns
Athletic	1.04	.61	.63	.80	1.45	ns	<1	ns
Miscellaneous	.04	.17	.13	.25	<1	ns	<1	ns
Total	3.82	2.68	4.64	3.10	<1	ns	8.18	.01

matched role models to students without matched role models. Subsequent analyses revealed that students with a race- and gender-matched role model reported extracurricular activities as “good events” more often than did students without a matched role model (Matched $M = 2.00$; Nonmatched $M = 1.33$, $F(1,50) = 5.55$, $p < .02$), though this did not interact with students’ race. School activities rarely appeared on students’ reports of “good events.” Contrary to predictions, there were no differences in the number of school-related events reported by students with or without a matched role model ($F(1,50) = 1.38$, ns).

There was also no difference in the number of “family” or “friends” events noted by students as “good events” as a function of whether or not students had a matched role model ($F[1,50] \leq 1.16$, ns).

Future orientation. Finally, students’ data were examined for evidence that matched role models helped to focus students’ attention on the future. Data were analyzed for evidence of participants’ future orientation, and these results are reported in Table 4. First, it was expected that those

Table 4. Future orientation of students as a function of the availability of a matched role model

	“Person I Look Up To”			
	White Students		Students of Color	
	Matched Role Model	Non-Matched or No Role Model	Matched Role Model	Nonmatched or No Role Model
Adult	23	13	10	11
Peer	2	1	0	5

$\chi^2 = 13.00$, $p \leq .01$

	Whether Students Think About What They Want to Be When They Grow Up			
	White Students		Students of Color	
	Matched Role Model	Nonmatched or No Role Model	Matched Role Model	Nonmatched or No Role Model
Think About?				
Yes	24	17	9	20
No	0	2	1	5

$\chi^2 = 2.20$, $p < .06$, one-tailed

students with race- and gender-matched role models would be more likely to report an adult as someone they look up to than a peer. This hypothesis was also supported. Although few students in this sample reported peers as the "person they most wish that they could be more like," log-linear analyses revealed that those students who did report a peer in that position were overwhelmingly students of color without a matched role model ($\chi^2 = 13.00, p < .01$).

Next, student reports about whether or not they ever think about what they want to be when they become adults were analyzed. By and large, the vast majority of students who answered this question (70 out of 78) reported that they do sometimes think about what they want to be when they grow up. However, seven of the eight who reported that they did not are students without a race- and gender-matched role model ($\chi^2 = 2.20, p \leq .06$, one-tailed).

DISCUSSION

In this study, the availability of race- and gender-matched role models showed a strong relationship to the developing identities of young adolescents. The availability of a race- and gender-matched role model was significantly and consistently predictive of a greater investment in achievement concerns on the part of these young adolescents. Those students who reported having a race- and gender-matched role model showed relatively better academic performance more than a year after the initial assessment. The possession of a matched role model was positively correlated with achievement-relevant goals and an enjoyment of achievement-relevant activities. Students with a matched role model were also more likely to think about their futures and to focus on adults rather than peers as idols. In each case, the possession of nonmatched role models did not have the same positive influence.

Moreover, the positive relationship between race- and gender-matched role models and students' achievement orientation did not depend on the educational achievements of that role model. Those students with a matched role model reported a greater investment in academic and achievement concerns irrespective of what career or professional position the role model held. In particular, students of color with a matched role model showed an increased investment in achievement-oriented goals and activities even though the role models they reported were relatively less likely to have a college education themselves. Also, students' later grades were unrelated to the educational achievements of their highest achieving, matched role model. Taken as a whole, these data suggest that race- and gender-matched role models provided these young people with something other than information about how to behave or specific goals towards which they might work.

Race- and gender-matched role models provide clear and concrete images through which young people can begin to develop a deeper sense of having a place of value within the structure of the larger culture in which they live. The matched role models—as people the participants themselves defined as being “like me” (in terms of race and gender) and in a desirable social position—provide a measure of some of the social resources available to young people as they try to envision their place within the larger social and cultural context of which they, as young adolescents, are developing an awareness. Thus, these data can be interpreted as demonstrating the reverse of the experience of discrimination. Steele (1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and Gougis (1986) have demonstrated that the experience of feeling discriminated against can, on its own, constrict the development of one’s goals and impair academic performance. This study demonstrates how goals and academic performance can be enhanced by the sense of opportunity afforded by seeing others like you in desirable social positions.

CASUAL DIRECTION: ROLE MODELS CREATE GOALS OR VICE VERSA?

These data demonstrate a clear connection between the presence of race- and gender-matched role models and students’ investment in their futures (as evidenced by their goals and idols) and their academic performance in later years. The time course of data collection in this study supports the position that it is the presence of matched role models that caused the later effects, but the time course alone cannot conclusively prove this. The argument could be made that those students who were thinking about their futures and achievement were those most likely to seek out race- and gender-matched role models. Future research efforts will need to be directed towards more definitively establishing this proposed causal linkage. Nevertheless, two answers to this challenge can be asserted on the basis of this study. First, the evidence taken as a whole is more supportive of the position that the role models came first. If it was the case that those students (of any ethnicity) who were most achievement oriented had simply sought out a race- and gender-matched role model, there is reason to expect that there would not be such large group differences in the educational levels of the role models chosen by White students and students of color. Instead, I think we would expect that all students would instead seek out higher achieving role models. However, these effects held even when the role models students reported held positions that did not require a college education.

Secondly, I would argue that the precise causal direction of influence—role models to achievement or vice versa—should not become the primary focus in discussing these data. The model presented in the study is that the race- and gender-matched role models provided students with an increased

sense of their own potential, value, and opportunities; and it is essentially one in which the role models themselves *cause* students to think more about their futures and to work harder to achieve their goals. In the larger perspective guiding the research, however, it is assumed that the processes by which these effects occur form a complex and cycling dynamic in which the development of one's understanding of oneself and one's understanding of the world and the opportunities it presents are inextricably linked. Whichever came first—role models or achievement—there is still something special about *race- and gender-matched* role models that is evidenced in this study. Whereas nearly all students in this sample listed at least one role model, the increased attention to achievement and academic performance is found only among those students with race- and gender-matched role models; and that is the central finding in this study.

Future Research Gaps

These data can provide some initial insights into the processes by which young people assess the opportunities available to them and the ways that these perceptions shape adolescents' investment in and efforts towards academic goals. However, these data can only tell us part of the story and much more research is needed to fully explore these questions. First, the measure of role models used in this study was quite crude, leaving little room to examine all the complexities in these processes. For example, race and gender were confounded, so that the author could not examine the effects of these different aspects of role models separately. It will be interesting to see if race and gender play different roles in these processes, particularly for different groupings of students. Also, further, more qualitative, explorations of the role models themselves will be important—how do students know these role models and what makes this relationship effective? Can role models available in the media have similar effects? This study design also did not allow for an analysis of the role that socioeconomic status may have played in the processes described here, nor did it allow for comparisons across different ethnic groups within the students of color. Future research should be designed to address such questions. Finally, different study designs that could better address the issues of causality would help us answer further questions about the meaning and function of role models in student development.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the relationship between of the availability of race- and gender-matched role models and young people's orientation toward achievement and their experiences in school in a 2-year study of adolescent iden-

tivity development. While the relatively small sample size make these data somewhat preliminary, they suggest important insights into adolescents' use of role models to spur motivation. Relative to students who reported having no role models and those who reported only nonmatched role models, those reporting a race- and gender-matched role model showed consistently more interest in achievement-relevant activities and goals throughout the study; and, in later years, they showed significantly greater academic performance. Moreover, these relationships were, if anything, stronger for students of color than for white students; and they did not depend on the educational achievements of the role models themselves. This study represents an effort to take young people's implicit ideas about the opportunities available to them and the value placed on members of their own social group and operationalize them in such a way that we can begin to examine their effect on identity and achievement outcomes. Adolescence is a time when critical decisions are made about which identities to adopt and which domains are worth investing in. These data provide broad evidence for the role of implicit cultural understandings in that process.

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Notes

1 Overall *n*'s reported refer to the number of students who participated in a given portion of the study. However, as per standard ethical procedures, individual students may have chosen not to respond to a given item on the measure. Although not an extensive problem, the degrees of freedom reported in analyses should be consulted for information concerning the number of students who responded to the particular items in each case.

2 This study presented difficulties in the use of language referring to race and ethnicity. The scientific meaningfulness of the word "race" is questionable, though its colloquial meaning is relatively well understood. Ethnicity is more scientifically appropriate. Unfortunately, we did not have information about the ethnic background of majority students, and therefore the use of the phrase "ethnically matched" to refer to the role models as measured is inappropriate. As a consequence, the phrase "racially matched" was used instead, though the reader should be aware this terminology is not without its own problems.

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