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Black achievement measured in terms of cultural context

# Culture and Black Students' Success

Robert T. Carter

The educational literature (e.g., Fleming, 1984) has suggested that Blacks have, in general, lower levels of measured academic achievement than their White counterparts (Jaynes and Williams, 1989). At the same time, few studies exist in the educational literature which examine the influence of racial/cultural variables on the educational and achievement experiences of Blacks. Most studies pertaining to Black educational achievement at predominantly White institutions have been primarily comparative with little consideration of within group culture-specific variations (Sedlacek, 1987). The absence of racial and cultural variables in studies of Black Americans is a serious shortcoming, and perhaps a barrier, in attempts to understand the educational performance of Black Americans (Fleming, 1984). The present article represents an initial attempt to explore the relationships between cultural variables, in particular, value-orientations (i.e., cultural values), racial/cultural identity attitudes (i.e., the extent to which one identifies with one's ascribed racial/cultural group), and Blacks' socio-political history in relation to Whites in American society. These variables are then used to discuss Black academic achievement at predominantly white colleges and universities.

Tyler, Sussewell and Williams-McCoy (1985) have clearly articulated the viewpoint that some racial differences that are obtained are a function of using practices and paradigms which are ethnocentric and represent Anglo-American cultural values. Several theorists, researchers and educators have also begun to recognize that educational models developed by white middle class social scientists and educators are bound by their cultural values or value-orientations (Sue, 1982), and, as a consequence, may have been inappropriately applied to Black students. Trimble (1976), for instance, suggested that theories based on Anglo-American cultural values such as individualism, achievement through externally measurable standards, and mastery over one's environment may have led to practices lacking sensitivity to a culture whose values emphasize emotional restraint, interpersonal cooperation and interpersonal harmony. These latter two value orientations or cultural values, some authors have argued, are characteristic of Black culture (e.g., Brown, 1975; Nobles, 1980).

I propose that a historical/cultural model should be used to understand and analyze Black Americans' academic performance and educational experiences. I believe we must consider Blacks' psychological orientations to

their socially ascribed racial group (i.e., racial identity). We must also understand the cultural values which characterize Whites and Blacks who identify with their cultures, and it is important to keep in mind Blacks' current and past socio-political circumstances as important elements of American culture and history. In particular, it seems fruitless to examine Blacks' educational experiences without placing them in an historical context. Socio-political circumstances and history are the context for a group's cultural expressions of its values. Moreover, consideration of a group's social position and historical roots allows for an accurate analysis of the institutional and individual avenues for development. Furthermore, I believe that any model or study of Black educational success which excludes the socio-political context and cultural variables is doomed to confusion and contradiction.

## Social-political Environment

A recent comprehensive report edited by Jaynes and Williams (1989) published by the National Research Council examines over a fifty year period life in American society for Blacks. Their report brings together extensive research and scholarship conducted from 1939 to 1989. Jaynes and Williams (1989) outline Blacks' socio-political circumstances and history. As these authors have noted, fifty years ago "most Black Americans could not work, live, shop, eat, seek entertainment or travel where they chose." Even 25 years ago, most Blacks were not in effect allowed to vote. Most blacks were poor, and were denied a basic education. Since 1939 things have changed; however, as Jaynes and Williams (1989) note, "... the great gulf that existed between Black and White Americans in 1939 has only been narrowed; it has not been closed (p. 3)."

Black Americans have survived admirably the hundreds of years during which their status in American society was viewed and legally classified as property and chattel. Blacks who were not held as slaves during these years were oppressed socially and economically. Black Americans have emerged from their status as objects to obtain citizenship. Blacks have and continue to fight for removal of racial barriers to housing, employment, education, and political life, and they have been struggling in the face of considerable resistance to attain equality in these sectors of American society (Jaynes and Williams, 1989).

According to Jaynes and Williams, to accomplish these goals requires government policies which provide and promote equality of opportunity. They also argue that Blacks need to maintain the behaviors and attitudes which have enabled them to benefit from the opportunities that have been provided:

"Black-White relations are important in determining the degree to which equal opportunity exists for Black Americans. Whites desire equal treatment in government policy; however, many Whites are less likely to espouse or practice equality of treatment for Blacks in their personal behavior. Thus, at the core of Black-White relations is a dynamic tension between many Whites' expectations of American institutions and their expectations of themselves ... the divergence between social principle and individual practices frequently leads to Whites' avoidance of Blacks in those institutions in which equal treatment is most needed. The result is that American institutions do not provide the full equality of opportunity that Americans desire."

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It is this discrepancy in Whites' expectations of themselves and their institutions that contributes to the continuation of



educational inequality. I believe it is essential to be aware of this phenomenon in efforts to understand Blacks' academic success. For instance, while educators may endorse affirmative action as a goal for the institution, individuals may have difficulty implementing it because it is not their goal, rather the institution's. It is also possible that Blacks who do attempt to participate as members of the college or university may be expected to adapt to White cultural patterns and behaviors in order to be seen as successful.

It is difficult to comprehend these racial tensions unless one maintains a focus on their roots. According to Jaynes and Williams (1989):

"foremost among the reasons for the present state of Black-White relations are two continuing consequences of the nation's long and recent history of racial inequality. One is the negative attitudes held toward Blacks and the other is the actual disadvantaged conditions under which many Black Americans live. Thus, a legacy of discrimination and segregation continues to affect Black-White relations. In the context of American history, this continuing legacy is not surprising. Racial and ethnic differences have had crucial effects on the course of American history. In particular, Black American's central role in several constitutional crises—their past status as slaves and the debates over slavery during the constitutional convention of 1787; the fighting of the Civil War; the denial of black's basic citizenship until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. . . . In view of this history, race is likely to retain much of its saliency as a feature of American society for some time." (p. 5)

One way that racial inequality has been most manifest has been in educational institutions. "Black and White educational opportunities are not generally equal. Standards of academic performance for teachers and students are not equivalent in schools that serve predominantly black students and those that serve predominantly white students. Nor are equal encouragement and support provided for the educational achievement and attainment of black and white students. (p. 5)"

In summary, a major contributing factor affecting Blacks' academic success is their socio-political history. In particular, the past and current practices of racial segregation makes it particularly difficult for Blacks to be successful in predominantly white institutions. Moreover, the unquestioned application and use of standards for success and achievement drawn from Anglo-Saxon culture does not promote acceptance of cultural values.

### Cultural Variables

Racial inequality in American life, while contributing to Blacks' inferior social status and their exclusion from educational and occupational sectors of American life, has also helped Blacks foster and maintain distinct Afrocentric cultural patterns that have endured for centuries (Nobles, 1980; Carter & Helms, 1990).

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) have presented a theory of variation in value orientations or cultural values which has been used (e.g., Papajohn & Spiegel, 1975) for understanding differences in racial/cultural groups' value systems. The model is intended to be universal in that Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck hold that all social and cultural groups must solve five common human problems, each of which has three possible solutions or alternatives (See Table 1). The value orientations or cultural values correspond to solutions to common problems. Posed in the form of questions

they are: (a) what is the character of human nature? (Evil, Mixed, or Good); (b) what is the relationship of people to nature? (Subjugation, Harmony, or Mastery); (c) what is the proper temporal focus? (Past, Present, or Future); (d) what is the proper mode of human expression/activity? (Being, Being-in-Becoming, or Doing); (e) what is the focus of social relations? (Lineal, Collateral, or Individual). A culture's distinctiveness is determined by the solutions it chooses to these problems. Researchers (e.g., Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Papajohn & Spiegel, 1975; Carter, 1990) have found White American cultural values to be characterized by preferences for Individual Social Relations, Activity Orientation, Master Person/Nature, and a Future Time Sense. See Table 1.

In a comparative study of cultural values, Carter (1990) found that Blacks and Whites could be distinguished on the basis of their cultural values. Black college students in Carter's study indicated cultural beliefs that were consistent with theoretical descriptions of Black American culture (Nobles, 1980). The cultural values that Carter found for Blacks, when they were compared to Whites, were preferences for Evil Human Nature, Subjugation to Nature, Past Time Focus or (a social time perspective), Expressive Individualism or Being-in-Becoming Activity, and a Lineal or Authority or Kinship based social relations. These cultural value preferences seem to be reflective of Blacks' socio-political history and unique culture. That is, Black students seemed to be struggling to survive in an unfamiliar and perhaps hostile environment. Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that Black students' academic achievement in predominantly White colleges and universities may be to some extent due to cultural conflict and the social-psychological consequences of Blacks' socio-political history.

However, racial group membership based on race *per se* may not be a sufficient criterion for cultural group membership. That is, it may not be appropriate to assume that all Blacks are the same or, that because of their racial category, they share a common culture. It is possible for individuals to respond differently to their socio-political environments and particular socialization experiences.

Furthermore, the legacy of racial attitudes of Blacks and Whites and their consequent behavior has affected individual Blacks' psychosocial and cultural development. While all Blacks in America are subject to similar social conditions and racial attitudes of Whites, Blacks might vary with respect to their psychological response to racial inequality. Therefore, to consider Blacks as a homogeneous group is probably as erroneous as the application of most Anglo-Saxon paradigms to racial/ethnic groups.

One of the most promising models for examining differences within racial groups is the Racial Identity Model (cf., Cross, 1978; Helms, 1990). Cross (1978) hypothesized a four stage process of racial identity development for Black Americans that begins at a stage called *Pre-Encounter* which is characterized by dependency on White society for definition and approval. Racial identity attitudes toward one's Blackness is negative and one views White culture and society as the ideal. The next stage is called *Encounter* and is entered when one has a personal and challenging experience with Black or White society. The *Encounter* stage is marked by feelings of confusion about the meaning and significance of race and an increasing desire to become more aligned with one's Black identity. The *Immersion-Emersion* stage follows the *Encounter* experience, and it is characterized by a period of idealization of Black culture and intense negative feelings toward Whites and White culture. One is absorbed in the Black experience and com-



pletely rejects the White world. Immersion is followed by *Internalization*; during the Internalization stage, one has grasped the fact that both Blacks and whites have strengths and weaknesses. In addition, one's Black identity is experienced as positive and an important and valued aspect of self. Therefore one's world view is Afrocentric. One's attitude toward whites is one of tolerance and respect for differences.

Racial identity attitudes for Blacks seem to be associated with various behavioral, affective, and cultural predispositions. Empirical research has found racial identity attitudes to be related to preference for a counselor's race (Parham & Helms, 1981), self-esteem (Parham & Helms, 1985a), affective states (Parham & Helms, 1985b), cultural values (Carter and Helms, 1987), socioeconomic status (Carter & Helms, 1988), and cognitive styles (Helms & Parham, 1990). Race has often been cited as related to demographic characteristics of students, such as their social class. It has been suggested that lower-class students do not fare well academically. However, Carter and Helms (1987) did not find racial identity attitudes for Black students to be related to traditional (i.e., education and occupation of parents) or perceived measures of socioeconomic status.

Other studies (e.g., Parham & Helms, 1981) have suggested a relationship between racial identity attitudes and a number of personality and cultural characteristics. For example, Parham and Helms (1981), in a study of preference for counselor race, found Pre-Encounter attitudes to be more predictive of preference for White counselors, whereas immersion attitudes were predictive of preference for Black counselors. They also found that persons with high levels of internalization attitudes were not concerned with counselor race and more concerned with the counselor's personal characteristics. In a similar vein, Parham and Helms (1985a) and (1985b) found racial identity attitudes to be predictive of affective states and self-esteem. Parham and Helms (1985a) found that Pre-Encounter and immersion attitudes were associated with low self-actualizing tendencies, low self-regard, and high anxiety. Persons with high levels of Immersion attitudes also were found to exhibit feelings of hostility. Encounter attitudes were associated with low anxiety, high self-actualization, and high self-regard (Parham & Helms, 1985b).

Using value-orientations theory to understand Blacks' cultural values, Carter and Helms (1987) investigated whether Black students had definable and measurable cultural characteristics and whether these characteristics varied as a function of Blacks' racial identity attitudes. Carter and Helms (1987) found in this within-group study of Black students that only those racial identity attitudes which involved identification with Black culture (i.e., immersion and internalization attitudes) were predictive of Blacks' cultural values. The cultural values that were predicted were Afrocentric (Harmony with Nature and Collateral or group social relations), i.e., Blacks who were identified with Black culture endorsed the cultural values of group cohesiveness and oneness with nature. These findings were supportive of theorists (e.g., Nobles, 1980) who suggest that such values are characteristic of Black American culture.

These studies provide evidence that Black and White psychological views of themselves may vary considerably, and their use may enhance our understanding of Black academic achievement. More importantly, these studies suggest that an individual Black person may adapt and interpret his/her socio-political environment and psychosocial development differently. Consequently characterizations of

Blacks, without consideration of these psychological differences, may lead to false or confusing results.

While many scholars point to the poor performance of Blacks on tests of cognitive abilities and focus on their need for remedial and "special" support services, much less attention seems to be directed at the complex consequences of cultural differences and similarities and Blacks' socio-political history as primary determinants of Blacks' academic achievement.

### Cultural Variables and Academic Achievement

Consider the fact that American educational institutions reflect White American cultural values (Future Time, Doing Form of self-expression, Mastery over Nature, Individual Social Relations) and that measurement systems and methods have been developed from their cultural perspective. Furthermore, styles of teaching and achieving may also be culture-bound. In addition, Whites' perceptions and exceptions of Black students are influenced by the socio-political history of racial inequality. According to Jaynes and Williams (1989), while Blacks may have fewer socioeconomic resources than Whites when they enter schools: "American schools do not compensate for these disadvantages in background; on average, students leave the schools with black-white gaps not having been appreciably diminished (p. 19)."

Segregation and differential treatment of blacks continue to be widespread in the elementary and secondary schools. Differences in the schooling experienced by black and white students are linked to black-white differences in achievement. These differences are closely tied to teacher behavior, social climate, and the content, quality, and organization of instruction (p. 19). There is little evidence to suggest that Blacks' experiences in post-secondary institutions are any different than their experiences in elementary and secondary schools. In fact some empirical investigations suggest that what may be most salient for Blacks in colleges and universities may be their socio-cultural fit.

In an examination of the educational performance of Black students on White campuses, Sowa, Thomson, and Bennett (1989) investigated traditional and non-traditional predictors of academic performance for Black students at predominantly White colleges and universities. These researchers concluded that the traditional and non-traditional predictors did not account for racial differences in GPA. These authors suggest that "A difference in the social adjustment process of Black students in comparison to White students on predominantly white campuses is supported in the literature. To the extent that Black students experience identity and social adjustment crises on White campuses, they encounter predictable academic stress at an important developmental stage (p. 19)." Other researchers (e.g., Gibbs, 1974; Kysar 1966; Fleming, 1984) have reported similar findings. Therefore, it may be more beneficial for educators to consider the complex interplay of cultural variables in their attempts to understand Black academic success.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical-cultural model may prove to be a useful and fruitful framework for analyzing the apparently complex interplay of socio-political events, racial awareness or identity, and culture as they affect Black students' educational experiences and performance on predominantly White campuses. Employing the historical-cultural framework might allow administrators, faculty, staff, and students to develop educational programs and services that would be psychologically appropriate by tak-



ing into account within-group differences and culturally relevant differences in cultural values.

In effect, I propose that we increase the level of complexity employed in addressing issues of racial harmony. For instance, when college and university officials begin to develop plans to increase the presence of Blacks on campus and they consider the historical-cultural model, I would hope they would understand the need to follow the guidelines offered by the American Council on Education in their publication *Minorities on Campus*. Green (1989) further suggests that the readiness of the institution be assessed. I would add the need to take stock of the attitudes and views of the members of the institution who would be expected to participate in such an effort. Moreover, it would be important for the institution to examine whether and if it engages in practices and uses procedures which have contributed to racial inequality. Also the model suggests the need for educators to redress the history of the exclusion of Blacks' contributions to American life. Furthermore, program and department faculty might be encouraged to begin to be racially inclusive in their teaching and scholarship. Professional staff might begin to design programs with within-group differences in mind and to include White student bodies in efforts to increase racial harmony. In these ways, predominantly White colleges and universities might begin to create educational and campus environments which are genuinely accepting of racial/cultural differences and similarities. I suspect that the socio-cultural and psychological stress experienced by many Black students would be diminished and we would witness gains in their academic performance.

The price we pay for ignoring America's racial history and current cultural norms regarding race is high. When Blacks ignore or avoid considering these historical-cultural issues, and Whites try to convince themselves that these matters no longer exist or they are not important, they only perpetuate racial problems and the insanity of a society founded on liberty and freedom which denies to its members the same fundamental rights. It is imperative that we recognize that the fortunes of Black Americans are intertwined with those of White Americans. As the National Research Council report points out, we share a common destiny.

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**TABLE I**  
**Value Orientations and Alternative Solutions**

Value Orientations	Alternative Solutions	
Human Nature	<b>Evil:</b> Humans are by nature evil.	<b>Mixed:</b> Humans are by nature both good and evil.
Activity	<b>Being:</b> Mode of activity characterized by spontaneous expression of needs and impulses.	<b>Being-in-Becoming:</b> Mode of activity which emphasizes containment, preparation, and meditation in the service of personal growth.
Time	<b>Past:</b> Focus is on events in the past, historical customs and traditions.	<b>Present:</b> Focus is on events occurring in the immediate present.
Person — Nature	<b>Subjugation:</b> Belief that humans have little influence over the forces of nature.	<b>Harmony:</b> Belief that humans should live in communion with the forces of nature.
Social Relations	<b>Lineality:</b> Group goals are considered more important than individual goals; relationships are based on the principle of hierarchy.	<b>Collaterality:</b> Group goals are considered more important than individual goals; relationships are based on the principle of equality.
		<b>Good:</b> Humans are by nature good. <b>Doing:</b> Mode of activity directed toward personal accomplishments and achievements evaluated by external criteria.
		<b>Future:</b> Focus is on events which will or may occur in the future. <b>Mastery:</b> Belief that humans should control the forces of nature to suit their purposes. <b>Individualism:</b> Individual goals are considered more important than group goals; relationships are based on individual autonomy and choice.