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Striving for Success: A Qualitative Exploration of Competing Theories of High-Achieving Black College Students’ Academic Motivation

Kimberly A. Griffin

Research on the academic performance of Black students has focused on low-achievers, framing their academic motivation as maladaptive and driven by externally (e.g., competition or compliance) rather than internally (e.g., love of learning) generated forces. This qualitative study challenges this mono-dimensional deficit framework, examining the motivation of nine Black high-achievers attending a large public university. Findings show that self-determination theory, socio-cognitive theory, and attribution theory cannot individually explain the motivation of these Black high-achievers. Instead, a multi-dimensional framework that incorporates all three models and that highlights internal and external sources of motivation best accounts for these students’ experiences.

Dressed in black, draped in their kinte cloths, the graduates enter the church. African drums draw them down the aisle two by two, swaying and smiling. Innumerable friends and family clap and cry around them, calling their names and snapping picture after picture to commemorate the evening. For many of these Black students, it was the end of a time of joy and struggle; four years of football games and parties coupled with unbelievably challenging classes and bleary-eyed late-night study sessions. But despite adversity, tears, and doubts, they persevered and were now just moments away from graduating from one of the most elite and prestigious universities in the country. When comparing this scene to the frequently noted statistics emphasizing the underachievement of Black students, one might wonder what makes these happy graduates different. What motivated them to work so hard and strive for excellence even when times were at their most difficult? This study addresses this question, examining the academic motivation patterns of nine Black high-achievers attending a large public university.

The success of high achieving Black undergraduates often draws great praise; however, research on Black collegians has focused primarily on those who experience academic difficulty. Although it is critical to comprehend the experience of Black students who struggle academically, it is also imperative to gain an understanding of the within-group differences between Black students. Black high achievers are typical college students in many ways; yet, the issues of Black students and gifted students can come together to shape their experiences in unique ways (Fries-Britt, 1997, 2000; Lindstrom & Van Sant, 1986; Noldon & Sedlacek, 1996, 1998; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). The existing literature on Black high achievers reveals that they often face such challenges as subtle and overt racism; reconciling their racial, ethnic, cultural, and gifted identities; and social isolation (e.g., Cooley, Cornell, & Lee, 1991; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Person & Christensen, 1996; Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Steele, 

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These experiences can limit these students' achievement and diminish their motivation. Scholars have discussed the important role that social support structures, such as engagement with other Black students, mentoring, and interactions with faculty, play in helping students overcome negative experiences and obstacles to success (Bonner, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Freeman, 1999; Nolden & Sedlacek). However, although the literature discusses barriers that Black high achievers face and the role that social support plays in mitigating the impact of these factors, there is less understanding of what pushes these students to continue to strive for academic excellence and pursue their goals despite these challenges.

This study addresses the lack of knowledge in this area, using qualitative methods to analyze the responses of a socio-economically diverse sample of high-achieving Black students to learn about both their sources of motivation and perceptions of how they contribute to academic achievement. Self-determination theory, socio-cognitive theory, and attribution theory are used as frameworks, enabling a fuller understanding of these students' motivation patterns. Although it is often argued that motivation is primarily one-dimensional and successful students rely on motivation stemming from internally generated sources, Black honors students in this study report being motivated by both internal and external factors. A multidimensional framework that acknowledges the role of both internal and externally inspired sources of motivation best reflects the motivation patterns of this group Black high-achievers enrolled in their university's honors program.

BACKGROUND
Motivation Theory
Motivation research can be understood as the study of how thoughts and beliefs are related to actions and behaviors (Ames & Ames, 1984). Scholars in this area have long made efforts to apply their work to the realm of education to determine how motivation impacts the learning, achievement, and self-esteem of students of all ages and across all educational contexts (Ames & Ames; Graham, 1994). This section will highlight three motivational theories that have been used to gain a greater understanding of student achievement: self-determination theory, socio-cognitive theory, and attribution theory.

Self-Determination Theory. In their discussion of self-determination theory, Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) highlight the impact of internal and external factors on student motivation. The authors present a model in which different types of motivation are placed on a scale from the most intrinsic, where decisions are made based on personal choice and locus of causality is internalized, to most extrinsic, where decisions are made based on compliance and locus of causality is external (Cokley, 2003; Deci et al.). In between these two extremes are introjected, identified, and integrated regulation styles, which balance varying degrees of intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation. Students employing introjected regulation motivation styles internalize the rules that shape their academic behaviors but are driven by rewards or punishments rather than a passion for the academic activity itself. Identified regulation is when students actively choose to engage in academic behaviors rather than just complying due to external pressure but their behaviors are based partially on external factors, such as a desire for continued academic success. Deci and his colleagues state that integrated regulation is the most advanced type of extrinsic motivation and occurs when behavioral regulation becomes a fully internalized
process. Integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation patterns are extremely similar; however, integrated regulators are motivated by valued outcomes associated with academic achievement. Increased levels of intrinsic motivation is considered the most positive, and has been cited as being highly related to student success, retention, academic achievement, and confidence (Benware & Deci, 1984; Cokley, 2003; Deci et al.).

**Socio-Cognitive Theory.** Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) suggest that students’ goals are directly related to their motivation and achievement in their socio-cognitive theory. Goals are regulated by self-efficacy beliefs; people set goals based on their beliefs about their abilities and the likelihood of meeting those goals (Zimbardo & Gerrig, 1996). Self-efficacy beliefs then influence motivation by affecting “the level of goal challenge people set for themselves, the amount of effort they mobilize, and their persistence in the face of difficulties” (Zimmerman et al., p. 664). Goal setting can increase students’ reactions to their successes and failures because goals serve as a guide that indicates what individuals define as personal success. “Self-regulated learners” are identified by Zimmerman et al. as a group whose members are proactive self-motivators who exhibit a high sense of ability to fulfill the goals that they have set out for themselves. Characteristics of these self-regulated learners, student driven goals and perceived efficacy for academic achievement, were found by Zimmerman et al. to be positively correlated with academic attainment.

**Attribution Theory.** Many have explored the relationship between students’ causal attributions and their academic motivation (Graham, 1994). According to these theorists, the attribution styles students utilize to explain unfamiliar situations have an impact on their motivation, future success strategies, thoughts, and emotions (Kraft, 1991; Perry, Hechter, Menec, & Weinberg, 1993; Wiener, 1984). Weiner’s theory of attribution acknowledges three attributional dimensions: locus of causality, stability, and controllability. Locus of causality addresses whether a student sees an outcome as being due to factors that are internal (e.g., intelligence or effort) or external (e.g., task difficulty or luck; van Laar, 2000; Weiner). Stability differentiates causes by their permanence and classifies events as resulting from factors that are enduring (e.g., inherent ability) or transient (e.g., luck or mood; Weiner). Finally, controllability identifies whether individuals view results as subject to their control (e.g., effort) or uncontrollable (e.g., illness or luck; Weiner).

Causal attributions, as understood through this matrix, determine students’ motivational reactions by shaping their emotions and future expectations (Perry et al., 1993; Weiner, 1984). In other words, students’ perceptions of why events occurred shape their expectancies and are important in determining future behaviors such as their motivation. Studies by motivation researchers have revealed that academic failures (as well as failures in other arenas) that are attributed to transient factors, such as effort or illness, maintain motivation because they acknowledge the “possibility that the future will be different” (Weiner, p. 26). Attributions also elicit affective responses; researchers have found that failure attributed to stable causes often results in hopelessness and resignation (Weiner).

**Motivation Patterns of Black Students**

A theme that recurs throughout the motivation theories described above is that more internally based beliefs about agency and control positively affect confidence, achievement, and motivation, whereas externally
influenced goals and beliefs about potential for success have a less positive (and often negative) impact (Benware & Deci, 1984; Cokley, 2003; Deci et al., 1991; Perry et al., 1993; Weiner, 1984; Zimmerman et al., 1992). For example, early motivation studies ascribe the achievement gap between Black and White students to the “deficient” motivation patterns of Black students, claiming that they have low achievement motivation and maladaptive, externally based, motivation patterns (see Graham, 1994, for full review of the literature).

According to Graham (1994), these assessments are misleading, and past attempts to understand the motivation patterns of Black students have been flawed and incomplete. She argues that the literature has too often compared the experiences of Black students to White students, has seen important cognitive variables as separate from one another, has not been sensitive to the dynamics of non-attainment of goals, and has neglected the experience of middle-class Blacks. More recent studies on the motivation patterns of Black students have attempted to address some of these inadequacies. For instance, in addition to being internally driven, Black students appear to employ motivation strategies that originate from external influences to both maintain their self-esteem and motivate them to achieve (Cokley, 2003; Graham; Husman & Lens, 1999; Hwang, Echols, & Vrongistnos, 2002; Kaplan & Maehr, 1999; O’Connor, 1997; van Laar, 2000). Garibaldi (1992) insists that more significant levels of external motivation are in order to really encourage increases in Black males’ academic achievement, stating that recognition of their academic abilities and achievements is directly connected to raising their academic confidence and self-esteem, both related to motivation. In a comparison of Black and White students, Cokley (2003) found that they were equally intrinsically motivated, but that Black collegians reported higher levels of extrinsic motivation. Black high achieving college students studied by Hwang et al. also indicated that they drew on both internal and external forces to encourage their academic motivation and desire to succeed.

Studies have also given some indication regarding the specific sources of motivation utilized by Black college students. The Black high achievers in the Hwang et al. study noted that their academic choices and behaviors were motivated by the positive career, social, and societal outcomes that awaited them if they were academically successful. There is also some indication that Black students call upon their racial background as a source of motivation. Cokley (2001) found that racial awareness and the centrality of race in a student’s identity were positively correlated with the academic self-concept and intrinsic motivation of Black females at historically Black colleges. Racial centrality was not significantly correlated with any of these constructs for Black males in the sample, leading Cokley to conclude that whereas Black females connect their academic achievement to their racial identity, males separate their achievement from their racial identity.

Recent research has also provided greater insight into attribution theory and how it applies to Black students and their motivation patterns. Van Laar (2000) found that, although they had high expectancies and made internal attributions at levels similar to their White peers at the beginning of college, the longer Black students enrolled in higher education, the less likely they were to make internal attributions for their academic failures. These decreases are described as being connected to the academic difficulties many Black students face early in their college
careers, and van Laar argues that the students were able to protect their self-esteem and stay motivated by making external attributions about the causes of these difficulties. She also found that Black students who made external attributions for their lower academic outcomes had higher levels of academic motivation than those who made internal attributions for failure. Further, those who made external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success were the most likely to exhibit high levels of academic motivation. Although these studies clarify the relationship between the internal–external attribution patterns, self-esteem, and academic motivation, there is still little knowledge of how Black students’ beliefs about the permanence and controllability of their academic outcomes impact their motivation.

Based on this literature, Black students appear to benefit academically and psychologically from external motivators and attribution patterns. Encouragement and beliefs in the positive outcomes associated with academic achievement, both considered external motivators, are cited as being related to academic achievement for Black students. However, they are not motivated by external factors alone. There is also evidence of the importance of internal forces and desires to achieve facilitating their academic drive. These findings further indicate that, rather than assuming that internal or external sources of motivation alone are the most conducive to Black students’ academic success, the incorporation of both internal and external sources result in higher levels of academic motivation and achievement.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a sociological multi-case study, which directed the researcher to give attention to the societies people live in, social problems, roles individuals play in society, and different classes that individuals fall into relative to their educational experiences (Merriam, 1998). Multi-case study methodology allowed the researcher to include data collection and analysis of more than one case (i.e., more than one student), facilitating comparisons across cases, and enhanced external validity of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam). Seeing each participant as an individual case allowed the researcher to compare the experiences of Black high-achievers both to each other and the broader research literature regarding Black students and academic motivation. Finally, this study was designed to be interpretive rather than analytical or descriptive. According to Merriam, interpretive case study allows researchers to go beyond describing phenomena to presenting data in ways that support, challenge, or develop theory about events, experiences, and outcomes. Therefore, data was collected in an effort to understand what Black high achievers experience in college in relation to the theories on motivation and student achievement, as opposed to describing what happens to them or evaluating whether the Honors program is good or bad for the students.

Research Questions

This study used motivation and attribution theories as frameworks to gain a greater understanding of the forces that drive high achieving Black students to succeed and learn more about how they feel their motivation facilitates their academic achievement. Rather than arguing that internally or externally based strategies are more or less important to the achievement of Black students, this study was an exploration of the multidimensional nature of student motivation and focused on how a group of Black high achievers view their
motivation and its sources, as well as how they perceive that it translates to their academic success. Specifically, this study aimed to answer two questions: (a) What forces do Black honors students identify as motivating them to “strive for success”? and (b) How do students think about and react to their academic struggles?

Institutional Data
The site for this study was “State University” (pseudonym), a large research university on the East coast that serves as the flagship of its state’s public university system. Census data indicates that in 2000, there were over 5 million residents in this state, and its racial/ethnic composition was 64% White, 28% Black, 4% Latino, 4% Asian, and 0.3% Native American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). State University enrolls approximately 35,000 students (25,000 are undergraduates), and just over 75% of undergraduates are state residents. Although not completely proportional, the undergraduate enrollment of State University somewhat mirrors the wider state population: 68% of undergraduates are White and 32% are minorities. Specifically, 12% of undergraduate students are Black, 14% are Asian American, 6% are Latino/Hispanic, and 0.3% are Native American.

Sample
The researcher employed purposive methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to recruit a sample that would provide the most insight into the study’s research questions; the sample was composed of nine Black students enrolled in the Honors Program at State University. Enrollment in the Honors Program was used as the characteristic that defined students as “high achievers” because of the rigorous academic standards required to gain admission to the program. All State University applicants that met the Honors Program requirements of a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) and 1200 on the SAT were considered for acceptance to the program. Students who were admitted to the Honors program for the Fall 2000 semester had, on average, a 4.1 GPA, and 50% of the students had SAT scores between 1360 and 1470. In comparison, the average high school GPA for the whole incoming class at State University in 2000 was significantly lower at 3.72 overall, and 50% of those students had SAT scores between 1170 and 1330.

Six females and three males participated in the study; therefore women composed two thirds of the sample. The average participant age was 19.6, with ages ranging from 18 to 23. Four subjects were sophomores, making them the most represented class in this study. The sample also included two freshmen, one junior, and two seniors. All participants were full time students, though seven worked part time during the school year. Six of the students had attended public high schools before attending State University, two went to private schools, and one attended both public and private high schools. Seven of the students reported taking advanced placement courses in high school and four had participated in SAT preparation courses.

There was significant diversity in respondents’ family backgrounds. Six respondents’ mothers had completed some college education, with two obtaining Bachelors degrees and three having Master’s degrees. Five students had fathers who had college experience: two completed Bachelors degrees, one had a Master’s, and one had a PhD or professional degree. Three students had parents with no postsecondary education. In terms of financial status, one student reported that her yearly family income was between $10,000 and $20,000, two students had family incomes between $30,000 and $45,000, two students’
family incomes were between $45,000 and $60,000, and there was one student each in the $60,000-$80,000 and $80,000-$100,000 yearly family income categories. Two respondents reported family incomes in excess of $100,000 a year.

Procedures
Student participants in this study were recruited from the Honors Program at State University in the winter of 2000. The researcher met with a key administrator in the Honors Program to obtain permission to both focus the study on students in the program and obtain an initial list of potential participants. Identified students were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. The researcher also recruited a member of the Honors Program to inform students about the project and help enlist potential respondents. All students who agreed to participate met individually with the researcher. Each participant first completed a short demographic questionnaire and then participated in a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews offer researchers the opportunity to respond to new ideas or emerging worldviews presented by their respondents during the course of the interview (Merriam, 1998). Consequently, many of the core questions were complemented by a series of probing questions that added depth and detail to subjects’ responses and allowed exploration of issues not covered by questions in the protocol. Interviews were 45 to 60 minutes in length, audio taped, and later transcribed for analysis. In order to ensure their anonymity, all study participants were assigned and referred to by pseudonyms.

Measures and Analysis
Both qualitative and demographic data were collected from participants. A 5-minute demographic survey about their background and family characteristics was administered before every interview. The primary source of data came from the interview transcripts. The interview protocol was formulated based on a review of the literature on the challenges and experiences of gifted Black students. Questions were composed to assess subjects’ perceptions of their sources of motivation, feelings about their academic transition, views on the prevalence of stereotyping, and opinions about what factors served as barriers to their academic achievement. This protocol was tested in a pilot interview with a Black female student prior to its use in this study.

Interview transcripts and research literature on motivation and attribution patterns were reviewed to identify recurring themes from which coding schemes were developed. The data were manually coded, and these themes were used to further analyze student interviews by utilizing the “pattern matching” technique (Yin, 1994), whereby data collected from participants was compared to existing theories on student motivation and research on the experience of high achievers.

RESULTS
Across both gender and socioeconomic status, respondents in this study shared many common characteristics. Most were happy with their choice to attend State University and were pleased with the diverse community they found on campus. They all experienced significant levels of academic success at their respective high schools and came to college with high expectations and aspirations. Students’ spent a great deal of time talking about where their aspirations came from and the forces that drove their desire to work hard and be successful. In discussing the sources of their academic motivation, students’ com-
ments fell into several common related themes. While emphasizing the important role their own internal drive played, students also acknowledged the influence that their families, racial background, and academic struggles had on their motivation. Self-determination theory, socio-cognitive theory, and attribution theory were used to frame students’ experiences. Respondents’ comments suggested that, rather than relying solely on internal forces, these Black high achievers draw on both internal and external sources to fuel their academic motivation and that a multi-dimensional framework best explains these students’ motivation patterns.

Self-Motivation

Participants described themselves in ways that were consistent with socio-cognitive theory (Zimmerman et al., 1992), stating that they were self-motivated, goal-oriented learners. Janice, a female in her first year at State University noted, “My motivation to do well in school is, first and foremost, fueled by my own personal drive.” Rather than feeling like their parents or teachers pushed them to be academically successful, students overwhelmingly credited themselves as being their primary source of motivation; in other words, they felt their motivation was often internally generated. In reference to his mother’s role in motivating him, Julian, a fourth year student, remarked: “As much as my mom been there to support me, I always felt like, okay, I’m going to do whatever I want to do. So once I decide, okay, I really want to do this. I really want to go to school and I want to pursue this line of education and get this degree, it was always then, okay, keep your focus. Decide on what you want to do and do it.” Anna, a sophomore at State University expressed similar sentiments on her internal sense of motivation:

I motivate myself and I didn’t really need the motivation of others to lead me here or anything of that nature. . . . I couldn’t even put it on teachers. They really didn’t—I was a strong student anyway, so I really didn’t need the motivation of teachers.

Almost half of the students in this sample described using their future career goals and aspirations as a way to stay focused and that they used these goals to fuel their internal motivation. Ashley, a sophomore who reported a combined family income between $10,000 and $20,000 a year, broadly described being driven by her desire to improve her socio-economic status, noting that part of her motivation came from “trying to get away from where I came from.” For some students, educational and career goals were perceived as being directly connected to both their own success and the success of others. Katrina, a junior, connected her motivation to her specific career goals and explained: “I have always been self-motivated. . . . You know, I want to be a pediatrician so I’ve got that goal, you know. So doing well academically is just a necessity for that.” Allen, a sophomore who was interested in a career in medicine, connected the educational requirements for his career goals to both his and his peers’ motivation, commenting:

If you really have no motivation for doing all this strenuous work then you’re really going to have a hard time, you know, getting the job done and doing it well. I found that students who really are on a course to go somewhere, who know in their minds that I want to go to med school or I want to be an engineer, they have more motivation to sit down and do the work that’s going to help them to get there, whereas students who aren’t really sure, you know, they’re less motivated to, you know, read and, you know, do all this hard work because they don’t really I guess
it kind of seems useless to them. You know, if you don’t really see an application for this knowledge that you’re getting then you really have no reason to do it basically you’re just working to get grades to please your parents or something, you know.

Goals are critical to the motivation of self-regulated learners; within the framework of socio-cognitive theory, students are pushed forward by their perceived efficacy to reach their goals. Through the lens of self-determination theory, however, these types of goals would be classified as an external source of motivation and understood as identified regulation or integrated regulation, in which behaviors are internalized, but are nonetheless driven by extrinsic sources such as the desire for future success or some other valued outcome. Therefore, these sources of motivation would be considered less adaptive and to have a less positive impact on student achievement than more internal motivators, such as a love of learning and discovery.

**Family Influences**

One external source of motivation reported by almost all participants was their parents. In their testing of their socio-cognitive theory, Zimmerman et al. (2000) found that “students often do not adopt the high academic aspirations imposed upon them” (p. 673) and noted that more needed to be learned about how parents socially influence their children’s goal setting. As mentioned above, respondents did not describe their parents as forcing them to work hard or adopt specific achievement goals. Students did credit their parents and family members with influencing their motivation, however. First, parents were often described as impacting their children’s internal drive by instilling them with an early desire to be academically successful, always encouraging them to “do their best” and explore what life had to offer them. Julian’s comments are quite illustrative of this theme:

> It’s been me and my mom . . . you know, [she was] always telling me go do my homework, always telling me to study, just give it your best [emphasis added], you know, always encouraging me because she didn’t get a chance to go to college, so she always wanted me to have that opportunity.

Similarly, Katrina expressed that her parents were always proud of her as long as she put forth her best effort. Further, the following comment illustrates one of the ways that Katrina’s parents took an active role in encouraging her to think broadly about her academic potential and career goals while she was young:

> Actually it was when I was about, like, 13 and my mom had asked . . . what do you want to be, and I said I wanted to be a teacher because she’s a teacher. . . . And then she’s like, well, you know, you could be anything you wanted you know, you want to be . . . you could even be a doctor. And I was, like, wow, really, a doctor, me? And so then, you know, I’ve always been pretty excited about it and from then on, you know.

Nathan, a senior at State University, also noted that his parents always encouraged him to learn about new opportunities: “[They] encouraged me to explore my options and don’t just half-way explore it. You know if, like, you’re interested in it, find out what interests you about it and follow that.”

Three respondents, Nathan, Teddi, and Anna, explicitly stated that they were motivated by their desire for their parents’ approval. According to self-determination theory, this is an external source of motivation that is less positively associated with academic achievement. Teddi, a sophomore, shared that her parents emphasized that they felt they had little
to do with her grades or success and put the responsibility for her achievement solely on her. Despite this, she stated: “I wanted their approval most. So I considered a way to gain that approval by getting good grades and doing my best. . . .” Nathan simply commented, “I think—I know that the stuff I’m doing I’m doing in part because of my family, like I want to make them proud of me.”

Racial Background

Although all students identified as Black, some students felt more connected to the Black community than others. However, regardless of their connection to the Black community, eight of the nine respondents were aware of common stereotypes about Black students and felt that stereotypes held by their peers and professors influenced their behavior both in and outside of the classroom. Respondents felt that others saw Blacks as being lazy, only being at State University because they were on athletic teams, late for class, and academically unprepared for college coursework. The students did note that they often acted in ways to challenge these perceptions, and three students (Anna, Julian, and Teddi) specifically described their attempts to disprove negative stereotypes about the academic abilities of Blacks, an externally inspired source of academic motivation. Teddi shared that that her racial background did have an effect on the effort she put forth in the classroom:

I think probably intrinsically I might have felt at one point that I needed to try harder, because I was Black, to not be a stereotype . . . not just chill, you know, talk with Ebonics or stuff like—the stereotype that people have of Black people. I purposely try to steer away from that. I think that’s certainly definitely, in a certain respect, that’s true.

Julian also explained how important it was to him to disprove stereotypes about Black students, noting that in his eyes, the intellectual distinctions made between Black and White students were largely artificial. Further, he implies that he is frustrated by others’ belief in a racial intelligence hierarchy, insisting on using his performance to challenge stereotypes and prove that very little distinguished Black students from their peers academically:

That’s [disproving stereotypes] one of the key motivations because a lot of folks just don’t—they don’t think that Black people are intelligent at all. They still think that . . . we’re a subdivision of human folks and we’re lower than they are. So it’s important for me to prove that, you know, I can do everything that you can do, you know. There’s no difference between you and I except our skin color.

Finally, Anna added that being Black and wanting to disprove stereotypes motivated her to be more competitive in her courses:

Well, when I find that I’m the only Black person in a class, I feel that I have to prove myself just as intelligent, just as smart, just as worthy, you know, of the same grade as somebody else who’s not of my race. I’m not extremely competitive, but I feel competitive in that instance where I have to prove myself to be a strong student, you know, to compete with those in my classroom.”

Four students also noted that they wanted to be a source of pride to the Black community and address the underrepresentation of Black professionals, also externally inspired sources of motivation. Anna said: “. . . It definitely drives me to work harder knowing that, you know, I have to achieve this, you know, in order to make the rest of my Black race proud of me. . . . And it’s definitely a motivation to work harder.” Katrina and Janice both connected their desire and drive to become doctors to their racial backgrounds, though in different ways. Katrina saw her personal
success as a way to increase the representation of Blacks in medicine:

I think the fact that I am not only Black but a Black female going into the field of medicine where we’re definitely an underrepresented minority it makes me actually want to do better. It, like, gives me that extra edge of determination to do well in my classes so that I can go to med school and become a doctor. And so it actually pushes me along, so it’s a good thing.

Janice’s comments focused on the ways that being a doctor would enable her to contribute directly to the Black community:

One of the primary reasons that I want to become a doctor is so that I could work in urban areas. . . . I want to go to an area that is accessible to Black youth. I think that my success and my achievement plays a big role in the successes and achievement of those who will come behind me. And I think it’s a circle—that it’s a circle.

Academic Challenges

The majority of these students described being motivated by their encounters with academic challenges, which could be considered an externally inspired source of motivation. For example, when reflecting on an academic struggle he faced, Allen stated: “It kind of, like, motivated me to do better. I just, you know, concentrated so hard—because I saw the challenge and I have to have, like, a real challenge . . . it’s kind of refreshed my vigor and my enthusiasm.” Similarly, Nathan added:

To be honest, like, I love it when somebody says the class is hard. . . . Okay, it’s going to be me and the class and I’m going to be, like, no class is better than me, come on. And this one kicked my butt. But when I got the good grades that I got, which were few and far between, I liked it and it motivated me. And I was still driven in that class.

These students’ responses to their struggles can be analyzed through the framework of attribution theory. Participants occasionally attributed their academic struggles to external factors such as insufficient high school preparation or poor teaching techniques. However, the majority of students attributed their academic difficulties to internal factors, especially a lack of effort expended on their coursework. For example, when reflecting on a class in which she was earning a B, a freshman named Casey noted,

I know I’m not working as much as I could be, so I’m trying to put in that extra effort. So I’m not—I can’t do as much as I’d like to do . . . I guess I’ll have to do more homework in those classes.

Regardless of whether the source of the problem was internal or external, participants felt that they had agency and control over their difficulties; in other words, that their academic failures were unstable and controllable. They described relying on resilience, effort, and hard work to overcome these academic challenges. In Teddi’s mind, success in college was attributable to internal and highly controllable factors: “. . . if you follow the pattern that people tell you, you can get a good grade. I mean, it’s not necessarily intelligence, it’s following the rules—finding out what somebody wants and giving it to them. . . .” Julian, who noted that his GPA dropped when he started college due to a lack of exposure to rigorous coursework in high school (an external attribution), explained:

I never doubted whether or not I could hang here because, like, I knew I could be doing I could be working a lot harder. It was just a matter of just putting forth that effort, you know. Like, I would always think that maybe I never thought
college wasn’t for me, but I’m like, man, this stuff is hard and you’ve been trying to do too much. And it’d just be like well, if you really think about it you’re just not working hard enough, you know. You could work a lot harder than you do.

Anna, who also made multiple external attributions for why she was experiencing difficulty in calculus, noted that in the end, she felt she had control over her own academic performance:

I was the only black person in that class, once again. It was the honors version of calculus. . . . It was a TA teaching the class, I believe. And he had I’m not going to say he had trouble with the English language, but he wasn’t proficient. . . . And I think that played a major role in why I just couldn’t understand or comprehend what was going on. The students that were also in my class had a background of calculus, so they’ve taken . . . AP calculus in high school or they may not have taken the test. . . . So I felt that these honors [students] really did have, you know, an advantage over me who was just learning the material. . . . And also at that time . . . I didn’t have information—enough information like I do now to, you know, find tutors or other resources. . . . I blame it half on myself and possibly half on the teacher, as well. So—but I think I blame it more on myself and not looking into other resources.

One student described an instance when racism had the potential to be a roadblock. When discussing the impact of stereotypical faculty perceptions on the performance of Black students (an external influence), Janice shared her own decision to focus on factors related to her achievement that were, again, internal and controllable:

I don’t think any professor outright comes out with his or her feelings towards Black students . . . it’s very subtle, it’s very distinct. You can feel like someone is having a conversation with themselves about you, you know, in their head. I feel that sometimes. But I try to focus on me, you know.

DISCUSSION

According to Hwang et al. (2002), Black student motivation is neither purely internal nor external; rather, it is a multidimensional construct. The findings of this study support this conceptualization, revealing that nine successful Black students often drew on multiple sources to fuel their academic motivation. This group of Black high achievers overwhelmingly connected their motivation to their internal drive and desire to be successful. However, there were multiple external factors that students felt encouraged that internal drive or influenced their motivation to succeed directly. If we view these students through the lens of self-determination theory, these students are best categorized as integrated regulators (Deci et al., 1991). Although they describe themselves as being highly internally driven, they are motivated partly by achieving highly valued (and often externally inspired) outcomes, such as reaching their career goals, making their families proud, and being a positive representative of the Black community.

These valued goals appeared to be quite important to these students’ motivation and there were no occasions when students discussed being motivated purely by their own love of learning. Based on their emphasis on goals, perhaps the framework of socio-cognitive theory provides us with greater understanding of how these students describe and view their motivation. These Black high achievers have clearly articulated goals and are not dissuaded by their academic stumbles. Rather, the interviews reveal that these Black
high achievers have a high sense of self-efficacy; they believe that despite obstacles they face, they can accomplish their goals with hard work and focus.

External forces and goals both directly and indirectly fed into students’ drive to achieve. For example, for some students, the desire to make their parents proud was a significant external motivator that directly encouraged their efforts to achieve. Parents also appeared to be able to indirectly impact their children’s motivation by instilling them with an early desire to always “do their best” and introducing them to opportunities that lay ahead of them. Another external motivator of note described by these students was connected to their racial background. Students were driven by their goals to be positive examples of Blacks and their abilities, address the underrepresentation of Black professionals, and reach out to underserved members of their community. Cokley (2001) reported that there was a positive correlation between the centrality of race to a student’s identity and their academic motivation. Three students (Nathan, Teddi, and Katrina) reported that they did not feel as connected to the Black community as others in the sample, but these students appeared to be just as motivated as their peers. Although similar ideas, connection to their racial community and centrality of a student’s racial identity are not necessarily synonymous constructs. Future studies should address this relationship in more depth, determining whether community engagement has any impact on students’ academic motivation patterns.

Further, the expressed desire to prove their worth and academic abilities also supports research that asserts high achieving Blacks often feel driven to prove the statistics and stereotypical beliefs about the academic abilities of Blacks wrong (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2002). Solorzano et al. found that one response of students who had their abilities doubted was to work doubly hard and show their peers and professors that they belonged. Successful Black students interviewed by Fries-Britt and Turner shared that they often encountered students that made comments based on stereotypical images of Blacks and that they felt that they repeatedly engaged in a “proving process” to establish themselves as worthy and academically able both in and outside of the classroom. A high achieving Black male attending a predominantly White institution that was interviewed by Bonner (2001) also reported feeling pressure to be “ten times as smart as everyone else” (p. 11) and that he constantly had to prove himself and his capabilities.

Although three students described their desire to disprove stereotypes as a motivator, this study does not allow us to infer whether or how encounters with stereotypes could change students’ motivation patterns over time. Past studies show that when taken to an extreme, actively resisting stereotypes can negatively impact student academic performance and well being. Solorzano et al. (2002) remind us that students of color who consciously challenge stereotypes about minorities often “push themselves to exhaustion and still are not able to reap the fair rewards for their work” (p. 67). Research on stereotype threat also confirms that high-achieving minority students are often highly aware of the stigma associated with their racial groups and that they are often distracted from academic tasks by their attempts to disprove social stereotypes about members of their race (Steele, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). A longitudinal study that addresses the influence of encounters with negative stereotypes on the academic motivation of Black high achievers is certainly in order to gain greater insight on when resistance
can be constructive rather than detrimental. Importantly, the findings of this study indicate that encountering academic struggles does not have to diminish Black students’ academic motivation. These high achievers rarely acquiesced or gave up in the face of their academic challenges. In fact, these struggles were described as facilitating participants’ motivation and desire to succeed. Black high achievers in this sample largely believed that they were able to overcome academic struggles with increased effort or utilization of campus resources, an optimistic belief that enabled them to stay motivated. Congruent with attribution theory (Weiner, 1984), high achievers in this sample were able to translate academic difficulty into motivation rather than hopelessness as a result of their perceived agency over their educational outcomes and attribution of their academic difficulties to controllable and transient factors. There was little difference in the motivational responses of students who made internal or external attributions for their academic difficulties. Some students made external attributions for their academic struggles, such as lack of familiarity with the subject, inadequate high school preparation, poor teaching, and isolation. However, their responses to their difficulties in the classroom were essentially the same as students who felt that they had not put enough personal effort into their coursework; all participants exhibited a perception of agency and controllability, resolving to just work harder and put forth a better effort. Therefore, it did not matter whether their academic problems were defined as being due to internal or external forces; making an external attribution for an academic difficulty did not necessarily mean that the problem was uncontrollable. This further complicates the distinction between and implications of students making internal versus external attributions for their academic challenges—in analyzing the experiences of these students, one cannot distinguish one pattern as being more adaptive than another.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of the application of motivation frameworks. None of the three theories presented in this study on its own completely accounted for the motivation of Black high achievers in this study; however, each theory was helpful in illuminating different aspects of these students’ motivation patterns. Self-determination theory highlighted the importance of being intrinsically motivated, clearly reflected in the internal drive these high achievers displayed. Although self-determination theory frames more extrinsic motivation patterns as being less positive and productive, the socio-cognitive theory proposed by Zimmerman and his colleagues (1992) clarifies how motivators that have traditionally been classified as externally based, such as academic and career goals, encouraged the motivation and drive in this group of Black high achievers. Neither of these theories, however, could fully account for why students in this study would describe academic struggles that they faced as motivators. Attribution theory allows us to see that rather than simply being motivated because they are facing difficulties, students in this study were able to stay driven in the face of challenges because of the way that they viewed their academic struggles as controllable occurrences despite the source. This leaves us with an understanding of student motivation that is multidimensional and that highlights the integrative, rather than diametric, nature of internally based and externally influenced sources of academic motivation and their relationship to
Being that this research focused on the experiences of nine students at one institution and does not account for how these students’ motivation patterns change over time, it is difficult to generalize these findings to the wider community of Black students or determine whether motivation patterns differ based on gender or socioeconomic background. However, the findings of this study can begin to help us understand the multiple sources these high achieving Black students draw on for motivation and how they see this motivation influencing their academic achievement. Further, the knowledge this research provides about the ways in which externally influenced factors can potentially encourage the motivation and internal drive towards academic success for Black students enables administrators, policy makers, professors, and parents to act in ways that can more broadly influence Black students to develop their academic motivation. These high achievers described being driven by goals that they valued and set for themselves. Their goals often reflected students’ career aspirations and desires to be a source of pride for their family and wider community. This indicates that facilitating opportunities for Black students to formulate and articulate specific aspirations that they are working towards, as well as providing information on the steps needed to reach those goals, may be helpful in developing their academic motivation.

Findings also may lead us to consider whether reminding parents that they too can serve as positive motivational forces for their children could positively influence student outcomes. Although the high achievers in this study did not report feeling forced to adopt their high educational goals by parents and family members, their goal setting behaviors were influenced by their parents’ encouragement. Rather than setting specific achievement goals that their children had to reach, students repeatedly noted that their parents were at their most influential when they urged their children to put forth their best effort, were supportive through academic difficulties, and encouraged them to really explore the opportunities to which they had access. Parents were also influential to the extent they exposed students to educationally enriching experiences that facilitated learning and curiosity. Encouraging Black parents and family members to adopt these behaviors may be helpful as they seek to develop and help maintain their students’ academic motivation.

Academic struggles can beset the most talented students. Students in this study experienced difficulties for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of high school preparation, the difficulty of a topic, or simply not putting forth enough effort. Attribution theorists argue that encouraging students to see academic struggles as temporary or unstable gives them a sense of control over their achievement, encouraging them to make behavioral changes in order to improve (Weiner, 1984). Based on the strategies employed by high achievers in this study, acknowledging external sources of academic difficulties (such as lack of preparation or discriminatory behavior) does not have to leave students feeling helpless and unmotivated. For example, students frequently acknowledged widely held social stereotypes about the abilities of Blacks, and some expressed that they continue to be subject to discrimination and stereotyping in and out of the classroom. Despite these barriers, respondents saw themselves as agents of their own success and relied on their will, effort, and resourcefulness to overcome the barriers.

These findings have some parallels with the work of Gurin and Epps (1975) on Black students who were striving to balance their
individual and collective goals within the Black community. Gurin and Epps identified a group of students, “committed achievers,” who both had high individual goals (degree and career aspirations) and were engaged in civil rights activities throughout college. Committed achievers were well aware of social inequalities of and discrimination against Blacks; however, they persevered and remained committed to their personal goals. In other words, much like the students in this sample, the committed achievers maintained and believed in their ability to fulfill their ambitions while acknowledging the role that race played in their experiences and the experiences of others. Therefore, although these students certainly cannot control every academic outcome or educational experience, these findings imply and push us to further explore whether encouraging Black students to stay motivated by framing their academic challenges as not being totally out of their control, regardless of their source, is a consistently valuable strategy for teachers, parents, and administrators to impart as they seek to maintain and increase students’ motivation.

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