The Relationship of School Belonging and Friends' Values to Academic Motivation Among Urban Adolescent Students

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ABSTRACT. Students' subjective sense of school belonging recently has been identified as a potentially important influence on academic motivation, engagement, and participation, especially among students from groups at risk of school dropout. Students' friends also influence their academic motivation, sometimes negatively. In this study, the relationship among early adolescent students' sense of school belonging, perceptions of their friends' academic values, and academic motivation was investigated among 301 African-American, White/Anglo, and Hispanic students in two urban junior high schools. School belonging was significantly associated with several motivation-related measures—expectancy of success, valuing schoolwork, general school motivation, and self-reported effort. Students' beliefs about their friends' academic values were more weakly related to these outcomes. The correlations between school belonging and the motivation-related measures remained positive and statistically significant even after the effects of friends' academic values were partialled out. School belonging was more highly associated with expectancy for success among Hispanic students than among African-American students, and among girls than among boys.

THERE IS A GROWING CONSENSUS that academic motivation is not a purely individual, intrapsychic state; rather, it grows out of a complex web of social and personal relationships. As Weiner (1990) stated, "School motivation cannot be understood apart from the social fabric in which it is embedded" (p. 621). Students' associations with cultural and ethnic groups, their families, and their friends (especially in adolescence) are fundamental aspects of this social fabric. Another potentially important element of the social context is students' sense of belonging in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which they feel

personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment.

The influence of friends and peer groups on students' academic achievement and attitudes toward school has been widely noted (e.g., Brown, 1990; Coleman, 1961; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992), with early adolescence marking the highest point of conformity to peers (Berndt, 1979). Because peer influence can be negative as well as positive, it may pose special dilemmas for students whose personal friendship groups hold antiacademic norms (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991), a situation often more common among ethnic minority than majority students (Steinberg et al., 1992). The African-American high school students studied by Fordham (1988), for example, described overt striving for academic achievement as *acting white,* a sign of ethnic disloyalty. Whether peer influence is more likely to have a negative educational impact on African-American or Hispanic adolescents than on White/Anglo students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, however, has not been determined.

A more recent approach to understanding social influences on school motivation, especially among disadvantaged students, has focused on students' subjective sense of school belonging. Finn (1989), for example, posited an *identification–participation* model to account for school withdrawal among at-risk students. Basically, the model suggests that unless students identify with the school to at least a minimal extent; feel that they belong as part of the school; and believe themselves to be welcomed, respected, and valued by others there, they may begin the gradual disengagement process of which officially dropping out is only the final step. Investigating over 5,000 eighth-grade students from demographic groups statistically at risk of school failure (urban minority, low socioeconomic status, or non-English home language), Finn (1992) found that some dimensions of school belonging—particularly students' perceptions of teacher support—predicted several measures of school participation and engagement.

Using primarily ethnographic methods to examine schools that had been successful with at-risk students, Wehlage (1989) and Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) used the term *school membership* to refer to a construct almost identical to Finn's *belonging.* The psychological sense of school membership, according to Wehlage, is not simply technical enrollment but rather students' perceptions that others in the school, especially adults, are *for* them and that they count in the school.

This sense of membership heavily influences students' commitment to schooling and acceptance of educational values. Other ethnographic accounts (Farrell, 1990; Fine, 1991; Kramer-Schlosser, 1992; see also Kagan, 1990) also have revealed the ways in which students perceive (or unfortunately often fail to perceive) the school as a personally supportive community.

Several questions regarding school belonging call for more thorough empirical research. Do most students, especially urban adolescents and ethnic minority students, feel a sense of school belonging? To what extent is belonging associated

with academic motivation and engagement? Is it *more* highly associated with motivation for some subgroups of students than for others? Finally, is a solid sense of membership in, and support from, the school community in general (especially including teachers and other adults in the school) sufficient to outweigh the influence of a student's friends or immediate peer group in affecting motivation?

In the present study we investigated the hypothesis that students' sense of belonging in school would be significantly associated with measures of school motivation, expectations of academic success, valuing of academic work, and persistence in difficult tasks. We further hypothesized that these effects of school belonging would be significant even after controlling for the influence of friends' academic values. Although we made no directional hypotheses regarding ethnic or gender differences in school belonging and motivation, or in the strength of association between the two, we also investigated these differences.

Method

Participants and Procedures

We conducted the study in a middle-sized city in the Northeast. The city is mostly working-class and has large Hispanic and African-American populations; the average per capita income in the city places it in the bottom quartile of the state. At the time that this research project was conducted, students were assigned to elementary and junior high schools on the basis of residence, resulting in a pattern of de facto segregation.

We contacted two of the six junior high schools (Grades 7–9) in the city, and their staffs agreed to participate in the study. Procedures and participants differed slightly by school. In School 1, a randomly chosen half of the student body participated in the study by filling out a questionnaire administered in their homerooms. The other students completed a different questionnaire at this time. A total of 198 students completed the survey; 104 were boys and 87 were girls (7 did not indicate gender). Eighty-nine students identified themselves as African-American or Black, 32 as Hispanic, 66 as White, 2 as Asian, and 9 indicated no ethnic identification. Student ages ranged from 12 to 16, averaging 13.80 years of age ($SD =$ 1.0). Participants included 74 seventh-grade students, 79 eighth-grade students, and 45 ninth-grade students.

In School 2, only seventh-grade students participated. As with the first school, half of all seventh graders completed the questionnaire; the other half completed an alternative questionnaire. The 103 participants included 54 boys and 43 girls (6 no answer), with an average age of 13.11 years ($SD = .89$). The student population was largely Hispanic (77 students, 16 of whom completed the questionnaire in Spanish), with 7 African-American students, 16 White/Anglo students, and 1 Asian-American. Two students did not indicate ethnicity.

The attendance rate for relevant students on the testing date, midweek in May, was approximately 73%. School personnel indicated that this was not unusually low, especially late in the school year.

Measures

School belonging. School belonging was assessed by the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM), an 18-item scale developed for use with early- and midadolescent students (Goodenow, 1993b). The PSSM includes items that involve not only perceived liking, personal acceptance, and inclusion (e.g., "Most teachers at this school are interested in me," " I feel like a real part of this school") but also respect and encouragement for participation (e.g., "People here notice when I'm good at something," "Other students in this school take my opinions seriously").

Items on the PSSM and on the measures described below contained a 5-point Likert-type format, with choices ranging from *not at all true* (1) to *completely true* (5); these were then averaged to produce a scale score. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for this sample was .80.

Friends' values. To assess the influence on motivation of students' personal friendship network, we asked students to rate their agreement with the statement "My friends think that it is important to do well in school."

Motivation. Students were administered two scales based on an expectancy–value theory of motivation (Atkinson, 1964; Eccles et al., 1983). According to this theory, motivation to engage in achievement-related behavior is a joint function of the expectation that such behavior will be successful and the value attached to that success. One of the scales contains five items measuring students' expectancy of success in schoolwork; the other scale contains six items about the intrinsic value, interest, and importance that students attribute to academic schoolwork. Both were shortened versions of scales used by Pintrich and De Groot (1990) in studying motivation in junior high school students. In this study, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .72 for the expectancy scale and .81 for the value scale.

To supplement the expectancy and value scales that focus specifically on academic schoolwork, we also administered a four-item general school motivation measure. This scale, a shortened version of Ford and Tisak's (1982) School Motivation Scale, measures the more global set of beliefs and feelings that being in school is satisfying, worthwhile, and important, rather than boring or irrelevant. Internal consistency reliability of this scale for the sample was .61.

Effort/persistence. Two items on the questionnaire asked students to rate the extent to which they put forth effort and persisted despite difficulties in schoolwork: "I work hard to get good grades, even if I don't like a class," "When schoolwork

is hard, I just do the easy parts or I give up." Although these items do not capture the full range of school participation and engagement displayed by committed and successful students, they do target behaviors most likely to decline if students become discouraged or alienated from the schooling process.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

There were no significant differences between the two schools or among grade levels on students' mean scores on any of the scales. Therefore, we combined students across schools and grade levels for all subsequent analyses.

As shown in Table 1, students, on average, scored well above the 3.0 scale midpoint on the measures of expectancy, value, and effort. Students agreed that

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for School Belonging, Friends' Values, and Motivation Measures

Measures	Total $(N = 301)$	African-American $(n = 96)$	Hispanic $(n = 109)$	White/Anglo $(n = 82)$	Male $(n = 158)$	Female $(n = 130)$
School belonging (PSSM)						
M	3.10	3.09	3.15	3.03	3.03[b]	3.20[b]
SD	.68	.70	.64	.74	.63	.73
Friends' academic values						
M	3.05	2.98	3.10	3.01	2.89[c]	3.23[c]
SD	1.39	1.38	1.48	1.28	1.34	1.41
Expectancy of school success						
M	3.80	3.84	3.70	3.87	3.73	3.87
SD	.85	.70	.94	.86	.78	.93
Value of academic work						
M	3.59	3.56	3.64	3.56	3.50	3.70
SD	.92	.84	1.00	.89	.89	1.00
General school motivation						
M	3.01	3.12	2.98	2.85	2.90[d]	3.12[d]
SD	.89	.83	.90	.94	.79	.99
Effort/persistence						
M	3.61	3.64	3.42[a]	3.85[a]	3.53	3.70
SD	1.01	1.03	1.06	1.01	1.03	1.10

[a,b,c,d]Between-ethnic-group or between-gender means followed by the same superscript were significantly different at $p < .05$ or better.

they personally valued schoolwork and put forth effort; however, they were far less likely to assert that their friends thought that doing well in school was important ($M = 3.05$).

When responding to questions not focused on academic work per se but on reactions to the school as a whole, students were less positive. The average score on the scale measuring school belonging was only slightly above the 3.0 scale midpoint. In fact, 41% ($n = 124$) of the students were more inclined to disagree than agree that they felt they belonged and were supported by others in the school. Similarly, 40% ($n = 122$) of the students were more negative than positive in their responses to the general school motivation scale.

We also investigated ethnic and gender differences in scale means. Several gender differences appeared: Girls were more likely than boys to express a high sense of school belonging and general school motivation and to say that their friends thought that doing well in school was important. We found only one significant ethnic difference: Hispanic students were less likely than White/Anglo students to assert that they tried hard to do well in school.

Correlational Analyses

The major focus of the study was the effect of school belonging and friends' values on academic motivation and effort. As shown in Table 2, school belonging was significantly correlated with friends' values and with all four outcome measures, accounting for approximately one fifth of the variance in expectancy ($r^2 = .19$) and general school motivation ($r^2 = .21$) and nearly one third of the variance in value ($r^2 = .30$). The correlation with effort/persistence, although significant, was quite small. Significant correlations between friends' values and three of the four motivation-related outcomes also were obtained, but each was smaller than the corresponding correlation for school belonging.

TABLE 2
Intercorrelations of Measures of School Belonging, Friends' Values, Motivation, and Effort

Measures	School belonging	Friends' values	Expectancy	Value	School motivation
School belonging	—				
Friends' values	.44**	—			
Expectancy	.42**	.24**	—		
Value of schoolwork	.55**	.37**	.54**	—	
School motivation	.46**	.21**	.30**	.38**	—
Effort/persistence	.12*	.02	.41**	.31**	.22**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

Partial Correlations: Controlling for Friends' Values

We computed partial correlations to examine the effect of school belonging independent of friends' values. Even after we controlled for friends' values, school belonging was significantly associated with expectancy ($r = .35$, $p <$ .001), value ($r = .46$, $p < .001$), general school motivation ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), and effort/persistence ($r = .12$, $p < .05$). Although the belief that personal friends did not value doing well in school may have counteracted the influence of general school belonging to a *slight* extent, friends' values by no means overrode the stronger influence of the psychological sense of belonging and of perceived support from teachers and others in the school.

Ethnic and Gender Differences in the Impact of Psychological Membership

Several significant differences emerged when correlations between the social variables (school belonging and friends' values) and the motivation measures were calculated separately for the three major ethnic groups and for both genders (see Table 3). First, it is clear that in no case did friends' values have a higher level of association with outcome measures than did school belonging. Second,

TABLE 3
Correlations Between Measures of School Belonging and Friends' Values and Measures of Academic Motivation and Effort, Separately by Ethnic and Gender Groups

Measures	Expectancy	Value	School motivation	Effort
School belonging				
African-American ($n = 96$)	.27**[a]	.44***	.46***	.08
Hispanic ($n = 109$)	.50***[a]	.63***	.41***	.11
White/Anglo ($n = 82$)	.46***	.57***	.55***	.15
Male ($n = 158$)	.27***[b]	.54***	.44***	.06
Female ($n = 130$)	.53***[b]	.55***	.46***	.15
Friends' values				
African-American ($n = 94$)	.08[c]	.31**	.19	.06
Hispanic ($n = 105$)	.35***[c]	.40***	.25**	.08
White/Anglo ($n = 80$)	.20	.35**	.22	−.02
Male ($n = 151$)	.16	.31***	.18*	.02
Female ($n = 128$)	.27**	.37***	.19*	−.03

[a,b,c]Fisher's r to z transformation was used to compare correlation strengths. Within each ethnic- or gender-comparison group, correlations followed by the same superscript were significantly different at $p < .05$ or better.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

for both measures of specific academic motivation, expectancy and value, the level of association with school belonging and with friends' values was stronger for Hispanic students than for African-American students, although significantly so only for expectancy. Third, expectancy was more highly correlated with school belonging for girls than for boys. The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to the value scale of motivation was also higher for girls, although again not significantly so.

As with the total sample, we computed partial correlations for each ethnic and gender subgroup between school belonging and the motivation measures, controlling for friends' values. The correlations dropped slightly (differences between simple and partial correlations ranged from .01 to .11) when the effects of friends' values were partialled out, but the overall pattern of correlations did not change.

Discussion

Three significant results emerged from this study. The first is that many urban adolescents may have a poor sense of school belonging and low school motivation. Second, students who do have a high sense of belonging in school are also more likely to be motivated and academically engaged than those whose sense of belonging is low. Finally, there are both ethnic and gender differences in this pattern of relationships. These findings are considered in turn.

One of the most important but unfortunate findings of this study is that despite positive scores on measures of academic motivation, students expressed relatively weak beliefs that they "belonged" in their schools, that teachers and schoolmates respected and valued them, that their friends valued school success, and that being in school was worthwhile. Although more students scored above the midpoint on the school belonging, friends' values, and general school motivation scales than did not, a substantial proportion of students were more negative than positive in their attitudes toward school in general. The fact that over one quarter of the enrolled students were absent on the testing day suggests that even the moderate scores on school belonging and general school motivation reported here might be overestimates of actual urban student attitudes.

These urban students' scores on the expectancy and value scales were quite similar to those found in related studies of middle-class suburban students (Goodenow, 1993a, 1993c), but their friends' values scores (Goodenow, 1993c) and school belonging scores (Goodenow, 1993b) were significantly lower. That is, the urban adolescents appeared to be no less academically motivated—at least as motivation was assessed in terms of self-reported expectancies and values— but they expressed far lower levels of social and personal connection to others in the school, a lower belief that others in the school were *for* them, and less confidence that their friends valued school success than did suburban students.

The central finding of this study concerns the association between students' psychological sense of membership and motivational outcomes. School belonging

accounted for substantial proportions of the variance in attitudinal scales that measured general school motivation, expectancy for academic success, and especially the value that students attributed to academic work. It also correlated positively but weakly with students' scores on the effort/persistence scale, a self-report measure of behavior.

If the sense of school belonging contributes to general school motivation, what might be the psychological processes involved? The answer to this question appears to be fairly straightforward: Almost all people find school (or other work settings) more enjoyable, worthwhile, and interesting when they believe that others in the environment like and value them.

How might a sense of belonging influence expectancy of academic success and valuing of academic coursework? With regard to expectancy, researchers have found that people are not simply effective in general, they are effective within a specific context (Fuller, Wood, Rapoport, & Dornbusch, 1982). If students believe that others at school are rooting for them, are on their side and willing to help them if necessary, they have reason to believe that they have the resources necessary to be successful. Expecting to be academically successful, then, results not only from students' belief in their individual abilities but also from their belief in the supportive resources—the help and encouragement of others—that they can bring to bear on academic tasks.

Belonging also can influence the value that adolescents attribute to academic work. This view is supported by Maslow's (1962) theory of motivation, which proposes that meeting the need for belonging is a necessary precondition to higher needs such as the desire for knowledge. Also, the findings of recent motivation research (Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991) suggest that when people (especially children or adolescents) feel themselves to be related, connected, an important member of a group of others, they are more likely to internalize the values of those others.

"Authentic contact with others appears to play a crucial role in connecting individuals to social tasks and promoting internalization of valued goals. Primarily, one identifies with and emulates the practices of those to whom one is, or might desire to be, attached" (Ryan & Stiller, 1991, p. 121). Especially among students for whom family or neighborhood do not provide academic supports, a sense of warm personal connection to teachers and others in school may be essential for the development and maintenance of academic motivation.

In the present study, scores on the friends' values measure—the students' belief that their friends view school success as important—yielded much lower correlations with the motivation scales than did school belonging. Furthermore, both in the total sample and in each separate subgroup, school belonging predicted substantial proportions of variance in the motivation scales, even with the effects of the friends' values measure partialled out. Given the widely shared belief in the strong influence of adolescent peer groups and friends on academic motivation, how could this be so? One possibility is that the single-item measure of

friends' values lacks the reliability to measure accurately the effects that friends have on adolescents' achievement-related motives and behaviors. It will be important in future research to include more substantial measures of this variable, for example, by adding questions about friends' commitment to studying and trying hard, friends' own educational aspirations, and friends' reactions to their own and other students' academic successes and failures.

The present results suggest that with regard to academic motivation within school contexts, students' sense of belonging and support in school can in some ways *override* the influence of a student's personal friendship group. Schools that can function either as a whole or as a set of smaller teams to create a sense of community where adolescent students feel personally known, important, and encouraged to be active participants may have a more powerful impact than the influence of individual friends or cliques.

The findings revealed differential importance of school belonging for different groups. The especially strong association between belonging and motivation found for Hispanic students may reflect the importance that most Hispanic cultures attach to communal and affiliative values as opposed to individualistic or competitive values (Abi-Nader, 1990; Garza & Santos, 1991). Given the especially low high school completion rate of Hispanic students (recently 61% vs. 81% for Black students and 90% for Whites/Anglos [National Center for Education Statistics, 1992]), fostering a sense of school belonging and community may be particularly important for them to succeed in school.

The observed gender difference in the strength of association between the school belonging and expectancy scales parallels results obtained in a similar study conducted in a suburban middle school (Goodenow, 1993a). In early adolescence, when gender role norms are particularly strong, girls may feel pressure to adopt stereotypically feminine and passive behaviors rather than to pursue academic work with any vigor. In this developmental context, the support and encouragement of others in the school, especially teachers, may be important in sustaining academic motivation.

Some caveats about the findings must be mentioned. Correlational research with cross-sectional data, especially self-report data, has serious limitations. Measures of classroom and friendship behavior and academic achievement would enhance our ability to draw conclusions about the relationship between school belonging, motivation, classroom engagement, and educational achievement. In urban schools like these, where attendance rates are low and dropout rates high, longitudinal studies tracking the effect of school belonging on attending and completing school would be especially useful.

The relationship between sense of school belonging and motivation is undoubtedly far more reciprocal than has been suggested by these analyses. Just as students who feel themselves to be full and valued members of the school are more motivated and engaged, so, too, motivated and engaged students are accorded more acceptance and respect from others in the school, especially school adults.

As a way of thinking about educational intervention, however, it may be useful to begin with the school social context. Programs explicitly designed to foster *psychological membership* in a school community may not be just *misplaced warm fuzziness* (Ryan & Stiller, 1991) but a vital part of keeping many students in school and promoting educational achievement. Developments in instructional methods, such as cooperative learning (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Slavin, 1990) or reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) are likely to foster a sense of belonging, as are many whole-school efforts such as interdisciplinary teaching teams and homeroom advisory systems. Whatever the potential sources of an increased sense of belonging, we need to recognize that the *result* of a failure to attain a full and legitimate sense of membership in the school as a social system may be, for many students, lowered motivation, less active engagement, and ultimately diminished academic achievement or even school withdrawal.

NOTE

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