Research Article

Fitting in Matters

Markers of In-Group Belonging and Academic Outcomes

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ABSTRACT—*Minority boys are at risk of academic disengagement. Prior research documents that an aspect of racial-ethnic identity, in-group connection, can buffer against this risk, but that in-group connection is undermined in high-risk neighborhoods. We examined another way that boys may feel connected to the in-group, by looking like in-group members. We hypothesize that physical markers of in-group membership can serve to improve boys' sense of belongingness, thereby facilitating their engagement in school. We tested our model with low-income, high-risk African American (Study 1, n = 102) and Latino (Study 2, n = 66) teens. Hierarchical regression supported our model; dark skin tone was a protective factor (and light skin tone a risk factor) for African American boys, and feeling that one looks Latino was a protective factor (and feeling that one does not look Latino a risk factor) for Latino boys' grades, in-class behavior, and school engagement. Mediational analyses suggest that markers of belongingness have their impact via peer-group choice.*

Emerging research evidence across multiple samples points to the role of racial-ethnic identity in promoting academic success (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006) and engagement (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). This research suggests an equally positive role for racial-ethnic identity for boys and girls (for a review, see Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, in press). Yet African American and Latino boys are much less likely to graduate on time than African American or Latino girls (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Why might this be?

One possibility is that African American and Latino boys do not value school as much as African American and Latino girls. This possibility is not supported by the available evidence. Indeed, African American and Latino boys do value academic success—school is a central focus of their possible selves (Oyserman, Johnson, & Bybee, 2006). Another possibility is that

the components of racial-ethnic identity that matter most differ between boys and girls. There is some reason to believe that the social-connectedness aspect of racial-ethnic identity is more crucial for boys. Generally, whereas girls value personal relationships, connection to groups is particularly important to boys (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997); boys are more likely than girls to use social group membership as the basis for self-definition (Grace & Cramer, 2003). With regard to low-income African American and Latino boys, there is both evidence that boys attain more academic benefit from feeling connected to their racial-ethnic in-group than girls do (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003) and evidence to suggest that boys' sense of racial-ethnic connection is vulnerable to neighborhood context effects. Boys, but not girls, report lower sense of racial-ethnic in-group connection when they live in economically deprived neighborhoods (Oyserman, Bybee, & Dai, 2006). Given the possibility that boys generally value group membership but that economic deprivation makes it harder for African American and Latino boys to feel a positive sense of in-group connection, we asked if it was easier for some boys than others to hold on to this sense of connection. Specifically, we investigated the role of physical markers of in-group belonging, hypothesizing that these markers can buffer boys against academic risk.

We refer to *markers of belonging* to make the point that markers can provide evidence of fit with the in-group and allow for pursuit of personal goals (e.g., school success). Individuals who lack clear physical markers of belonging, we argue, are more likely than others to pursue belongingness through behaviors perceived as in-group syntonic. A number of literatures have used the term *mark* or *marked* in different ways. The stigma literature has used the word *mark* to mean blemish or flaw (Goffman, 1963). The linguistics literature has used the word *marked* to mean tagged or different from the main category. From an insider perspective, however, markers can be markers of belonging, rather than exclusion. We focus on markers as inclusion signals.

No matter how they self-identify, boys who feel they do not look like an in-group member may be concerned that other people will misperceive them (Baynes, 1997). Their racial-

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ethnic identity may be continually challenged by in-group members suspicious of their heritage or belongingness (Graham & Juvonen, 2002). For example, skin tone has been a focus of in-group boundary marking for African Americans, perhaps because of an assumption that light skin tone connotes lack of racial purity whereas dark skin tone is more "real" (Keenan, 1996; Wade, 1996). For Latinos, need for in-group support may be intensified by migration stress, because the majority of low-income American Latinos are immigrants or of first-generation Mexican heritage (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993), and according to segmented assimilation theory, feeling identified with the in-group is an important psychosocial resource that facilitates successful competition in other domains (e.g., school; Lopez, 2003). Moreover, low-income African American and Latino youths are likely to live in neighborhoods where a single racial-ethnic in-group is the dominant group (Iceland, Weinberg, & Steinmetz, 2002). The combination of a low-income context and racial segregation reduces possible group memberships—if one does not fit in with one's racial-ethnic group, there are unlikely to be many alternative social identities to engage.

MALE ADOLESCENTS' SOCIAL IDENTITY AND OUTCOMES

Adolescents seek to move beyond childhood identities and to establish a sense of the person they will become (reconstructing their answers to the "who am I?" and "how do I fit in?" questions; Erikson, 1968). Because boys look to social groups for belongingness (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997), racial-ethnic social identity is likely to provide an important anchor for them (Quintana, 1998). Looking like an in-group member facilitates this process; feeling unambiguously connected to an important social group should free boys to focus on their future or possible selves. According to social-identity theory, feeling part of one's in-group should be positively reinforcing (Tajfel & Turner, 1986); nonprototypical physical appearance may challenge this connection, leading boys to seek other means of enacting this important social identity.

For adolescent boys, alternative enactment of social identity is likely to involve toughness and not focusing on school (Pollack, 1998). A physical attribute studied among adolescent boys of low socioeconomic status (SES) is having a "baby face": those with a baby face are more likely to be involved in delinquent behavior than their equally attractive but more averagely mature-looking peers (Zebrowitz, Andreoletti, Collins, Lee, & Blumenthal, 1998). The assumption is that baby-faced adolescent boys engage in delinquent activities in an attempt to undermine the perception that they are childlike and not tough (Zebrowitz & Montepare, 1992). With regard to physical attributes connecting boys to their male identity in the context of race-ethnic identity, we were able to find a qualitative study examining enactment of masculinity among low-SES young men. This study suggests both that toughness is valued as a way

of expressing autonomous masculinity and that these young men derive a sense of belonging from membership in racial-ethnic groups (Fine, Weis, Addelston, & Marusza, 1997). We propose that physical markers of race-ethnicity may be particularly important for low-SES teenage boys seeking to create a male identity in the context of race-ethnicity.

The notion that racial-ethnic membership can be enacted via behaviors antithetical to school success is implied in ethnographies exploring what teens think it means to enact their racial-ethnic identity (e.g., to "act Black"; Cousins, 1999). A number of qualitative studies have identified acting Black with particular dress, style, and music, as well as with lack of cooperation with teachers (Cousins, 1999). Similarly for Latino males, acting Latino includes enacting behaviors that undermine school success—being in a gang, not finishing high school, having children in early adolescence, and leaving school to support family members (E.B. Moje and students, personal communication, March 2005).

MARKERS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY AND INCREASED RISK OF POOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Group members are expected to adhere to in-group behavioral norms (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995), which provide a way to fit in. As noted, group norms associated with race-ethnicity shape the way that students view school-related behavior. To the extent that misbehaving is associated with acting Black or acting Latino, boys concerned about whether they fit in with their racial-ethnic group are at risk of disengaging from school and school-focused peers and of adopting behaviors that lead to problems in school, whether or not they wish to do well in school personally.

Among all racial-ethnic groups, low-income male students who try to succeed in school are frequently taunted as "nerds" (Farrell, 1994). Nerds do what their teachers ask them to do; they are compliant and, therefore, neither masculine nor cool (Farrell, 1994). Whereas in middle-class contexts, successful students can dilute the stigma of compliance with adults through success or leadership in other activities, these alternatives are less likely in high-poverty schools (Farrell, 1994). To fit in and avoid being considered a nerd, a boy is likely to employ various forms of impression management—including reducing extent of focus on and effort in schooling.

For low-income boys, acting tough and not focusing effort on school may be seen as ways of enacting racial-ethnic identity. Indeed, girls and boys identify behaviors associated with good students (e.g., paying attention in class) as more female than male (Heyman, 2001). African American boys and girls rate African American boys as more likely to be aggressive (Graham & Juvonen, 2002) and tough than to be good or well behaved (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). When asked to predict the race-ethnicity and gender of low-performing students, Hispanic teens nominate Hispanic boys (Graham, 2001; Hudley & Graham, 2001).

HYPOTHESES

Following our review of the literature, we hypothesized that physical markers of in-group belongingness (operationalized as dark skin tone in Study 1 and as looking Latino in Study 2) buffer adolescent boys against academic disengagement and that boys lacking these markers of belonging are more at risk of disengagement.

STUDY 1

Method

Sample and Procedure
Detroit-area adolescents ($n = 102$; 52 male; mean age = 15.0 years, $SD = 2.1$) and their mothers (mean age = 40.3 years, $SD = 5.7$) were included in this study, which was part of a larger study. Of the mothers, 43% were single and never married; 40% were separated, divorced, or widowed; and 17% were married. Their median monthly income was $1,308, and 56% were below the family-size-adjusted poverty line. The Detroit public school system is almost exclusively African American (more than 90% of students, 80% of teachers); only about 3% of students are White (Detroit Public Schools, 2002).

School records and self-report data from the teens and their mothers were obtained as part of a study of the development of high-risk youth; after data were linked, identifiers were destroyed. The interviewers were all African Americans from the Detroit area (see Oyserman, Bybee, & Mowbray, 2002, for details about the sample and procedure). The analyses reported here focus on the 102 youth who identified themselves as Black or African American (omitting 3 African American youth from whom no skin-tone data were collected). Teens and mothers responded separately to a structured interview led by an interviewer.

Dependent Variables
Grade Point Average (GPA). Each student's GPA ($4 = A$, $0 = F$) was obtained from school records for the semester including or most closely preceding the interview; across the sample, mean GPA was 2.21 ($SD = 1.01$).

Academic Self-Efficacy. Academic self-efficacy was assessed with Harter's (1988) seven-item scale (e.g., "Some people feel that they are just as smart as others their age but other people aren't so sure and wonder if they are as smart. Which is true for you?"). Responses to these items can range from 1 (*least efficacy*) to 4 (*most efficacy*); mean efficacy was 2.89 ($SD = 0.67$, $\alpha = .63$).

Social Acceptance. Social acceptance was assessed with Harter's (1988) seven-item scale (e.g., "Some teens are socially accepted by people their age; other teens wish that more people their age accepted them. Which is true for you?"). Responses to these items can range from 1 (*least acceptance*) to 4 (*most acceptance*); mean social acceptance was 2.93 ($SD = 0.73$, $\alpha = .58$).

Independent Variable: Skin Tone
To measure skin tone, we took the mean of the participant's and interviewer's rating of the participant's skin tone, using community members' perceptions of dark, light, and medium skin tone to categorize ratings, as detailed in the next paragraph. So that the focus on skin tone would be masked for participants, we created three color-palette displays in Microsoft Paint, one for hair colors, one for eye colors, and one for skin-tone colors. At the end of the interview, each participant was asked to make a self-portrait that included hair, eye, and skin-tone colors, by marking on the palettes the colors most closely resembling his or her own hair, eyes, and skin. Only the skin-tone palette was used for analyses. The skin-tone palette was also presented on a separate sheet for the interviewer, who independently marked the participant's skin tone immediately following the interview. The skin-tone continuum began with white (the color of the paper itself) and ended with black (the color of the black ink used for writing text). Tones in the middle were created by adding warm skin tones in slowly. The palette was 18 cm in length and is available from the first author. Interviewers' and participants' ratings were highly significantly correlated, $r = .65$, $p < .001$, and results did not differ substantively if only one of the ratings was used.

Community perception of light, medium, and dark skin tones was determined by asking a separate sample ($n = 31$) of African American adults in the community to examine the Microsoft Paint skin-tone color palette used by participants and interviewers. The community members' task was simply to add lines to demarcate light, medium, and dark skin tone ("In your opinion, where does light skin-tone begin?" "Where does medium skin-tone begin?" "Where does dark skin-tone begin?"), rather than to mark their own or someone else's skin tone. At the point beyond which no one in the sample drew the cutoff for "light," we marked a boundary for light skin tone; using the same criterion, we marked cutoffs for "medium" and "dark." For light, the boundaries were from 0 through 8.99 cm on the 18-cm palette; for medium, the boundaries were from 9 through 11.39 cm; and for dark, the boundaries were from 11.4 through 18 cm. These categories included 22.5%, 45.1%, and 32.4% of the youth, respectively.

Control Variables
We examined the sociodemographic and maternal variables commonly associated with academic outcomes (Sameroff, 1993): the child's age, gender, and poverty level (mother-reported family income as a proportion of the federal poverty line adjusted for household size, $M = 1.06$, $SD = 0.64$, range = 0.0–4.5) and maternal depressive symptoms, assessed 6 weeks prior to the youth's interview using the 20-item Center for Epidemi-

ology Scale for Depression (Radloff, 1977; $M = 21.38$, $SD = 15.28$, $\alpha = .93$).

Results and Discussion

Initial analyses showed no significant effect of maternal depression and youth's age, so these control variables were dropped. We used hierarchical multiple regression to examine the gendered effect of skin tone. Dummy variables for light and dark skin tone were created, with medium skin tone as the comparison; for direct comparisons of light and dark skin tone, we reran regression analyses with the dark-skin-toned youth as the comparison group. Table 1 summarizes the standardized coefficients, ΔR^2, and model R^2 for each successive block in the hierarchical regressions for each dependent variable. Significant effects are discussed in this section; given the directional hypotheses, one-tailed tests were used.

Social Acceptance

As hypothesized, light skin tone was negatively related to perceived social acceptance, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $\Delta F(2, 97) = 2.43$, $p = .05$. Youth with light skin tone felt significantly less accepted than those with dark skin tone, $\beta = -.24$, Cohen's $d = 0.62$, $p = .02$, and less accepted than those with medium skin tone, $\beta = -.16$, $d = 0.52$, $p = .06$. The negative effect of light skin tone on perceived social acceptance was not moderated by gender, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F(2, 95) = 0.28$, $p = .38$, but as displayed in the top panel of Figure 1, results are more clear for boys. Specifically, dark skin tone was clearly related to greater social acceptance for boys; for girls, the trend was very slight but in the same direction.

Academic Outcomes

As hypothesized, the effect of skin tone on academic outcomes depended on gender. When gender was not considered, skin tone alone did not influence academic self-efficacy, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $\Delta F(2, 97) = 0.15$, $p = .43$, or GPA, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F(2, 97) = 0.87$,

$p = .21$. However, effects of skin tone were significant for boys: For academic self-efficacy, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $\Delta F(2, 95) = 5.02$, $p < .01$, we found that light-skin-toned boys felt less efficacious than medium-skin-toned boys ($\beta = -.39$, $d = 0.67$, $p < .01$); the contrast between medium- and dark-skin-toned boys was not significant, though it was in the right direction. For GPA, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $\Delta F(2, 95) = 2.37$, $p = .05$, we found that boys with dark skin tone had better grades than those with medium skin tone, $\beta = .35$, $d = 0.64$, $p = .02$; light- and medium-skin-toned boys were not significantly different. The middle and bottom panels of Figure 1 show how academic self-efficacy and grades varied as a function of skin tone and gender.

Discussion

We posited that as a marker of in-group belonging, skin tone would be related to academic outcomes for low-income African American boys. For GPA, we found clear evidence that dark skin tone was a protective factor; for self-efficacy, light skin tone was a risk factor. The results for social acceptance showed that dark-skin-tone teens felt more socially accepted than light-skin-tone teens, though the effect was not gendered. For girls, skin tone did not relate systematically to outcomes; this can be seen by the nonsystematic variation across the dependent variables in the graphic display of Figure 1. The buffering effect of skin tone as a physical marker of in-group belonging was particularly important for African American boys because they are more at risk of not engaging with school, of not seeing school as a male thing to do, and of school failure.

Study 1 focused on skin tone as a marker of in-group belonging for African American boys. Although skin tone can be considered a main marker of in-group belonging for African Americans, no such single physical marker exists for Latinos. Informants in a focus group suggested that the closest parallel is "looking" Latino. Therefore, in Study 2, we asked youth how much they looked Latino. We also broadened our assessment to

TABLE 1

Effect of Skin Tone and Gender on Social Acceptance, Academic Efficacy, and Grade Point Average in Study 1

Block and variables entered	Social acceptance			Academic efficacy			Grade point average		
	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2
Block 1: demographics		.07*	.07*		.04*	.04*		.05*	.05*
Gender (1 = male, 0 = female)	.22*			−.06			−.21*		
Poverty level	.09			.19*			.11		
Block 2: skin tone		.05*	.11*		.00	.04		.02	.06†
Light	−.16†			.05			−.08		
Dark	.09			.05			.08		
Block 3: Skin Tone × Gender		.01	.12*		.09**	.13*		.04*	.11*
Light Skin Tone × Gender	−.06			−.39**			.18		
Dark Skin Tone × Gender	.08			.10			.35*		

Note. The table presents a summary of hierarchical multiple regression analyses, where β = the standardized coefficient of each variable at the block it was entered. Values for ΔR^2 and R^2 indicate the incremental variance at each block and the total variance at each block, respectively.
$^\dagger p < .10$. $^* p < .05$. $^{**} p < .01$. (All tests one-tailed.)
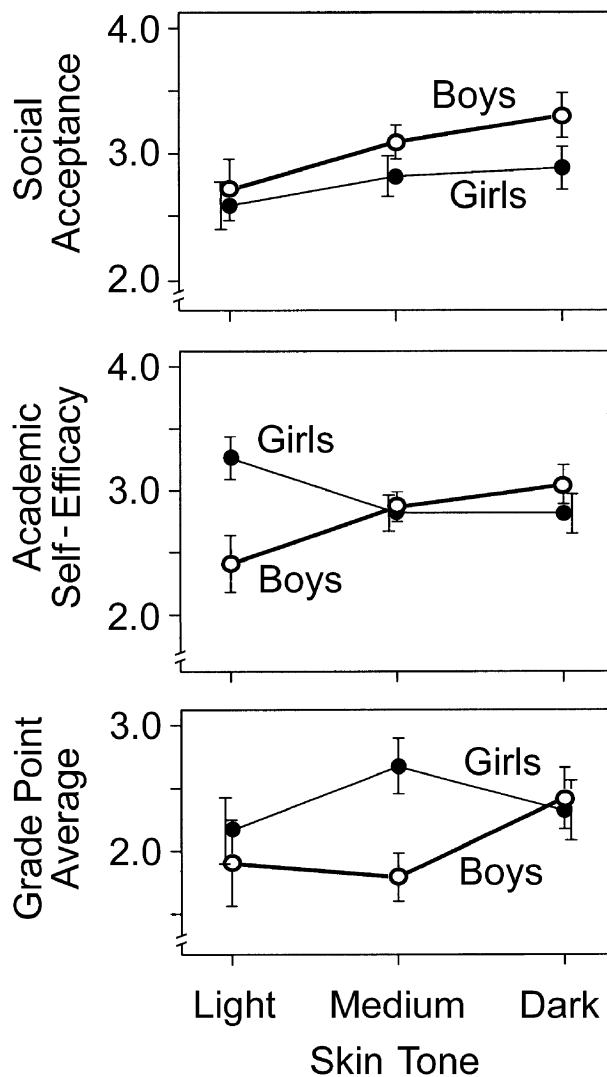
Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: effect of skin tone on social acceptance, academic self-efficacy, and grade point average among boys and girls. Error bars represent ±1 *SE*.

include teachers' reports of in-class behavior and tested our process model by examining the mediating effect of peer choice on the relation between markers of belonging and academic outcomes.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants were 66 Detroit-area Latino eighth graders (31 male; mean age = 13.4 years, *SD* = 0.53) attending a primarily Hispanic school and living in Latino-dominated neighborhoods.

As part of a larger study, these youth completed in-class questionnaires and were rated by their core-subject teachers; their schools reported their GPAs. As soon as data were linked, identifiers were removed.

Dependent Variables
The dependent variables in Study 2 were as follows:

GPA. Participants' GPAs were obtained from school records for the quarter that most closely followed administration of the in-class questionnaires. The mean GPA was 2.55 (*SD* = 0.97; 4 = A and 0 = F).

Teacher-Rated In-Class Behavior. A core-subject teacher rated each student's in-class disruptive behaviors and in-class participating behaviors using a 14-item checklist (e.g., "This student completes homework and in-class assignments" and "This student needs to be reprimanded or sent to the office"; the original high school version is from Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995; we used an eighth-grade revision developed by J.D. Finn, personal communication, October 14, 1998). Ratings were made on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), and items referring to negative behaviors were reverse-coded. The mean score was 3.58 (*SD* = 0.72, α = .94).

School Engagement. Participants reported their school engagement on a 6-item scale (e.g., "I feel I really belong at school" and "I wish I could drop out of school"; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992). Response choices ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and negatively worded items were reverse-coded. The mean score was 3.62 (*SD* = 0.58, α = .73).

School-Focused Peers. Core teachers were asked three questions about peers (from M. Eddy, personal communication, October 14, 1998). The questions had a common stem, "How often does this student associate with people who . . . ," which was followed, respectively, by "do well in school/are academically motivated?" "are friendly, helpful, and dependable?" and "misbehave at school?" (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*; *M* = 3.54, *SD* = 0.75, α = .81). The negative item was reverse-coded.

Independent Variable
The independent variable was youths' rated agreement to the following item: "I look like a member of my racial-ethnic group." Responses were made on a scale from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 5, *strongly agree* (*M* = 3.71, *SD* = 0.93). Distribution was skewed; analyses used a log transformation.

Results and Discussion
With skin tone, there is a natural comparison group (medium), but no such group exists for looking Latino. Therefore, in Study 2, we could examine effects of looking like an in-group member, but could not distinguish whether it was more the case that fitting in helped outcomes or that not fitting in hurt outcomes. We used hierarchical multiple regression to examine the gendered effect of looking Latino. Table 2 summarizes the standardized coefficients, ΔR^2, and model R^2 for each successive block for each dependent variable. In addition to testing for gendered effects of looking Latino on academic involvement and outcomes, we

TABLE 2

Effect of Looking Latino and Gender on Grade Point Average, Teacher-Rated In-Class Behavior, and School Engagement in Study 2

Block and variable entered	Grade point average			Teacher-rated in-class behavior			School engagement		
	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2
Block 1: gender (1 = male, 0 = female)	−.15	.02	.02	−.05	.00	.00	.01	.00	.00
Block 2: external marker (look Latino)	−.10	.01	.03	.24*	.05*	.06†	.23*	.05*	.05
Block 3: External Marker × Gender (Look Latino × Gender)	.66*	.09**	.12*	.71**	.10**	.16**	.50*	.05*	.10*

Note. The table presents a summary of hierarchical multiple regression analyses, where β = the standardized coefficient of each variable at the block it was entered. Values for ΔR^2 and R^2 indicate the incremental variance at each block and the total variance at each block, respectively.
$^\dagger p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (All tests one-tailed.)

examined the extent to which choosing school-focused peers mediated the impact of looking Latino. The mediational analyses followed Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998). Given the directional hypotheses, one-tailed tests were used. Significant effects are discussed in this section.

Effects on Academic Outcomes and School Engagement
As hypothesized, looking Latino predicted academic engagement and outcomes for boys, but not girls: GPA, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $\Delta F(1, 62) = 6.19$, $p < .01$; in-class behavior, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $\Delta F(1, 62) = 7.65$, $p < .005$; and school engagement, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $\Delta F(1, 62) = 3.54$, $p < .04$. Looking Latino was positively related to grades for boys (β = .35, $d = 0.75$, $p < .01$), but not girls (β = −.29, $p > .15$); was positively related to school behavior for boys (β = .52, $d = 1.22$, $p = .001$), but not girls (β = −.18, $p > .36$); and was positively related to school engagement for boys (β = .42, $d = 0.93$, $p = .007$), but not girls (β = −.07, $p > .72$).

Although it was not possible to prove conclusively whether it was more the case that looking Latino improved academic engagement or more the case that not looking Latino undermined academic outcomes, we were able to shed light on this question by comparing boys with girls. Specifically, for each outcome variable, we compared the points on the regression line for girls and boys who scored high (at $+1\ SD$ on looking Latino) and girls and boys who scored low (at $-1\ SD$) on looking Latino. Among youth scoring high in looking Latino, boys and girls did not differ significantly on any outcome variable: GPA, $t = 0.85$, $p > .39$; in-class behavior, $t = 1.30$, $p > .19$; and school engagement, $t = 1.02$, $p > .31$. However, among youth scoring low in looking Latino, boys and girls differed significantly on all three outcome variables: GPA, $t = -2.76$, $p = .004$; in-class behavior, $t = -2.70$, $p = .004$; and school engagement, $t = -1.69$, $p < .05$. Given that boys are generally at risk of worse school performance than girls, our interpretation of these findings is that looking Latino reduced risk for boys.

Mediational Analyses
Because direct effects were found only for boys, mediation could be tested only for boys (note that reduced degrees of freedom

makes the direct-effects coefficients slightly different from effect coefficients for the full sample). The conditions for examining mediation were met—looking Latino was positively related to choosing a school-focused peer group (β = .50, $d = 1.15$, $p = .002$) and, controlling for the effect of looking Latino on each outcome variable, choosing a school-focused peer group related positively to GPA (β = .72, $p < .001$), teacher-rated in-class behavior (β = .80, $p < .001$), and school engagement (β = .44, $p = .01$). Sobel's test demonstrated that choice of a school-focused peer group significantly mediated the effect of looking Latino on grades ($Z = 2.6$, $p < .005$), in-class behavior ($Z = 2.9$, $p = .002$), and school engagement ($Z = 1.9$, $p = .03$). When added to the regression after effects of choosing a school-focused peer group were accounted for, looking Latino no longer significantly predicted GPA (β = .04, $p > .39$), in-class behavior (β = .12, $p > .13$), or school engagement (β = .18, $p > .17$).

Discussion
We posited that markers of in-group belonging—in this case, looking Latino—would reduce risk of academic disengagement for Latino boys. We found direct effects for boys' grades, teacher-rated in-class behavior, and school engagement. These effects were mediated by choice of peer group: Boys who felt they looked Latino were more likely than other boys to choose school-focused peers, and having school-focused peers was associated with better grades, better in-class behavior, and a greater sense of engagement with school. Although looking Latino is an imperfect measure of the underlying construct, these findings, taken together with findings from Study 1, suggest that physical markers of in-group belongingness help boys' academic attainment by providing a sense of connection to the in-group, freeing boys to join school-focused peer groups. Some of our results are also compatible with the hypothesis that boys lacking these markers are at risk of disengaging from school.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We proposed that external markers of belonging to one's racial-ethnic group may be particularly important for minority boys'

school success. The bases for our model come from emerging strands of evidence in diverse literatures—evidence that boys' connectedness needs are met by belonging to social groups (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997), that racial-ethnic and other social group memberships are more central to boys' self-concept than to girls' self-concept (Grace & Cramer, 2003), that racial-ethnic connectedness is particularly important for boys' academic outcomes (Oyserman et al., 2003), and that boys' racial-ethnic connectedness is vulnerable to neighborhood context effects (Oyserman, Bybee, & Dai, 2006). Because connectedness is so central to boys, they will actively seek cues to distinguish in-group members from nonmembers. Looking like an in-group member is one means of bolstering one's sense of connection to the in-group. We have provided evidence for the buffering effect of looking like an in-group member and for the risk-inducing effect of not looking like an in-group member. It was boys, who are more at risk of academic failure and disengagement than girls, who were bolstered by external markers of racial-ethnic identity.

Skin tone influenced academic outcomes of African American boys: Boys with dark skin tone had better grades and felt more academically efficacious and accepted by peers than other boys did. Boys with light skin tone felt less academically efficacious and less accepted by peers than boys with medium skin tone. Latino boys who felt that they looked Latino, compared with those who did not feel that they looked Latino, had better grades, participated more in class, and felt more engaged with school. The effect sizes obtained were medium to large.

Our model focuses on the importance of social group connection for boys. We expected that boys who looked Latino would be freed to join a school-focused peer group, whereas boys who did not would enact racial-ethnic belonging by disengaging from school. We also expected that school engagement would be fostered for boys who were members of school-focused peer groups. Indeed, we found that boys who felt they looked Latino were more likely than other boys to choose school-focused peers and that having school-focused peers mediated the effect of looking Latino on academic outcomes and engagement. Our consistent finding that belongingness markers matter for boys underscores their powerful desire to be members of an important in-group and the pernicious effect that concerns about fitting in may have on academic performance. For girls, looking Latino and skin tone were unsystematically related to academic engagement and outcomes. Further research is necessary to begin to untangle the effects of external markers of belonging for girls.

Study 1 focused on one kind of marker of in-group belonging—physical appearance. Other markers of in-group belonging, such as language, use of speech codes, dress, and nonverbal cues (e.g., stance), may also facilitate boys' belongingness—and in Study 2, we examined the effects of "looking" Latino, which may include all of these cues but is likely to focus on how one "looks" more concretely. Although it seems reasonable to assume that boys lacking physical markers of belonging to the in-

group will try various methods of enacting an in-group identity (e.g., by being tough or not focused on school), many of these enactments will not bolster academic outcomes, and may in fact undermine them.

Our findings link physical markers of group membership with consequential behavior and outcomes, and suggest that markers of in-group belonging have positive effects for boys via their choice of peer networks. We focused on adolescent boys living in racially segregated neighborhoods; we expected that for these boys, looking unambiguously like an in-group member would be helpful. It is possible that results may differ for youth living in more racially heterogeneous contexts or in higher-SES contexts. Markers of in-group membership may carry different meanings in these contexts. Youth in higher-SES contexts are likely to have more choices about social groups to belong to and draw identity from, including school clubs, youth groups, community-based volunteer groups, and so on. These groups may not be race-ethnicity based, and in fact, for youth in these more diverse contexts, atypical racial-ethnic features may afford a sense of belonging to another group, the larger society. Feeling connected to larger society is likely to have positive consequences for academic outcomes to the extent that doing well in school is considered a larger-society in-group thing to do.

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