

On Defense: African American Males Making Sense of Racialized Narratives in Mathematics Education

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In this article, we explore the role of racialized narratives (e.g., "Asians are good at math") in the mathematics learning experiences of African American male students. Drawing on concepts from sociocultural theory and cultural psychology, we conceptualize racialized narratives as dynamic cultural artifacts, which students appropriate and deploy in processes of identification and positioning. Interview data suggest that students had deep knowledge of these narratives, and made sense of them in a way that linked perceptions of Asian Americans as a mathematically gifted "model minority" to perceptions of African American males as intellectually inferior. Despite this positioning, many students spoke of re-purposing racialized narratives in order to assume positions of mathematical competence.

The learning sciences has long known that learning is deeply related to engagement; learning occurs when one is invested in the learning setting, and when one has access to the resources necessary to learn. Identity, then, is deeply intertwined with processes of learning, because identity speaks to one's sense of connection and belonging. In their groundbreaking book, *Situated Learning*, Lave and Wenger (1991) tell the story of a newcomer to the activity of meat-packing. He is charged with the task of wrapping the meat, and is sequestered in that task in a way that prevents him from learning how to cut the meat. They argue that this leads to him being unable to develop an identity as a meat-cutter, thus relegating him only to wrapping the meat and accepting a marginalized identity. This story illustrates the ways that we have typically thought about identity and learning in the sociocultural literature on learning. We have come to view identities as being rooted in and developed through the everyday learning practices that we have access to and engagement in (Wenger, 1998; Nasir & Hand, 2008).

This perspective on identity is a compelling one, and indeed, represents an important redefinition of identity. In contrast to more traditional psychological accounts of identity that privilege the individual, the sociocultural tradition views identity as being intimately related to learning, and developing in the context of the learning setting. Socioculturally-oriented research has highlighted the development and intertwining of identity and learning processes in a variety of locales, such as the meat-cutting department of a grocery store, an insurance company claims adjustment division, a basketball court, and mathematics classrooms (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2006; Nasir & Hand, 2009). Identity, from this perspective, is viewed as involving a reflexive relationship between the individual and the others in an activity. That is, one simultaneously positions oneself as being a certain kind of person, and one is positioned by others as well (through language, gesture, roles, etc.) (Harré & van Langenhove, 2008; Polman & Miller, 2010; Wortham, 2006). Thus, this view of identity privileges the local learning setting as being a site where positioning occurs.

This was the focus of Nasir's work on identity and learning for African American male students in basketball and in the math classroom. One study (Nasir & Hand, 2008) examined the nature of learning and identity for African American high school boys as they engaged in two learning settings: their varsity basketball team and their math classrooms. Analyses focused on how the players were positioned as learners by the structures of these activities, and how those structures made available roles that supported them in seeing themselves as basketball players more strongly than as students. One student who exemplified that trend was Jeremiah. On the court, Jeremiah was a strong leader. He saw himself as "leading by example," by which he meant that the other players learned both the plays and appropriate comportment on the court. He saw himself thus as both a teacher and an effective learner in the basketball setting. In the classroom, Jeremiah's engagement was quite different. For many class sessions he kept his head down on the desk, often wearing a hooded sweatshirt with the hood on. Nasir and Hand (2009) argued that the basketball setting offered a myriad of resources from which to construct an identity as a learner—resources that were harder to come by in the math classroom.

This study articulated the details of how these two settings, the basketball court and the mathematics classroom, made identities—as learners and as valued members of the practices of these settings—available to young people. However, while such an analysis based on the sociocultural literature on learning identities is useful, it only offers a partial story. More specifically, it under-theorizes the racialized identities that underscore how African American men might be positioned by others (and might position themselves) in both basketball and school mathematics. Powerful and salient narratives exist in society about what it means to be an African American male (Dance, 2002). We contend that analyzing the ways in which youths make sense of these narratives and the ways they are deployed in learning settings is critical to understanding the engagement, participation, and mathematics identities of African American students in mathematics classrooms.

As the research literature indicates, narratives about African Americans—males, in particular—have been longstanding, and despite slight variation, have remained essentially the same over time (Bobo, 2001). Narratives about African American males tend to frame them as unintelligent, lazy, and inclined toward criminality (Devine & Elliot, 1995) at worst, and as perpetually 'in danger' at best (Schott Foundation, 2010). Dance (2002) has termed the common portrayal of African American men as the archetype of the "criminal Blackman," and in her analysis she highlights the role of the media in perpetuating this narrative.

The research literature has typically referred to these narratives as ‘stereotypes’ (Bobo, 1999; Hudley & Graham, 2001). Stereotypes are defined as “mental representations of the characteristics of a particular social or cultural group that are shared among members of society” (from Stangor & Schelter, 1996, cited in Hudley and Graham, 2001, p. 202). In this paper, we use the term ‘narratives’ to refer to these shared storylines rather than ‘stereotypes’ for two reasons. The first is to emphasize the social aspect of these forms, as opposed to conceptualizations that treat them as purely in-the-head phenomena. The second reason is that calling them ‘narratives’ implies the role of storytelling in their propagation, which takes place through the media and through social interaction. In other words, as cultural forms the narratives are not static—they are continually taken up, reproduced, and resisted in multiple ways in daily life.

Alongside the narratives about African American males, there also exists a parallel set of narratives about Asian Americans as comprising a “model minority” (Prashad, 2000; Wu, 2003). Lee (1994) writes, “According to the model minority stereotype, Asian Americans are successful in school because they work hard and come from cultures that believe in the value of education” (p. 413). Additionally, an important aspect of the model minority narrative is that Asians are perceived to be smart, especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields (Lee, 1994).

The model minority narrative is problematic because it homogenizes the “Asian American experience,” thereby obscuring both the within-group diversity and the very real discrimination faced by all people of Asian descent in the United States (Chou & Feagin, 2008). Furthermore, Glover-Blackwell, Kwoh, and Pastor (2002) argue that while on the surface it appears positive and complementary, the model minority narrative is inherently relational in that it pits Asians against other groups; Asians get positioned as diligent or intelligent only in *comparison with* or at the expense of other “minority groups.” This also plays out in the context of mathematics education, as the notion that “Asians are good at math” constructs and mutually reinforces the mathematical incapacities of non-Asian children.

Such racialized narratives tend to exist slightly underground (e.g. Pollock, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Schaffer & Skinner, 2009). Common discourse in school settings rarely takes up issues of race explicitly, and yet, race is a key aspect of students’ experiences from preschool through high school (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Schafer & Skinner, 2009; Lewis, 2003; Pollock, 2004). In an educational system that regularly stratifies by race (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ferguson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006), it is not surprising that common racialized narratives are perpetuated in schools and classrooms. In this article we focus on these narratives. We argue that racialized narratives take up life and get invoked, resisted, and *used* in schools and classrooms (Schafer & Skinner, 2009; Pollack, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Ferguson, 2007). We ask, how might these narratives impact African American male students as they participate in their mathematics classrooms?

The research literature on African American male students in mathematics tells us that African American male students often view racism as central to their mathematics learning experiences. One way in which racism plays out in mathematics education is through tracking, as African American male mathematics students have reported being overlooked for gifted and talented programs and disproportionately identified as ADHD and enrolled in special education (Berry, 2005). Certainly, the presence of these phenomena in mathematics education reflects the issues facing African American males in school and in society more generally. Stinson (2006) argues that African American males continue to be stigmatized by what he terms the “discourse

of deficiency” (i.e., deficit views of African American culture as rife with moral and economic poverty) and the “discourse of rejection” (i.e., the notion that African American males tend to reject schooling). In an attempt to counter these persistent discourses, recent research in mathematics education has shifted toward focusing on *successful* African American children (see Berry, 2005; Martin, 2000; Moody, 2004; Stinson, 2004). This emerging literature demonstrates that in spite of recurring racialized obstacles spread throughout their schooling experiences, many African American students resist racism and successfully continue into advanced mathematics.

In this paper, we examine how African American male students understand, interpret, and think about the effects of racialized narratives in relation to mathematics learning. Toward this end, we draw on data from three studies on race and mathematics learning, all of which included interviews with African American male students about race and their experiences in schools and math classrooms. We highlight two prevalent narratives that students articulated about race and mathematics learning: 1) the narrative that African Americans are *not* good at school and math, and 2) the narrative that Asians *are* good at math. We argue that these narratives exist fundamentally in relation to one another. Further, we explore how these narratives are deployed in classrooms (with a focus on mathematics classrooms), highlighting both the everyday nature of the narratives, the range of purposes for which they are invoked, and the effects of such narratives in the eyes of the students that we studied. We connect these narratives to the ways students make sense of the kinds of people they are; we view them as a sort of raw material from which young people build their identities, including identities as math learners.

Theoretical Framework

Artifacts as a Key Component of Human Activity

A central argument we make in this article is that racialized narratives about students’ intellectual and mathematical abilities play a central role in processes of positioning and identification. This implies that narratives such as “Asians are good at math” are more than static cultural beliefs. Students put these narratives to work for them in myriad ways that construct identities for themselves and for other students. Analyzing the mechanisms by which this identity work takes place requires a theoretical lens that sheds light on how students deploy these narratives in everyday activity. To that end, we propose conceptualizing racialized narratives as “cultural artifacts,” a concept borrowed from anthropology and cultural psychology with theoretical roots in the work of Vygotsky.

The brand of sociocultural theory that grew out of the Russian school of psychology was predicated on a basic Marxist question: What is the relationship between human beings and their environment? In a direct rebuke of stimulus-response models, Vygotsky (1978) maintained that instead of interacting directly with their environment, human beings structure everyday activity through the production and deployment of “mediating devices.”

For example, the sculptor wishing to carve a statue from a block of marble cannot do so directly. Instead, she requires a chisel, a tool invented by humans and refined over time that mediates her interaction with the stone. In addition to tools, humans invent signs that function as mediating devices, as illustrated by Vygotsky’s famous example of the practice of tying a handkerchief around one’s finger for the purpose of remembering. Indeed, language itself represents a system of sign forms we invented for the purpose of mediating our interactions in

the social world. Thus, a key idea in Vygotsky's original formulation is that human beings *intentionally* produce and deploy mediating devices in the service of goal-directed activity. Whereas apes may have the capacity to create and use tools and signs, what distinguishes our species is that we deliberately do so because we find them useful in serving particular functions in local contexts.

In reflecting on Vygotsky's research it is important to note that his primary focus was individual ontogeny. Although he acknowledged the role of societal and historical forces as affecting individuals, Vygotsky's sociocultural treatment was limited to person-to-person interactions. Cole's (1996) work, on the other hand, has shown that Vygotskian concepts can provide a foundation for conceptualizing the broader question of "culture in mind." Central to Cole's cultural psychology is the notion of an "artifact," a more general construct that subsumes both "tools" and "signs." The shift in terminology reflects his interest in what it means to be a thinking being engaged in particular activities situated within cultural contexts. Artifacts take center stage in Cole's formulation because they represent the legacies of human interaction over time, or what one might simply call "culture." Let us now focus in on some of the key attributes of artifacts.

Artifacts come in a variety of forms. Wartofsky (1973) has proposed three levels of artifacts: 1) primary artifacts, which consist of the tools and signs described earlier – material and non-material objects used directly in production and social interaction; 2) secondary artifacts, which comprise the means by which beliefs and norms are preserved and transmitted; and 3) tertiary artifacts, which represent the broader contextual spaces in which human activities take place. Within this framework, the racialized narratives of particular interest in this article are secondary artifacts.

Artifacts, by themselves, hold no unique, predetermined meaning. Artifacts are always embedded in the contexts within which they are appropriated, and a range of meanings can emerge as they are deployed within an activity structure. In other words, an artifact's meaning is subjective and depends on how it gets taken up. As we will show in our analyses, this is also true in the case of racialized narratives. That is, what sense students make of "Asians are good at math" or "African American males are not good at school" is reflected in the functions for which they deploy them, whether they be in the service of personal identity formation, positioning fellow students, or otherwise.

Further, artifacts can change over time in function, and they can take different forms or shapes. Saxe (1990) has argued that in order to understand development, one can focus on the way that old forms get used in new ways to serve new kinds of cognitive functions in activity, as well as the ways that new forms emerge. Saxe and Esmonde (2005) illustrated the utility of a form-function analysis in their research on the quantification practices of a local community of people in New Guinea known as the Oksapmin. Their work centered on a word form called 'fu.' In his original visit to New Guinea during the late 1970s, Saxe observed that the Oksapmin used the word 'fu' to indicate the complete counting of a set of objects. Upon returning to New Guinea in 2001 Saxe and Esmonde discovered that the same word 'fu' was now being used for a different purpose, namely in conjunction with number words to double their value. Despite the fact that the word form had stayed the same, the function it served had shifted dramatically over the course of two decades. Using a form-function analysis, Saxe and Esmonde were able to trace the trajectory of how the Oksapmin's use of 'fu' evolved within the context of changing sociopolitical and economic conditions. They emphasized that the function of a particular form

or artifact can mutate or shift and assume different meanings as people make use of it in regular activity.

To summarize, the notion of a “cultural artifact” is useful for sociocultural analysis because artifacts are integral components of everyday human life. Next, we consider how an artifacts-based lens can help in conceptualizing racialized narratives, which students can deploy in order to position other students, as well as to position (and re-position) themselves, in the context of mathematics learning.

Conceptualizing Racialized Narratives as Artifacts Relevant to Mathematics Learning

From a Vygotskian perspective, a mathematics classroom can be thought of as a space filled with a plethora of “mediating devices” that facilitate student learning. Rulers, calculators, the Pythagorean theorem, and algebraic representations are all examples of tools and signs students appropriate as it suits their purposes in the process of learning mathematics. But thinking about mathematics classrooms in terms of their *cultural artifacts* expands the theoretical space. From this perspective, not only do students make use of rulers and calculators but, as we will see, they also grapple with and deploy widely held cultural beliefs about who can and who cannot be successful in mathematics. As artifacts they become equally important elements of the learning process, especially given research that shows students across age groups are aware of such racialized narratives (Nasir, Wischnia, & O’Connor, 2010; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

An artifacts-based lens on racialized narratives also affords an analysis at the level of mechanism (i.e., how and for what ends these racialized narratives get taken up). To illustrate let us consider a racialized narrative outside of mathematics education that is widely recognized in the general population but especially in the realm of basketball: the notion that “White men can’t jump.” On the basketball court, to the extent that players of all racial backgrounds are aware of this narrative, it becomes a salient artifact for them in the practice of playing basketball. “White men can’t jump” is fundamentally a statement about identity, a message about who can and who cannot be good at basketball. In a sense, then, the narrative makes available certain subject positions that players can either identify with or reject. The seminal research on stereotype threat confirms both the pervasiveness of these racial narratives in our society, and their effects on performance across many domains (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

And yet, it is more complex than to simply say that the narrative provides a “menu” of possible selves from which all people are free to choose. The subject positions made available vary significantly by individual. For a White player, the narrative circumscribes the identities available to him by *hailing* or *recruiting* him into the position of someone who lacks the innate physical talent for basketball (Althusser, 1971). As a result, the player is forced to respond. Even if he wanted to ignore it, awareness of the narrative renders this virtually impossible, and the identity work that follows becomes defensive in nature. This point illuminates how such narratives unequally distribute the freedom to identify with particular subject positions. It also shows that power dynamics are deeply embedded in processes of positioning and identification; the narratives are not neutral.

Of course, the prevalence of the “White men can’t jump” narrative does not mean that no White players excel at basketball. In fact, this is precisely where a form-function analysis becomes especially relevant. Certainly, some White players will appropriate the narrative as-is, in which case it may function to discourage their ongoing effort to participate and improve. But as an artifact, the same narrative can be re-deployed for a different function (e.g., to fuel a White

player's desire to be an exception). In doing so, the narrative itself gets modified, in that if there are exceptions to the rule then it cannot be true that *all* White men can't jump. All of this stresses the point that artifacts assume meaning when and how they are deployed.

So part of the story is that narratives are made to function in processes of self-understanding. The flipside of this issue is how narratives can be deployed in order to position other people. As with "Asians are good at math," the notion that "White men can't jump" exemplifies how racialized narratives tend to be inherently relational in character. The inability of White men to jump is only visible because of the (presumed) certainty that non-White men (usually African American men) *can* jump. With this in mind, consider how the "White men can't jump" narrative might be used against a African American man who is not a great leaper or who has no interest in basketball. There are at least two problems here.

First, the narrative might get deployed against a vertically challenged African American male so as to question his racial authenticity: *only White men can't jump – what's your problem?* The narrative is deployed or "thrown" in a power play with the goal of actively positioning another individual. And again, more generally, the function that the artifact serves reflects the meanings it takes on in a particular moment. A second issue is that similar to how the narrative sets boundaries around White players' identification with basketball, it also makes particular subject positions less available to non-White players as well. That is, if African American men are considered to be good basketball players or athletes in general, they are less likely to be considered strong intellectuals or students.

The case of "White men can't jump" is useful for several reasons as we move into a discussion of our data. First, it shows the theoretical value of conceptualizing racial narratives as cultural artifacts. Second, it demonstrates how a form-function analysis can specify processes of positioning and identification as people grapple with the raw material of the narratives "in the air" around them. And last, it previews the complex ways in which the students in our studies made sense of and deployed racialized narratives about mathematical ability.

Methods

The data that we draw on in this paper come from three complementary studies of students' belief about race and mathematics learning. All of these studies focused on understanding the racialized narratives students drew on to make sense of the relation between race and math achievement. In particular, in this paper, we draw on interview data with African American male students.

Stereotype Study

This study, conducted by the first author and colleagues, took place at a diverse middle school and its feeder elementary school in a medium-sized Northern California community, and combined student surveys, interviews, and classroom observations. Interviews focused on twelve 5th and 7th grade target students, drawn from the population of students (n=152) in the larger study. Participants in the interview portion of the study were all African American and Latino students, and represented a range of achievement levels. In this paper, we draw primarily from interviews with three African American male students, one 7th grade student, and two 5th grade students. Each of these target students participated in two interviews, each lasting between twenty and forty minutes. Interview 1 focused on students' general self-descriptions, including

questions of how relevant their ethnic/racial and academic identities were to them both in general and in school and math contexts. Students were also asked about the implications of each of their self descriptors for their behavior, and how they thought valued others expected them to participate in school and in math class. Interview 2 focused on students' feelings about school and math, and on their awareness and endorsement of stereotypes about who does well in school and in math.

Race & Math Study

This study focused on documenting the ways that racial identities shaped learning and achievement in math classes at a large, diverse public high school. Our work included observations of students in math classes, interviews with African American students, and a survey. The first author and colleagues conducted weekly observations in math classrooms, ranging from algebra to calculus. We also interviewed 68 students (over three years) regarding their perceptions of the school, experiences in math classrooms, and perceptions of who they were as racial group members and as math learners. Finally, we conducted a survey of over 500 students that explored students' racial, mathematical, and academic identities, as well as issues of connection, disconnection, and achievement. While the school was multi-racial, our qualitative data focused largely on the experiences of African American students. In this paper, we draw primarily on the 15 interviews with African American male students.

Race & Math Study #2

This study was primarily aimed at capturing spontaneous instances of racialized talk in mathematics classrooms through longitudinal classroom observation. The study took place at a racially diverse, urban high school in Northern California. For 5 months, the second author acted as a participant-observer in four classrooms (Pre-algebra, Algebra 1, Geometry, and Precalculus) for two days per week on a weekly basis. The racial composition of each class almost exactly matched the overall demographics of the school. From the four classrooms observed, nine students were interviewed about their past experiences learning mathematics, their beliefs about what it takes to succeed in mathematics, and their perspectives on how issues of race come up in the context of mathematics education. Among the interviewees, there was one African American male, a high-performing ninth grader enrolled in Geometry named Will¹. Data from his interview serves as a focal point for our analysis.

Findings

The focus of this paper is to examine the racialized narratives that African American male students articulate as being relevant to their experiences in schools and math classrooms, and to begin a conversation about how these narratives may impact students' identification with mathematics and their engagement in math classrooms. We might note that while often discussions of narratives about race tend to highlight the ways that such narratives can be problematic for achievement in math (and we share this perspective), we also want to explore the ways that African American male students repurpose these narratives, imbuing them with new functions as they do so. We organize this section into two main parts: 1) we detail students' understandings of the two racialized narratives that came up most often in our interviews, the

narrative that Asians are good at school/math, and the narrative that African Americans are not good at school/math; and 2) we examine how these narratives get deployed, repurposed, or used by African American male students, to position themselves and others with respect to identity.

Two Complementary Racialized Narratives about Academic Achievement

Racialized narratives about math and school exist in many forms in our society. In our interviews with African American male students, two versions of such narratives were prevalent. The first is the narrative that African American students are not good at school and/or math, and the second is that Asian students are good at school and/or math. The students that we interviewed saw these two narratives as related, like the two sides of a coin, and several students articulated *how* these narratives were related to one another. Consider the words of two high school students:

Julian: I can tell you what the stereotype is. You'll have like Asian, then White people, then Mexican and Black people I guess is on the same level. And with Mexicans and Blacks, like Latin. So that's kind of how it breaks down. Native Americans don't even really get a mention. But um, that's kind of how it breaks down. But then I don't look at it like that. To say – I do find that a lot of Asian kids, their parents do motivate them, like when I talk to them. But no, you have African-American kids and Latin kids that are just as smart and have the potential to be just as smart. And you have White kids that are just as smart or have the potential to be just as smart.

Cayton (in response to the question, does race have anything to do with doing well in school): Uh, I don't think so. But it seems to be that it's true. Cause most of the African-American kids up here it's like they don't really – it seems to me that they don't really care about school as much as Asians or White kids who are at the school. It seems like they care less than all of them. And they not dedicated enough. Like if they hit a problem they just gonna shut down and not try to work through it. And like Asians, I have a couple Asian friends, if they get a problem, they gonna work through it until they get it right. They just – they don't stop. They dedicated.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Cayton: I don't know. It probably has to do with how they raised at home or whatever. I think that's what it is. Cause if I get a problem I work through, so I can't say that all African –Americans do that, cause I work through it when I get a problem.

Both Julian and Cayton articulate their view of a racial hierarchy of scholastic achievement. Julian expresses what he views as the “levels” of how the different groups do in school, with Asians at the top, followed by Whites, and Mexicans and African Americans at the bottom. Consistent with the model minority narrative, Julian puts forth that Asian parents push their children more than parents of other racial backgrounds. But it is interesting to note that while Julian explains the hierarchy, he also notes that he does not believe that the hierarchy

really exists, and he argues that there are African American, Latino, and White students that are “just as smart” or have the “potential” to be as smart as Asian students.

Cayton attests to a similar racial hierarchy in which the motivation and academic tenacity of Asian and White students contrasts with the scholastic apathy and limited perseverance shown by African American children. However, Cayton is not just reporting what he thinks others believe—he is saying what he himself believes. In other words, he not only recounts the stereotypes about Asians, Whites, and African Americans in relation to one another, but he also endorses these stereotypical narratives himself. Later, he makes clear that he sees himself as a counter-example to this narrative, in that he does not give up easily when he has a problem that he does not understand.

What is clear in both of these comments is that by juxtaposing contrasting narratives about racial groups, these students view the narratives as opposite ends of a continuum. In short, this suggests that a narrative such as “Asians are good at math” is as much about other children of color as it is about Asian children. The notion of a model minority requires a *non*-model minority. This relation organizes a racial hierarchy of scholastic achievement. In mathematics education this hierarchy becomes what Martin (2009) has called a “racial hierarchy of mathematical ability.” What we also find interesting is that both of these students were somewhat conflicted about whether or not they bought into these narratives. While we will explore this issue in greater depth later in the article, for now we highlight the ease with which these two students engage in the discourse of racial hierarchies, as well as the way in which narratives about African Americans and about Asians mutually construct each other.

Overall, the presence of each of these narratives was prominent across interviews and data sets. Next, we share a few more examples of the ways that students understand the narrative that African American students are not good at school/math, and then we examine in more detail how students make sense of the narrative that Asians are good at school/math.

Narratives About African American Students

In this section, we describe students’ understanding of the narrative that African Americans are not good at school and/or math. This narrative is complex and, as we have noted, involved sense-making around African Americans in math in particular, and in school and society more generally. This narrative draws not only on age-old stereotypes about African Americans being intellectually inferior and scholastically apathetic, but also on stereotypes about African Americans as tending towards criminality and overall cultural deficiency. These ‘traits’ are intertwined in the narrative, and are often thought of as either genetic or environmental.

The young men we interviewed were overwhelmingly aware of these narratives about African Americans in general, and African American males in particular. Not only did they express their knowledge of the racialized narratives, but they also described how the narratives got applied to them. For instance, in the transcript below, Will, a ninth grade student enrolled in advanced Geometry, shares how the racialized narrative about African Americans not being smart got applied to him when he was placed in an accelerated English class.

Interviewer: Right. Do you think – you were saying how being on the basketball team and being a nice guy: do you think that affects their impression of you in some way?

Will: Like, what do you mean?

Interviewer: Well, does that affect their impression of how you are in math, for example?

Will: Yeah, I remember – this is an experience that I had this year actually. I have accelerated English, and I'm the only Black person in that class.

Interviewer: Right.

Will: So when I walked in a lot of kids...um...thought that I had been placed in the wrong class and that – I remember when I first started talking, they thought: "Where is this guy from?" Cuz as you can see I have a vivid diction and I have a very in-depth vocabulary, so I get the basic stereotypical, "Oh, you just pass. You get like a 2.5, 2.0 (GPA), and teachers just pass you because they like you – you have to because you play on the team, but in actuality I'm fairly articulate.

In this excerpt, Will's description of his classmates' reaction to his placement in an accelerated English class is telling of the sense he makes around racialized narratives about African American males. In the first place, Will maintains that his classmates were surprised at his "vivid diction." To the extent that an "in-depth vocabulary" symbolizes intellect, the fact that they might automatically perceive Will as inarticulate connects to the narrative about African Americans being intellectually inferior.

Students' positioning of Will as a below average student is further exacerbated by his identity as a basketball player. According to Will, other students feel that teachers grant basketball players special privileges, but prior to this part of the interview, Will had talked about his membership on the basketball team as a signal to people that he was not academically inclined or successful. Given the broader narrative about African American males as athletic but not smart, Will's membership on the basketball team (along with perceptions of his speech patterns) amounts to a racialized statement about his intellectual status. From Will's perspective, these narratives about intellectual capacity converge to enable students to position him as a below average African American student who does not belong in an accelerated class.

Will's statement reveals his perception that he is positioned by others as less intelligent by virtue of his race and his participation in basketball. Other students also expressed the narratives about African Americans as being less invested in school and being more likely to be involved in criminal activity. Consider these quotes from Eric and Aaron:

Eric: Cuz people stereotype so much, it's like what ever you see, what kind of person you could say someone like me would be a gangster or a thug or something, and I would be identified as, you know, [something] lot of people do. But I know a lot of other people like you can be white or Asian and they do the same things, but people just look at that as that's usually a black person or something.

Interviewer: Why would someone identify you as a gangster or thug?

Eric: I don't know because that's what around, that's what most black people are around here usually. People are hustlers, trying to get money, and like that, basically.

Aaron: To be African American, I define myself more, because a lot of African Americans they, a lot of African Americans, [long pause]

Interviewer: What do you see in African American students?

Aaron: They settle for like bad grades, like Fs and all that stuff. And they don't really care about school. I need to be different, like go to college.

Both of these excerpts from interview transcripts highlight narratives about African Americans that touch on the themes of doing poorly in school and/or being involved in criminal activity. Eric makes the point that African Americans, and himself as an African American male, are at risk for being viewed by others as being in line with these narratives—in other words, that the narratives are applied to them by others. Interestingly, Eric seems to take up the narrative of African Americans as criminal as reflecting the ‘reality’ that “that’s what black people around here” usually do. Similarly, Aaron struggles how to express his own African American identity, given that he takes up the narrative that African Americans settle for bad grades.

Racialized narratives related to intelligence were also present in interviews with younger students. For instance, a 7th grade student, Derrick, said the following in response to a question about how other people would describe his ethnic/racial group:

Derrick: Um, ‘cause some people like they doubt the African Americans or like they’re dumb and like they don’t stand out to people. Like they’re just like other people and stuff so I don’t like people saying that about me and stuff, ‘cause I’m really smart, a lot smarter than other kids but, so that’s why I like my culture and stuff.

Derrick, similar to Will, both articulates the presence of the narrative that African Americans are “dumb,” and argues that he does not agree with the narrative, and that he, in fact, is a counter-example. Later, in his second interview, Derrick articulates that many people think that once “blacks and Mexicans” are old, that they are “in jail and stuff,” thereby showing awareness of the narrative of African American males as criminals. He vehemently objects to this characterization and argues that he knows plenty of Blacks and Mexicans that “have a career and a life.” Again, Derrick both describes the narrative that exists and expresses that he does not view this narrative as truth.

The issue of criminality relates to the general matter of African American males as culturally and morally deficient. Of the two fifth grade, African American male students we interviewed, one of them had no knowledge of these racial narratives, while the other, Kevin, made comments in line with this narrative by characterizing African American men as having a tendency to be drunk, and arguing that you never see “Chinese” people “going everywhere all drunk or something like that.” He seems to buy into this narrative—both believing that African Americans have a tendency to be drunk, and considering it in light of the model minority narrative about Asian Americans. However, Kevin also expressed a counter-narrative, stating that being African American meant being proud, being from good families, and helping others. He seems conflicted between these two opposing narratives, and in fact it could be that for him these two narratives simultaneously serve different functions. For Kevin, it may be that the negative narratives serve the function of helping him to make sense of the world he sees around him, while the counter-narrative functions to position him outside of the pejorative African American male identities.

Narratives About Asian American Students

The second set of narratives consistently present in the student interviews was the narrative that Asians are good at math and, in general, belong to a model minority. Like the

narratives about African Americans, this narrative took various forms and students made sense of it in a variety of ways. First consider how Will articulates this narrative.

Interviewer: Have you heard some people say that some groups are better than others at math?

Will: Um, that's a big stereotype. You go around saying that Asians are better than people at math...like my dad reminded me that when my sister was in college, she was like, "Oh, I got a 'C' and all the other Asians got an 'A' because Asians are better at math." That's, that's impossible (laughs). Just to put it in laymen's terms. Because you can't be better at math – like a group of people can't be better at math than this people. I mean, they can – say like the Egyptians: they built the pyramids. They weren't better at math. They knew what to do to build the pyramids. And apparently we don't know what to do so we can't build the pyramids. It's not because they were better at math and knew the different dimensions and took it further, it's cuz we're just ignorant to how to build the pyramids. So like Chinese people, or the whole racist Asian stereotype that "Asians are good at math" isn't true because I'm pretty sure that there are some Asians out there that haven't been in Precalculus and that aren't in Algebra 2 as a freshman or something like that.

This excerpt is compelling for a number of reasons. First, while the initial prompt made no explicit mention of race, Will interprets the question in racial terms. Moreover, he jumps immediately to the "Asians are good at math" narrative. Initially, Will treats the narrative as a non-starter. Based on a clever argument comparing the mathematical knowledge of ancient and modern cultures, he outright rejects even the possibility of a racial hierarchy of mathematical ability. Will also challenges the idea that *all* Asians are good at math, but he struggled with the degree to which he endorsed the narrative as his own truth. Later in the interview Will admits that "statistically speaking, more Asians pass all their math requirements than African Americans or Latinos and Caucasians," but he explains his observations by arguing that Asian students "live up to their stereotype," instead of the pervasive view that Asians are genetically endowed with the intellectual capacity for mathematics.

Andre also picks up on the model minority narrative as he cites and explains differential academic success among Asian American students. However, unlike Will he tends to endorse the narrative that this success (in part, at least) is a function of their innate intelligence.

Interviewer: Okay, uh, describe the smart kids in your school.

Andre: I don't mean to be racial or anything, but it's usually the Asians. I don't know if their parents are more strict or if they're more strict on themselves but it seems the Asians always getting the 4.0's, having their homework everyday, straight A's and everything. . . But that doesn't mean cause I'm not Asian I'm not able to do what they do.

Like several of the other students, Andre is conflicted, taking up some aspects of the narrative, and rejecting others. His endorsement of the model minority narrative does not prevent him from adopting an identity as someone who is "able to do what (Asians) do." Again, it may be that these narratives serve different functions; with the model minority narrative helping him make

sense of what he perceives to be true, and the counter-narrative preserving his sense of individual agency and competence.

Besides narratives about Asian intelligence and academic success, some students believed that Asians were “smarter” because of a strong work ethic cultivated by their parents. For instance, Julian says:

Julian: I mean I think that from just certain backgrounds, you have people that push more, like I know a lot of Asian kids, I find that at this school, I don't know about every other school, I find that their parents push them a lot. You'll always hear them say, my parents want me to do this, my parents want me to do this. Where you have a lot of other kids, where their parents aren't really pushing them, motivating them that much, I guess it's not really that important to get A's. You can get a B that's fine. Um, ya know, different cultural aspects like that. But I think that's kind of like, the lines are getting more distorted, because you have a lot of the parents starting to get strict on grades and stuff like that because they learning the importance of it.

Here Julian makes two core arguments. First, he argues that Asian kids have parents that push them more than other students (a model minority narrative). Then, at the end, he makes the point that the other (non-Asian) parents are starting to get stricter about grades, “because they are learning the importance of it.” This construction of the counter-narrative is quite sophisticated, as it leaves room for the narrative not to be exclusively true, but still to be fundamentally true.

The racialized narrative about Asian students and achievement also had a version about mathematics in particular. Consider the following quotes:

Eric: A lot of people will um stereotype like people think you know if you're Asian you know a lot about math, and you like a math expert. And just because you're Asian doesn't mean that you know everything. It could be like somebody who's Mexican [knows] just as much. You know. Just as much. It's not really like that, it's like everybody, I don't know. It's not really like that, it's not racist at all. Race doesn't matter.

Aaron: There's a lot of people who think Asians are smart, are good at math. It's sort of true. Mostly a lot of Asian girls do good in math. And in all the other subjects too.

In these retellings of the narrative, Aaron and Eric articulate that there is a math-specific component to the narrative about Asian American smartness. Again, while Aaron seems to be using this form of the narrative to serve the function of representing reality, Eric expresses both the narrative and the counter-narrative. Eric views the narrative as a cultural form invoked by others, and argues that a Mexican student could know just as much about math as an Asian student.

To summarize, our interview data suggest that the African American males in our studies were keenly aware of the racialized narratives at play in mathematics education and struggled to make sense of them in sophisticated ways. First of all, they often situated their understanding of what it meant to be an African American male learning mathematics within a range of broader societal narratives about African American males as scholastically apathetic, tending toward

criminality, culturally and morally deficient, and intellectually inferior. Students also struggled to make sense of these narratives as they related to a parallel, contrasting set of narratives about Asian American students as members of a “model minority,” which instantiates in mathematics education most explicitly through the notion that “Asians are good at math.” In this sense, the narratives are mutually constitutive and contributed to a hierarchical ordering of which groups can and cannot succeed in mathematics, school, and life in general.

The fact that students’ held considerable knowledge about these racialized narratives means that as artifacts they represent salient elements of the learning space for African American males. In the next section we elaborate on the ways these artifacts get deployed in everyday activity, and how the various deployments can circumscribe some subject positions for students and make other subject positions more readily available.

The Deployment of Racialized Narratives About School and Math

We have suggested thus far that the racialized narratives students conveyed to young people about school and math were not neutral, both in that they took standard forms that related to racial narratives that are widespread in our society, and in that they were used to serve particular functions in talk and activity. In this section, we examine the deployment and uses of these narrative more closely. Recall that we view the racialized narratives as cultural artifacts, which supports the idea that they are used in daily life to serve functions in talk and activity. Very often these functions were related to positioning; that is, they were used to support certain versions of who one is or of who one is not.

In the following transcript excerpt, Will talks explicitly about what he sees as the effects of the ‘Asians are good at math’ narrative on African American students.

Interviewer: Do you think those stereotypes are affecting non-Asian kids in their math experiences?

Will: Yeah, because this is my personal experience, but if I see, like – I’m pretty sure if a Black kid sees an Asian kid get an ‘A’ on a test, it’s like, “I wish I could do that” or “I’m never going to do that because it must have been because for him it’s super easy...it’s like he’s super smart and I’m nowhere near as smart as him, I’m never going to be able to do that.” So it affects him mentally, which in turn affects the outcome of his or her performance.

Interviewer: Have you seen that affect friends of yours in that way?

Will: Because of someone else’s performance? Yeah...there are kids in the class who see other kids get ‘A’s’...well, it’s like one of my friends, he saw me get an ‘A’ and he had...they had me pinned for the stereotypical African American male who wasn’t going to do good in math. He saw me get an ‘A’ and he thought *he* was going to be able to get an ‘A’...but then he wasn’t, and then he saw me as like, “Oh you’re hecka smart. You must have some Asian in you.”

Interviewer: (Laughs) He’s another Black boy?

Will: Yeah, so he’s like, “I’m never going to be able to live up or reach where you’re at.” But in actuality, have you ever heard like when people think they’re sick so much, that they actually *become* sick?

There is much to analyze in the excerpt. In Will's first comment he offers a hypothetical scenario about what may be running through an African American male student's head as he sees an Asian student succeed in math. In this scenario, the "Asians are good at math" narrative functions to sow doubt in the student's sense of his own mathematical competence. In other words, the narrative limits the availability of the subject position of a capable doer of mathematics. Based on how the student appropriates the narrative, this particular "possible self" becomes basically inaccessible. As Will describes it, the narrative also functions to question the African American student's intellectual capacity in general.

Whereas this comment illustrates how appropriation of the narratives bears on students' self-understandings and processes of identification, Will's second comment exemplifies how narratives can be deployed for offensive purposes as students struggle to actively position each other. Initially, Will's high achievement in math inspires an African American classmate to believe in himself and make more of an effort. When the classmate's effort falls short, however, he re-evaluates Will's success by deploying the "Asians are good at math" narrative (i.e., "You must have some Asian in you"). This comment is subtle and complex and requires unpacking.

As in the previous example, the deployment of the racialized narrative functions by setting boundaries around available subject positions. His classmate deploys this narrative to reconcile the fact that Will's academic performance is not congruent with the narrative that Asians are good at math, nor is it congruent with the narrative that African Americans are not good at school (and math by extension). On the one hand, the racialized caveat placed on Will's success in mathematics effectively closes the possibility that an African American male could succeed in mathematics without an "infusion" of some Asian "math genes." On the other hand, not only does this reinforce perceptions of mathematical ability as a fixed, genetic trait, but it also underscores the exclusivity of these genes to Asian children.

The subject position of a studious, bright young African American male proficient in mathematics is obstructed or, at worst, rendered basically unavailable to Will. By his classmate's logic, he cannot be doing well *because* he is African American. Instead, his accomplishment is diminished and he is slotted into the identity of an intellectually inferior African American male. Another subtlety here is that the deployment functions potentially as an affront to Will's racial authenticity. Can Will be "fully" African American if he has "some Asian" in him? Of course, on all fronts Will still can resist these attempts by his classmate to position him, but the point remains that these racialized narratives can be deployed in a very purposeful way with the intent to achieve a particular goal or goals.

Similarly, Julian, in the following transcript, argues that when students are faced with the narrative that African Americans are not smart, the narrative serves the function of making students less confident. He also notes the possible transformative power of teachers (and peers) conveying counter-narratives about students' potential.

Julian: In the AP classes you'll look and you'll see. I don't even think African-Americans are usually in my class. I'm the only African-American in my AP Calculus class. But then, I had to switch blocks, the block I'm in now I'm the only African-American. But my last block there were like three or four.

Interviewer: And guys.

Julian: None. No African-American guys. It's just girls.

Interviewer: What about History?

Julian: AP U.S. History, um, it's two including me. Two African-American males and then about three or four African-American girls. And then it's a lot of Asians in like all my AP classes.

Interviewer: Why do you think there is a difference between the male and the female African-Americans in the AP classes?

Julian: Um, I don't really know. I think it's because of the confidence. Like something has to do with – cause all the African-American males I talk to they don't feel like they're smart so if you go into something with a defeated attitude you can't really think that you're going to accomplish something because you are defeated before you even go into something.

Interviewer: How do you know that they don't feel confident?

Julian: Well the ones I know, I don't know about everybody, but they'll tell you I can't do that. Or I don't got a chance to do something like. Or I'm not as smart as you, you're special or something like that, you know. I'm like what, what are you talking about?

In this excerpt, Julian begins by making the point that there are very few African American male students in the advanced classes at his school. He then goes on to say that he thinks that African American male students lack confidence, and feel that they can't be smart—in other words, they feel that the subject position of smart African American male does not exist, or is not available to them. While Julian doesn't explicitly discuss this in relation to narratives about African American males, he makes clear his perception of the salience of this narrative in earlier segments of the interview, suggesting that the inability to perceive a subject position of smart African American male might well be related to the presence of the current limiting racialized narratives.

Julian and other African American male students also spoke about the ways that racialized narratives about schooling and math were deployed by their teachers to serve the function of excluding them from participation in high-level classes or to excuse teachers from feeling responsible for engaging students in class. Consider the following example:

Interviewer: So overall do you think your teachers care about you?

Julian: Um, no, except for this one teacher. No, how many teachers – there was a couple of them. Mr. Harding and Mr. Levy. When I was in Mr. Levy's class, um, that's where I felt my race had something to do with how he was treating me or whatever, because I was in his class and um, he was conducting a lab, and um, he told us all to talk about something. But for some reason he felt like he needs to come up to me and figure out what I was doing or whatever. I'm an A student in his class and he came up to me and said, you're not talking about what you need to be talking about. And I was like, what you talking about? And we were really discussing the work, like honestly. The honest truth. And he was just rude, and picking on me. And I was like, what does this have to do with, what are you talking about. So I switched out of his class. And then I was switched to another physical science class, Mr. Harding, and I don't know if they had some type of talk when I was switching or whatever, but I walked into class and he was like, I'm not having that, I'm not having any juvenile delinquents ruining my class. And I was like, what, you don't even know

me. I told him, I said, you know what, I'm getta A in your class. And I just left it like that. I said I'm gonna getta A in your class. And I just sat down there and got an A in his class. I couldn't understand how he was talking to me – he was just tripping.

In this example, Julian recounts an incident in which the teachers make assumptions about him by virtue of race. He perceives that the first teacher, Mr. Levy, attempts to position him as a poor student and as a trouble-maker, thus deploying the narrative about African Americans as not being good at school, and using it to serve the function of positioning him as off-task. He is then transferred to another class, where the subject position of African American as criminal is made available to him by Mr. Harding saying that he does not want “juvenile delinquents” ruining his class. In both examples, Julian rejects these attempts to reposition himself as an A student.

In this section, we have highlighted a few ways that racialized narratives are deployed to position African American male students with respect to particular subject positions and identities. The analyses that we have presented offer a perspective on racialized narratives as artifacts that exist and are taken up and resisted in learning spaces, both by African American male students, and by their peers and teachers. In effect, the narratives of “Asians are good at math” and “African Americans are not good at school/math” were deployed in ways that could undermine the sense of intelligence and competence for African American male students. As they and others around them drew on these narratives, their possible identities or subject positions were constrained.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have articulated two narratives that bear on African American students' experiences in school. The first narrative contends that African Americans are not good at school or math, and the second contends that Asians are good at school and math. We argue that these narratives are the primary way that math achievement and ability gets linked to race, and that the narratives are particularly salient in schools and society.

For African American children, the “African Americans are not good at school” narrative and the “Asians are good at math” narrative spawn a host of subject positions, some that are available to them and some that are out-of-bounds. Of the subject positions that are made available, it is not simply a menu of options; students are often *recruited* into particular positions and then forced to reconcile. In this way, activity around these artifacts is not neutral, but rather an exercise in power and positioning.

The narratives clearly suggest the subject position of an African American student that struggles in math; students can appropriate this position outright (e.g., say to themselves that Asians are good at math, so why bother trying in math if I'm not Asian). Students can also re-purpose the narrative to modify the subject positions made available by the narrative, such as that of an African American student who acknowledges the stereotype in defiance. As we saw with the anecdote involving teachers, it may also be the case that other people may deploy the narratives against them (e.g., “you must have some Asian in you”) for the purpose of threatening the possibility of these new subject positions. In none of these cases has the form changed; the differences lie in to what ends (i.e., for what function) the artifacts were taken up.

The data presented in this article also suggest that African American students do not typically have a choice to simply ignore these issues, as their awareness of the narratives means that the narratives are salient artifacts within the classroom space that may be deployed against

them in some way, usually to position them in ways detrimental to learning. The deployment puts them on defense, forcing them to either confirm or continually assert an alternative subject position. The young men and boys that we interviewed were, thus, not simply aware of racialized narratives about school and math performance; they found themselves regularly needing to respond to these narratives. To their credit, many of these students responded by asserting the presence of a counter-narrative, defining themselves as smart and mathematically capable. However, the data indicate that students still struggled to reconcile this sense of themselves with the salient racialized narratives. As educators, and as a society, we cannot underestimate the burden such negotiation places on students. Our analyses highlight the importance of strengthening and employing the counter-narratives in schools and classrooms. The racialized narratives that the young people in our society articulated are the product of centuries of oppression and discrimination. It is critical at this juncture in our national history to make powerful counter-narratives available to African American students.

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JOURNAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN EDUCATION

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Endnote

1. All names of individuals and places are pseudonyms.

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