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Am I Black Enough? An Examination of the Importance of Racial Identity and Black Students'  
Sense of Belonging to their Racial Group

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## Abstract

### Am I Black Enough? An Examination of the Importance of Racial Identity and Black Students' Sense of Belonging to their Racial Group

By Elexis Fisher

Only a few studies examine the relationship between sense of belonging to a racial group and its relation to racial identity of Black individuals. In this paper, I examine how sense of belonging to a racial group is related to an individual's behavior and the importance of their racial identity to their self-concept. Using qualitative and quantitative data from a survey of 21 Black undergraduate students, I find a positive but not significant relationship between Black students' sense of belonging to their racial group and how importance their race is to their self-concept. The results suggest that Black students do feel a strong sense of belonging to their racial group and engage in race-related behaviors to feel a sense of belonging when with other Black individuals. Black students engage in these behaviors for at least two reasons: to defend their racial identity and their feelings of not being enough.

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The development of the Black racial identity has been influenced by the history of Black/African Americans in the U.S. The history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, the Civil Rights Movements, and most recently the Black Lives Matters Movement are key events that have impacted the identity of Black/African Americans in the U.S (Vandiver et al. 2001). Research suggests that the situation or context of an individual greatly influences how they view themselves, their identity formation, and how they verify their identity through behavioral changes (Burke 2006; Stets and Burke 2000; Burke and Stets 2021). Researchers, William Cross and Sellers and his colleagues, have studied how history and the social contexts of Black/African Americans in the U.S. have impacted the development of racial identity and how racial identity can be studied (Vandiver et al. 2001; Sellers et al. 1998). Though studies have looked at how racial identity develops, few have investigated how Black individuals interact with their racial group and its influence on their racial identity.

Within the social identity literature, when a person makes a social comparison to another within their self-identified group, they strengthen their connection to the group, improve their self-worth and self-esteem, and tend to favor their ingroup versus the outgroup – anyone outside their self-identified group (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Hughes et al. 2015; Hogg 2000; Hogg 2018). This has been found to occur among Black individuals and their Black peers in studies that looked at academic settings or organizations (Hughes et al. 2015; Hunter et al. 2019; Cox 2020). In this paper, I focus on Black students' sense of belonging to their racial group through an examination on how sense of belonging to a racial group is related to an individual's behavior and the importance of their racial identity to their self-concept. This research contributes to the literature on sense of belonging to a racial group by exploring how important Black students' race is to their self-concept and its relation to their sense of belonging to a racial group.



Additionally, this study adds further explanation for why Black students adjust their behaviors when with their fellow Black peers.

## RESEARCH GAP

Recent studies on sense of belonging focus on academic identities and environments of undergraduate students and individuals with disabilities (Good et al. 2012; Mahar et al. 2013; Hunter et al. 2019). Much of this literature investigates how college campuses can foster a sense of belonging within the institution for undergraduates from various backgrounds. Only a few studies examine the relationship between a sense of belonging to a racial group and its relation to racial identity for undergraduate students. Additionally, there are few recent studies exploring Black racial identity aside from the prominent work of William Cross and his Nigrescence Model of Black Identity (Vandiver et al. 2001) and Sellers and colleagues' Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) (Sellers et al. 1998). These two studies focus on the development of Black racial identity and how Black racial identity can be studied. Although these models are important, there is a need for more research on Black racial identity. For example, research on how Black individuals construct their identity or what influences their sense of belonging to others of the same racial identity (Hunter et al. 2019). For this study, I am examining how Black students define themselves as Black individuals to feel a sense of belonging to their racial group.

## BACKGROUND

### *Racial Identity*

To explore the relationship between racial identity and sense of belonging, I use Sellers and his colleague (1998) definition of racial identity,

“as the significance and qualitative meaning that individuals attribute to their membership within the Black racial group within their self-concepts. This definition can be broken into two questions: ‘how important is race in the individual’s perception of self?’ and ‘what does it mean to be a member of this racial group?’” (Pp. 23)

To examine, the first question, how important race is to an individual’s perception of themselves, I focus on the *centrality* dimension of the MMRI. Racial centrality, one of four dimensions of the MMRI, refers to the importance of an individual race to their self-concept (Sellers et al. 1998). One of the assumptions of the MMRI is that the self-perception of one’s racial identity is a very important aspect in understanding their identity (Sellers et al. 1998). This assumption is supported by identity theorists who’ve defined centrality as the “self-ascribed importance [to the individual], based on the value of activities representing an identity” (Stryker and Serpe 1994:19). The self-perceptions and activities referenced above are influenced by the identity schemas the individual ascribes to. These schemas are ideas or concepts that individuals use as guides to enact their identities and how they behave in certain situations (Stryker and Serpe 1994:19). Individuals use these schemas to determine what it means to be a member of a racial group. Therefore, an individual that places great importance on their race as central to their self-definition will use those schemas to actively define what it means to be a member of a racial group.

The MMRI represents the ways in which racial identity can manifest and how identity schemas can influence its manifestation. The model allows for a deeper interpretation of Black/African Americans’ behaviors based on the situational contexts, the importance of their race to the individual, and how they evaluate what it means to be Black. For example, a Black student introduces herself as a proud Black woman and one of the few Black nursing students at her school. She believes that it is her responsibility to help educate Black women about the medical system and provide them with beneficial resources. She enjoys buying from Black

woman-owned businesses and sharing them with her classmates. Every weekend she volunteers at local food banks serving food to minority teens in the foster system. Applying the centrality dimension to this Black nursing student, she views her racial identity as very important to her self-concept (centrality). She has a positive view of Black/African Americans and believes in supporting Black women, Black businesses, and minority children. These behaviors represent this Black nursing student's schemas of what it means to be a Black woman and a Black nursing student. It is seen through this example how the importance she places on her race is present in her subsequent actions. Another component of the MMRI is that an individual can emphasize the importance of being a Black person, but not engage in similar actions as the Black nursing student.

For example, a different Black nursing student at the same school places great importance on her role as a soon to be nurse. She wants to help all individuals and equally share the information she's learned to everyone. She places her position as a nursing student as holding more importance to her self-concept. She believes she can help the lives of everyone and not just the Black community. This nursing student believes in fighting climate change and improving the quality of neighborhoods for the betterment of the community. Applying the centrality dimension to this Black nursing student, she views her role as nursing students as more important to her self-concept. Her schema of a nurse is someone who helps everyone regardless of gender, class, or race. As highlighted in the example of the two Black nursing students, the MMRI shows that the importance of a particular identity is related to different behaviors that indicate that identity. Sellers et al. state that "individuals may vary in the way...they behave in a particular situation ... [based on their] qualitative meaning[s] they ascribe to being Black ..." (1998:29).

*Sense of Belonging to Racial Group*

Few studies have asked whether Black individuals perceive they belong to their racial group and what influences this belonging. To examine this relationship to sense of belonging, I will be building on the work of Hunter, Case, and Harvey's (2019) qualitative study on how Black students describe their sense of belonging to their racial group. They define sense of belonging as "the connection to group members that provides a sense of community and various forms of support" (Hunter et al. 2019:952). Other definitions of sense of belonging emphasize individuals having the desire to identify and belong with a group, holding respect and appreciation for them, and having high regard and emotional connection to the group (Mahar et al. 2013; Hunter et al. 2019; Hogg 2018). I seek to examine how Black students form the connection to other racial group members to provide them with a sense of community thus establishing a sense of belonging to their racial group.

To understand how Black students discuss their sense of belonging to their racial group, Hunter et al. conducted interviews. They found three core themes regarding how Black individuals describe what it means to have a sense of belonging to a racial group: (1) authenticating Blackness; (2) acculturative loss; and (3) connection with and responsibility toward others (2019). Authenticating Blackness refers to expectations of how a Black person should behave and how to be Black. Acculturative loss is whether a Black person must sacrifice some aspects of their identity. The final core theme is a connection with and responsibility toward others. This theme was critical to students understanding their interactions with their racial group members and feeling connected and like they belong with other Black individuals (Hunter et al. 2019). Using these definitions of sense of belonging and the themes related to sense of belonging, I will explore how Black students establish the connection to their racial

group that provide them with a sense of community to feel a sense of belonging to their racial group.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to determine how sense of belonging to a racial group is related to an individual's behavior and the importance of their racial identity. This investigation contributes to the growing literature of sense of belonging to a racial group and racial identity literature. To examine sense of belonging, I ask do Black students feel a sense of belonging to their racial group and what happens. I also ask what occurs when students feel like they do not belong to their racial group and how they adjust their behaviors to feel a sense of belonging. To understand the importance of one's race to their self-perception, I ask how important Black students' racial identity is to their self-concept.

### *Hypotheses*

Identity theory literature has argued that when a particular identity is important to an individual's self-concept, they are more inclined to behave in ways that are associated with that identity (Sellers et al. 1997; Burke and Stets 2021). Furthermore, Sellers and his colleagues' findings suggested that African Americans who engaged in race-related behaviors also identified strongly with their race (1997). Race-related behaviors were also found to be related to an individual's personal beliefs regarding the importance of their self-concept (Sellers et al. 1997; Hughes et al. 2015; Hogg 2018). Therefore, I propose two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The importance of one's racial identity to the individual is positively related to sense of belonging.

Hypothesis 2: I hypothesize that Black students will engage in race-related behaviors to feel a sense of belonging.

## METHODS

To explore how sense of belonging to a racial group is related to an individual's behavior and the importance of their racial identity, I use qualitative and quantitative data from a three-part survey via Qualtrics. It took respondents 15 to 20 minutes to complete the survey. I recorded demographics in the first section, including age, gender, sex, race, and college year. In the second part, respondents completed a revised MIBI survey and sense of belonging to a racial group survey. The final section, respondents answered two open-ended questions about how they adjusted their behaviors to verify their identity (see Appendix A for survey).

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 21 Black/African American college students at Emory University and Georgia Tech University in the metro-Atlanta area between the ages of 17 to 26 ( $M = 20.52$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ). I removed 18 participants from the study for not completing more than 50% of the survey and not identifying as Black/African American. I recruited participants via flyers, social media advertising, and email listservs at various departments within Emory University and Georgia Tech University. The sample was predominantly female (85.7%; 14.3% male), 17 identifying as ciswomen, 3 as cismen, and 1 as nonbinary. All participants identified as Black/African American and attended predominantly white institutions (PWI). The sample consisted of 6 freshmen, 2 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 8 seniors (1 participant did not report this information).

### *Measures*

The MMRI measures racial identity using the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity Scale (MIBI). The MIBI examines the multiple dimensions that impact an individual's racial identity which is influenced by the importance they place on their race and their perspective of others regarding their race and the situational context. I used this scale to address the question of racial identity and its importance to the individual (Sellers et al. 1998). The original MIBI scale proposed by the MMRI was a 71-item measure with three total scales with corresponding subscales on a 7-point Likert-type scale. For this study, I focused on the centrality scale using only 4-items out of 7 original items. The 4-items I used were: "Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself," "In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image," "Being Black is unimportant my sense of what kind of person I am," and "I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people." These 4-items directly measured the importance of race to the individual whereas the removed 3-items measured the importance of race to the community taking the focus away from the individual. Participants responded to how likely they agreed or disagreed with the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

I adapted Good, Rattan, and Dweck's (2012) Sense of Belonging to Math Scale to measure sense of belonging to a racial group. This scale was selected because it considers five aspects of belonging: Membership, Acceptance, Affect, Trust, and Desire to Fade. The researchers selected these factors to understand the relationship between students' intent to continue pursuing math and their sense of belonging to math (Good et al. 2012). For this examination, I am studying sense of belonging to the racial group in general, referencing two settings that are most familiar to Black undergraduate students: their home and college campus. I administered two surveys on sense of belonging with the same items. Respondents answered

how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the items following the prompts: “When I am with other Black individuals on my college campus” and “When I am with Black individuals at home” on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). I used 4-items from the original scale’s 30-items for both surveys (at home and at college). The 4-items I used were “I feel that I belong to the Black community,” “I feel a connection with the Black community,” “I feel like an outsider,” and “I feel accepted.” I revised the scale to include the word “Black” and removed the word “math.” I analyzed the data by combining responses to both the sense of belonging survey for at home and college campuses. To analyze the data from the MIBI and sense of belonging scale, I ran a Pearson’s correlation test to assess the associations between the MIBI scales and the sense of belonging scale.

To measure how Black students engage in race-related behaviors to feel a sense of belonging, I asked two open questions to describe a situation where they had to prove their Black identity to other Black individuals in two contexts: at home and college. I analyzed 12 responses to identify recurring themes using a content analysis approach to code the responses.

## RESULTS

In this study, I investigate how sense of belonging to a racial group is related to an individual’s behavior and perceptions of their racial identity. I hypothesize that the importance of one’s racial identity to the individual would be positively correlated to sense of belonging. Additionally, I hypothesize that Black students would engage in race-related behaviors to feel a sense of belonging. I find a positive but not significant relationship between Black students’ sense of belonging to their racial group and how important their race is to their self-concept. The



results suggest that Black students do feel a strong sense of belonging to their racial group and engage in race-related behaviors to feel a sense of belonging.

### *Importance of Racial Identity to Sense of Belonging*

I expected that in both settings (college campus and at home) Black students would feel a strong sense of belonging to their racial group based on the importance of their race to their self-concept. After conducting a Pearson's correlation test, I found a positive but not significant relationship between the two scales (centrality:  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ; SB =  $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ;  $r = .21$ ; see Table 1). To understand how the importance of race to an individual's self-concept is related to sense of belonging to a racial group, I conducted another correlation test between the 4 centrality items and the combined sense of belonging scale, specifically looking at the items, "In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image," and "Being Black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am (R)" (see Table 2). These items specifically address how important respondents' race is to their self-concept. I found a positive but not significant relationship between the combined sense of belonging scale and the item, "In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image" ( $r = .27$ ). This evidence supports that the importance of race to Black student's self-concept is related to their sense of belonging to their racial group. Due to the small sample size, I was not able to detect a significant difference between the items.

In addition, I wanted to see if Black students do feel a sense of belonging to their racial group in general. Using the definition of sense of belonging by Hunter et al., the individual's "connection to [their] group members" is stressed and is an important aspect to feeling a sense of belonging (2019: 952). I expected to see positive correlations between the centrality and sense of belonging items that used the words: "connection," "belong," and "community." From Table 2, I

found a positive and significant correlation between the combined sense of belonging scale and the centrality item, “I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people” ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ). This finding suggests that Black students do feel a sense of belonging to their racial group. Therefore, I ran two additional Pearson’s correlation tests to examine the individual items of sense of belonging at home (SBH) and at college (SBC) separately compared to the items on the centrality scale to see if there were differences depending on the setting (see Tables 3 and 4). I found one positive and significant relationship between the SBH item, “I feel that I belong to the Black community,” and the centrality item, “I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people” ( $r = .63, p < .01$ ; see Table 3).

#### *Race-Related Behaviors and Sense of Belonging*

The findings from the open-ended questions suggest that Black students do adjust their behavior by engaging specific race-related behaviors to feel a sense of belonging. Respondents claimed that they attended Black events, engaged in conversations about Black culture, showed pictures of themselves to confirm their race, or even pretended to understand Black cultural topics. These responses are examples of participants engaged in race-related behaviors to prove their racial identity. The responses suggest that Black students’ behaviors were influenced by their beliefs about what it means to be Black. Based on the analysis, there were two types of reasons why they sought to prove their Black identities when with other Black individuals: having a desire to defend their Black identity to prove their racial identity and feelings of not being enough.

#### *Defending Racial Identity*

Respondents wrote about their desire to defend their racial identities to others such as their family, friends, and partners. The need to defend their Black identities arose when they

were “called...out,” questioned about their race and opinions on their racial group, and when they perceived potential judgment from other Black individuals. The defending racial identity theme is most similar to Hunter et al.’s characterization of Authenticating Blackness (2019). Authenticating Blackness refers to expectations of how a Black person should behave and how to be Black. This theme supports the MMRI findings, that a person’s evaluations, beliefs, and attitudes about their racial group influence their behaviors (Sellers et al. 1998). Aspects of Authenticating Blackness and the person’s evaluations, beliefs, and attitudes towards racial groups can be observed from the students’ responses and their need to defend the way they expressed their identity. For example, one student claimed that a Black person should be proud of their racial group and Black culture. This student believes that Black individuals should express pride toward their racial group and its cultural features. Similarly, other respondents described how they felt they had to prove they did not hate being Black to their partner or defend their reasons for talking to non-Black individuals. These examples suggest that to prove their racial identity, Black students needed to engage in certain behaviors that aligned with what it meant to be Black. For one respondent to be Black meant to show how informed they were about Black culture. When asked how they proved their Black identity to other Black individuals, the respondents stated that,

*Respondent A:* In conversations and at Black history trivia events, I often feel that I need to prove my Black identity by showing that I know a lot about Black history, Black culture, and Black music. I think that if I do not know about important Black historical figures, people will think that I am not proud to be Black and am uneducated about the culture.

*Respondent B:* Dating non-Black person always brings interesting conversations, especially when they are white. I had to prove I didn’t hate myself - read hating being black.

*Respondent C:* When some black friends 'called me out' and asked why I talk to so many non-black people. (EX: East Asians, Southeast Asians, White people, Hispanic people). I had to defend my reason for engaging with other minorities and white people.

These responses show how some Black students can feel the need to defend their identity by emphasizing their knowledge or pride in Black culture. We know that when racial identity is very important to the individual, they are likely to engage in behaviors that reflect their racial identity and identity schemas (Sellers et al. 1998). By defending their racial identity, Black students are engaging in race-related behaviors that prove their identity to others based on the expectations the student has on how a Black person should behave and how to be Black.

### *Not Being Enough*

In contrast, other students expressed they did not feel as though they were enough to identify as Black and were motivated to prove their racial identity. The feeling of not being enough was a theme reflected in the responses experienced both at home and college. This theme refers to how students adjusted their behaviors based on their emotions – the feeling of not being enough. The students' responses suggest that by not knowing Black cultural references, notable Black figures, or having different music tastes or dress styles, the respondents felt they were “different” or an “outsider.” These descriptions of how respondents proved their racial identities to counter feeling like outsiders or too different support the hypothesis that Black students will engage in race-related behaviors to verify their identity.

The not being enough theme is most similar to Hunter et al.'s characterization of Acculturative loss (2019). Acculturative loss refers to whether a Black person must sacrifice some aspects of their identity to feel a sense of belonging to their racial group. The findings suggest that Black students who felt like they were not enough, also did not believe they were behaving in ways to support their perceptions of their racial identity and the perceptions of others on what it means to be Black nor how to behave as a Black person. It could be inferred that to overcome this negative feeling they are sacrificing aspects of their identity to best fit their

perceptions and those of others on what it means to be Black and how to behave as a Black person. Following Burke and Stets' Identity Theory, individuals want to maintain consistency between their identity and what they perceive others think about their identity (2021). If the individual perceives an inconsistency between those two, they are motivated to correct this inconsistency through a process called identity verification. To make sure their perception of their identity, and their perceptions of what others think to align, the individual can either adjust their behavior or change their appraisals (Stets and Burke 2000; Stets and Carter 2012; Burke and Stets 2021). This process is seen in the respondents' descriptions of how they proved their Black identity based on feelings of not being enough. Respondents stated that,

*Respondent D:* In conversations/events/etc., not knowing enough of Black culture (in all aspects) to feel I was really Black; only having the skin color, but not much else.

*Respondent E:* When at Black group gatherings, I also feel like an outsider. I do not listen to the same music, dress the same, talk the same, I just feel very different and that I have to prove myself.

*Respondent F:* Upon first arriving...it felt as though there was a lot of culture that I had to catch up on... When there was the first BMI dinner, I felt as though I had to be quiet and pretend to vibe to songs I had never heard before in my life.

These students described how their perception of how to be Black and what they believed others thought did not align. They describe feeling as though they were measuring up to a particular ideal of a Black person. These responses suggest that to belong to the Black community there were certain cultural aspects they needed to know or pretend to know to be accepted. By staying quiet and pretending to know a song or not understanding the conversations around them, the respondents were engaging in race-related behaviors to attempt to resolve these inconsistencies and not feel like an outsider or too different. Black students who believed they were not enough engaged in particular behaviors that emphasized their racial identity. They were motivated to

perform these behaviors to relieve the negative feelings that arose as a result of not viewing themselves as behaving as a Black person would according to their expectations.

## DISCUSSION

One of the assumptions of Sellers et al.'s MMRI is that the self-perceptions of one's racial identity is a very important aspect of understanding their identity (1998). I found a positive but not significant relationship between Black students' sense of belonging to their racial group and how important their race is to their self-concept. My study found that Black students who believed being Black was an important part of how they saw themselves were also likely to feel a sense of belonging to their racial group. These findings suggest that Black students' definitions of what it means to be Black play a role in whether they believe they belong to their racial group. When race is important to an individual's self-concept, they are likely to feel a sense of belonging to their racial group. This finding is supported by the identity literature. The literature claims that an individual's racial identity is defined in part by the importance they place on their race in relation to their self-concept (Stryker and Serpe 1994; Seller et al. 1998). Additionally, this importance is based on their values and beliefs, or identity schemas, on what it means to be of a certain racial identity (Stryker and Serpe 1994). The values and beliefs the individual holds guide how they behave and whether or not they believe they belong to their racial group. Furthermore, an individual that does not view their race as important to their self-concept is not likely to hold beliefs about their race that influence their behaviors to feel a sense of belonging to their racial group.

Drawing upon Hunter et al.'s definition of sense of belonging, they refer to the individual feeling a "connection to group members [providing] a sense of community" for the individual

(2012:952). The responses from the surveys support this definition of sense of belonging to a racial group. In this study, I found evidence to support that Black students do feel a sense of belonging to their racial group. Black students that feel a connection to and acceptance from their racial group are likely to feel a sense of belonging. This can occur if the individual has a desire to belong with their racial group as seen in this study's findings (Mahar et al. 2013; Hunter et al. 2019; Hogg 2018). Referring to the student's responses, they chosen to attend Black sponsored events and learn Black trivia facts to show their pride and knowledge of their Black culture and Black identity partly because they wanted others to view them as a fellow Black individual similar to them.

The researchers, Sellers et al. (1998), when studying racial identity asked what it meant for a Black individual to be a member of the Black racial group. They found that Black/African Americans' behaviors were influenced by the importance the individual placed on race to how they viewed themselves. From the analysis of the survey, I found that Black students do feel a sense of belonging and connection to their racial group. This suggests that the students' behaviors are likely influenced by their sense of belonging to their racial group. I found that students believed that to be a member of the Black racial group, they should engage in race-related behaviors which would further impact whether they felt like they belong with other Black individuals. The behaviors students engaged in were reflective of the identity schemas, the beliefs and values, they held on what it meant to be Black and how to behave as a Black person reflecting the findings of Sellers and his colleagues. For example, one of the respondents, believed that a Black individual was someone who was proud of their racial identity and knew Black history and cultural references. This belief, or schema, was present in many student responses.

These schemas support Hunter et al.'s findings on how Black students authenticate their Blackness (2019). Black students that defended their racial identity to others do so when they are questioned about their race or perceive judgement from other Black individuals. Students developed their schemas of their race and how to behave as a Black person based on how others view them, specifically how their Black peers view them. Researcher Jonathan Cox (2020) describes a performative nature to Hunter et al.'s theme of authenticating Blackness that places Black identity as a racial identity and a role with expectations for how individuals should behave and act. These expectations can come from the individual's fellow Black peers. The responses suggest that students wanted other people to think they were proud of their racial identity. This implies that the perspectives of others were important in why they adjusted their behaviors. Majority of the students referred to Black individuals as those who pointed out their actions and questioned their identities based on their behaviors. This perceived pressure from other Black individuals to behave a certain way motivated students to attend Black dinners or "pretend to vibe to songs" they had never heard before in order for the individual to feel like a member of the group, to feel like they belonged (Cox 2020).

Other students expressed their feeling of not being enough and adjusted their behaviors to feel a sense of belonging to their racial group. The students who felt they were too "different," and an "outsider" held similar schemas on what it meant to be Black and how to behave as a Black person as those who sought to defend their racial identity. However, these students were motivated to reduce these negative feelings caused by the inconsistencies between their identity schemas and how they believed others viewed them. To establish consistency, these students changed their behaviors, for example by attending Black events despite not dressing the same or having similar music tastes as those around them. These behavioral adjustments therefore



support Hunter et al.'s acculturative loss theme. Students who questioned whether they are Black enough could feel a need to sacrifice parts of their identity to belong to their racial peers. The changes students made suggest that aspects of their identity were sacrificed in order for them to feel a sense of belonging to other Black individuals.

## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that sense of belonging to the racial group is related to Black students' who view their race as important to their self-concept. Black students also feel a sense of belonging to their racial group and engage in specific race-related behaviors to feel a sense of belonging. Students engage in these behaviors for at least two reasons: the need to defend their racial identity and from the feeling of not being enough. The researchers, Hunter et al. (2019), found that Black students described their sense of belonging to their racial group through their understanding of what it meant to be Black and how to behave referring to the perceived pressures from other Black individuals and other non-Black individuals (Cox 2020). The findings of the study suggest that Black students desire to form a connection to other Black individuals influence their behaviors when interacting with members of their racial group in part to develop a sense of community and feeling of acceptance.

These findings are not generalizable due to the small sample size. It is possible that I was unable to detect a significant difference between the items due to the size of the sample. Another potential explanation for not finding significant differences was the duration of the survey. Respondents could have grown fatigued when completing the survey potentially impacting their willingness to complete the study and their understanding of the prompts.

This study suggests that Black students feel the need to defend their racial identities when among their peers and feel like they are not behaving in ways that they perceive Black individuals should. Future studies can explore this relationship further by investigating alternative reasons students engage in these behaviors. Future studies can also examine alternative ways to measure sense of belonging to see what other factors influence sense of belonging to a racial group and how one's perception of their racial identity influence whether they feel a sense of belonging to their racial group. Future studies can investigate how the five factors of sense of belonging in Good et al.'s study independently relate to the dimensions outlined in the MIBI for a better comparison looking at different aspects of racial identity and sense of belonging (2012). It would be beneficial to study in-depth how Black students prove their racial identities using Identity Theory to focus on the process of identity verification (Burke and Stets 2021).

This current project contributes to the existing literature examining sense of belonging to a racial group for Black students particularly at predominantly white institutions. Jonathan Cox studied how Black students at PWIs and HBCUs differed in their views on Black authenticity (2020). Cox found that Black students felt pressure to express themselves as “stereotypical blacks” or to attend and support Black events and organizations to not be “labeled as an outsider” (2020:179). This pressure came from the students at the PWI and other Black students on campus. Cox states that within PWIs “black students *themselves* construct black authenticity” and navigate this construction through “external and internal evaluations of their blackness” (2020:184). The Black students in this study believed that to be seen as a Black individual they would have to behave or act in certain ways that proved their racial identity. Students that held their race important to how they viewed themselves were likely to engage in these behavioral

adjustments and rely on both external and internal evaluations of themselves to prove their racial identity to other Black individuals. Furthermore, they are likely to engage in this process to feel a sense of belonging and maintain that consistency with their personal views of themselves and how they believe others view them as a Black individual.

## TABLES

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Centrality Scale and Sense of Belonging at Home and College Scale

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1
1. CENTRALITY	3.90	0.68	
2. SB	3.58	0.66	.21

*Note.* *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. SB = Sense of Belonging, a combination of sense of belonging at home and at college; R = items were reverse recorded. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Centrality Items and Sense of Belonging at Home and College

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people	3.57	1.08				
2. Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself (R)	3.67	1.20	-.00			
3. In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image	4.10	0.94	.34	.21		
4. Being Black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am (R)	4.29	0.96	.22	.22	.52*	
5. SB	3.58	0.66	.58**	-.19	.27	-.07

*Note.* *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. SB = Sense of Belonging, a combination of sense of belonging at home and at college; R = items were reverse recorded. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Centrality Items and Sense of Belonging at Home Items

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself (R)	3.67	1.20							
2. In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image	4.10	0.94	.21						
3. Being Black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am (R)	4.29	0.96	.22	.52*					
4. I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people	3.57	1.08	-.00	.34	.22				
5. I feel that I belong to the Black community (at home)	3.94	1.06	-.15	.01	.07	.63**			
6. I feel a connection with the Black community (at home)	4.00	0.97	.00	-.07	.00	.33	.52*		
7. I feel like an outsider (at home) (R)	3.00	1.37	.19	.05	-.36	.43	.38	.47	
8. I feel accepted (at home)	3.94	1.03	-.02	.08	-.23	.37	.16	.50*	.44

*Note.* *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. R = items were reverse recorded. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .

Table 4: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Centrality Items and Sense of Belonging at College Items

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself (R)	3.67	1.20							
2. In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image	4.10	0.94	.21						
3. Being Black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am (R)	4.29	0.96	.22	.52*					
4. I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people	3.57	1.08	-.00	.34	.22				
5. I feel that I belong to the Black community (at college)	3.63	1.12	-.33	.30	.08	.34			
6. I feel a connection with the Black community (at college)	3.74	0.99	-.05	.19	.23	.23	.61**		
7. I feel like an outsider (at college) (R)	3.05	1.35	-.26	.29	.03	.25	.82**	.47*	
8. I feel accepted (at college)	3.47	0.90	-.31	.41	-.12	.33	.46*	.15	.43

*Note.* *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. R = items were reverse recorded. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Survey Instrument  
*Demographics*

1. How old are you?
2. What is your sex?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Prefer not to answer
3. What is your gender identity?
  - a. Cisman
  - b. Ciswoman
  - c. Non-Binary
  - d. Transgender Male
  - e. Transgender Female
  - f. Other
  - g. Prefer not to answer
4. What is your year in college?
  - a. First Year
  - b. Second Year
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  - e. Prefer not to answer
5. What is your race/ethnicity?
  - a. White



- b. Black/African American
- c. Hispanic/Latinx
- d. Asian
- e. Middle Eastern
- f. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- g. American Indian or Alaskan Native
- h. Other
- i. Prefer not to answer

*Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity*

Today, we have some questions we would like you to answer about your Black racial identity and your experience with the Black community. When we mention Black individuals, we are referring to the broad group of people who identify as Black/African American.

We would like you to consider your Black identity within the Black community. By virtue of identifying as Black, you could consider yourself a member of the Black community in a variety of contexts such as on your college campus and at home. Given this broad definition of belonging to the Black community, please respond to the following statements based on how you feel about that group and your membership in it.

There are no right or wrong answers to any of these statements: we are interested in your honest reactions and opinions. Please read each statement carefully and indicate the number that reflects your degree of agreement.

Please answer the following questions about your Black racial identity.

Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)

Centrality Scale:

1. Overall, being Black has very little to do with how I feel about myself (R)
2. In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image
3. Being Black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am (R)
4. I have a strong sense of belonging to Black people
5. I have a strong attachment to other Black people
6. Being Black is an important reflection of who I am
7. Being Black is not a major factor in my social relationships (R)

## Regard Scale

### Private Regard Subscale:

8. I feel good about Black people
9. I am happy that I am Black
10. I feel that Black people have made major accomplishments and advancements
11. I often regret that I am Black (R)
12. I am proud to be Black
13. I feel that the Black community has made valuable contributions to this society

### Public Regard Subscale:

14. Overall, Black people are considered good by others
15. In general, others respect Black people
16. Most people consider Black individuals, on the average, to be more ineffective than other racial groups (R)
17. Black people are not respected by the broader society (R)
18. In general, other groups view Black people in a positive manner
19. Society views Black people as an asset

(R) items will be reverse coded

## Ideology Scale

### Assimilation Subscale:

20. A sign of progress is that Black people are in the mainstream of America more than ever before
21. Because America is predominantly White, it is important that Black people go to White

schools so that they can gain experience interacting with Whites

22. Black individuals should try to work within the system to achieve their political and economic goals
23. Black people should feel free to interact socially with White people
24. Black people should view themselves as being Americans first and foremost
25. The plight of Black individuals in America will improve only when Blacks are in important positions within the system

Humanist Subscale:

26. Black and White individuals have more commonalities than differences
27. Black people should not consider race when buying art or selecting a book to read
28. Black people would be better off if they were more concerned with the problems facing all people than just focusing on Black issues
29. Being an individual is more important than identifying oneself as Black
30. Black individuals should judge White people as individuals and not as members of the White race
31. People regardless of their race have strengths and limitations

Oppressed Minority Subscale:

32. The same forces which have led to the oppression of Black individuals have also led to the oppression of other groups
33. The struggle for Black liberation in America should be closely related to the struggle of other oppressed groups
34. Black people should learn about the oppression of other groups

35. Black people should treat other oppressed people as allies
36. The racism Black people have experiences is similar to that of other minority groups
37. Black individuals should try to become friends with people from other oppressed groups

Nationalist Subscale:

38. It is important for Black people to surround their children with Black art, music,  
literature
39. Black people would be better off if they adopted Afrocentric values
40. Black students are better off going to schools that are controlled and organized by  
Blacks
41. Black people must organize themselves in a separate Black political force
42. Whenever possible, Black individuals should buy from other Black businesses
43. A thorough knowledge of Black history is very important for Black people today

*Racial Group Sense of Belonging Scale*

Please answer the following questions about your Black racial identity within the Black community on your college campus and at home.

Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)

When I am with other Black students on my college campus in general,

1. I feel that I belong to the Black community
2. I feel a connection with the Black community
3. I feel like an outsider (R)
4. I feel accepted
5. I feel respected
6. I feel valued
7. I feel excluded (R)
8. I feel like I fit in
9. I feel at ease
10. I feel anxious (R)
11. I feel comfortable
12. I feel tense (R)
13. I feel nervous (R)
14. I feel content
15. I feel inadequate (R)
16. I wish I could fade into the background and not be noticed (R)
17. I try to say as little as possible (R)
18. I enjoy being an active participant

19. I have trust that I do not have to constantly prove myself
20. I believe that others see me as Black
21. I believe that my Black peers see me as Black
22. I trust that my Black peers accept me

When I am with other Black individuals at home,

1. I feel that I belong to the Black community
2. I feel a connection with the Black community
3. I feel like an outsider
4. I feel accepted
5. I feel respected
6. I feel valued
7. I feel excluded
8. I feel like I fit in
9. I feel at ease
10. I feel anxious
11. I feel comfortable
12. I feel tense
13. I feel nervous
14. I feel content
15. I feel inadequate
16. I wish I could fade into the background and not be noticed
17. I try to say as little as possible
18. I enjoy being an active participant

19. I have trust that I do not have to constantly prove myself
20. I believe that others see me as Black
21. I believe that my Black peers see me as Black
22. I trust that my Black peers accept me

*Open-Ended Questions*

Please read and answer the following questions:

Describe a situation where you felt you had to prove your Black identity among Black individuals on your college campus.

Describe a situation where you felt you had to prove your Black identity among Black individuals at home.



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