Predicting African-American Adolescents' Expectations and Aspirations About the Future: The Role of Racial Discrimination

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Abstract

Given the strong likelihood that many African-American adolescents will encounter racial discrimination in their educational and occupational pursuits, it is crucial to consider the protective role parents can have in helping their children deal with discrimination. This study investigates predictors of parents' attitudes about whether or not they believe their children will face discrimination, the strategies parents use to help their children deal with discrimination, and how those strategies relate to adolescent characteristics. Findings suggest that socio-economic status, child's gender, and parent's frequency of experience with discrimination predict parent's attitudes about whether or not they believe their children will encounter discrimination. Additionally, adolescents are more likely to think they will be discriminated against if their parents hold the same expectation. However, compared to adolescents who do not expect to be discriminated against, those who do place a higher value on school as being important for their future. Finally, parents who use communication/conversation with their children as a strategy to help deal with discrimination do better in school and are less concerned with being socially successful. Findings are discussed in terms of the existing literature in this area.

Introduction

Thirty years after the civil rights movement, the problem of racial discrimination continues to exist. Minority adolescents who set high goals for themselves will likely encounter societal barriers. What can parents do to help their children find ways of combating racial discrimination?

Research suggests that parents' can help their children attain high goals despite difficult circumstances (Clark, 1983; Epps & Jackson, 1985; Ogbu, 1991). Parents' past experiences as well as their attitudes about the future play an important role in adolescents' academic success (Clark, 1983). Ogbu (1991) suggests that African-American parents who experience discrimination are skeptical about how useful school will be for their children's long-term job success. This pessimistic outlook gets communicated to children when parents talk about bad experiences African-Americans have had or barriers they have run up against. Ogbu suggests that children's expectations about the future get more and more negative as they hear discouraging stories and as they begin to experience racial discrimination. Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence to support Ogbu's predictions.

Theoretical work and ethnographic methodologies have been used to study the role racial discrimination plays in adolescents' expectations and aspirations for the future. The present work is among the first to study these issues in a large scale study with a broad range of African-American families. Four questions are posed: 1) What factors differentiate between those parents who think their kids will encounter racial discrimination from those parents who do not think their kids will be discriminated against? 2) Do parents' expectations about whether their children will encounter discrimination affect their children's expectations about discrimination? 3) What strategies do these parents employ to help protect their children from discrimination? 4) How do

these strategies relate to adolescents' academic success and values for academic and social success?

Predictions

1. We predicted that the higher the SES, the more likely it was parents would expect that their children would encounter racial discrimination. The reasoning behind this prediction is that people with high levels of SES have greater education levels and are more likely to have a high concentration of white colleagues at their work place. Thus, compared to those with low SES, people with high SES may be more aware of racial discrimination and more likely to be in a job situation where they experience a glass ceiling. Research on Black males suggests that they are an "endangered species". For this reason, it was predicted that boys, more so than girls, would be expected to encounter racial discrimination. Finally, we predicted that the more discrimination a parent has experienced, the more likely the parent would be to expect that their child would encounter discrimination.

2. As suggested by Ogbu, it was expected that adolescents whose parents think they will be discriminated against will have a more pessimistic outlook on their future compared to adolescents whose parents do not think they will encounter discrimination.

3. As an exploratory question, we investigated the kinds of strategies parents use to help protect their children from racial discrimination. Among those strategies, we expected to find parents who try to educate their children about the roots of discrimination, parents who try to instill certain values in their children (e.g., working hard is crucial for success, respect and love yourself), and parents who talk with their children about racial discrimination. No specific predictions were made regarding which strategies would lead to the most positive adolescent characteristics.

4. According to Ogbu, the more parents talk about racial discrimination, the more pessimistic adolescents will feel about their futures and the less value adolescents will place on school. Thus, following Ogbu's line of thought, it was expected that the more parents talk with their children about racial discrimination, the poorer kids will be performing in school and the less important kids will think school is for their future. In turn, adolescents may place a higher value on social success than on other types of success.

Methods

Subjects.

Approximately 1500 families were recruited from a Mid-Atlantic county to participate in The Middle School Family Survey Study (MSFSS), a longitudinal study of adolescent development. Sixty percent of these families were African-American. Seventh graders and their primary caregivers (usually the 7th grader's mother) were interviewed face-to-face and completed self-administered questionnaires. Families came from a wide range of socio-economic status and 7th graders were evenly divided by gender.

Materials.

Measuring SES. A composite score of income, educational attainment, and job status was created based on the caregiver's income and job status. If a family had more than one caregiver, we used information from the caregiver who made the most money, had the highest educational attainment, and the highest job status.

Measuring Parent's Level of Discrimination. Parents were asked: "Over your lifetime, in general, how often have you felt discriminated against because you are African American?" Parents answered on a five point scale: 1= never, 2= almost never, 3= occasionally, 4= sometimes, 5= very often.

Measuring Parent's Perception that Child will Encounter Discrimination. Parents were asked: "Do you think it will be harder for (CHILD) to get ahead in life because (he/she) is African-American?" 1= yes, -1= no.

Measuring Adolescent's Outlook for the Future. 7th graders were asked: "Do you think it will be harder for you to get ahead in life because you are African-American?" 1= yes, -1 = no.

Measuring Strategies Parents Use to Help Protect Children from Racial Discrimination. Of those parents who thought it would be harder for their children to get ahead in life because of their race, we asked: "What kinds of things are you doing for (CHILD) to protect him/her from being discriminated against because (he/she) is African-American?" Undergraduate research assistants coded these open-ended responses. Later, these responses were collapsed into 11 macro categories.

Measuring Adolescents' Academic Performance and Value for Social and Academic Success.

- Adolescents' self-reports of their grades were used to create their grade point average (GPA). GPA was based on the traditional 4 point scale where 4= A, 3= B, 2= C, and 1= D.
- Value for social success was assessed by a scale measuring the importance of being popular. Items in this scale were:

  "Compared to other things..."

  1. how important is making friends to you?
  2. how important is being good looking?
  3. how important is being popular with Black kids?
  4. how important is being popular with White kids?

The alpha of this scale is .76. Values ranged from 1= much less important to me than other things and 7= much more important to me than other things.

Value for academic success was assessed by a scale measuring the importance of school for one's future. Items in the scale were:

1. I have to do well in school if I want to be a success in life. (This item gets flipped.)
2. Even if I do good in school, I still won't be able to get a good job when I grow up.
3. Schooling is not so important for kids like me.
4. I learn more useful things from friends and relatives than I learn in school.
5. I have so much to do at home that I don't have enough time to do homework.

The alpha of this scale is .69. Values ranged from 1= strongly agree to 5= strongly disagree.

Results

1. Which parents are more likely to think their children will encounter racial discrimination? Given that 60% of the parents in our sample did not think their kids would face discrimination, we looked at factors differentiating between them and the 40% of parents who did think their kids would encounter discrimination. As can be seen by Figure 1, parents who think their kids will encounter discrimination have a higher SES than parents who do not think their kids will face discrimination. Figure 2 shows that parents are more likely to think their kids will encounter discrimination if their child is male. Figure 3 shows that the more often parents have experienced discrimination, the more likely they are to think their children will also face discrimination.

2. As can be seen by Figure 4, adolescents whose parents think they will be discriminated against have a more pessimistic outlook on their future compared to adolescents whose parents do not think they will encounter discrimination.

3. Of the 40% of parents who believed their kids would encounter racial discrimination, we found that parents employ a variety of strategies to help protect their children. Fifty-eight percent of parents used the following four strategies: education about discrimination (32.2%), communication/conversation about discrimination (13.3%), encouraging self-esteem as a protective factor against discrimination (7.7%), and encouraging hard work as a way to combat discrimination (4.8%). The remaining 36.1% of parents used strategies such as encouraging their children to have a positive attitude, to be color blind, to think critically, to have racial pride, to have religious morals, and to be a good person. Others said they tried to be role models for their kids or mentioned a general protection strategy. The remaining 5.9% of parents said they did nothing to help protect their children from discrimination.

4. As can be seen by Figure 5, adolescents of parents who used communication/conversation as a strategy had better GPAs and placed less importance on social success compared to adolescents of parents who used other strategies. However, the type of strategy parents used did not relate to how important adolescents felt school was for their future. It should be pointed out, however, that compared to adolescents who do not expect to be discriminated against, those who do place a higher value on school as being important for their future; $t(871)=2.21$, $p<.03$.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the role parents play in helping their children deal with discrimination. We first explored factors predicting to which parents

anticipated that it would be harder for their children to get ahead in life. We found that SES, child's gender, and parents' frequency of experience with discrimination predicted parents' attitudes about whether or not their children would encounter discrimination. We also investigated the types of strategies parents used to help their children deal with discrimination. The most commonly used strategies were: education, communication/conversation, encouraging self-esteem, and encouraging kids to work hard. Compared to using other strategies, parents who used communication/conversation had kids with higher levels of academic success. In addition, these kids were less concerned with being socially successful. These findings imply that communication/conversation is a better strategy than the other ones previously mentioned.

According to Ogbu, the more parents talk about racial discrimination, the more pessimistic adolescents will feel about their futures and the less value adolescents will place on school. Our findings are strikingly different from Ogbu's contentions. While it is true that adolescents are more likely to think they will be discriminated against if their parents also hold that view, it is not the case that they value school less. In fact, adolescents who thought they would encounter discrimination placed a higher value on school being important for their future compared to kids who did not expect to be discriminated against. These findings negate Ogbu's prediction.

References

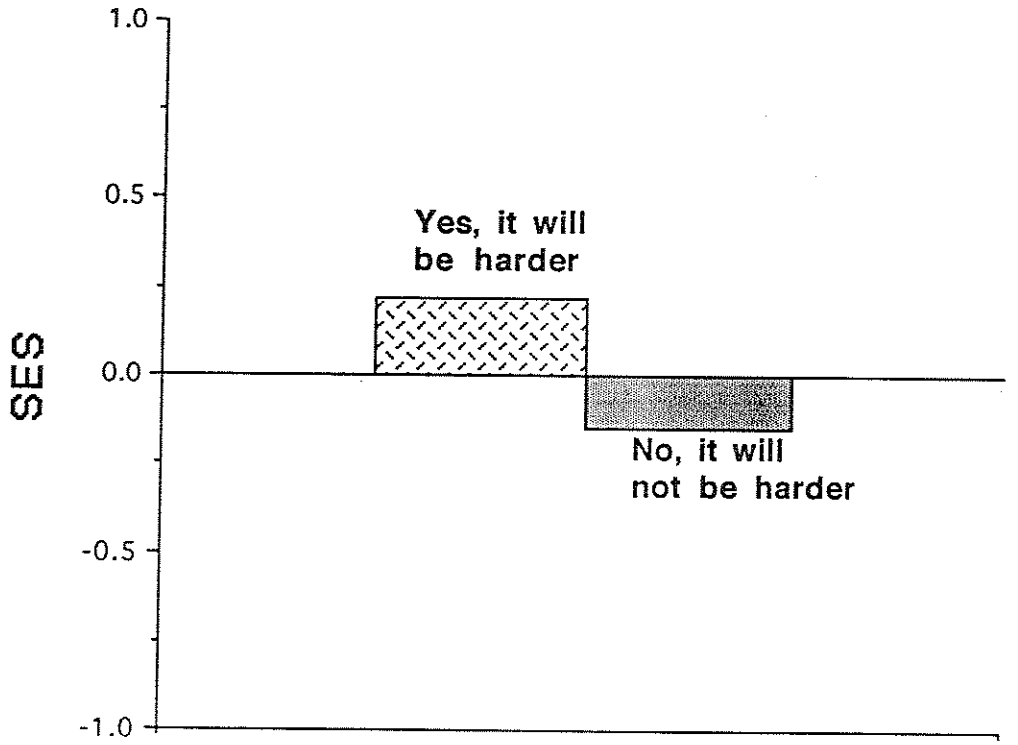
Clark, Reginald, M. Family life and school achievement: why poor black children succeed or fail. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Epps, E.G. & Jackson, K. (1985). Educational and occupational aspirations and early attainment of black males and females. (Atlanta, GA: Final report to the Southern Education Foundation, April, 1985). Cite taken from the Slaughter and Epps (1987) paper.

Ogbu, John, U. (1991). Minority coping responses and school experience. The Journal of Psychohistory, 18, 433-455.

Figure 1.

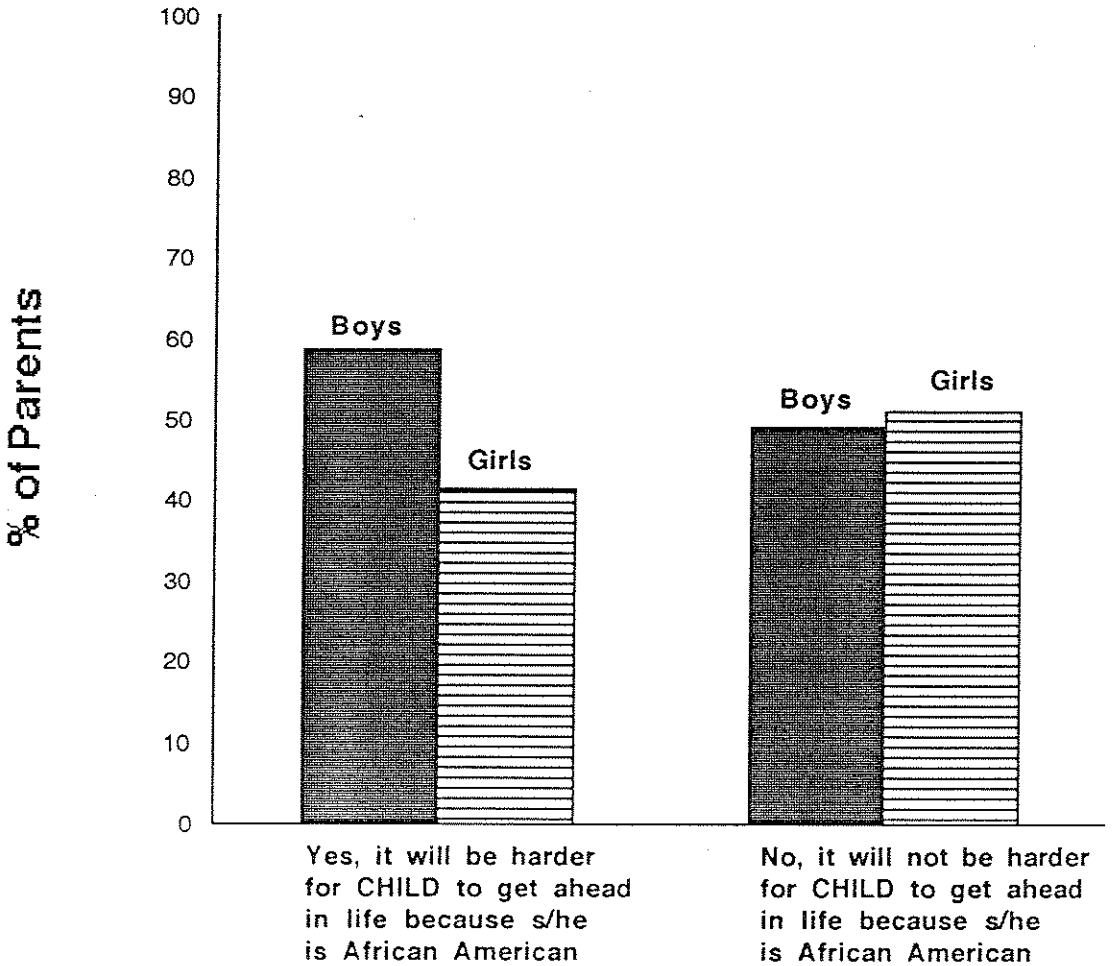
Are there SES differences between those parents who think it will be harder for their kids to get ahead in life compared to those parents who do not think it will be harder?



Note: SES has been standardized so that the mean is 0 and the standard deviation is 1.

t= 5.38 (875), p<.0001

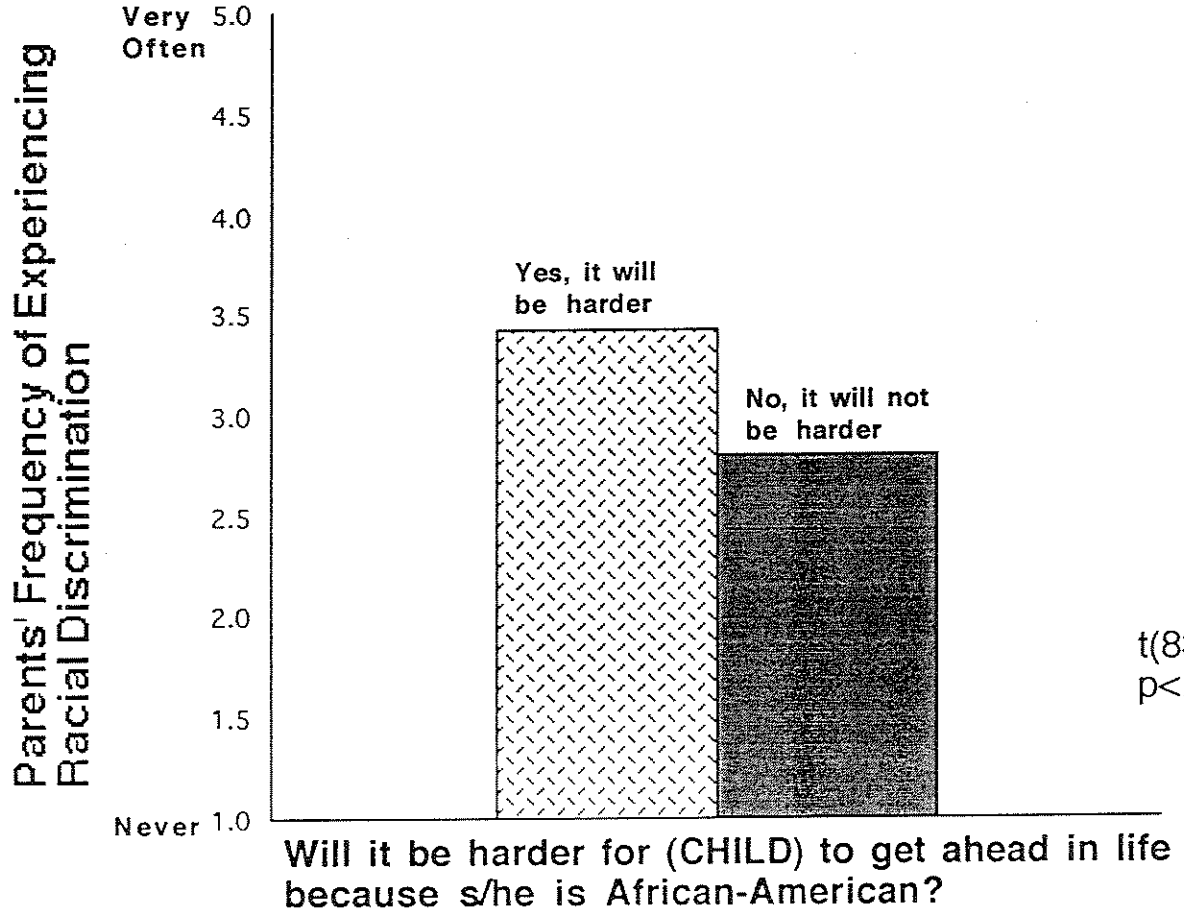
Figure 2. Do parents' expectations that it will be harder for their children to get ahead in life because they are African American depend on children's gender?



Chi Square = 166.64, p<.0001

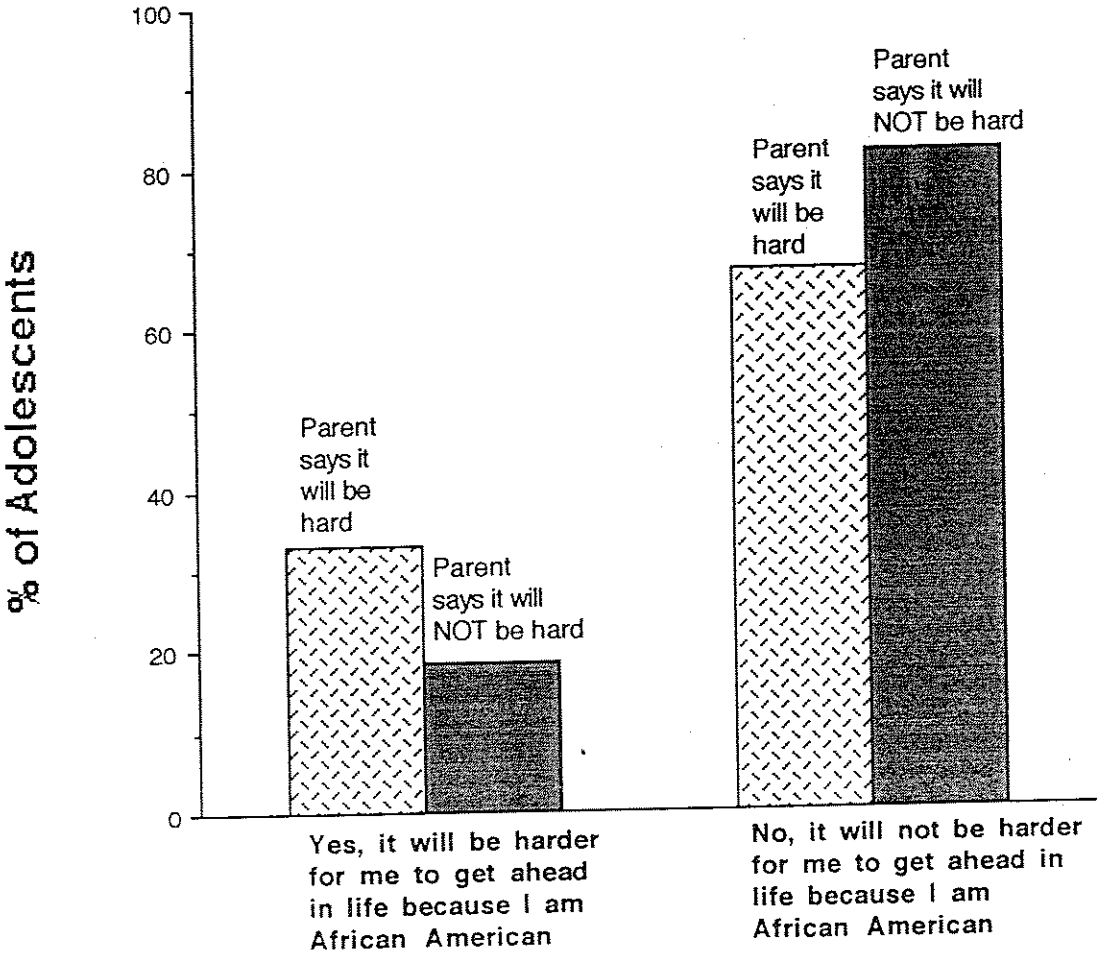
Figure 3.

Does the parents' expectation that it will be harder for their children to get ahead in life because they are African-American depend on the frequency with which parents have experienced racial discrimination?



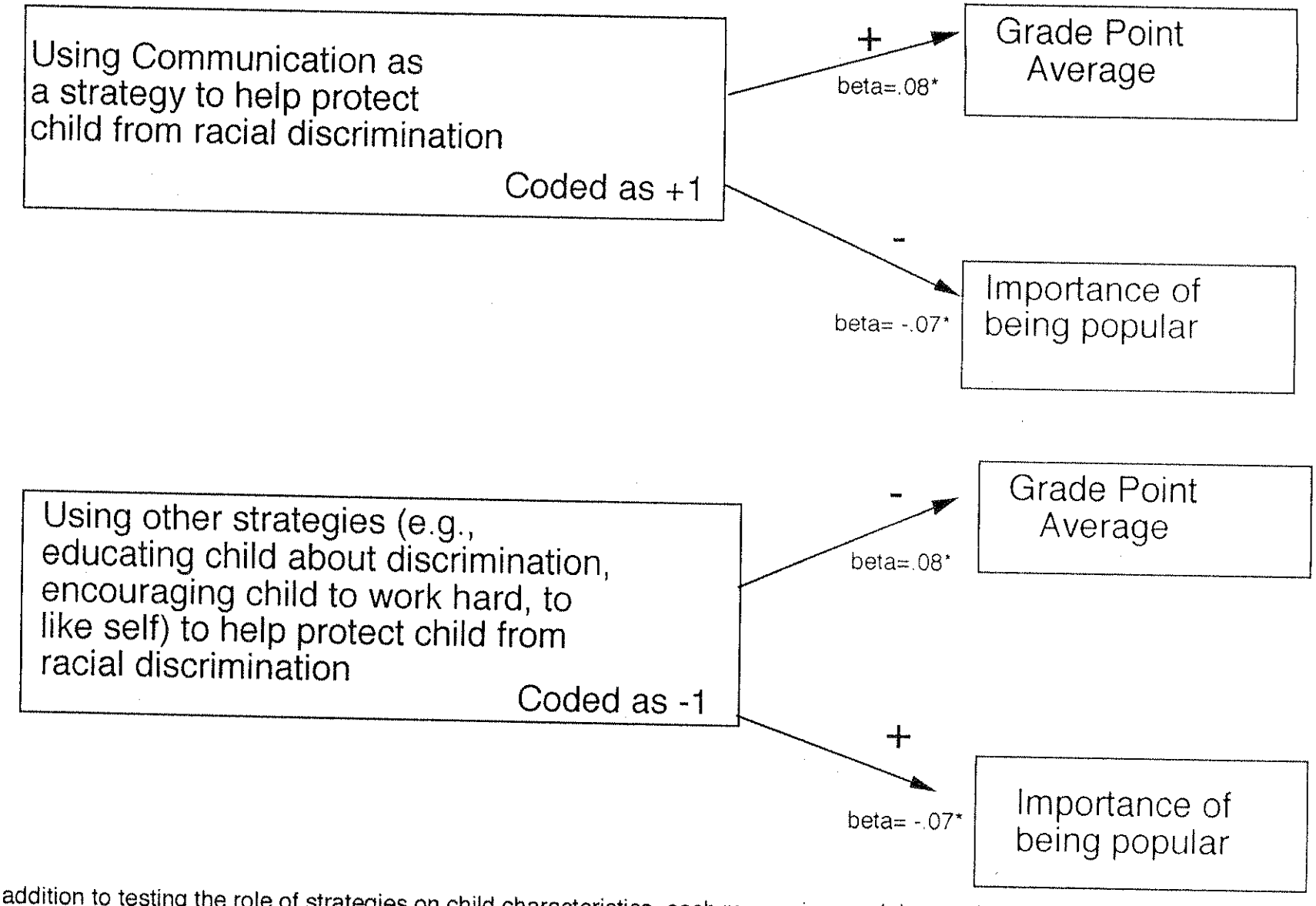
t(835)=7.13, p<.0001

Figure 4. Do adolescents' expectations that it will be harder to get ahead in life because they are African American depend on their parents' expectations?



Chi Square = 83.08,
p<.0001

Figure 5. Do parent strategies to help protect child from racial discrimination differentially predict to child characteristics?



Note: In addition to testing the role of strategies on child characteristics, each regression model controls for parents' SES, parents' expectations for how much their children will be discriminated against, parents' level of discrimination, child's gender, and whether the child expects to be discriminated against. When predicting GPA and importance of being popular, child's gender and parents' SES are significant predictors. Compared to boys, girls have higher GPAs and are less concerned with wanting to be popular. In both cases, higher levels of SES relate to higher GPAs and a higher importance for being popular.