

Household Tasks and Academic Functioning Among African American Adolescents

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Abstract

Academic functioning has been a focus of substantial research because it is essential for youth's future. Grounded in an ecological perspective that daily molar activities shape youth development, I examined the association between academic functioning and *time spent* performing household tasks among 344 African American adolescents age 10 to 18 ($M_{age} = 12.23$, $SD = 2.50$). I also tested if the association between academic functioning and time spent performing household tasks differs for boys and girls. In home interviews, adolescents completed questionnaires about their school experiences (school self-esteem and school trouble), and mothers reported adolescents' report card grades. Adolescents reported the amount of time they spent performing household tasks in a series of 7 nightly phone interviews. Results showed that adolescents who spent more time performing household tasks reported more school trouble and lower GPA; however, these associations did not differ for boys versus girls. Conversely, time spent performing household tasks was not significantly related to school self-esteem for either boys or girls. These findings highlight the role of family responsibilities in understanding academic functioning among African American adolescents.

Keywords: African American adolescents; academic functioning; household tasks

Introduction

Academic success is important for youth because it prepares them for their future careers. It is also a significant social issue: when students do not excel in school by doing well on exams and earning good grades, then their opportunities, including attending college and finding good jobs, will be limited. Unfortunately, there are several students in the United States who are at risk for not reaching their full academic potential. During adolescence, many youth experience declines in their academic functioning (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009), which includes their school engagement and academic achievement. In particular, African American adolescents appear to be less engaged in school than youth from other racial and ethnic groups (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). They also tend to have lower performances in the classroom than their White peers. Prior research suggests that there are many factors associated with African American youth's academic functioning including their experiences with teachers and lack of educational resources such as books and other necessary school supplies (Chesmore, Winston, &

Brady, 2015). Although many different factors contribute to African American adolescents' academic functioning, it is important to understand whether and how their experiences at home are related to their academic functioning because home and school is where youth spend most of their time, and these two settings are closest to the child.

Indeed, a large body of work focuses on links between the home environment and academic outcomes and has established that home-school connections have implications for youth's achievement. For example, Louque and Latunde (2014) found that when African American families were engaged in the school setting by attending school events and workshops, youth experienced greater academic success. Additionally, one study showed that parental-school involvement was associated with adolescents' achievement and future aspirations across both middle school and high school (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Nonetheless, it is most important to understand youths' experience in the home and how it is related to their academic functioning. These experiences can include the quality of their relationships with their parents, as well as parental monitoring. For example, a study by Lowe and Dotterer (2013) found that youth were less likely to have behavioral problems at school when they felt high levels of their mother's warmth. This study also found that parental monitoring was also associated with better academic outcomes. Adolescents had higher levels of school self-esteem when their parents were aware of their activities and whereabouts (Lowe & Dotterer, 2013). If youth and their parents are building positive relationships at home, youth will have greater academic outcomes in school such as getting along with their teachers and peers, as well as doing well on school assignments like homework and exams. Positive relationships with parents in the home can promote competence and autonomy within the home which then becomes internalized and used in other settings like school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

The current study extends the literature on the role of connections between families and schools in adolescents' academic functioning to examine one domain of family life that has received limited attention, and that is adolescents' household responsibilities. The literature on youths' involvement in household tasks suggests that parents may see household tasks as a way for their children to become contributing members of the household and a way to prepare youth for their future (Dunn, Magalhaes, & Mancini, 2014). Task involvement, however, places time demands on youth and can create problems in the home such as conflict between parents and their children that may arise when youth are resistant to doing these tasks (Lam, Greene, & McHale, 2016). A study by Mandara and colleagues (2009), for example, found that African American parents gave their adolescents more household tasks than European American parents; they also had more arguments with their adolescents about rules than did European American parents (Mandara, Varner, Greene, & Richman, 2009). These authors argued that demanding family responsibilities and the parenting practices of African American families may contribute to the Black-White student achievement gap. In the current study, I built on this work, first, by using a finer-grained approach to measuring youth's task involvement. Specifically, I relied on a daily diary data collection method to assess the amount of time youth spent on household tasks each day, moving beyond the more global (yes/no) approach used by Mandara et. al. (2009). In addition, moving beyond an exclusive focus on school grades and academic achievement, I examined the links between time spent performing household tasks and three domains of academic functioning: performance (grades), affective (school self-esteem) and behavioral (school trouble).

Theoretical Perspectives

This study was grounded in an ecological perspective which highlights the significance of daily molar activities, that is, regular daily activities that are perceived as having meaning or intent by individuals in a particular setting and are thought to shape and be shaped by youth development (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983). Positive development, for example, may depend on whether youth spend their time learning new skills or engaging in passive leisure (e.g. watching television). These molar activities can include time spent doing homework as well as time spent doing household tasks. In Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the microsystem refers to the contexts of individuals' daily lives, and for most youth, this includes family and school. At the next level of ecology is the mesosystem, which refers to the connection between the microsystem settings of everyday life. From this perspective, youth's daily household tasks can be related to their academic outcomes because spending more time on household tasks may limit the time youth have to be involved in school related activities.

Household Tasks in African American Families

Across many cultures, household tasks are viewed as an obligation and a daily requirement for adolescents (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). Chores are common in the United States for children beginning at age 9, and these tasks average about 7 hours per week (Riggio, Valenzuela, & Weiser, 2010). Household tasks are communal and done in many homes to increase social participation and skills in youth. Children are given specific household duties to complete, and these duties tend to be significantly greater when both parents, especially mothers, are in the workforce full-time (Romich, 2007). For many adolescents, especially those who have parents who are employed, housework is typically an after-school responsibility. Caregivers expect children to assume more household tasks as they age (Rogoff, 2003). These tasks can include cleaning their rooms, taking out the trash, washing the dishes, and caring for younger siblings or elderly family members (Berridge & Romich, 2011). Household tasks are one of many ways that youth make important contributions to their families (Raley, 2006).

Several studies show that youth from poorer homes with single-employed mothers are more likely to engage in chores than youth from wealthier homes (Riggio et. al., 2009). In one study, it was shown that youth from low income families developed adult-like roles that were necessary to meet their family's daily needs (Burton, 2007). These adult-like roles include preparing meals and frequent care for siblings and elderly family members. Families that are economically disadvantaged may not have access to child-care, which will then lead them to rely on their oldest to care for their youngest (East, Weisner, & Reyes, 2006). Parents with minimum-wage jobs may have to work many hours and multiple jobs in order to make enough money to provide for their family. As a result, children assume more household responsibilities when their parents have to put in more hours at work (Burton, 2007).

The existing literature suggests that household tasks play a significant part of the in-home daily activities of African American children. African American families tend to have an egalitarian household where the division of labor is equally distributed among family members by appropriate age and development (Kamo & Cohen, 1998). A study by Smetana and colleagues found that African American mothers view household tasks as responsibilities that should be completed by both boys and girls (Smetana, Daddis, & Chuang, 2003). African American families may also use household tasks as a way to prepare their children for the world of work. Research show that family socialization of African American children into the world of work occurs within the context of several employment-related disadvantages (McLoyd, 2011). Thus, by giving their children responsibilities in the home, African American parents may

provide them with skills such as responsibility and independence that will help them when they enter the workforce. Even though parents may believe that giving their children household tasks will benefit them, the amount of time youth spend doing household tasks might actually have a negative influence on their schooling because it can take away time spent doing homework and studying. This study explores the relation between time spent performing household tasks and the academic functioning of African American adolescents.

Gender Differences in Household Tasks

Girls spend more time in household tasks than boys do, despite economic development or schooling. This practice may stem from the traditional belief that women are meant to be homemakers while men are head of the household and the “breadwinner” of the family. The increased responsibility placed on daughters is viewed as normative because daughters tend to identify with their mothers and household tasks are normally seen as “women’s work” (Crouter, Head, Bumpus, & McHale, 2001). Mothers typically perform the largest share of household tasks, so they rely on their daughters to keep the home and family running smoothly while they are at work (Crouter et. al., 2001). Another reason why girls may assume more responsibility in the home is because gendered division of labor begins early on in life with girls doing more household tasks than boys from childhood and throughout adolescence (Berridge & Romich, 2011).

Household tasks are considered a structured activity for adolescents to engage in. However, the amount of time youth spend cooking, washing dishes, cleaning, and other tasks may take away time and energy from academic activities like doing homework and studying for exams. Mandara and colleagues (2009) found that when parents did not burden adolescents with excessive amounts of household chores, adolescents tended to score higher on exams. Nevertheless, there were several limitations in this study because their measures of household tasks consisted mainly of yes/no responses. Further, Mandara and colleagues’ study was limited because they focused only on academic achievement using standardized test scores. School experience is multidimensional and can include other elements such as how the student feels about his/her school, and how often the student gets into trouble with school authority. These domains are important to examine because youths’ overall academic success does not only depend on their grades, but it also depends on their school engagement and daily experiences.

Household Tasks and Academic Achievement: Gender as a Moderator

Despite gains in academic achievement, on average, African American adolescents still face educational barriers that put them behind their White and Asian peers. However, there are gender differences in school outcomes. In general, African American boys lag behind African American girls in many academic domains (Louque & Latunde, 2014). African American girls are more academically successful than African American boys and have higher grades and test scores (Mickelson & Greene, 2006). The achievement gap between African American girls and boys may be, at least in part, the result of parents’ socialization. Although prior research showed that African American parents have egalitarian households, some work also suggests that African American mothers tend to “love their sons and raise their daughters” (Mandara, Varner, & Richman, 2010). This suggest that girls are given more responsibilities and are expected to have higher educational achievement than boys. Less may be expected from boys, so if they do have more household responsibilities, they may not know how to balance the tasks given and their school work. Therefore, household tasks may have fewer negative effects on girls than boys.

The Current Study

In sum, the purpose of the current study was to contribute to the literature on the role of family experiences in African American adolescent's academic achievement by examining the relation between the amount of time youth spend performing household tasks and youth's academic functioning. More specifically, I tested whether time spent performing household tasks was related to school self-esteem, school trouble, and academic achievement, as measured by GPA. I also tested whether gender moderated the association between time spent on household tasks and academic functioning. I hypothesized that youth who spent more time performing household tasks would exhibit poorer academic functioning. Furthermore, I hypothesized that the relation between time spent performing household tasks and academic functioning would be stronger for boys than girls.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 344 adolescents from 173 families who participated in the first phase of a longitudinal study of gender socialization and development in two-parent, Black/African American families. Families who self-identified as Black or African American, and had at least two middle-childhood and/or adolescent aged children, were recruited from urban and suburban communities in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States with large populations of African Americans. There were two strategies used to recruit these families. First, African American individuals who lived in the targeted communities were hired to recruit other families by posting flyers, providing information on the study in local churches, stores and other community sites, and handing out flyers at youth activities. Interested families contacted the project. The second recruitment strategy involved purchasing a marketing list that included names and addresses of African American students in grades 4 to 12. These families were telephoned and asked to participate.

Procedures

Of the original 202 families originally recruited into the study, families in which parents were not in a couple relationship were excluded from the study (e.g., mother and grandfather were the parent figures; $n = 7$) and parents who were no longer married ($n = 7$). In addition, because the focus of the current study is on the school functioning of adolescents, we limited the sample to youth in grades 4-12. Families were interviewed by a team of two interviewers who were mostly African American. For children under 13 and family members with reading difficulties, all questions were presented orally. The second data collection procedure consisted of seven nightly telephone interviews with adolescents and their parents to obtain information about their daily activities. During each of these calls, youth reported on the activities they were involved in outside of school hours during the day of the call, the individuals who were involved in the activities, and how long each activity lasted. After completion of these interviews, families were sent a \$200 honorarium.

Measures

School trouble was measured using 4 items from a scale developed for the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Adolescents rated statements about how often they had trouble in school (e.g., paying attention in school or getting homework done) using a 1 to 5 scale (1 = "never" and 5 = "every day"). Items were averaged to create an overall score of school trouble. Cronbach's alphas were .88 and .87 for older and younger siblings respectively, with higher scores meaning higher reliability.

School self-esteem was measured with ten items from the school subscale of the Hare Area-Specific Self-Esteem Scale (Hare, 1996). Items were averaged to create an overall score of school self-esteem. Students rated items about how they felt in school using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Higher scores on this scale represent greater school self-esteem (e.g., “school has been harder for me than for most people”). Cronbach’s alphas were .75 and .72 for younger and older siblings.

Grade-point average was calculated from mothers’ report of youth’s grades in math, science, social studies, and language arts. Letter grades were assigned numerical scores (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, and E = 0) such that higher scores indicated higher grades.

Time spent on household tasks was assessed from the phone interview data. Youth reported the amount of time spent (in minutes) completing 16 household tasks (e.g., cleaning, sibling care, elderly care, laundry, doing the dishes, cooking, and shopping for food). I controlled for parent’s education, birth order, and family income which were also collected from parents in the home interview.

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics that were computed for adolescents’ time spent on household tasks and their academic functioning. Adolescents spent an average 254 minutes on household tasks over the course of 7 days ($M = 253.89$, $SD = 196.87$). According to an independent samples t test, there was a marginally significant difference in the amounts of time boys ($M = 235.1$, $SD = 202.2$) and girls ($M = 272.0$, $SD = 189.4$) spent performing household tasks, $t(324) = 1.70$, $p = .09$. An examination of adolescents’ school engagement showed that youth scored above the midpoints on *school trouble* ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.35$), and *school self-esteem* ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.46$). In addition, students earned an average *GPA* of 2.80 ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.78$) on a 5-point scale. Table 2 shows the correlation between descriptive statistics.

Relation between Household Tasks and Academic Functioning

School trouble. Results from the model examining the relation between household tasks and school trouble showed that time spent performing household tasks was positively related to school trouble ($\gamma = .08$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .03$). However, gender did not moderate the association between household tasks and school trouble ($\gamma = .02$, $SE = .15$, $p = .90$). In addition, there was no direct relation between gender and school trouble ($\gamma = -.03$, $SE = .07$, $p = .97$).

GPA. There was a trend level effect for the relation between household tasks and GPA such that youth who spent more time spent performing household tasks earned lower grades in school ($\gamma = -.05$, $SE = .02$, $p = .07$). A positive effect for gender indicated that girls had higher grades than boys ($\gamma = -.18$, $SE = .09$, $p = .03$), but gender did not moderate the association between household tasks and GPA ($\gamma = .09$, $SE = .03$, $p = .84$).

School self-esteem. No significant association between household tasks and school self-esteem emerged ($\gamma = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p = .12$), and gender did not moderate the association between household tasks and school self-esteem ($\gamma = -.03$, $SE = .03$, $p = .24$). Among covariates, a positive effect for birth order indicated that younger children reported having higher school self-esteem than older children ($\gamma = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .03$), but there were no significant gender differences ($\gamma = -.03$, $SE = .05$, $p = .60$).

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine whether time spent on household tasks was linked to academic functioning of African American youth. It is important to understand academic success in African American adolescents, because education brings opportunities and resources such as better paying jobs and greater financial stability, and those opportunities can alleviate some of the problems that are rampant in many African American communities. Although a prior study examined the relation between household tasks and academic outcomes among African American youth (e.g., Mandara et. al., 2009), the study was limited because there was an exclusive focus on academic achievement (i.e., test scores) rather than on school engagement more generally. Results from the present study indicated that there was a positive association between time spent performing household tasks and school trouble, and a trend for the link between household tasks and GPA. Inconsistent with my hypothesis, however, gender did not moderate these relations. In addition, there was no significant association between the amount of time that youth spent on household tasks and school self-esteem for either boys or girls. Below I discuss the academic functioning of these youths as measured by school trouble, school self-esteem and academic achievement.

Youth scored above the midpoint for school trouble meaning that they reported having trouble paying attention in school, getting homework done, and getting along with teachers and peers. They also scored above the midpoint for school self-esteem, meaning that overall, they felt good about their school experiences. Additionally, the students earned an average GPA of a solid C+. Consistent with previous literature on African American families, no gender differences emerged in school self-esteem or school trouble, and there was no significant difference in the amount of time spent boys and girls spent on household tasks. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that African American families have egalitarian households and both boys and girls are expected to engage in these household tasks (Kamo & Cohen, 1998).

Consistent with previous research by Mandara, et. al. (2009), I found that time spent performing household tasks was negatively related, at trend level, to academic achievement as measured by GPA. Also, constant with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983), if youth are spending more time in household tasks, they may be spending less time in school-related activities such as studying or doing school assignments, which could have a negative impact on their GPA. Nonetheless, these findings do not suggest that youth should not engage in household tasks; rather it may suggest that too much time spent on other tasks like home responsibilities can take away time that youth may spend on school-related activities in the home. Prior research showed a positive association between household responsibilities and self-reliance and responsibility (Blair, 1992).

Other studies have looked at the relation between household tasks and academic achievement and found that when youth had excessive amounts of household tasks, they scored lower on exams (Mandara et. al., 2009). Moving beyond prior research, however, I found that time spent on household tasks was also related to school trouble, though not to school self-esteem. That is, time spent on household tasks was related to youth having more problems with getting homework done, paying attention in school, and getting along with teachers and peers but not problems with fitting into their school's setting or feeling important in their classes. A reason that African American adolescents had more school trouble when they spent more time performing household tasks may be that they already experience racial discrimination at school (Kurtz-Costes, Swinton, & Skinner, 2014), and the added stress of time demands at home puts

them at risk of not being academically successful when they are not able to get their homework done or pay attention in school. Time spent on household tasks may not relate to school self-esteem because, consistent with previous research, African American adolescents have strong school attachment and overall feel good about their school experiences and are thus protected from self-esteem problems (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004).

Limitations and Directions for Future Study

It is important that future research build on the literature about home-school connections for African American youth's academic functioning because positive and strong connections may lead to greater academic success. Despite the contributions of this study to the literature on the academic functioning of African American youth, there are several limitations. First, other potentially important factors were not assessed that could moderate the relation between household task and academic functioning. For instance, parent-youth conflict about household tasks may strengthen or weaken the relation because youth who have more conflict with their parents may be resistant to doing tasks as a form of rebellion.

In addition, youth familism values could also moderate the relation between time spent performing household tasks and youth's academic functioning. One study showed that the average time spent on household tasks was positively related to depressive symptoms when youth had low familism values (Lam, et. al., 2016). Youth who do not perceive family activities as important or valuable may have negative attitudes toward household tasks which could strengthen the negative relation between time spent performing household tasks and academic outcomes. Another limitation of my study was that I examined time spent performing household tasks at only one time point. The amount of time that youth spend on household tasks varies across adolescence. For example, prior research reported that time spent on household tasks increased from middle childhood to early adolescence (Raley, 2006), then leveled off after mid-adolescence (Hilbrecht, Zuzanek, & Mannell, 2008). Thus, measuring time spent on household tasks at one point in time may not accurately capture youth's experience. In addition, testing the relation between time spent on household tasks and academic functioning using data collected at only one time point makes it impossible to draw conclusions about directions of effects. For example, if youth have low GPAs, their parents might discipline them by requiring more household responsibilities.

To better understand the relation between academic functioning and time spent performing household tasks, future studies should also examine curvilinear relations between task time and academic functioning. It may be that both too little and too much time spent on household tasks is problematic, so future studies should determine whether a moderate amount of time is optimal. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspective on molar activities, future studies should also examine the quality and meaning of these household tasks rather than just the amount of time. For example, caring for a younger sibling or an elderly family member may be a more meaningful contribution to the family than just washing dishes or taking out the garbage. Tasks may have different implications for youth development and their academic functioning because if youth are engaging in activities that are more important for their family well-being, then the quality of their school work and school behavior may be more positive. Furthermore, to maximize the academic success of African American adolescents, future researchers need to continue to build on the literature on their academic functioning rather than their academic achievement, because it is important to understand their school experiences and not just their grades and test scores. School experience does not only include academic

achievement, it also includes youth's behavior in the classroom setting and feelings about their school performance and school abilities.

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Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD
GPA	2.80	0.78
School trouble	3.30	1.35
School self-esteem	3.12	0.46
Household tasks	253.89	196.87
Mother's education	14.65	1.83
Father's education	14.32	2.30
Family income	\$90807	\$57797

Table 2.

Correlations between Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. GPA									
2. School trouble	.19								
3. School self-esteem	.01**	.02							
4. Household tasks	.03	.06	.42						
5. Family income	.01	.25	.06	.25					
6. Mother's education	.06	.41	.87	.01	.01**				
7. Father's education	.01*	.25	.08	.31	.01**	.01**			
8. Gender	.03	.74	.78	.10	.95	.67	.39		
9. Birth order	.03	.01**	.02	.01**	.69	.80	.69	.19	

Note. *= $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$