Re-Assessing the Role of Student Attitudes and Beliefs

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Since the 1980s scholarship on student attitudes and beliefs has been heavily influenced by the oppositional culture perspective, which proposes that African American students fare poorly in academics because they reject schooling as a means of status attainment. Moreover, the opposition culture perspective fits neatly within ‘colorblind’ narratives that suggest equality of opportunity has been achieved and that remaining racial disparities in educational achievement are due to the dispositional characteristics of African American students. However, empirical evidence on student attitudes and beliefs indicates that African American students have more positive attitudes towards school than their white counterparts, and that African American students generally endorse hard work and effort as paths to success. Despite the lack of empirical support for the oppositional culture model, few new theoretical approaches to understanding student attitudes and beliefs have been advanced and the oppositional culture model continues to frame scholarship and popular debates regarding the role that student attitudes play in racial disparities. This paper argues that a view of student beliefs and attitudes based in the concept of Black habitus (Moore, 2004; 2008) has the potential to move scholarship beyond the oppositional culture perspective and its color-blind implications.

Dr. David Merolla received his PhD from Kent State University in 2010, where he received a University Fellowship. Since coming to Wayne State in the Fall of 2010, Dr. Merolla has published articles in Sociological Perspectives, Social Psychology Quarterly, and the Journal of Pain and Symptom Management, and the Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Dr. Merolla was a Humanities Center resident scholar for the 2011-2012 academic year. Current research projects include a project that looks at the effects of wealth on educational achievement and a project that investigates the role of identity on graduate school entry in science.