The Paradox of Low Academic Achievement but High Self-Esteem in African American Students: An Attributional Account

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Despite evidencing on average lower academic achievement than White students, African American students are usually found to have higher self-esteem. An attributional account is provided to explain this paradox. This account focuses on the expectancies, attributions, and self-esteem of African American college students. The existing literature with regard to attributions, expectancies, and self-esteem is reviewed, and the findings from two recent studies are introduced. Finally, some implications for education are discussed. It is concluded that concerns over threats to self-esteem in African American students may be misplaced. Instead, the data show that African American college students experience increasing doubts that their efforts will be rewarded in ways equivalent to those of White students, and they make increasingly external attributions. The results suggest the need to address the issue of ethnicity and opportunity more directly in our educational institutions.

KEY WORDS: attribution; self-esteem; motivation; achievement; blacks; discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking examples of the still remaining inequality between Black and White Americans is seen in the lower academic outcomes of Black students in schools and colleges. The severity of the problem is illustrated by an attrition rate that runs as high as 62% among African American college students, compared with 40% among all college students

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in the United States (American Council on Education, 1996). Most alarming is that the differences in achievement between White students and African American students increase with age. Whereas African American students start school with test scores close to those of White students, the longer students are in school, the wider the gap grows between African American and White students (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 1995b; Steele, 1992). For example, whereas the average Black 13-year-old is reading two years below the average White 13-year-old student (NCES, 1995b), the average Black 17-year-old is reading at a level comparable to that of a 13-year-old White student (NCES, 1995b).

In higher education, the situation is no more encouraging, although some positive developments are clear. One positive development is the increasing percentage of African American students attending higher education. Whereas in 1967 African American enrollment accounted for only 6% of all students in higher education (Mingle, 1981), between 1974 and 1984 African American enrollment increased by 40% (Higher Education and National Affairs, 1986).³ However, since the late 1980s there has been a leveling off in the number of Black college students continuing on to college, whereas among White students the rate is still increasing—leading to a widening of the gap between Black and White college enrollment rates (NCES, 1994, 1995b; also see American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1988; Hauser & Anderson, 1991). In 1971, Black 25–29-year-olds were about half as likely as their White counterparts to have completed four years of college, and this disparity still remains equal 20 years later (NCES, 1995b). Moreover, even the most optimistic of carefully projected trends predict a drop in the enrollment of African American students over the next few decades, as a result of the tuition increases needed to finance the shortfall in funding for higher education (Council for Aid to Education, 1997).

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Many social scientists have assumed that the lower academic performance experienced by African American students would be reflected in a more negative self-evaluation in these students. Such a hypothesis is consistent with many theories of self-evaluation that expect information about performance, social comparisons with others, and the judgments of the individual made by others, to be processed by individuals into self-judgments. For example, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Wills, 1991)

³Note that this still indicates a large discrepancy between college enrollment rates of Blacks and Whites (see Allen and Jewell, 1996; Blackwell, 1990).

predicts that downward social comparisons following negative performance feedback will lead to a less positive self-concept. The symbolic interactionist perspective maintains that the appraisals reflected by others will be internalized into the self-concept (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934). Despite these clear predictions of lower self-esteem in Black than in White students, African American students have generally been found to have equal or higher self-esteem than White students (for reviews see Crocker and Major, 1989; Graham, 1994; Hoelter, 1983; Hughes and Demo, 1989; Porter and Washington, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979; Wylie, 1979). Moreover, although self-evaluation theories expect achievement to influence self-esteem, social scientists have often found little relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem in African American students (Allen and Haniff, 1991; Demo and Parker, 1987; Drury, 1980; Osborne, 1995; Rosenberg and Simmons, 1971). For example, Osborne (1995) finds a decreasing relationship between achievement and self-esteem among African American students with increasing age.

The assumption that lower academic achievement will affect self-esteem is so intuitive that various alternative accounts of this literature have been given. For example, some have argued that the reason the research literature shows high self-esteem among African Americans is that researchers have looked at global indices of self-esteem rather than at specific indices, such as academic self-esteem (see Rosenberg *et al.*, 1995, for a discussion of the distinction between global and specific self-esteem). It has been argued that such indices of specific self-esteem are more strongly related to academic performance than are global indices (e.g., see Mboya, 1986, for evidence consistent with this finding). The problem with this explanation for the high self-esteem found among African American students is that most studies do not find Black students to be lower in academic self-esteem than White students. Specifically, in her review of 18 studies that examined differences between Blacks and Whites in academic self-esteem, Graham (1994) found that whereas 11% of studies show White students to have higher academic self-esteem than Blacks, 39% show Blacks to have higher academic self-esteem, 22% show no difference, and 27% show mixed results (that is, some comparisons show Whites higher than Blacks, but other comparisons in the same study show Blacks to be higher in academic self-esteem than Whites). Moreover, the two studies that showed White students to be higher in academic self-esteem than African American students were both conducted in the 1960s.⁴

⁴Unfortunately, although there are a number of reviews based on the vote counting method to assess differences in self-esteem between Blacks and Whites, no meta-analysis has been conducted. Such an analysis would provide a more sensitive test, and possibly could come to somewhat different conclusions about the size and direction of any differences in self-esteem between Blacks and Whites.

Recently, a number of researchers have focused on disidentification or disengagement with the college domain among African American students as one vehicle by which self-esteem may become disassociated from academic achievement (e.g., Crocker and Major, 1989; Major *et al.*, 1998; Osborne, 1995; Steele, 1997; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; also see Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). The available evidence suggests that such a dissociation could, in part, account for the paradox of lower academic achievement but high self-esteem in African American students (Major *et al.*, 1998; Osborne, 1995; Steele, 1997).

In this paper, the focus is on another process that can account for the higher self-esteem among African American students—namely, the attributions African American students make for their performance. Two competing models are proposed, both based in Weiner's attribution theory of motivation and emotion (Weiner, 1986, 1992). After describing the models, the existing literature with regard to the relationships specified in these two models is reviewed. Finally, the findings of two recent studies are introduced, and some implications for education are discussed. Although a similar discussion could be held with regard to the experiences of members of other ethnic minority groups, the focus here is on the Black–White comparison.

The account begins with African American students occupying a still somewhat economically and ethnically segregated high school environment (Farley, 1987; Orfield, 1993; Yinger, 1995). In this environment, high schools attended by Black students on average receive less funding than the high schools of White students (General Accounting Office, 1995; Greenwald, 1996; Karp, 1997; Kozol, 1991; NCES, 1995a; Yancey and Saporito, 1997). African American students on average, then, receive a lower quality education. Such structural differences lead to African American students entering college on average less academically prepared than White students. However, at the same time, African American students are somewhat prevented from seeing this difference in preparation until they arrive at college, and are directly exposed to students who attended other high schools.⁵ Thus, it is maintained that African American students enter college with attributions and expectancies that are similar to those of White students. Upon college entry, the differences in preparation, combined with the additional burdens

⁵This argument about changing reference groups is based on social comparison research. This research suggests that people's feelings about themselves are very much influenced by those in their immediate social environment (e.g., Powers *et al.*, 1971; Rovner, 1981; Simmons, 1978; Soares and Soares, 1969). Low status groups may thus be less aware of their disadvantage when the social environment prevents exposure to others with more resources (for a similar argument, see Crocker and Blanton, 1999). The change, however, to an environment in which those higher in social status are overrepresented forces such comparisons. In support of this, results from research on social comparison indicates that individuals who are members of low status groups are especially likely to make comparisons with the higher status outgroup when they are in a numerical minority (e.g., Crosby, 1982).

of being a member of a disadvantaged minority group (e.g., see Allen and Haniff, 1991; Steele, 1992, 1997), result in a situation where, on average, African American students evidence lower academic achievement than White students. Such a negative and unexpected outcome, in a domain of such central importance to college students, is hypothesized to instigate an attributional search in which African American students strive to know the cause of their lower academic achievement. The two models described below present two possible outcomes of this search.

The first model, the *self-esteem model*, reflects research on self-esteem and performance. Early theorists such as Mead (1934) and Cooley (1956) introduced concepts of a self highly bound to the appraisals of others through the “looking glass self” and “reflected appraisals.” Later work based in social comparison and self-evaluation maintenance theory also suggests that comparisons with higher achieving others should lead to less positive self-evaluation (e.g., Morse and Gergen, 1970; Tesser, 1986). Similar views can be found in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), just world theory (Lerner, 1980), and equity theory (Adams, 1965; Walster *et al.*, 1978). According to the self-esteem hypothesis, African American college students internalize the negative stigma surrounding their group and blame themselves for their lower outcomes. In addition, their attribution to a stable factor lowers African American students’ expectancies for future outcomes and decreases their motivation and performance. The attributional process is outlined below:

In contrast, the *external attribution model* maintains that rather than making internal attributions for their lower outcomes, African American college students become increasingly concerned about structural barriers that may limit their personal performance and begin to make more external attributions for their lower outcomes in life.⁶ Such external attributions

⁶Note that it is not being argued that African American students perceive no barriers to achievement prior to college entry. There is considerable evidence that African American students become aware of negative treatment by others toward members of their ethnic group at an early age (e.g., see Averhart and Bigler, 1997; Glover and Smith, 1997; Katz and Kofkin, 1997; Spencer, 1982, 1985). What is being maintained is that prior to college entry—and thus prior to daily exposure to students of higher social status—African American students perceive that they will be able to overcome the barriers that they perceive to exist for their personal achievement. Thus it is an argument about perceived self-efficacy to overcome barriers.

prevent self-blame (see also Oyserman *et al.*, 1995), but do not protect expectancies for the future, resulting in the maintenance of high self-esteem (Crocker and Major, 1989) but decreases in expectancies for future outcomes. Thus, the external attribution model proposes that a dissociation between self-esteem and expectancies will occur in which Black students' beliefs about their future become dissociated from their evaluations of themselves. The exact consequences for motivation and achievement behaviors depend on how stable and controllable by others the student perceives these structural inequalities to be. The external attribution model also makes predictions for social action, which is hypothesized to result from external controllable attributions for the lower outcomes (these will not be discussed further here). The attributional process is outlined below:

The two models differ, then, in the attributions they predict African American students to make in college. However, the two models make quite similar predictions for expectancies. As a direct consequence of the differences in attributions, the two models deviate in their predictions for self-esteem, affect, and social behavior.

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON ATTRIBUTIONS, EXPECTANCIES, AND SELF-ESTEEM IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE STUDENTS

How do the two models fit with the existing empirical literature? A review finds a wide range of studies related to the two models. These range from studies that examine perceptions of discrimination in members of ethnic minority groups to experimental studies on attributions. However, there are a number of problems in interpreting these studies. The first problem is that studies examining the perceptions of African Americans often do not make an important distinction between self-perceptions and perceptions related to other members of one's ethnic group. Such studies

thus make the assumption that what one believes about other members of one's ethnic group one also believes about the self. A second problem is that the research on differences between Black and White students in attributions and expectancies has often been conducted in an artificial laboratory context. Although such a situation allows us to study any differences in the basic processes governing attributions and expectancies in Black and White Americans, it does not allow us to examine the effects of real world constraints on the expectancies and attributions of African American and White students.

Because of these two problems, the interpretations one can draw from the existing studies are somewhat disappointing. Nevertheless, a review of the studies provides an overview of the current knowledge in the field with regard to the attributions, expectancies, and self-esteem of Black and White American students. Although providing no final answers, the studies do present a starting point from which to conduct more targeted research.

High Expectancies and Internal Attributions at High School

According to the self-esteem and external attribution models, African American college students experience an important change in the transition from their high school environment to the college environment. Specifically, these students, who have been highly successful previously, suddenly find themselves no longer at the top of their class. Both models propose that this experience instigates an attributional search in which the cause of this lower performance is examined. Thus, both models assume that African American students, like other students, arrive at colleges and universities with high expectations and internal attributions for success and failure. Let us examine the evidence for this prediction.

In support of the two models, studies that have examined differences in expectancies between Black and White students at the high school level have generally found that African American students have equal or higher academic expectations than White students (e.g., Antonovsky, 1967; DeBord, 1977; Della Fave, 1974; Epps, 1967; Graham and Long, 1986; Shapiro and Crowley, 1982; Simmons and Rosenberg, 1971; Smith and Abramson, 1962). In fact, a recent national study of high school seniors found that the percentage of Black high school seniors expecting to complete college is equal to that of White high school seniors. Similarly, the percentage of Black high school seniors expecting to complete graduate school is equal to that of White high school seniors (NCES, 1997).

There are few attributional studies that have examined differences in

the attributions of Black and White students at high school.⁷ Research on locus of control has assessed such differences. Although locus of control is construed as a personality characteristics, rather than a characteristic of a cause (Rotter, 1966), the results from studies that have used locus of control can be reinterpreted to refer to differences in the causes perceived by Black and White students. Unfortunately, few of the studies that assessed differences in locus of control have made a distinction between perceived causes for success and failure. This is important because perceptions of discrimination should lead students to make more external attributions for failure, but not more external attributions for success. With the possible exception of college entry, positive outcomes that could conceivably be attributed to ethnicity rather than to internal characteristics are relatively rare in the experience of African American college students. However, these studies can be used as an approximation. A closer examination of the studies on locus of control included in the comprehensive review by Graham (1994) reveals that in the eight studies that examined differences in attributions at the high school level, 54% of the comparisons found Black high school students making equal or more internal attributions than White students. Also, the students examined in the studies reviewed by Graham included those who did not continue on to the college level. As it is the students who make the most external attributions who are least likely to continue on to college, we can conclude that Blacks students who are bound for college are even more likely to make internal attributions than the studies reviewed by Graham suggest. Thus, as both models predict, it appears that at the high school level, the expectancies and attributions of Black and White students are quite similar.⁸

Increasing Perceptions of Discrimination and Increasingly External Attributions

If the external attribution model is correct, then we should find that while at college African American college students begin to perceive more discrimination, and that this perception leads them to make more external attributions for their lower performance. There is little relevant research on the first point, but some quite supportive evidence on the second point.

⁷Two exceptions are Mickelson (1990) and Steinberg (1996). However, these studies, for a variety of reasons, are not applicable to the specific issue raised here.

⁸Unfortunately, no meta-analysis has been conducted on differences in locus of causality between Black and White students. It is possible that such an analysis would come to somewhat different conclusions about the size and direction of any differences in locus of causality between Blacks and Whites.

Perceptions of Discrimination

The results of research conducted in the relative deprivation framework provide some support for the suggestion that college entry increases perceptions of discrimination. These results suggest that being forced to make comparisons with a higher status outgroup, as Black college students entering predominantly White colleges are forced to do, increases the likelihood of perceiving discrimination. Research in the relative deprivation framework is concerned with how perceived deprivation is a function of the availability of a comparison standard. It makes the prediction that a group that is objectively worse off than another group may actually perceive itself as less deprived if it does not have a higher status group with which to compare itself. For example, Zanna *et al.* (1987) found that making comparisons with a high status group is associated with feeling more deprived, with perceiving a wider gap between what one has and what one wants, and with perceiving a wider gap between what one feels entitled to have and expects to have. There is some more direct evidence of increasing perceptions of discrimination among Black college students over the college years. In a longitudinal study of 25,000 college students, Astin (1993) found that during the college years, African American and White students increasingly diverge in their agreement with the proposition that racial discrimination is no longer a problem. In addition, it appears that the classes taken by students affect their tendency to make external attributions. Specifically, Astin (1993) found that, controlling for entering characteristics, attending a racial or cultural awareness workshop at college increases the likelihood that students will perceive discrimination as a problem in American society. Because African American students take such classes in greater proportions than White students do (van Laar, 1999), it is likely that ethnic studies classes also play a part in increasing external attributions.

What is the evidence with regard to attributions becoming more external in college for African American students? Although studies that have examined the attributions of Black and White students have rarely made a distinction between attributions for success and failure, such studies can be examined for general differences between Blacks and Whites in locus of causality.

Studies of Locus of Control

Studies that have examined differences in locus of control among college students find that Black students make more external attributions

Fig. 1. Percentage of studies showing internal attributions of Black and White students at high school and college.

than White students do.⁹ Five of the studies reviewed by Graham (1994) make use of college student samples. In 67% of the comparisons between Blacks and Whites, Blacks make less internal attributions on the locus of control scale. Although Graham did not hypothesize or examine differences between high school and college in the attributions made by Black students, the results of the thirteen studies she reported can be used to examine such a hypothesis. As Fig. 1 shows, the studies using college students are much more likely to find Blacks making less internal attributions on the locus of control scale than the studies using high school students. These findings are even more convincing given that students who make more internal attributions are the ones most likely to continue on to the college level. Despite such selection effects that would reduce the likelihood of finding a difference in attributions at the college level, it appears that Black college students are not only more likely to make less internal attributions than

⁹As mentioned earlier, in the locus of control framework such differences should be interpreted as indicating differences in personality characteristics, but these results can be reinterpreted in attributional terms as being indicative of the different causes that Black and White students perceive to be determining their outcomes.

White college students, but that the gap between Black and White students is wider at the college level than at the high school level.¹⁰

Experimental Studies on Attributions

When investigators have examined the attributions of African American college students in a laboratory setting, they have found that African American students are no more likely to make external attributions for failure than are White students (and, in fact, are sometimes even less likely to do so; see Graham, 1994, for a review). However, such studies were conducted in a laboratory setting that removed the students from the constraints present in the real world setting. Although such studies allow researchers to (and indeed were set up to) examine whether Black and White students differ in general processes of attribution, they do not permit examination of the real world attributions of Black and White students. It is precisely the social conditions present in the real world, but absent in the laboratory setting, that are predicted to cause external attributions for lower outcomes in African American students. Only within the existing social system, and within the structural limits that this system imposes, should researchers see more external attributions for lower outcomes among African American students. Therefore, the experimental studies support predictions derived from the external attribution model, which is that Black and White students would make similar attributions if structural inequalities were removed.

External Attributions Protect Self-Esteem

According to Weiner's attributional theory of motivation and emotion (1986), the attribution of lower outcomes to internal causes will lead to low self-esteem, whereas the attribution of lower outcomes to external causes should protect self-esteem. A number of other theorists have proposed similar hypotheses (see Abramson *et al.*, 1978; 1989; Oyserman *et al.*, 1995). The results from studies using various low status groups are consistent with the interpretation that attributing negative outcomes to external causes, such as discrimination, protects self-esteem, whereas attributing negative outcomes to internal attributions leads to lower self-esteem. For example, Oyserman and colleagues showed that awareness of racism is

¹⁰Meta-analytic review would provide a more sensitive test of this hypothesis, and possibly may lead to somewhat different conclusions about the size and direction of differences in external attributions between Black and White students.

positively correlated with self-esteem, suggesting that recognition of racism either in one's own life or as a general force in society preserves and protects one's sense of personal worth (Oyserman *et al.*, 1995).¹¹ Similarly, Dion *et al.* (1978) found that self-esteem did not suffer among Chinese Canadians who perceived discrimination to be directed against them by the majority group. Experimental evidence for the protection of self-esteem through external attributions for negative outcomes comes from a study by Crocker and her colleagues, who found that women experienced less depressed affect when they were negatively evaluated by a sexist male evaluator than when they were negatively evaluated by a nonsexist evaluator, presumably because they could attribute the negative evaluation to the evaluators' attitudes toward women (Crocker *et al.*, 1991). Similarly, a second study by Crocker and her colleagues indicated that African American students' self-esteem decreased when they received a negative evaluation from an evaluator who could not see them but not when they received a negative evaluation from someone who could see them (Crocker *et al.*, 1991). Again, self-esteem was presumably protected when the student was visible to the evaluator because the student could attribute the negative evaluation to the evaluator's prejudice rather than to characteristics internal to the student. Dion (1975) also showed that women who attributed negative feedback from a male evaluator to discrimination had higher self-esteem than those who attributed it internally (also see Dion, 1986; Dion and Earn, 1975). In fact, it appears that attributing negative outcomes to external causes can be so effective in protecting self-esteem that the negative affect experienced is equal to that experienced when one is successful. In addition, McFarland and Ross (1982) presented participants with a success or failure experience and induced either internal or external attributions. They found that participants making external attributions after failure evidenced equally positive affect as those experiencing success. These findings support the idea that attributions can overcome the negative effects of failure on well-being (Weiner *et al.* 1978, 1979).

If external attributions for lower outcomes protect self-esteem, then we should find that African American college students are high in self-esteem. As discussed earlier, there is overwhelming evidence that African Americans have self-esteem levels that are equal to or greater than those of White Americans (for reviews see Crocker and Major, 1989; Graham, 1994; Hoelter, 1983; Hughes and Demo, 1989; Porter and Washington, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979; Wylie, 1979). Thus, consistent with the external attribution model and contrary to the self-esteem model, not only are African Americans very high in self-esteem, but the evidence from experi-

¹¹Of course, in a correlational study the alternative prediction that persons with high self-esteem are more likely to make external attributions is also plausible.

mental research indicates that this high self-esteem may well be the result of attributing lower outcomes to external causes.

External Attributions Lead to a Dissociation Between Self-Esteem and Outcomes

Not only should external attributions for lower outcomes protect self-esteem, but external attributions should also lead to a dissociation between an individual's evaluation of his/her outcomes and his/her evaluation of him/herself. As a result, the self-esteem of students who make external attributions should be less affected by their outcomes than should the self-esteem of students who make internal attributions. However, the self-esteem model expects both Black and White students to make internal attributions. Thus, the self-esteem model would predict that both Black and White students are affected by outcomes, with failure causing more negative self-esteem than does success.

As discussed earlier, previous research has found some evidence in support of the external attribution models' prediction that self-esteem is less related to outcomes in African American students than in White students (Allen and Haniff, 1991; Demo and Parker, 1987; Drury, 1980; Mboya, 1986; Osborne, 1995; Rosenberg and Simmons, 1971). For example, Allen and Haniff found a correlation of .03 between self-esteem and college GPA for Black students. Similarly, Demo and Parker found a correlation of $-.08$ between the same variables. Mboya (1986) found an average correlation of .06 between global self-esteem and academic achievement test scores among Black 10th graders (also see Mboya, 1988). In a direct comparison with White students, Osborne (1995) found a correlation of .08 for Black male 10th graders as compared to .24 among White male 10th graders.

External Attributions Lower Expectations Despite High Self-Esteem

Whereas external attributions for lower outcomes can serve a self-protective function for self-esteem, expectancies for future economic outcomes are hypothesized to be negatively affected by attributions to external causes. This decline in expectancies is especially likely to the degree that the external cause held responsible for lower outcomes is perceived to be stable. However, African American students who attribute their lower outcomes to low ability (as the self-esteem model predicts) are also likely to have low expectancies, because they perceive internal stable characteristics to be responsible for their future outcomes. Although it is unclear

whether external stable or internal stable attributions for lower outcomes will lead to lower expectancies, the key distinction between the two models is that whereas the self-esteem model suggests that expectancies will decline as self-esteem declines, the external attribution model makes what initially appears to be a counterintuitive prediction: beliefs about one's future will become more negative while beliefs about the self remain positive.

There are two sources of evidence concerning the relationship between locus of causality and expectancies. The first is from research that examines the general relationship between locus and expectancies, and the second is from research that has examined differences in expectancies between Black and White students.

Locus of Causality and Expectancies

First, some of the researchers who have examined the relationship between attributions and expectancies tend to find that external attributions are associated with lower expectancies (e.g., Cosby, 1974; Gurin *et al.*, 1969; Smith, 1976). However, other studies find no relationship between locus and expectancies (e.g., Evans and Herr, 1994). The problem with these studies is that the outcome (success or failure) was not controlled, and therefore these findings are difficult to interpret.

Differences in Expectancies Between Black and White Students

Studies that have examined differences in expectancies between Black and White students are also not very informative (e.g., see Astin, 1993; Back and Simpson, 1964; Glanz, 1977; Grace, 1984; Littig, 1968; Trent, 1984). One problem with these studies is that a crucial distinction between expectancies and aspirations is often not made. Aspirations are desired career goals given ideal conditions, whereas expectancies include an individual's consideration of the factors that may affect his or her achievement. This distinction is particularly important when we discuss a group with low social status. Specifically, the aspirations of an African American student reflect what he or she would like to be in an ideal world where interpersonal and institutional discrimination play no role. However, the student's expectations of what he or she will actually achieve will be constrained by his or her perceptions of discrimination. It is thus expectations rather than aspirations that are the concern of this paper. In support of the importance of the distinction between aspirations and expectations, studies have found a consistent discrepancy between African American students' aspirations

and their expectations (e.g. Baly, 1989; Cosby, 1974; see also Mickelson, 1990). Because studies that have included measures of locus of causality have often not made a distinction between expectancies and aspirations, we are unable to examine the evidence for the external attribution model using these studies.

In summary, a review of the empirical evidence suggests that the literature with regard to some of the hypothesized relationships is quite sparse. The research that examines relationships between attributions, expectancies, and self-esteem has tended to look at these variables in the laboratory, removed from the real world of external constraints that are so central to the hypotheses presented here. The available literature suggests that, in support of the external attribution model, and contrary to the self-esteem model, African American students appear to be making more external attributions at the college level, have high rather than low self-esteem, and evidence a dissociation between their outcomes and their self-esteem. But this evidence is weak and insufficient to conclude that the external attribution model in fact accounts for the higher self-esteem observed in African American students as compared to White students.

SOME NEW EVIDENCE

To specifically examine some of these relationships in White and African American students two studies—one cross-sectional and one longitudinal—were conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles. The first study examined differences in attributions, expectancies, and self-esteem between African American ($n = 134$) and White ($n = 395$) college students (see van Laar, 1998).¹² Students at various stages of their college career completed measures of expectancies, attributions, and self-esteem. Students' expectancies for future outcomes were assessed by asking students about the future earnings they expected to obtain, their future socioeconomic status, and their general future economic well-being. Students' attributions for these outcomes were assessed by asking students to what extent these outcomes would be due to their ability, their effort, and to external factors in the society around them. Students' self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). To examine the hypothesized effects of college attendance, comparisons were made between students early in their college career (freshmen and sophomores) and students who had been at college for some time (juniors and seniors).

The results confirmed the external attribution model. Specifically, as Fig. 2 shows, African American students in the later years of college were

¹²The category "White" was defined as Euro-Americans, with Hispanic Americans excluded.

Fig. 2. Study 1: Attributions for outcomes by ethnicity and year in college. High numbers indicate internal attributions (scale consists of four standardized items).

found to make significantly less internal attributions for their future economic outcomes than African American in the earlier years of college and than White students in the later years of college. Also, as Fig. 3 shows, the expectancies for future outcomes of African American students in the later years of college were considerably lower than those of African American students in the earlier years of college.¹³ The results also confirmed that, consistent with the external attribution model, such external attributions have self-protective effects: As Fig. 4 shows, African American students were found to have higher self-esteem than White students. African American students in the later years of college were also found to have self-

¹³A number of studies have described a phenomenon where students, regardless of ethnicity, enter college with high expectations, and evidence a slight decline when they adjust their expectancies for the general college competition level. These effects have been referred to as the ‘matriculation myth’ (e.g., Baker *et al.*, 1985; Cooper and Robinson, 1988), and the “frog pond effect” (Davis, 1966; Bachman and O’Malley, 1986). The effects described in this paper differ in that they refer to substantially larger shifts that are accompanied by changes in attributions and expectancies for future economic outcomes.

Fig. 3. Study 1: Expectancies for future economic outcomes by ethnicity and year in college. High numbers indicate high expectancies (scale consists of these standardized items).

esteem that was equal to that of African American students in the earlier years of college. No differences were seen among White students in the early and later years of college in terms of their attributions, expectancies, or self-esteem.

Study 2 supported these findings. Because Study 2 was a longitudinal study it also provided evidence of changes within individual students, and it provided information on the early college experiences that preceded these changes (see van Laar, 1998). African American ($n = 51$) and White ($n = 514$) college students were followed from the summer prior to their college entry until the end of their first year in college.¹⁴ As in Study 1, students completed measures of attributions, expectancies, and self-esteem. The results showed that prior to college entry the attributions and expectan-

¹⁴This study was part of a larger project funded by the Russell Sage Foundation grant for “Studies in Intergroup Conflict: A University Context” and by the Office of the Chancellor, University of California, Los Angeles. The primary investigators on the project are Professors Marilynn Brewer, David Sears, and Jim Sidanius.

Fig. 4. Study 1: Global self-esteem by ethnicity and year in college. High numbers indicate high self-esteem (Rosenberg self-esteem scale: 10 standardized items).

cies of Black students are very similar to those of White students: As Fig. 5 shows, prior to college entry African American students had very high expectancies for their future economic outcomes, even higher than those of White students. These high expectancies for future economic outcomes were accompanied by equally high expectancies for academic performance among Black as among White students. Also, at this time Black students attach even higher importance than White students to a high academic performance. And, as expected, prior to college entry, African American students were found to make attributions for failure that are as internal as those of White students.

The picture changes after college entry. The results of Study 2 showed that within the first year of college, on average, African American students experience substantial disappointment with regard to their academic performance. By the end of the first year, African American students perceive

Fig. 5. Study 2: Expectancies across the first year in college by ethnicity. High numbers indicate high expectancies (seven-point scale).

that they are doing less well than other students. They also attach less importance to obtaining high academic outcomes than they do prior to college entry, and they are concerned about confirming stereotypes of their ethnic group. Through the first year in college African American students' expectancies for their future economic outcomes decline considerably (see Fig. 5), and attributions become more external. As found in the first study, and consistent with the external attribution model, self-esteem remains stable over this time, despite the considerable academic disappointment experienced by these African American students.

What then were the effects of these changes in attributions and expectancies on academic motivation in African American students? Academic motivation was measured in Study 1 with three items. The items asked participants how many hours they studied per week, how likely they were to return to college the following year, and how likely it was that they would consider dropping out of college. Study 1 found Black students who

Fig. 6. Study 1: Academic motivation for Black participants by attributions for success and failure. High numbers indicate high academic motivation (scale consists of three standardized items).

make external attributions for lower outcomes to be high in academic motivation, higher than students making internal attributions for lower outcomes. Moreover, as shown in Fig. 6, Study 1 found that Black students who make external attributions for failure—but internal attributions for success—are most likely to evidence high academic motivation.

To further examine the fit of the causal relationships specified in the hypotheses a structural equations model was specified with the data from Study 1.¹⁵ Specifically, a two-sample model was specified, one for Black and one for White students (see Fig. 7). The fully constrained model was first tested, with all regression paths constrained to be equal across the Black and White samples. The equality constraint on the path from self-esteem to motivation was released after the Lagrange Multiplier Test indi-

¹⁵There was an insufficient number of Black participants in Study 2 to allow the test of a two-sample structural equations model.

cated that this path was not equal in the two groups. There were no further modifications to the model that would afford a significant increase in fit. The models support the basic relationships hypothesized in Weiner's attributional model of motivation and emotion. The models start with an outcome: how the student felt he or she was performing compared to how he/she expected to perform. As expected, for Black (and White) students the lower one's actual academic performance is (compared to their expected academic performance) the more external one's attributions for one's outcomes. As hypothesized by Weiner and colleagues (1978, 1979), the effect of the outcome experienced by the student on self-esteem and expectancies for future outcomes depends on the attributions the student makes for the outcomes. As expected, Black and White students lower their expectancies as they make more external attributions. For Black and White students, the more internal one's attributions, the higher one's self-esteem. As expected, further analyses disclosed that for Black participants this effect was moderated by perceived academic performance: Whereas Black students who perceive themselves to be performing well show a positive relationship between internal attributions and self-esteem, Black students who perceive themselves to be performing less well show a negative relationship, with external rather than internal attributions being associated with high self-esteem. As predicted by Weiner's theory, the EQS model also shows that a students' self-esteem and his or her expectancies for the future mediate the effects of attributions on motivation. For both Black and White students, the lower one's expectancies the higher one's motivation. For Black students, this result is explained by other findings that show that Black students are more academically motivated when they make external attributions for failure, and thus have low expectancies. Thus, for Black students low expectancies would be associated with high motivation. However, it is not clear how to explain these results for White students. Lastly, as expected for both Black and White students, the higher the self-esteem the more academically motivated is the student. Interestingly, the model indicates that there is a difference in the strength of the effect of self-esteem on academic motivation for Black and White students. For Black students this effect is very strong, whereas for White students the relationship is smaller in magnitude.

Overall, the results of the two studies suggest that the external attribution model provides a good description of the changes experienced by African American students as they go through college. African American students start college optimistically, believing they can overcome the barriers they face in society, but Black students become increasingly pessimistic about this prospect as they go through college. However, the results also show that these external attributions for failure have more positive conse-

Fig. 7. The model tested for Black and White participants.

quences for motivation than internal attributions for failure, as long as they are combined with internal attributions for success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

What are the implications of the observed changes in attributions and expectancies and the stability of self-esteem for education? One clear message is that concern over threats to self-esteem in African American students may be misplaced. Instead, the data suggest that African American college students are very resilient in the face of such threats, even when these threats are in domains of primary concern for them, such as academic achievement. Self-esteem does not appear to be the story here. This is not to say that self-esteem does not matter—it does: both Black and White students show a positive relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation. This is consistent with various accounts in psychology which posit the importance of positive self-views (e.g., Taylor and Brown, 1988). But the results presented here show that among Black students it is not high self-esteem that is lacking. Thus, interventions aimed solely at maintaining high self-esteem among this group would be misplaced. To the contrary, the story seems to be very little about beliefs about the self, and instead is concerned with external attributions: beliefs African American students have about the world around them and their place in it. The changes evidenced are in terms of African American students increasing doubts that their efforts will make a difference in their outcomes. The large proportion of African American students leaving colleges and universities stems not, then, from fear of failure in that setting, or because their self-worth is negatively affected. Instead, it appears to derive from the increasing

doubt African American students have that the returns to their efforts will be worth it.

Views will differ on the question of whether the decline in optimism about the future shown among African American students is a move toward a more realistic view of the barriers faced, or an overly pessimistic view of the opportunities available for these students. Most would agree, however, that even in a less than fair world an individual is better served with a college education than without it, and that educators should attempt to lower the number of African American students leaving college without a degree. As perceptions of opportunity appear to be a central issue for African American college students, efforts to increase the number of African American students graduating from college will need to address the issue of "opportunity" directly. Educators could direct efforts toward African American students themselves, toward educational institutions, or toward educational policy more generally. Parents of members of underrepresented ethnic minority students have long been struggling with the issue of how to discuss the issue of discrimination with their children. On the one hand, parents can warn their children of racism, in order to prepare them for any negative experiences they may have, but at the risk of lowering their children's motivation. On the other hand, parents can encourage their children to have high expectancies and to prepare for fair treatment, but at the risk that they may become disillusioned. While parents struggle to find a balance between these two concerns, it seems many high schools presently have no formal classroom program for dealing with the issue of discrimination. Such a program could focus on individuals or on groups. One suggestion would be for teachers and counselors to explicitly raise the issue of opportunity for members of underrepresented minority groups with individual African American students. Essential to such efforts is further research investigating the effects of messages about discrimination on motivation and self-evaluation.

Second, educators should strive to create positive multiethnic climates on university campuses. The current debate on affirmative action in institutions of higher education has unintentionally also made colleges and universities a less welcome place for students of underrepresented minority groups. There appears to be, at best, little close interaction between members of various ethnic groups on college campuses, and at worst substantial conflict. It is likely that the changes in attributions and expectancies discussed in this paper are affected by this less than optimal environment. A number of researchers have addressed what needs to be done to ensure a positive multiethnic environment on university campuses (e.g. see Anderson, 1989; Steele, 1997). Increasingly we are obtaining a clearer view of the effects of membership in a stigmatized group on achievement. Research

in this area has uncovered processes of academic disengagement (e.g., Osborne, 1995), as well as direct declines in performance following subtle exposure to negative stereotypes (Steele, 1997; Steele and Aronson, 1995). It is likely that processes such as disengagement and external attributions occur under different conditions, with disengagement from the academic domain occurring when an external cause for lower achievement cannot be clearly identified. We are currently conducting research to address this issue. The effects of educational environments on such processes remain largely unexplored.

Although efforts directed at students and educational institutions can attempt to lower attrition rates among African American students, a third and most ambitious effort would deal directly with educational policy. Educators need to ensure good opportunities for students of all ethnic groups at every level of education. Such a goal would include the identification of the policies and procedures that are succeeding in meeting this promise, and systematic research into the instances in which the education system fails to live up to this promise.

Concluding Remarks

In studying changes in expectancies and attributions as a result of educational experiences, the approach presented here joins an increasing body of work focusing on the processes by which educational environments influence the achievement of ethnic minority students. There is considerable knowledge about the school and living conditions experienced by members of majority and minority groups. There is also extensive evidence of the eventual outcomes of such conditions in terms of lower academic and economic outcomes among ethnic minorities. Yet there is as yet little known about the psychological processes that mediating the relationship between objective conditions and lower outcomes. It is in identifying these mediators that psychologists can make a substantial contribution. Recent publications suggest that there is an increasing interest in this area (e.g., Crocker *et al.*, 1998; Eberhardt and Fiske, 1998; Swim and Stangor, 1998). A better understanding of these psychological mediators will aid attempts to increase academic achievement among ethnic minority students.

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