DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 540 95 UD 016 460

AUTHOR Massey, Grace C.; Darnbusch, Sanford M.
TITLE Self-Enhancement, Self-Consistency, and Distinctiveness of Feedback in a Field Study of Academic Self-Concept: Attribution Processes in Inner-City High Schools. Technical Report No. 49.
INSTITUTION Stanford Univ., Calif. Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO SCRDT-TR-49
PUB DATE Aug 76
CONTRACT NE-C-00-3-0062
NOTE 25p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Ability; Academic Failure; Asian Americans; *Attribution Theory; Caucasian Students; *Comparative Analysis; Disadvantaged Youth; Educational Attitudes; *Ethnic Groups; High School Students; Inner City; Low Achievers; Minority Groups; Morale; Negroes; *Psychological Characteristics; Questionnaires; Secondary Education; *Self Concept; Self Congruence; Self Esteem; Self Evaluation; Spanish Speaking

ABSTRACT

The relationship between attribution processes and academic self-concept is studied among students from four ethnic groups in inner-city high schools, and an explanation as to why low achieving minority students do not report low academic self-concepts is sought in this paper. Questionnaires eliciting self-conceptions and responses to hypothetical feedback are administered to 772 students, a five percent random sample from the eight comprehensive and academic high schools in a large city. Using a symbolic interactionist approach, internalization and externalization of feedback are studied to test hypotheses derived from assumptions about self-enhancement, self-consistency, and distinctiveness of feedback. Results indicate that self-consistency has more impact than self-enhancement on the attribution of causality for evaluations in school. Hypotheses based on a tendency toward self-enhancement are more successful in predicting attributions to ability -- and internal attributions in general -- than are hypotheses based on self-consistency. Academic self-concept is affected by the social context of the school. Students in low achieving minority groups or in low achievement schools are less likely to attribute low grades to lack of ability than are students in high achievement schools, for whom low grades are distinctive. These results are said to help to explain why more students from low achieving groups believe they are average in ability than would be expected on the basis of their grades. (Author/AM)

Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching
School of Education, Stanford University
Stanford, California

Technical Report No. 49

SELF-ENHANCEMENT, SELF-CONSISTENCY, AND DISTINCTIVENESS OF FEEDBACK IN A FIELD STUDY OF ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT: ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES IN INNER-CITY HIGH SCHOOLS

Grace C. Massey and Sanford M. Dornbusch

August 1976

Published by the Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching, supported in part as a research and development center by funds from the National Institute of Education, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the National Institute of Education. (Contract No. NE-C-00-3-0062.)

Introductory Statement

The mission of the Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching is to improve teaching in American schools. Current major operations include three research and development programs--Teaching Effectiveness, The Environment for Teaching, and Teaching and Linguistic Pluralism--and two programs combining research and technical assistance, the Stanford Urban/Rural Leadership Training Institute and the Hoover/ Stanford Teacher Corps Project. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources is also a part of the Center. A program of exploratory and related studies provides for smaller studies not part of the major programs.

This report represents part of the work of the Environment for Teaching Program.

Contents

Abstract

The relationship between attribution processes and academic self-concept was studied among students from four ethnic groups in inner-city high schools; and an explanation of why low-achieving minority students do not report low academic self-concepts was sought.

Questionnaires eliciting self-conceptions and responses to hypothetical feedback (evaluation) were administered to 772 students, a 5 percent random sample from the eight comprehensive and academic high schools in a large city. From school records, background data were collected for each student on ethnicity, sex, grades in English, math, and social studies, and achievement test scores. Black and Spanish-surname students had considerably lower grades and achievement scores than Other White and Asian-American students, yet they were not more likely to report that they were below average in any subject.

Using a symbolic interactionist approach, internalization and externalization of feedback were studied to test hypotheses derived from assumptions about self-enhancement, self-consistency, and distinctiveness of feedback. (Internal attributions include attributions to ability and effort; external ones include luck and teacher's liking or disliking.) The results indicate that self-consistency has more impact than self-enhancement upon the attribution of causality for evaluations in school. Hypotheses based on a tendency toward self-enhancement were less successful in predicting attributions to ability--and internal attributions in general--than were hypotheses based on self-consistency.

Academic self-concept was affected by the social context of the school. Hypotheses based on the concept of distinctiveness--the idea that a student who receives evaluations that are inconsistent with those received by other students in his social setting is more likely to internalize those evaluations--were tested. For high grades the distinctiveness hypotheses failed. But students in low-achieving minority groups or in low-achievement schools were less likely to attribute low grades (non-distinctive feedback) to lack of ability than were students in high-achieving ethnic groups or high-achievement schools, for whom low grades were distinctive. These results help to explain why more students from low-achieving groups believed they were average in ability than would be expected on the basis of their grades.

SELF-ENHANCEMENT, SELF-CONSISTENCY, AND DISTINCTIVENESS OF FEEDBACK IN A FIELD STUDY OF ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT: ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES IN INNER-CITY HIGH SCHOOLS

Grace C. Massey and Sanford M. Dornbusch

This study is an attempt to test findings from experimental research on attribution and self-concept (Frieze and Weiner, 1970; Weiner et al., 1971) in the field setting of inner-city high schools. We deal with a limited aspect of the self, evaluating only how a student views his or her academic ability in specific subjects. Figure 1 illustrates our view of academic self-concept as an end-product of various interactions and processes among students in the school environment. We focus on the way in which students attribute causality to given feedback, believing that attribution processes may help to explain how disadvantaged minorities can maintain a reasonably favorable self-image despite negative feedback and discrimination.

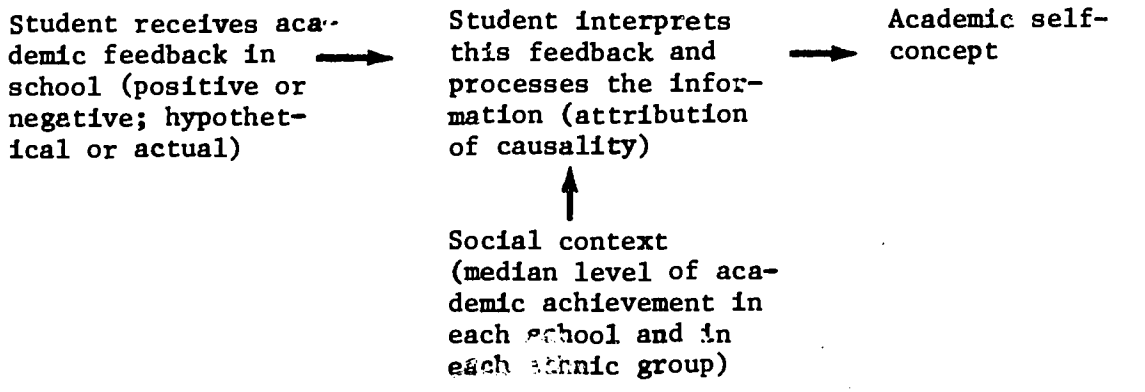

Fig. 1. A symbolic interactionist view of the development of academic self-concept.

The dichotomy between causes attributable to the individual and causes attributable to the environment is a theme in much of the literature on locus of control. Rotter (1964) refers to this dichotomy as

internal versus external control. He indicates that people differ in the amount of control they perceive themselves to have over their environment, which leads to different expectations from that environment and, consequently, to varied patterns of behavior. We follow Weiner et al. (1971), who view internalization-externalization as based less on general personality dispositions than on the nature of a specific situation.

Our study examines three approaches to attribution and the self-concept: self-enhancement, self-consistency, and distinctiveness of feedback. Self-enhancement represents a process by which an individual seeks a more positive view of the self as he or she interprets feedback from the environment. Self-consistency in this paper represents a process by which an individual develops a view of the self that is congruent with the sustained feedback from the environment. Distinctive feedback received by a student refers to evaluations that are inconsistent with those received by other students in the same social setting. Our central variables are sustained evaluations in the form of grades, hypothetical positive and negative feedback, the distinctiveness of an individual's grades relative to the average grades in the school or ethnic group, attribution to internal and external causes, and academic self-concept. We use these variables to test the utility of these three approaches to the development of academic self-concept among students of diverse backgrounds and levels of skill.

Method

Data Base

A student questionnaire was used to collect data from the eight comprehensive and academic high schools in a large inner-city high school district. We took a 5 percent random sample of students in each school--a sample large enough to be representative of the varied students in the system. The schools varied greatly with respect to their proportions of Black, Spanish-surname and Asian-American students, but each ethnic group was represented in more than one school. The major ethnic groups in this study were Spanish-surname, Other White (Whites not Spanish-surname), Black, and Asian-American.

We were unable to reach the full 5 percent sample because some students on the roster had moved from the district, while others' addresses were listed incorrectly and they were not attending school. Approximately 80 percent of the students drawn were available for our study, and the remaining 20 percent of our sample were replacements also selected at random. The total sample for the eight schools was 772 students.

Students completing the questionnaire were paid $2.00 to foster the participation of those students least satisfied with school and schooling. An initial letter was sent to all students in the 5 percent sample informing them of the study and assigning them a time and place after school to complete the questionnaire. "Locators" were hired to contact students and facilitate completion of the questionnaire. These locators, often bilingual, were usually graduates of the high school in question. Only a few contacted students chose not to participate in the study.

Procedures

Each student in the sample was given the questionnaire in a small group by a trained administrator. The administrators were young college students, assigned to schools so as to match the ethnic makeup of students in each school. Selection of administrators on the basis of ethnicity was designed to reduce student anxiety and to increase student trust and responsiveness in completing the questionnaire; some minority students were distrustful of the enterprise, and the questionnaire administrators aided tremendously in reducing this distrust. Some students had to be read the questionnaire because of their poor reading skills. A Spanish translation was also necessary at times. Only part of our lengthy questionnaire (Massey, 1975) is used for the analyses in this paper.

Background data for each student were gathered from school records by school clerks (who were paid by us for their time): ethnicity; achievement scores in reading and mathematics in eighth and tenth grade; and last grade recorded in math, English, and social studies. These statistics, and other information from school records not analyzed here, yielded objective data to compare with the more subjective reports of students (via the questionnaire) and also provided control variables for analysis.

Analysis

In order to maximize the number of cases in the cells of contingency tables and to simplify the analyses, we grouped two key variables. First, schools were grouped by student achievement: the four schools higher in average achivement versus the four schools lower in average achievement, determined on the basis of a cumulative score derived from mean achievement on standardized eighth- and tenth-grade math and verbal tests.

Second, to determine academic self-concept, we simply asked students "How good do you think you are in English?" The same question was rephrased for math and social studies. The students could respond by checking: "Far above average," "above average," "average," "below average," or "far below average." "Far above" and "above average" responses on self-concept were combined, and "far below" and "below average" were also combined, leaving three categories: "far above and above average," "average," and "below and far below average" in academic self-concept.

For measurement of internalization and externalization specific to this academic situation, we introduced a hypothetical grade situation to the students. Different categories of responses were possible for each of two questions:

1. Everyone gets a poor grade sometimes. When you get a poor grade, which reason do you think usually causes the poor grade?
2. Everyone gets a good grade sometimes. When you get a good grade, which reason do you think usually causes the good grade?

For the hypothetical poor grade, the students could respond by checking one of the following:

(a) I didn't work hard.
(b) I'm not good at this subject.
(c) I had bad luck.
(d) The teacher didn't like me.

For the hypothetical good grade, the students could respond by checking one of the following:

(a) I worked hard.
(b) I'm good at this subject.
(c) I was lucky.
(d) The teacher liked me.

Attributions to effort or to ability (a or b) were categorized as internal responses, while attributions to luck or to liking by the teacher (c or d) were categorized as external.

To measure the general disposition of our sample to be internal or external in attribution, we developed from the work of Rotter (1966) and Deslonde (1970) a four-point scale. This general scale differentiates between those individuals who believe that events in their life are more contingent upon their own actions or behavior and those who believe their fate is contingent upon external factors, such as luck or chance.

The students were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

(a) If a person is not successful in life, it is his own fault.

(b) Every time I try to get ahead, something or somebody stops me.

(c) Good luck is more important than hard work for success.

These three questions formed an acceptable Guttman scale.

Hypotheses and Results

General and Specific Measures of Internalization and Externalization

We set out to test our view that internalization or externalization of feedback is situation-specific, and so we examined the relationship between our specific academic measures of internalization-externalization and our more general scale.

In general, there was a positive correlation between the general scale and each specific measure of internalization-externalization. The gammas, nonparametric measures of association (with a possible range of -1.0 to 1.0; Goodman & Kruskal, 1954), ranged from .17 to .30, all in the expected positive direction. Yet these gammas were not very high, a circumstance supporting the view that a general personality disposition is not a satisfactory basis for predicting internalization or externalization in specific situations. We went on to consider other factors--self-enhancement and self-consistency--which affect the attribution process.

Self-enhancement

The principle of self-enhancement applied to attribution processes states that positive feedback, compared to negative feedback, is more likely to be internalized; that is, in terms of our study, to be attributed to personal ability or effort. This principle logically implies that negative feedback is more likely to be externalized (attributed to bad luck or dislike by the teacher).

In developing hypotheses to test this principle of self-enhancement, we first sought to eliminate analyses in which self-consistency processes could be confounding our analysis. Consequently, after the first hypothesis, H_1, which has no controls, we analyzed data only for those situations in which the hypothetical feedback was inconsistent with self-concept or last recorded grade; that is, in both H_2 and H_3, self-enhancement was tested in situations for which self-consistency did not vary. Our three initial hypotheses were as follows:

(H_1) Students who receive hypothetical negative feedback externalize more than students who receive hypothetical positive feedback.

(H_2) Students who report lower academic self-concepts and receive hypothetical positive feedback internalize more than students who report higher self-concepts and are given hypothetical negative feedback.

(H_3) Students with low grades who receive hypothetical positive feedback internalize more than students with high grades who receive hypothetical negative feedback.

None of these hypotheses was supported by the data. In H_1, students were expected to attribute a hypothetical poor grade, more than a hypothetical good grade, to external causes. Yet, when combining all students for H_1, students in math and social studies externalized good grades more than poor grades, as shown in Table 1. In English, the percentage of externalizations was about the same for both types of hypothetical grades.

Hypotheses H_2 and H_3 also were not supported by the data. Analysis of a series of tables showed that students reporting higher academic self-concepts internalized hypothetical negative feedback more than students

TABLE 1

Percentage of Students Attributing Hypothetical Grades to External Reasons for Each Subject Area

	Math		English		Social Studies	
	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)
Poor Grades	8.3	(759)	9.6	(767)	9.9	(751)
Good Grades	15.4	(761)	8.6	(763)	14.7	(753)

with lower academic self-concepts internalized hypothetical positive feedback. This same pattern was found when high and low recorded grades were substituted for high and low self-concepts. Within each ethnic group, the same rejection of H_2 and H_3 was evident.

Like Videbeck's study (1960), our data challenge the notion that predictions of attribution of causality need only be based on self-enhancement, and they are inconsistent with much of the experimental literature on attribution and self-enhancement. To explain these inconsistencies, we made several observations. First, in such experiments, subjects are usually faced with a new task situation where there is not a stable self-conception concerning ability to do the task. In contrast, within the school setting, students usually have a stable view of their academic ability based upon frequent past evaluations. An additional basis for the discrepancy between our field results and the experimental literature may be our use of academic abilities or skills which students must yet exhibit many times in the course of their education: any unrealistic enhancement of self-concept would produce pain in the future when new negative evaluations were received. The experimental studies usually employ very specific skills limited to the laboratory situation. The self-concept, after all, is the product of dynamic processes that, according to symbolic interaction theory, can take the future into account.

In their summary of experimental literature on self-enhancement, Webster and Sobieszek (1974, pp. 154-55) state a similar conclusion:

> Although results of the analyses in this chapter convince us that maximization [of self-concept] does not occur as an invariant process observable in all

> social situations at all times, our analyses do not rule out the possibility that maximization occurs sometimes under certain circumstances. . . . A related type of situation that may lead to maximization involves an individual who is not called on to perform and prove his claimed ability. People who claim to be good at driving a car, or at making love, almost never are asked to demonstrate their abilities; perhaps there is a tendency to magnify one's self-esteem at tasks when the threat of a test is low.

Self-consistency

The principle of self-consistency applied to attribution processes states that hypothetical evaluations which are consistent with past evaluations or self-concept are more likely to be attributed to ability than are hypothetical evaluations which are inconsistent with past evaluations or self-concept. We developed four hypotheses to test this principle of self-consistency:

(H_4) Students who have received high grades attribute hypothetical positive feedback to high ability more than do students who have not received sustained positive evaluations.

(H_5) Students who have received low grades attribute hypothetical negative feedback to low ability more than do students who have not received sustained negative evaluations.

(H_6) Students who report high academic self-concepts attribute hypothetical positive feedback to ability more than do students who do not report high academic self-concepts.

(H_7) Students who report low academic self-concepts attribute hypothetical negative feedback to ability more than do students who do not report low academic self-concepts.

All four self-consistency hypotheses (H_4, H_5, H_6, and H_7) were supported by the data, as shown in Tables 2-5. Students with a history of positive evaluations, exemplified by high grades or high academic self-concept in a given subject, were more likely to attribute any additional positive feedback to high ability than were students with low grades or low self-concept. Similarly, students with a history of negative evaluations attributed negative feedback more to low ability than did students with high grades or high self-concept. The data exhibited the same consistent pattern within each ethnic group.

TABLE 2

Percentage of Students Attributing Hypothetical Good Grade to High Ability, According to Actual Grades Recorded in Three Subjects

Grade	Math		English		Social Studies	
	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)
A	22.3	(94)	22.8	(120)	22.7	(163)
B	6.5	(154)	16.9	(225)	12.4	(161)
C	10.8	(203)	19.1	(173)	12.8	(179)
D	8.0	(137)	9.5	(105)	6.3	(96)
F	8.1	(99)	7.9	(101)	10.9	(64)

Note: The percentage represents the number of students responding that ability causes a good grade--rather than luck, effort, or the liking of the teacher for the student--in each recorded grade category; thus, the denominator (N) varied for the calculation of each percentage.

TABLE 3

Percentage of Students Attributing Hypothetical Poor Grade to Low Ability, According to Actual Grades Recorded in Three Subjects

Grade	Math		English		Social Studies	
	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)
A	14.0	(93)	9.1	(121)	6.1	(160)
B	14.1	(156)	7.0	(227)	14.6	(164)
C	24.4	(201)	10.3	(174)	11.3	(177)
D	24.6	(138)	9.5	(104)	17.7	(96)
F	24.2	(99)	11.8	(102)	20.3	(64)

Note: The percentage represents the number of students responding that low ability causes a poor grade--rather than bad luck, poor effort, or teacher dislike of a student--in each recorded grade category; thus, the denominator (N) varied for the calculation of each percentage.

TABLE 4

Percentage of Students Attributing Hypothetical Good Grade to High Ability, for Three Levels of Academic Self-concept in Three Subjects

Reported Self-concept	Math (%)	Math (N)	English (%)	English (N)	Social Studies (%)	Social Studies (N)
Far Above & Above Average	17.5	(263)	22.8	(259)	24.7	(251)
Average	5.8	(433)	12.1	(439)	6.9	(436)
Below & Far Below Average	11.9	(42)	14.3	(42)	17.1	(41)

Note: The percentage represents the number of students responding that high ability causes a good grade--rather than good luck, effort, or the liking of the teacher for a student--in each category of self-concept; thus, the denominator (N) varied for the calculation of each percentage.

TABLE 5

Percentage of Students Attributing Hypothetical Poor Grade to Low Ability, for Three Levels of Academic Self-concept in Three Subjects

Reported Self-concept	Math (%)	Math (N)	English (%)	English (N)	Social Studies (%)	Social Studies (N)
Far Above & Above Average	19.3	(259)	10.4	(260)	9.1	(254)
Average	22.0	(436)	7.7	(442)	13.8	(435)
Below & Far Below Average	24.4	(41)	19.0	(42)	19.0	(42)

Note: The percentage represents the number of students responding that low ability causes a poor grade--rather than bad luck, poor effort, or teacher dislike for a student--in each category of self-concept; thus, the denominator (N) varied for the calculation of each percentage.

Self-enhancement versus Self-consistency

In the preceding analyses we tested whether self-enhancement principles were at work (H_1-H_3) or whether self-consistency principles were at work (H_4-H_7). We did not, however, pit these alternative processes against one another to test their relative predictive power. In Table 6 we show, for comparison, predictions of internalization based on self-enhancement and predictions based on self-consistency given certain conditions and certain hypothetical feedback.

TABLE 6

Alternative Predictions of Internalization Based on Self-enhancement and Self-consistency

State of self-concept or grade and hypothetical feedback	Prediction by self-enhancement	Prediction by self-consistency
1. High self-concept and positive feedback vs. low self-concept and positive feedback	No difference	Former more internal
2. High self-concept and positive feedback vs. low self-concept and negative feedback	Former more internal	No difference
3. High self-concept and negative feedback vs. low self-concept and positive feedback	Latter more internal	No difference
4. High self-concept and negative feedback vs. low self-concept and negative feedback	No difference	Latter more internal
5. Low self-concept and positive feedback vs. low self-concept and negative feedback	Former more internal	Latter more internal
6. High recorded grade and positive feedback vs. low recorded grade and positive feedback	No difference	Former more internal
7. High recorded grade and positive feedback vs. low recorded grade and negative feedback	Former more internal	No difference
8. High recorded grade and negative feedback vs. low recorded grade and positive feedback	Latter more internal	No difference
9. High recorded grade and negative feedback vs. low recorded grade and negative feedback	No difference	Latter more internal
10. Low recorded grade and positive feedback vs. low recorded grade and negative feedback	Former more internal	Latter more internal

The results of these ten comparisons support our previous findings relating self-enhancement and self-consistency to attributions to ability. Here we combined attribution to ability with attribution to effort as our measure of internalization. Self-consistency predicted better than self-enhancement in nine out of the ten comparisons in Table 6. Only for comparison 4 did self-enhancement predict better. Thus, the direct comparisons support our earlier findings that self-enhancement processes did not explain our data and that self-consistency processes did well.

The school situation is such that each evaluation of a student--i.e., a grade--represents part of a continuing flow of evaluations that serve as a system of control (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975): daily, students are confronted with requests or opportunities to exhibit their skill. Because of this circumstance, the students were likely to appraise their ability realistically. The orientation to future performances in this field situation differs from the limited time scale of the experimental laboratory, with consequent failure of self-enhancement approaches to the attribution process.

Inflation of the Self-concept

We indicated initially that our findings may help to explain how low-achieving minority students can maintain a reasonably favorable self-image despite negative feedback and discrimination. The differences in academic self-concept were relatively minor among ethnic groups. There were no major ethnic differences in the "below-average" category, although there were ethnic differences in the "above-average" category. Table 7 presents the academic self-concepts within each ethnic group for English (it is illustrative of the academic self-concepts reported for math and social studies).

The differences in achievement levels between ethnic groups were, however, far greater than the ethnic differences in self-concept. The data showed major ethnic differences with respect to the proportion receiving low scores on standard achievement tests (Table 8) and the proportion receiving D and F grades (Table 9). The same pattern of differences was found among the various schools. Schools with very low average achievement

TABLE 7

Percentage Distribution of Academic Self-concept Responses in English for Four Ethnic Groups by Sex

Reported Self-concept	Spanish-Surname		Other White		Black		Asian-American	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Far Above & Above Average	31.8	37.4	44.0	60.1	20.0	37.7	39.4	40.3
Average	54.0	50.7	41.0	34.3	61.1	48.4	47.2	52.2
Below & Far Below Average	14.3	11.9	15.0	5.6	18.9	14.0	13.5	7.6
Total N	(63)	(67)	(100)	(108)	(90)	(93)	(89)	(92)

TABLE 8

Proportion of Students Scoring Low on Verbal and Math Achievement Tests for Four Ethnic Groups by Sex

Achievement	Spanish-Surname		Other White		Black		Asian-American	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Verbal:								
10th Grade Below 6.0 Grade Level	.22	.29	.06	.04	.54	.37	.16	.14
8th Grade Below 5.0 Grade Level	.29	.15	.05	.09	.70	.40	.09	.05
Math:								
10th Grade Below 6.6 Grade Level	.24	.10	.07	.08	.55	.59	.00	.02
8th Grade Below 5.2 Grade Level	.18	.18	.06	.01	.69	.38	.04	.02

TABLE 9

Proportion of Students Receiving D and F Grades
by Four Ethnic Groups by Sex

Subject	Spanish-Surname		Other White		Black		Asian-American	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Math	.47	.25	.36	.24	.59	.48	.19	.17
English	.44	.29	.23	.13	.53	.41	.12	.08
Social Studies	.22	.26	.26	.10	.38	.51	.11	.08

did not have many more students with low academic self-concepts. Thus, the self-concepts of many students, particularly Black and Spanish-surname students, did not seem to reflect the grades and achievement scores they had actually received. Their academic self-concepts appeared inflated.

The data presented thus far support a pattern of self-consistency, but that principle could not explain this inflation of self-concepts. Moreover, the self-enhancement hypotheses, which might have explained this inflation, were not supported by our data. So, we turned to another explanation--the "distinctiveness" of evaluative feedback--to see if ethnic differences in self-concept were being reduced by the impact of that variable.

Distinctiveness of Feedback in Relation to the Social Context

Weiner et al. (1971; p. 99) include social context in their notion of attribution:

> If performance is consistent with the norms, that is, success when others succeed or failure when others fail, the outcome is attributed to the external factor of task difficulty, and insufficient information is provided for self-evaluation. On the other hand, performance at variance with social norms--success when others fail or failure when others succeed--is likely to give rise to internal attribution and self-evaluation judgments.

Utilizing this distinctiveness idea, we predicted that evaluations which were distinctive--i.e. at variance with norms for a school or an ethnic group--would be more attributed to self (as reflected in academic self-concept) than evaluations which were not distinctive from the typical evaluations in a setting. Consequently, students doing poorly in a school or ethnic group where most other students were also doing poorly would not be as likely to attribute their poor performance to themselves. The social context thus would serve as a buffer to negative evaluation and would, for those students, act as an inflationary mechanism.

We evolved hypotheses 8A through 11B to test this principle. To operationalize the degree of distinctiveness, we used only A grades as high when depending on students' self-reports on the questionnaire, and A or B grades when using school records. In addition, C grades were considered low only in hypotheses focusing on students in high-achieving groups.

(H_{8A}) Given recorded grades of A or B, more students in schools with lower average achievement report high academic self-concepts than in schools with higher average achievement.

(H_{8B}) Given recorded grades of A or B, more students in lower-achieving ethnic groups report high academic self-concepts than in higher-achieving ethnic groups.

(H_{9A}) Given A grades reported by the students, more students in schools with lower average achievement report high academic self-concepts than in schools with higher average achievement.

(H_{9B}) Given A grades reported by the students, more students in lower-achieving ethnic groups report high academic self-concepts than in higher-achieving ethnic groups.

(H_{10A}) Given recorded grades of D or F, more students in schools with lower average achievement report high academic self-concepts than in schools with higher average achievement.

(H_{10B}) Given recorded grades of D or F, more students in lower-achieving ethnic groups report high academic self-concepts than in higher-achieving ethnic groups.

(H_{11A}) Given C, D, or F grades reported by the students, more students in schools with higher average achievement report low academic self-concepts than in schools with lower average achievement.

(H_{11B}) Given C, D, or F grades reported by the students, more students in higher-achieving ethnic groups report low academic self-concepts than in lower-achieving ethnic groups.

The data for these distinctiveness hypotheses were very orderly. Hypotheses 8A, 8B, 9A, and 9B predicted that high grades, recorded or reported by the student, would affect the self-concept more in a setting of lower-achievement schools or lower-achieving ethnic groups. None of these four hypotheses was supported by our data. Students receiving high grades in lower-achievement settings did not develop high self-concepts any more than did students receiving high grades in higher-achievement settings. Indeed, students in high-achievement settings, whether schools or ethnic groups, were more affected by high grades than were students in low-achievement settings. This is illustrated in Table 10 where the data for hypothesis 8A are presented. The data for hypotheses 8B, 9A, and 9B follow this same pattern: distinctiveness hypotheses clearly failed for high grades.

TABLE 10

Average Percentage Distribution Across Subjects of Academic Self-concept for Students with Recorded A and B Grades in High- and Low-achievement Schools

Reported Self-Concept	High-Achievement Schools		Low-Achievement Schools	
	A	B	A	B
Far Above & Above Average	62.7	48.9	47.2	37.4
Average	30.6	41.6	50.0	53.8
Below & Far Below Average	6.6	9.6	2.8	8.7
Total N	(271)	(356)	(108)	(195)

Low grades in high-achievement settings, however, affected self-concepts more than low grades in low-achievement settings; that is, hypotheses 10A, 10B, 11A, and 11B were all supported by our data. Table 11 illustrates the pattern, testing hypothesis 10B using the ethnic context.

TABLE 11

Average Percentage Distribution Across Subjects of Academic Self-concept for Students with Recorded D and F Grades in High- and Low-achieving Ethnic Groups

Reported Self-Concept	Spanish-Surname & Black		Other White & Asian-American	
	D	F	D	F
Far Above & Above Average	16.0	18.6	20.8	11.1
Average	57.2	56.9	48.3	50.0
Below & Far Below Average	26.7	24.5	30.9	38.8
Total N	(187)	(167)	(120)	(72)

Note: Black and Spanish-surname students, lower in mean academic achievement, are combined in one grouping, while Other White and Asian-American students, higher in mean academic achievement, form the second ethnic category.

Both D and F grades were more likely to result in below-average self-concepts when received by Other White and Asian-American students. For Black and Spanish-surname students, groups with lower average achievement, receiving grades of D or F was less likely to produce a low self-evaluation. The distinctiveness hypotheses did seem to explain, at least in part, the surprisingly low proportion of Black and Spanish-surname students who considered themselves academically below-average.

The data testing hypotheses 8A through 11B may also be examined from a slightly different perspective. Both high and low grades, whether recorded by the school or reported by the student, are more closely related to the self-concepts of students in higher-achievement schools or in higher-achieving ethnic groups. These findings also indicate that the notion of distinctiveness works for negative feedback--particularly for the lowest grade, F--but not for positive feedback. The self-concept of students in lower-achievement schools or ethnic groups is not as much

affected by poor grades as the self-concept of those students who belong to schools or ethnic groups in which high achievement is typical.

Since more students in low-achievement schools and lower-achieving ethnic groups are receiving low grades, and since these are the very students whose self-concept is less affected by these low evaluations, more students in these low-achieving groups believe they are "average" than would generally be expected from their grades and standardized achievement scores. Since higher grades are also less likely to affect the self-concept of these lower-achieving students, the self-concepts of students in the lower-achieving groups are being pushed from both extremes toward "average" by the combination of partial success and partial failure of the distinctiveness hypotheses.

Summary

In this paper, using the inner-city high school environment as a field test of hypotheses previously tested in experimental settings, we have investigated situation-specific attribution process, which we found to be only slightly correlated with Rotter's early view of externalization-internalization as a personality disposition. We have also, and at greater length, focused on two approaches to attribution processes and self-concept: self-enhancement and self-consistency.

Testing our first set of hypotheses, we found no relation between self-enhancement and attribution processes. Students did not tend to raise their self-concepts by attributing hypothetical positive feedback to internal factors and hypothetical negative feedback to external factors. The stability provided by past evaluations and orientation to future performances in this particular field situation affected the attribution process, producing results that differed from those found in some laboratory studies.

The second set of hypotheses was designed to test self-consistency in the interpretation of feedback. We predicted that students would attribute hypothetical feedback to ability when the feedback supported their self-conception or their past evaluations. All of these self-consistency

hypotheses were supported by our data. When directly compared with each other, self-consistency made better predictions of internalization than did self-enhancement in nine out of ten comparisons.

These findings for self-consistency and self-enhancement did not explain why minority students doing poorly in school were not much more likely to report that they were below-average in ability. But our third set of hypotheses predicted that the self-concepts of students who received distinctive feedback--that is positive feedback in a lower-achievement group or negative feedback in a higher-achievement group--would be more affected by this feedback than the self-concepts of students receiving feedback consistent with the usual evaluation within their group. And we found that self-concepts of students in higher-achievement settings were indeed more affected by negative feedback than were the self-concepts of students in lower-achievement settings. But, contrary to our prediction for positive feedback, the self-concepts of students in those same higher-achievement settings were again more affected.

Thus, for academic skills, we have found that the lack of distinctiveness of low grades for Black and Spanish-surname students, and the consequent lack of attribution to ability, may explain why these students are not low in academic self-concept. Other researchers have found that, in general, the self-concepts of groups which occupy low-status niches in the prevailing social order do not match their low position (Rosenberg and Simmons, 1971). Perhaps the results of our analyses of self-enhancement, self-consistency, and distinctiveness with respect to academic skills may apply in other field settings and help explain these more general findings. We do not feel comfortable generalizing from this one study of distinctiveness in a field setting nor from the failure of self-enhancement and relative success of self-consistency. Indeed, an unfinished study by Dornbusch will show that self-enhancement explains a great deal about behavior in situations involving moral choice. Other field studies, perhaps using nonacademic skills, are needed to assess the generalizability of our results.

References

Deslonde, J. L. "Beliefs in Internal-External Control of Reinforcement, Racial Ideology, and Militancy of Urban Community College Students." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California at Riverside, 1970.

Dornbusch, S. M., and Scott, W. R. Evaluation and the Exercise of Authority: A Theory of Control Applied to Diverse Organizations. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975.

Frieze, I., and Weiner, B. "Cue Utilization and Attribution Judgments for Success and Failure," Journal of Personality, 31 (1971), 591-606.

Goodman, L. A., and Kruskal, W. H. "Measures of Association for Cross Classifications," Journal of the American Statistical Association, 49 (December, 1954).

Massey, G. C. "Self-Concept, Personal Control and Social Context among Students in Inner City High Schools." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1975.

Rosenberg, M., and Simmons, R. G. Black and White Self-Esteem: The Urban School Child. Arnold M. and Caroline Rose Monograph Series, American Sociological Association, 1971.

Rotter, J. B. Social Learning and Clinical Psychology. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964.

Rotter, J. B. "General Expectancies for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement," Psychological Monographs, 80 (1966): (1, Whole No. 609), 1-28.

Videbeck, R. "Self-Conceptions and the Reactions of Others," Sociometry, 23 (December, 1960), 351-59.

Webster, M., and Sobieszek, B. Sources of Self-Evaluation. New York: Wiley & Sons, 1974.

Weiner, B.; Frieze, I.; Kukla, A.; Reed, L.; Rest, S.; and Rosenbaum, R. Perceiving the Causes of Success and Failure. New York: General Learning Press, 1971.