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ABSTRACT

Using an attributional framework, the study examined college students' (N=529) expectations of their future economic outcomes and the role they perceived that discrimination would play in determining these outcomes. Expectancies for self, locus of causality for outcomes, self-esteem, locus of causality for failure, locus of causality for success, academic motivation, and group activism were measured; an ANOVA was conducted. Results are presented and discussed. It was found that early in college African Americans have higher expectancies than other students, but that these expectancies decline during college. At the same time that expectancies decline, African Americans' self-esteem does not decline. There is a dissociation, such that self-esteem is less related to expectancies for Black than for White students. The decline can be accounted for by African Americans' increasing external attributions for their future outcomes: their pessimism about being able to overcome the barriers faced by African Americans. Further analyses show that when these external attributions for failure are combined with internal attributions for success, they are associated with high achievement motivation and high group activism. (EMK)

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Attributions and Expectancies as Determinants of Achievement in Black Students

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Abstract

Using an attributional framework, we examined college students' expectations of their future economic outcomes, and the role they perceived that discrimination would play in determining these outcomes. The focus is on the role of expectancies, attributions and self-esteem in determining motivation.

We find that early in college, African Americans have higher expectancies than other students, but that these expectancies decline during college. At the same time that expectancies decline, African Americans' self-esteem does not. There is a dissociation, such that self-esteem is less related to expectancies for Black than for White students. The decline can be accounted for by African American's increasing external attributions for their future outcomes: their pessimism about being able to overcome the barriers faced by African Americans.

Further analyses show that when these external attributions for failure are combined with internal attributions for success they are associated with high achievement motivation, and with high group activism.

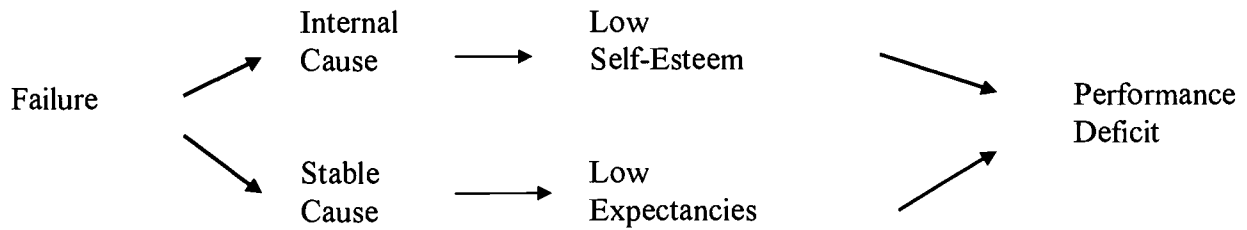
Attributions and Expectancies as Determinants of Achievement in Black Students

The academic under-achievement of African Americans is one of the most striking examples of inequality in the United States (see National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995, 1997). The severity of the problem is illustrated by the attrition rate which runs as high as 62% among African American college students, compared with 40% among all college students in the United States (American Council on Education, 1996). Most alarming is that the differences in achievement between African American students and White students increase with age. For example, while the math performance of African American students is 14% below the national average at age 9, by age 17, this gap has grown to 20% (Holmes, 1982). Similar differences between Black and White students occur in higher education. For example, African American students graduate from college with a grade point average that is two-thirds of a letter grade below that of White students (Nettles, 1988). Despite their lower achievement, African American students appear to maintain remarkable positive self-concepts and positive views of their abilities (for reviews, see Graham, 1994; Hare, 1988; Hoelter, 1983; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979; Wylie, 1979). According to the perspective to be presented here, these paradoxical findings can be reconciled through an examination of the causal explanations African American college students make for their performance. Two hypotheses are proposed, both based in Weiner's attributional theory of motivation and emotion (Weiner, 1986).

The Self-Esteem Hypothesis.

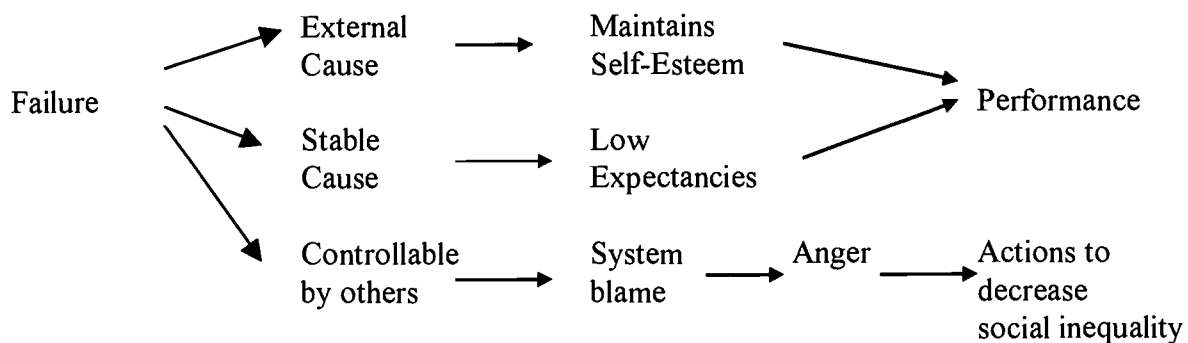
The "self-esteem" hypothesis, which reflects research on self-esteem and performance, maintains that African American college students internalize the negative stigma placed on them by the

social system, and blame themselves for their lower outcomes. The attributional process is outlined below:



The External Attribution Hypothesis.

In contrast, the external attribution hypothesis maintains that rather than making internal attributions for failure, African American college students become aware of the structural barriers to their performance, and begin to make external attribution for their relative failure. Such external attributions will allow students to maintain positive views of the self (see also Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa & Major, 1991; Major & Crocker, 1993; Major, Feinstein & Crocker, 1994), but will lead to low expectancies for future outcomes. The argument advanced in this paper is that entirely internal attributions for failure are not advantageous for African American students, as they lead to self-blame and reduce African Americans' ability to make sense of a social system in which their outcomes are in part influenced by their group membership (also see Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995). The attributional process is outlined below:



Predictions

According to the external attribution hypothesis:

1. While African American students will evidence high expectancies early in college, these expectancies will decline the longer they are in college. No such decline in expectancies will occur for White students.
2. Self-esteem among African American students will be high and will not decline.
3. Attributions among African American students will be internal early in college, but will become more external the longer African American students are in college. No such declines in internal attributions will occur for White students.
4. African American students, but not White students, will evidence a dissociation between self-esteem and expectancies, such that self-esteem will not be related to expectancies among African American students, but will be related to expectancies among White students.
5. Black students who make external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success will evidence high academic motivation.
6. Black students who make external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success will evidence high group activism.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Students enrolled in psychology courses at UCLA were recruited to participate in a survey in return for partial course credit. A total of 529 participants took part in the study. Of these participants 75% were White and 25% were African American.

Measures

Expectancies for self. The measure of expectancies for the self consisted of three items, which assessed participants' general expectancies for their future economic outcomes, as well as their expected income and socioeconomic status ($\alpha=.78$).

Locus of causality for outcomes. The measure of locus of causality for future economic outcomes consisted of four items ($\alpha=.56$). Participants were asked to what extent their future economic outcomes would be influenced by their ability, their effort, and society. A fourth item asked participants to what extent their outcomes would be due to personal characteristics versus factors in society.

Self-esteem. The ten item Rosenberg self-esteem scale was used to measure self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965; $\alpha=.88$).

Locus of causality for failure. The measure of locus of causality for future economic failure asks participants that if they were to achieve less than expected, to what extent would this be due to discrimination against them because of their ethnicity. The scores were recoded such that high scores indicate more internal attributions for failure.

Locus of causality for success. The measure of locus of causality for future economic failure asks participants that if they were to achieve more than expected, to what extent would this be due to discrimination in their favor because of their ethnicity. The scores were recoded such that high scores indicate more internal attributions for success.

Academic motivation. Three items asked participants how many hours they studied per week, how likely they were to return to UCLA next year, and how likely it was that they would consider dropping out of UCLA (recoded) ($\alpha=.61$).

Group activism. Five items assessed how seriously participants had considered participating (or actually had participated) in demonstrations, voting, signing petitions, joining an ethnic student organization and sending letters to government officials on behalf of their ethnic group ($\alpha=.92$).

Results

To provide more power for the analyses, the year in college variable was dichotomized. Participants were divided into two groups: freshmen and sophomores versus juniors and seniors.

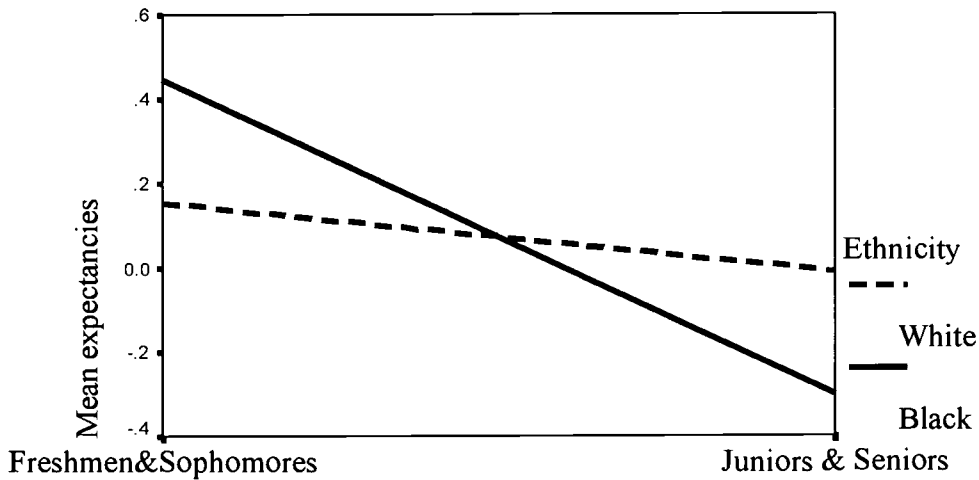
Expectancies of Black students decline over the college years

According to Prediction 1, the expectancies of African American students, but not of White students, will decline across years in college. A 2 (ethnicity: Black versus White) x 2 (year in college: freshmen/sophomores versus junior/seniors) ANOVA was conducted, using expectancies for self as the dependent variable. As expected, there was a significant interaction between ethnicity and year in college, $F(1,528) = 9.47$, $p = .002$. As Figure 1 shows, while Black students have higher economic expectancies than White students in the first two years of college, these expectancies have declined significantly during college. Pairwise comparisons show that while in the first two years of college African American students have higher expectancies for future economic outcomes than White students, the expectancies of African American students in the last two years of college are significantly lower ($p < .05$).

Figure 1

The economic expectancies of Black students

decline over the college years



Note. High numbers indicate higher expectancies.

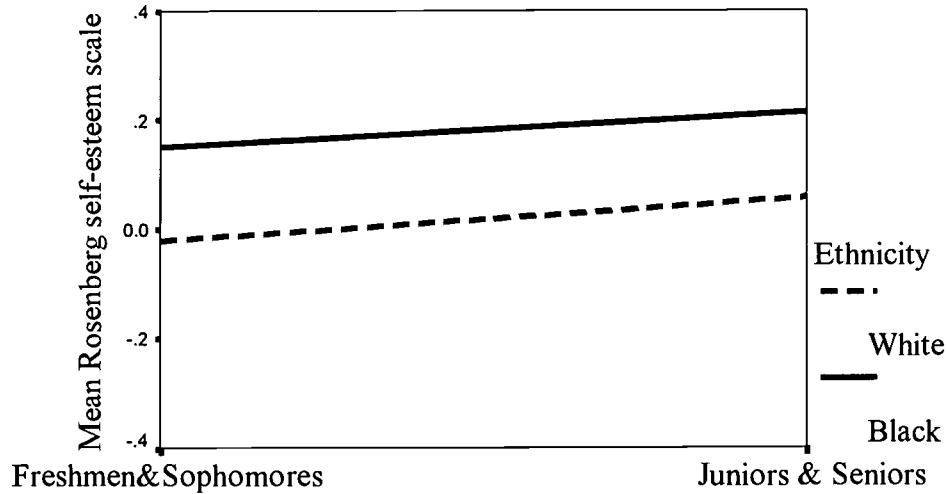
Self-esteem among Black students does not decline

According to Prediction 2, the self-esteem of Black students (and White students) will not decline across years in college. A 2 (ethnicity: Black versus White) x 2 (year in college) ANOVA was conducted, using self-esteem as the dependent variable. As predicted, there was no interaction between ethnicity and year in college, $F(1,314) < 1, p = .93$. As Figure 2 shows, in support of the external attribution hypothesis, and contrary to the self-esteem hypothesis, self-esteem among Black students does not decline across the college years. In fact, self-esteem increases among Black students (although pairwise comparisons show that this change is not significant, $p < .05$).

Figure 2

Self-esteem does not decline

among Black students



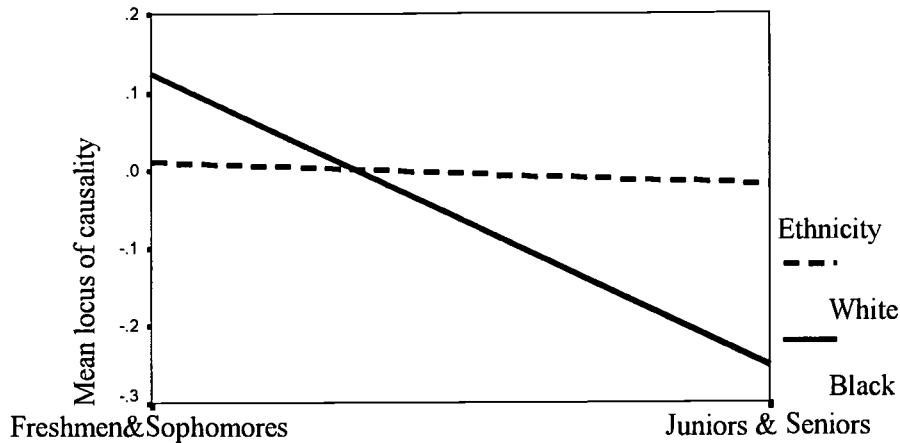
Note. High numbers indicate high self-esteem.

Black students make increasingly external attributions

According to Prediction 3, the attributions of Black students, but not of White students will become less internal across years in college. A 2 (ethnicity: Black versus White) x 2 (year in college) ANOVA was conducted, using locus of causality for future economic outcomes as the dependent variable. As expected, there was a significant interaction between ethnicity and year in college, $F(1,527) = 4.97, p = .03$ (see Figure 3). Pairwise comparisons revealed that Black juniors/seniors make significantly more external attributions than Black freshmen/sophomores and White freshmen/sophomores ($p < .05$).

Figure 3

Black students make increasingly external attributions over the college years



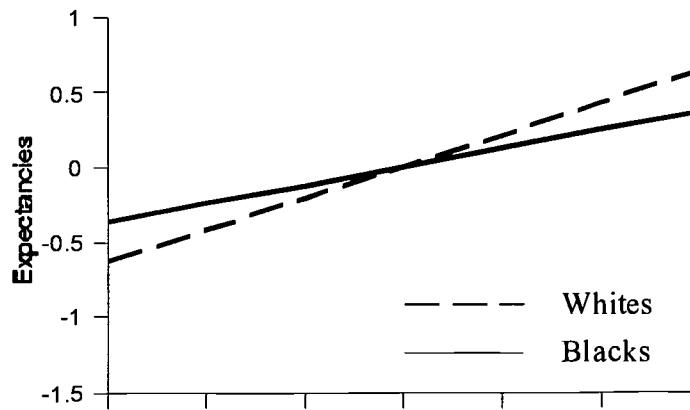
Note. High numbers indicate more internal attributions.

Black students evidence a dissociation between expectancies and self-esteem

To assess whether there was a dissociation between self-esteem and expectancies for Black students, as noted in Prediction 4, the correlations between self-esteem and expectancies were examined.

The results indicated that, as predicted, there was less of a relationship between ethnicity and self-esteem for Black students ($r=.12, p=.26$) than for White students ($r=.21, p=.002$). These results are illustrated in Figure 4.

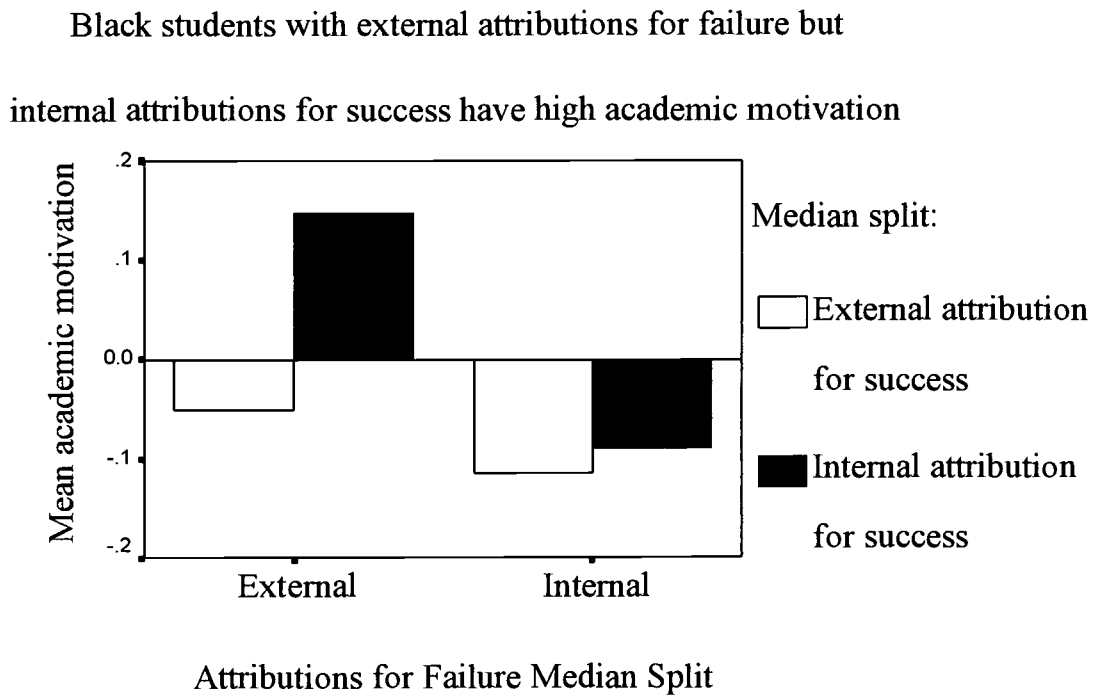
Figure 4: Dissociation between expectancies and self-esteem among Black students



Black students who make external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success have high academic motivation

To test Prediction 5, median splits were performed among Black students on the attributions for failure and success items. Those who scored below and above the median on each of the items were labeled ‘externals’ and ‘internals’. A planned contrast was then specified, comparing the mean on academic motivation of students who made internal attributions for success but external attributions for failure with the mean of the other three groups combined. The results showed that Black students who make external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success are significantly more academically motivated ($M=.23$) than Black students in the other three groups ($M=-.17$), $t(24.9)=2.15$, $p=.04$. See Figure 5.

Figure 5



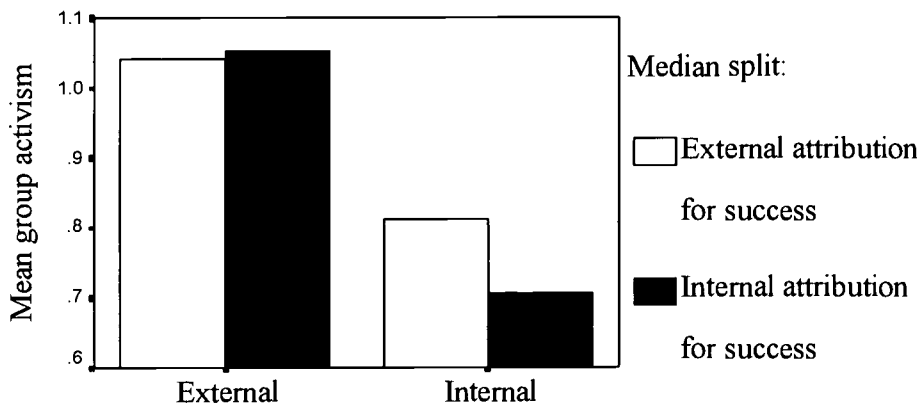
Note. High numbers indicate high academic motivation.

Black students who make external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success evidence high group activism

To test Prediction 6, the same median splits created for the test of Prediction 5 were used. A planned contrast was then again specified, comparing the mean on group activism of students who made internal attributions for success but external attributions for failure with the mean of the other three groups combined. The results showed that Black students who make external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success are no less likely to be engaged in activities to benefit their ethnic group ($M=1.05$) than Black students in the other three groups ($M=0.87$), $t(34)=0.60$, $p=.45$. See Figure 6.

Figure 6

Black students with external attributions for failure but internal attributions for success evidence high group activism



Attributions for Failure Median Split

Note. High numbers indicate high group activism.

Discussion

The results find consistent support for the external attribution hypothesis, and no support for the self-esteem hypothesis. Specifically, African American students enter college with high expectancies for their future economic outcomes. Also, early in college African American students are more convinced than other students that their future outcomes are in their own hands. However, the longer African American students stay in college, the more negative they become about their future outcomes. Moreover, the longer they stay on college, the more African American students perceive that their future outcomes will be influenced by the society around them.

At the same time that they become increasingly negative about their future, African American students' feelings about the self remain very positive. In fact, a dissociation occurs such that, unlike White students, African American students' expectancies for the future become separated from their feelings about themselves. Such a dissociation is consistent with a process in which African American students feel that their future outcomes have little to do with their personal characteristics, and suggests that African American students increasingly perceive that there are barriers that will limit their outcomes. While African American students enter college believing they can overcome these barriers, during their time in college African American students become increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of overcoming the structural barriers. Moreover, the results indicate that such external attributions for failure can have adaptive consequences. Specifically, when external attributions for failure are combined with internal attributions for success, academic motivation remains very high. Also, students with external attributions for failure, and internal attributions for success are highly involved in activities that benefit their ethnic group.

The results of this study raise some intriguing questions. One issue concerns the larger motivational consequences of the disillusionment experienced by African American college students. The declining expectancies and increasingly external attributions noted in this study may lead to hopelessness and lower persistence. Such apathy may emerge in higher attrition rates and lower grades. However, it is also possible that the increasing perception of barriers will make students more motivated to engage in social action against social inequality. Social action may be a more likely outcome than apathy, given that beliefs about the self are protected by the external attributions these students make.

A second issue that remains concerns the antecedents of this process. Of particular interest is the influence of the college experience on locus of causality and expectancies. Specifically, the experience of lower academic performance, and the effects of the negative social environment that surrounds African American students at our colleges should be examined. These issues are being examined in studies currently underway.

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