



Not just any path: Implications of identity-based motivation for disparities in school outcomes

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 May 2012

Received in revised form 29 August 2012

Accepted 4 September 2012

JEL classification:

I24

Keywords:

Assets

Low-income

Minority

Possible self

Identity

Expectations

Self

School Outcomes

ABSTRACT

Low-income and minority children aspire to school success and expect to attend college. These aspirations and expectations matter – predicting college attendance and graduation when present and failure to attend college otherwise. But aspiring to college does not necessarily result in relevant behavior; many children with high aspirations do not take sufficient action to work toward their school goals. This paper uses identity-based motivation theory (IBM, Oyserman, 2007, 2009a) to predict that school-focused expectations and aspirations predict action if at the moment of judgment, they are accessible (come to mind) and feel relevant. Relevance is operationalized in three ways. (1) Feeling congruent with important social identities (e.g., race-ethnicity, social class), (2) feeling connected with relevant behavioral strategies (studying, asking questions), and (3) providing an interpretation of difficulties along the way as implying task importance, not impossibility. Family assets and child savings are likely to influence each element of identity relevance.

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” asked Alice

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

(Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 6)

1. Introduction

As the Cat so succinctly explained to Alice, if one does not know where one is going, any path will do. Of course knowing where one is going is often not a matter of physical destination. Instead, people use travel along a path as a metaphor, where one is going or where one will end up are ways of describing one’s imagined, but possible, future, including both positive and negative aspects of one’s possible future self, the future self who is a high school graduate, on the way to college, or a high school dropout, homeless, or a struggling single mother. In that sense, wondering which way one ought to go is part of wondering who one will become and figuring out the path implies that there is a way to get there from here. If the future is unknowable, any current action might be the way to go. Having an idea of who or what one wants to become or avoid becoming – how one wants to ‘end up’ is assumed to be essential in making plans and staying motivated. In that sense one’s possible future self is the destination and

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the path is the steps one's takes to increase the chance of getting there.

This paper addresses questions related to this conceptualization of one's future as a 'destination' that can be reached via certain paths and not others. First, do children, including low-income and minority children, have ideas about how they want to end up? Second, do these ideas involve school? Third, when do these ideas about the future matter, influencing children's academic outcomes. And, for all of these questions, what is the role of economic assets in both content of future self-images and in developing and maintaining particular paths to children's future self-images?

To address these questions, a targeted review of the literature is presented using identity-based motivation theory to organize predictions, review results of relevant experiments, and highlight gaps for future research. As will be demonstrated, identity-based motivation theory ties together and synthesizes seemingly disparate findings and makes specific predictions about when and why assets matter. To set the stage in Section 2, I provide an overview of educational attainment in the U.S. and known associations between educational attainment, income and assets.¹

2. U.S. high school and college graduation

American parents have high educational aspirations and expectations² for their children even if their own

¹ Throughout I move between national survey-based results, in this case providing percentages, and smaller studies and experiments, in this case simply stating if effects are significant. The reason for this difference in presentation of results is that percentages reflect (or are hoped to reflect) national and representative outcomes. Experiments do not typically involve nationally representative samples; the point is not to describe reality as it exists but rather to predict the size of an experimental manipulation. Smaller studies which are not experiments but also not nationally representative samples are treated in the same way since focus is on significant differences between groups and so here too percentages are not reported. By using both survey data to describe and experimental data to highlight potential underlying processes, a more complete picture of how economic resources may matter can be told.

² Researchers find it useful to distinguish between aspirations and expectations, with an aspiration involving hopes and dreams (e.g., 'if you could be anything at all, what would you most hope and want to be') and an expectation involving subjective estimation of what is actually possible (e.g., 'if you had to bet money on it, what will you be'). Logically, hopes will be higher than expectations since expectations imply that one could really do it and hopes that one would want it to transpire. Another related way that the term expectation is used is as a prediction of competence – akin to how the term efficacy is used. Expectancy-value theories (e.g., Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) predict that people will take action to attain valued outcomes if they expect that they have the skills to attain the valued outcomes. In my own research, I have focused explicitly on expectations rather than aspirations with the assumption that expectations are more likely to be linked to behavior. Following this logical distinction, the way that data on aspirations and expectations are collected in survey research is typically to ask children and their parents how far they would ideally like to go in school and how far they realistically expect to go in school. The logical pattern of aspiration being higher than expectations is typically found with aspirations 10–15% higher than expectations (Elliott, 2009; Madeira, 2009). This pattern generally holds for low-income students as well (Kirk et al., 2012). However the pattern of relationship between the two questions suggests that children and parents do not distinguish between the aspiration and

educational and economic attainments are low (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Kim, Sherraden, & Clancy, 2012; Madeira, 2009). Large-scale longitudinal analysis of entering first graders in Baltimore demonstrate that parental aspirations and expectations remain high and are not initially influenced by child school performance, especially among low-income parents (Entwisle et al., 2005). However, parental aspirations and expectations are associated with child outcomes and seem to matter at least in part by influencing children's imagined future identities – whether children imagine that they might or could attain all 'A' grades, be college graduates, and so on (for a review, Wildhagen, 2009). The effect of parental educational visions for their children is still apparent when their children become young adults, predicting return to school among dropouts (Sacker & Schoon, 2007).

2.1. Educational attainment matters

Societies with higher educational attainment have higher economic growth; individuals with higher educational attainment have better lives (Gylfason, 2001). Current estimates are that in the U.S., twenty-something year olds who are graduates of four-year colleges earn 96% more than same aged high school dropouts, 53% more than high school graduates, and 28% more than associate degree holders (25–34 year olds, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Parental education is likely to make life easier for their children. Women who have not gone to college are more likely to be single mothers than to be married when they give birth; the reverse is true for women with college degrees; 51% of births to women who did not attend college are to single mothers while only 8%

expectation questions as researchers intend for them to. First, responses are *highly correlated* even for low-income children and their parents (Madeira, 2009) and second, *expectations sometimes exceed aspirations*, a logical inconsistency (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011). This means that what respondents are telling us about aspirations and expectations is not as nuanced as what we as researchers had hoped to learn. There are a number of reasons this may be the case. First, temporal distance, college is a distal goal and parents and students may focus on how much they value the outcome rather than estimate the obstacles along the way (Liberman & Trope, 2008). This would result in expectations being nearly as high as aspirations, especially for respondents without direct experience of the process of getting into and graduating college. Second, self-serving biases, the questions themselves may be threatening to low income and minority students and after threat there is an increased tendency to restore positive emotional state by seeing oneself in a positive light (Roese & Olson, 2007). Third, social desirability, responses to both questions may be influenced by knowledge that college is valued in society and failing to say that one expects and wants to go may be viewed negatively. Fourth, positivity bias, people tend to believe that their chances of attaining positive outcomes are higher than warranted (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004). Fifth, structure of typical questionnaires, using a closed-ended response format increases efficiency of data collection but systematically shifts responses (Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001). All of these disparate factors converge in predicting both that expectations will be as high as aspirations, and that aspirations will be high. Given that, many participants, particularly low income and minority participants may be providing essentially the same response to the 'expectation' and 'aspiration' questions. Therefore, in the current paper, I report responses to survey data from single item responses to expectation and aspiration questions interchangeably as imperfect measures of desired future possible futures. In reporting studies which collect more nuanced, open-ended data, I report more specifically what was found.

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