

Coping With Ethnic Stereotypes in the Academic Domain: Perceived Injustice and Psychological Disengagement

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Psychological disengagement is the defensive detachment of self-esteem from a particular domain. In the academic arena, disengagement can result from devaluing academic success or discounting the validity of academic outcomes. We review evidence for ethnic differences in these two processes of psychological disengagement and present results of a multiethnic study examining perceived ethnic injustice and academic performance as predictors of devaluing and discounting. Among African American students, beliefs about ethnic injustice (but not academic performance) predicted greater discounting and devaluing. Among European American students, poor academic performance (but not beliefs about ethnic injustice) predicted greater devaluing and discounting. Among Latino/a students, beliefs about ethnic injustice were associated with greater discounting, whereas poorer academic performance was associated with increased devaluing.

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African American and Latino/a students face negative cultural stereotypes that portray members of their ethnic groups as less intelligent than European American students (Steele, 1997). These stereotypes are compounded by statistics suggesting that, on average, members of these ethnic minority groups score lower on achievement tests, have lower grade point averages, and attain lower levels of education than their European American peers (Steele, 1997). Although one might anticipate that these negative stereotypes and educational outcomes would pose a threat to the self-esteem of ethnic-minority students, research consistently finds that African American and Latino/a students have levels of self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Porter & Washington, 1993) and academic self-concepts (e.g., Graham, 1994; Hare, 1981) that are on average equal to or higher than those of their European American counterparts. One way in which members of negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority groups might cope with academic threats is by psychologically disengaging their feelings of self-worth from their academic outcomes (Major & Schmader, 1998; Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998). In the present article, we describe two distinct processes that theoretically can produce psychological disengagement of self-esteem from academic performance. We review existing evidence of ethnic differences in these processes of disengagement. We then present the results of a multiethnic survey study in which we examined perceived ethnic injustice as an antecedent of psychological disengagement processes among negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority college students.

Psychological Disengagement

Psychological disengagement is a defensive detachment of self-esteem from one's outcomes in a domain such that self-esteem is not contingent upon one's successes or failures in that domain (Major & Schmader, 1998; Major et al., 1998; see also Steele, 1997). As part of a larger class of self-protective strategies, psychological disengagement is more likely to be evoked in evaluative situations that threaten a person's self-view. Thus, by psychologically disengaging one's view of oneself from an evaluative domain, a person can maintain previous levels of self-esteem despite information that implies one's inferiority in that domain.

Although we view psychological disengagement as a general strategy that might be used to cope with any sort of threatening information about the self, academic achievement is a particularly important domain in which to examine this phenomenon. Because academic outcomes such as test scores and grades are intended to act as the carrots and sticks that guide subsequent behavior, psychologically disengaging from such evaluations might reduce students' motivation to achieve academic success. Thus, if certain students disengage their self-esteem from academic outcomes whereas others do not, it would seem important to understand what factors predict this process. Furthermore, whereas any student might

face individual threats of incompetence that lead him or her to disengage self-esteem from academic performance, members of certain ethnic-minority groups in the United States face additional group-level threats in the form of negative stereotypes of intellectual inferiority (Steele, 1997). Steele has suggested that members of these minority groups might disidentify with, or chronically disengage from, the academic domain to escape the anxiety that results from performing under the weight of cultural stereotypes of inferiority (see also Ogbu, 1991). Because European American students do not face these same group-level threats in the academic domain, we might predict that levels of psychological disengagement from academic performance would be greater among negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority students than among their nonstereotyped peers.

Indeed, there is evidence that the relationship between academic performance and self-esteem is attenuated among some ethnic-minority students. For example, Osborne (1995) found that in a sample of 10th-grade students, self-esteem was positively related to grades among European American students, was unrelated to grades among African American males, and was related only weakly to grades among African American females. Similarly, evidence that African American college students might be more psychologically disengaged than their European American peers has also been found using experimental procedures (Major et al., 1998). In two experiments, European American and African American college students took a supposed intelligence test and received feedback about their performance. Results of both studies showed that whereas the self-esteem of European American students varied as a function of feedback they received on an intelligence test, the self-esteem of African American students was unaffected by their feedback. Furthermore, this nonreactivity to academic feedback was particularly evident among African American students who previously had reported being psychologically disengaged from their academic outcomes in general.

Processes of Psychological Disengagement

Although past research suggests that African American students might be more likely than European American students to disengage their self-esteem from academic outcomes, no research has articulated the processes by which psychological disengagement occurs. We define psychological disengagement in terms of two distinct psychological processes (Major & Schmader, 1998).

The first process of disengagement involves *devaluing* the domain, so that outcomes received in that context are no longer viewed as relevant or important to how a person defines or evaluates the self. Both correlational (Harter, 1986; Rosenberg, 1979) and experimental evidence (e.g., Tesser & Campbell, 1980) suggest that this strategy of psychological disengagement is often adopted for domains in which one's personal outcomes imply incompetence. Furthermore, recent theories posit that devaluing is a strategy that might be used to cope with threats to one's social

identity (Crocker & Major, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, Crocker and Major assert that members of socially stigmatized groups might protect their self-esteem by selectively devaluing those domains in which their stigma places them at a disadvantage.

The second pathway to disengagement involves *discounting* the validity of an evaluation one has received. Crocker and Major (1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Major & Crocker, 1993) have argued that, because people's evaluations of others are often shaped by social stereotypes, members of socially stigmatized groups such as ethnic minorities frequently perceive ambiguity regarding the causes of their outcomes. Given that social prejudices are at times plausible alternative explanations for their negative outcomes, ethnic-minority students might be more likely than European American students to discount negative outcomes rather than to accept them as valid indicators of ability. By attributing negative outcomes to prejudice and discrimination, members of socially stigmatized groups might maintain relatively high levels of self-esteem in the face of negative outcomes.

We speculate that negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority students might disengage their self-esteem from their academic outcomes either by devaluing the importance of academic success or by discounting academic feedback and test scores as being poor indicators of academic ability. In the remainder of this article, we focus on devaluing and discounting as two distinct processes of psychological disengagement. We begin by reviewing evidence for ethnic differences in academic devaluing and discounting, then examine factors that might predict the extent to which students engage in each of these self-protective strategies.

Ethnic Differences in Devaluing

Although several theoretical perspectives predict that ethnic differences in academic performance translate into ethnic differences in the value placed on academic success, in fact there is little evidence that negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority students place less value on academic success than do members of the ethnic majority (Mickelson, 1990). Rather, most studies suggest that African American high school and college students, on average, value academic success as highly as, and sometimes more highly than, European American students (e.g., Major & Schmader, 1998; Voelkl, 1997). Similarly, Latino/a students, particularly those whose families have recently immigrated to the United States, show little indication that they devalue the importance of academic achievement (Fulgini, 1997). In a study that compared European American, African American, and Latino/a students, the level of value placed on academic success did not differ by ethnicity (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). There is some evidence, however, that, although ethnic-minority girls value academic achievement as much as their

European American peers, ethnic-minority boys do not (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998).

Thus, although there is some suggestion that ethnic-minority males may be more likely than females to devalue academic success, the majority of research supports the null hypothesis that the value placed on academics does not differ by ethnicity. Granted, all existing research has been done with adolescents or young adults who are attending school. Given higher dropout rates among African American and Latino/a students (Steele, 1997), we might speculate that those students who leave school or do not attend college have at some point decided that academic success has little value for them. This points to the importance of determining what factors predict a tendency to devalue academic success.

Ethnic Differences in Discounting

Although several theorists have discussed a general distrust that ethnic-minority students might have for academic feedback and test scores (e.g., Hare, 1981; Steele, 1999), very few studies have examined ethnic differences in academic discounting. There is, however, some evidence to support the hypothesis that ethnic-minority students are more likely than ethnic-majority students to perceive their academic grades and test scores to be inaccurate and potentially biased indicators of their ability. For example, African Americans, more so than European Americans, tend to distrust information received from a European American evaluator (e.g., Banks, Stitt, Curtis, & McQuater, 1977). Banks and his colleagues found that when African American participants were given negative performance feedback from a European American evaluator, they were more likely to ignore his advice for improving their performance, their self-evaluations of ability tended to be less affected by his feedback, and they tended to rate him as less objective compared to a condition in which negative performance feedback was given by an African American evaluator. Further evidence suggests that this distrust of feedback from European Americans might even extend to positive feedback (Crocker et al., 1991). Thus, when outcomes are distributed by a member of the White majority, the potential for racial bias might raise doubts as to the validity of those outcomes in the minds of ethnic-minority members (see Ruggiero & Marx, 1999, for an opposing view).

Among African American students, the general distrust of outcomes that are distributed by European American individuals might translate into a distrust of academic outcomes received in traditionally European American educational establishments (Steele, 1999). For example, Hare (1981) speculated that African American students might be less likely than European American students to estimate their ability based only on teacher and test evaluations and that they might "blame the system" rather than themselves for poor academic performance. Major et al. (1998) found some empirical support for the notion that African American

students might have a general distrust of their academic outcomes. In these studies, African American students were more likely than European American students to believe that a supposed intelligence test was racially biased and that they had an unfair racial disadvantage on the test. Moreover, their greater distrust of the test was not moderated by whether or not the possibility of racial bias had been mentioned by the experimenter or by their success or failure on the test, suggesting that beliefs of test bias are a chronic concern for African American students.

In an additional study, Major and Schmader (1998) examined whether college students of different ethnic origins differ in the extent to which they devalue the academic domain and discount feedback on intellectual tests as invalid. African American students discounted the validity of academic feedback significantly more than did European American students. Consistent with the results of previous studies, however, African American students did not devalue academic success significantly more than European American students.

In sum, converging evidence suggests that negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority students disengage their self-esteem from the academic domain more than do European American students and that these ethnic differences in disengagement are accompanied by ethnic differences in a tendency to discount the validity of academic feedback, but not by ethnic differences in the value placed on academic success. In the remainder of this article, we shift from our focus on mean differences in psychological disengagement processes to address what factors predict devaluing and discounting among different ethnic groups. We propose that beliefs about the existence of social injustice that emerge from repeated experiences with prejudice and discrimination directed at oneself and one's ethnic group are an important predictor of discounting and devaluing among ethnic-minority students.

The Perception of Ethnic Injustice as an Antecedent to Disengagement Processes

Processes of psychological disengagement are often thought of as occurring in response to threats to one's personal or social self, such as poor performance, negative feedback, social rejection, or personal experiences with prejudice and discrimination. Thus, when an individual does poorly in a domain, she might buffer her self-esteem by devaluing the importance of that domain to her self-definition or by discounting her poor performance as an inaccurate indicator of her true abilities. But direct threats such as these are not the only factors contributing to psychological disengagement. We argue that among ethnic-minority students, discounting and devaluing processes will also be influenced by the degree to which one believes that one's ethnic group is treated unfairly in that domain. This belief, in turn, is likely to be related to general beliefs that outcomes in society are inequitable or unfair (Major, 1994). Thus, in addition to academic performance, we believe

that perceptions of ethnic injustice predict processes of psychological disengagement among ethnic-minority students.

In the present analysis, we examine perceptions that ethnic injustice exists at a systemic level and is targeted against one's own ethnic group. We refer to *systemic ethnic injustice* as the perception that status differences between various ethnic groups in society result from illegitimate practices of discrimination and that members of ethnic-minority groups, no matter how able or motivated, cannot improve their position in society because barriers impede the advancement of certain social groups. At the group level, beliefs of *injustice against one's ethnic ingroup* include the more specific perception that members of one's ethnic ingroup have been targeted by system injustices such as prejudice and discrimination.

In any discussion of perceived injustice, it should first be mentioned that people have a general tendency to perceive the world as a just place in which individuals receive outcomes that are deserved and deserve the outcomes they receive (Lerner, 1981). Furthermore, endorsing a global belief in the existence of justice might be important for maintaining a personal view of the world as an ordered, predictable, and controllable environment (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) and has adaptive implications for coping with stress (Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994). The tendency to hold beliefs that legitimize societal status hierarchies, in general (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), and justify the current system, in particular (Jost & Banaji, 1994), has been found even among low-status or disadvantaged groups.

Despite general tendencies to believe the world is just and the system is fair, however, evidence demonstrates that endorsement of justice beliefs does vary by ethnicity (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Major et al., 2000). At a system level, African American and Latino/a students are less likely than European American students to believe that members of any ethnic group can get ahead by working hard (Major et al., 2000). At a group level, African American and Latino/a students are more likely than European American students to report that other members of their *own* ethnic group experience discrimination (Major et al., 2000). Additional work shows that African Americans are more likely than European Americans to perceive that Blacks in general, are discriminated against (Turner & Turner, 1975) and may be targeted by governmental conspiracies (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999). Similar results have been found among Latinos (Penley, Gould, de la Vina, & Murphy, 1989). Thus, ethnic differences in perceived ethnic injustice do exist. Oyserman and her colleagues have suggested that having an "awareness of racism" allows members of ethnic-minority groups to navigate their social environment more effectively (Oyserman & Harrison, 1998; Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997).

We believe members of ethnic-minority groups who perceive a great deal of injustice in the current status hierarchy (at the system level or directed against their group) are more likely to believe that such injustices also permeate the academic establishment. Thus, we posit that perceptions of ethnic injustice are important

predictors of the tendency among negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority students to discount academic feedback and to devalue academic success. The belief in system ethnic injustice or injustice against one's ethnic ingroup should lead to an inference among ethnic-minority students that their own personal outcomes are not valid indicators of their personal abilities and efforts and thus should be discounted. The same relationships between more general perceptions of system and ingroup injustice and discounting should be much weaker or nonexistent for members of the ethnic majority, for whom ethnic injustice is a less plausible explanation for negative academic outcomes they receive.

In addition to predicting discounting among ethnic-minority students, beliefs about ethnic injustice might also predict the tendency among ethnic-minority students to devalue the academic domain. This prediction is consistent with Ogbu's (1991) discussion of cultural inversion, in which he suggests that ethnic-minority groups might be most likely to define themselves in opposition to society's standards when those standards are perceived to have been established with a clear bias in favor of the advantaged group. We recently obtained experimental support for the prediction that perceived injustice increases devaluing among lower status groups (Schmader, Major, Eccleston, & McCoy, 2000). In one of these studies, participants learned how students at their school compared on a fictitious personality dimension to students at another school of either higher or lower status. The perceived legitimacy of the status differences between the schools was also manipulated, and measures were taken of the extent to which students personally valued the dimension on which the schools had been compared. When students learned that the higher status school scored higher on the personal dimension than their own school, they valued that trait dimension when they perceived status differences to be legitimate but devalued the same trait when they perceived status differences between the schools to be illegitimate.

Ethnic Differences in the Antecedents of Academic Discounting and Devaluing

In this section we present results of a study examining the relationships among perceived ethnic injustice and processes of psychological disengagement. We tested a model in which academic performance and beliefs about ethnic injustice predict the extent to which students discount academic feedback and devalue academic success. Using structural equation modeling, we examined how this model differs among European American, African American, and Latino/a college students. Because ethnic injustice is a more plausible explanation for academic outcomes received by ethnic minorities who are negatively stereotyped in the academic domain, we hypothesized that perceptions of ethnic injustice would be a significant predictor of disengagement processes (particularly discounting) among

African American and Latino/a students but would not predict disengagement processes among European American students.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 676 undergraduates at the University of California, Los Angeles (184 African Americans, 270 Latinos, and 222 European Americans), who completed a survey for the chance to win one of six \$50 lottery prizes. As a measure of academic performance, participants reported their college grade point averages (GPA). In addition, they rated the following psychological variables on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Disengagement processes. Participants rated several items modeled after those used in previous research on psychological disengagement (Major & Schmader, 1998). Devaluing was assessed with four items ($\alpha = .78$): “Being good at academics is an important part of who I am” (reverse coded), “Doing well on intellectual tasks is very important to me” (reverse coded), “Academic success is not very valuable to me,” and “It usually doesn’t matter to me one way or the other how I do in school.” Discounting was assessed specifically in terms of perceived test bias, using the following item from a 4-item discounting subscale used in our previous work: “I feel that standardized achievement tests are definitely biased against me.” As in our previous research, these two constructs were found to be only weakly related to one another, $r = .09, p < .05$.

Perceived injustice. Beliefs about systemic ethnic injustice were assessed with four items ($\alpha = .69$): “Differences in status between ethnic groups are the result of injustice,” “Differences in status between ethnic groups are fair” (reverse coded), “America is an open society where individuals of any ethnicity can achieve higher personal status” (reverse coded), and “Personal advancement in American society is possible for individuals of all ethnic groups” (reverse coded). The perception of injustices against one’s ethnic group was assessed with two items ($\alpha = .68$): “Other members of my ethnic group experience discrimination” and “To what extent will prejudice and discrimination against others like you impose barriers to their future outcomes?” The latter item was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means for study variables are displayed in Table 1. Replicating past research, there were no ethnic group differences in devaluing, $F < 1$. There were, however, significant differences in discounting, $F(2, 561) = 69.51, p < .001$. African American and Latino/a students were more likely to discount test scores as biased than were European American students. African American and Latino American students did not differ in discounting.

As predicted, there were ethnic differences in perceptions of systemic ethnic injustice, $F(2, 561) = 50.75, p < .001$, and of injustice against one's ingroup, $F(2, 561) = 268.19, p < .001$. Perceptions of ethnic injustice were highest among African American students and lowest among European American students. Although means for all three ethnic groups were significantly different from one another on both measures of ethnic injustice, perceptions of injustice among Latino/a students were descriptively closer to those of African American students than to those of European American students.

Finally, consistent with past findings, there were significant ethnic group differences in reported GPA, $F(2, 561) = 35.92, p < .001$. European American students reported higher GPAs than did African American or Latino/a students (whose GPAs did not differ from one another).

Structural Equation Modeling Analyses

We next used structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the interrelations among academic performance, perceptions of ethnic injustice, and disengagement processes. Zero-order correlations among variables are summarized in Table 2. Of particular interest was whether the interrelations among variables differed across the three ethnic groups in our sample. Thus, we tested an initial model in which parameter estimates were free to take on different values for each of the

Table 1. Mean Differences in Main Study Variables by Ethnic Group

Measure	European Americans ($n = 189$)	African Americans ($n = 152$)	Latinos/Latinas ($n = 223$)
Devaluing	2.23 ^a	2.16 ^a	2.16 ^a
Discounting (test bias)	2.61 ^a	4.68 ^b	4.26 ^b
Systemic ethnic injustice	4.00 ^a	5.19 ^b	4.88 ^c
Injustice against ingroup	3.17 ^a	5.93 ^b	5.36 ^c
College GPA	3.33 ^a	2.98 ^b	3.06 ^b

Note. Means with different superscripts in the same row differ significantly from one another ($p < .05$). Significance tests are based on a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons.

Table 2. Correlations Among Variables for Each Ethnic Group

	System injustice	Injustice against ingroup	College GPA	Devaluing	Discounting
European Americans ^a					
System injustice	—				
Ingroup injustice	.03	—			
College GPA	.11	.19*	—		
Devalue	.01	-.14*	-.37***	—	
Discount	.12	.00	-.15*	.19*	—
African Americans ^b					
System injustice	—				
Ingroup injustice	.26***	—			
College GPA	.11	.13 ⁺	—		
Devalue	.14 ⁺	-.06	-.13	—	
Discount	.25**	.25**	.09	.14 ⁺	—
Latinos/Latinas ^c					
System injustice	—				
Ingroup injustice	.31***	—			
College GPA	.10	.02	—		
Devalue	.06	-.02	-.21***	—	
Discount	.22***	.28***	-.06	.04	—

^a $n = 189$; ^b $n = 152$; ^c $n = 223$.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. ⁺ $p < .01$.

three groups (a global-form model). We then examined whether relations among the variables varied by ethnic group (Bollen, 1989; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993).

Global-form model. First, we examined a global-form model in which we specified identical structural models for the three ethnic groups. The pattern of free and constrained paths was the same for each group, but the specific estimates for each ethnic group were free to vary. Thus, at this stage, we examined whether the hypothesized structural model adequately accounted for the data, without requiring that the strengths of the parameter estimates—or even their signs—be the same for each group.

We tested this model using LISREL 8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) and based our assessment of model fit on three indices: the overall chi-square, the comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), and the root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990). A nonsignificant chi-square statistic indicates good overall model fit. The CFI yields a value between 0 and 1, with values greater than .90 interpreted as good fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). Finally, an RMSEA value that is not significantly different from .05 indicates good fit. Based on these fit indices, the global-form model fit the data well, $\chi^2(18, N = 564) = 6.95, p < .990$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .001.

Ethnic-group differences. Next, we used a multiple-group SEM analysis to examine whether the global-form model differed across the three ethnic groups. This is the equivalent in SEM to examining interaction effects in regression and analysis of variance (ANOVA) models. We first constrained the estimates for all paths in the model to be identical across the three groups. This led to a significant detriment in model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(14, N = 564) = 60.49, p < .001$, indicating that there were ethnic-group differences in the strength of association among some of the variables in the model. Follow-up tests revealed ethnic-group differences for three specific paths: the path from academic performance to devaluing, the path from injustice against one's own group to discounting, and the correlation between systemic injustice and injustice against one's own group. Figure 1 displays pairwise ethnic group comparisons for each of these paths.

The estimates for European American students are shown in Figure 1a. Academic performance related negatively to both devaluing and discounting for these students. Perceptions of injustice (either systemic or against the ingroup) were unrelated to discounting and devaluing. These patterns indicate that performing poorly in school was the primary predictor of psychological disengagement processes among European Americans.

For African American students, the pattern of relations was quite different (Figure 1b). Academic performance was unrelated to either devaluing or discounting. Perceiving systemic injustice was related to increased devaluing and discounting, and perceiving injustice against the ingroup was related to increased discounting. These patterns indicate that performing poorly in school did not predict psychological disengagement processes among African Americans. Instead, broader perceptions of ethnic injustice predicted these students' beliefs about the importance of academics and the validity of intellectual tests.

Finally, Latino/a students demonstrated a negative association between academic performance and devaluing, similar to European Americans (Figure 1c). These students also demonstrated a positive association between perceptions of injustice and discounting, similar to African Americans. These patterns indicate that performing poorly in school predicted one form of academic disengagement among Latino/a students (devaluing) but that this performance did not predict the other form of disengagement (discounting). Instead, perceptions of injustice predicted whether these students discounted intellectual tests.

Discussion

Predicting Processes of Psychological Disengagement

In this article, we have extended our previous analysis of psychological disengagement to focus on perceptions of ethnic injustice as a predictor of academic devaluing and discounting among negatively stereotyped ethnic-minority students

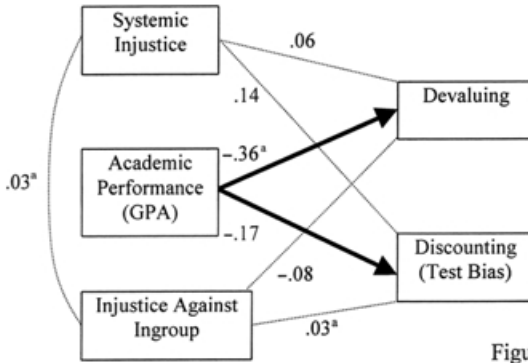


Figure 1a. European Americans

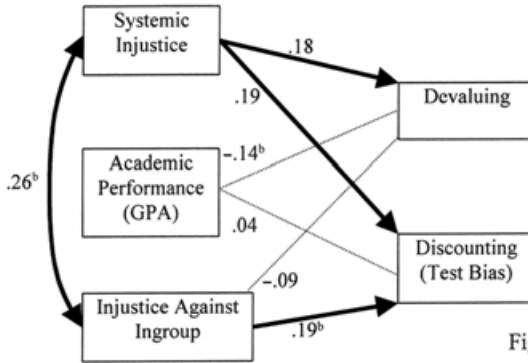


Figure 1b. African Americans

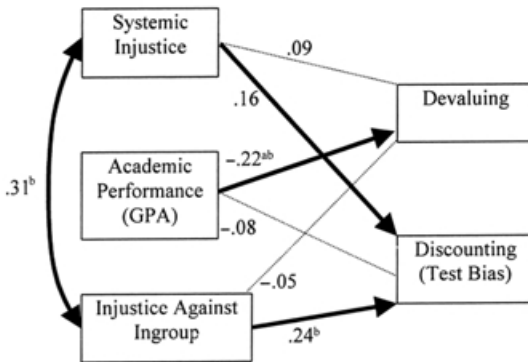


Figure 1c. Latinos/Latinas

Fig. 1. Structural equation models for each ethnic group. Significant paths within each ethnic group are indicated by solid lines ($p < .05$); nonsignificant paths are indicated by dashed lines. Paths with different superscripts across ethnic groups are significantly different from one another ($p < .05$).

(Major et al., 1998; Major & Schmader, 1998). The novel contribution of this research pertains to the results of a series of structural equation models suggesting that devaluing and discounting are predicted by different factors among ethnic-minority groups and ethnic-majority groups. Among European American students, beliefs about injustice were found to have little relation to the tendency to discount intellectual tests or to devalue academic success. Rather, European American students devalue academic success and discount their test scores to the extent that they perform poorly in school. Thus, psychological disengagement processes among European American students appear to be best explained by traditional theories suggesting that threatening performance feedback elicits strategies of self-protection (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979).

In contrast, processes of disengagement among African American students were found to be related to different mechanisms. Academic performance of African American students was unrelated to discounting academic test scores or devaluing academic success. Rather, beliefs about ethnic injustice were associated with both greater discounting and devaluing. For African American students, believing that their own ethnic group has been targeted by discrimination was related to the perception that they are *personally* targeted by injustices such as biased tests. Perceptions of injustice at a more systemic level also were associated with a greater tendency toward devaluing academic success among African American students. This latter relationship is consistent with Ogbu's (1991) hypothesis of cultural inversion, in that it suggests that perceived ethnic injustices might lead members of some ethnic-minority groups to question the personal value of a domain that is dominated by the European American majority. This relationship between perceived injustice and devaluing is also consistent with our recent experimental work demonstrating that members of lower-status groups devalue domains in which higher-status groups excel if they view status differences between the groups to be illegitimate (Schmader et al., 2000).

Among Latino/a students, the factors that predict psychological disengagement share common elements with predictors typical of both European American students and African American students. As seen with European American students, Latino/a students *devalued* academic success to the extent that they performed poorly in school. As seen with African American students, however, Latino/a students *discounted* academic feedback to the extent that they perceived a great deal of ethnic injustice. Interestingly, perceived ethnic injustice did not predict devaluing among Latinos, as it did among African Americans. Thus, there is no evidence that Latinos devalued education in the face of ethnic injustice as a way of rejecting the standards set by the European American majority. Again, however, this finding may be viewed as consistent with Ogbu's (1986) proposition that minority coping strategies differ depending on the historical context in which that minority status was created. Historically, African Americans did not choose to live in America, whereas many Latinos voluntarily immigrated to the United States in

search of greater opportunity. Given this historic difference, Latinos might have developed an ideology that includes a more optimistic view of their chances for opportunity in America (e.g., Latinos perceived significantly less ethnic injustice than did African American students), and as a result, are more inclined to value academic success based on their performance in school.

To summarize, many theorists predict that poor academic performance is a threat to the self that triggers self-protective strategies such as devaluing and discounting. But our data suggest that this prediction applies best to academic disengagement processes among European American students and, to a lesser extent, Latino/a students. Among disadvantaged ethnic-minority students, broader ideological beliefs about ethnic injustice appear to play a more important role in predicting academic attitudes. These findings are consistent with assertions that perceptions of injustice are important determinants of the coping strategies that are adopted by members of stigmatized groups (Major, 1994; Major & Schmader, in press). Thus, for students who are trying to cope with negative academic stereotypes, believing that ethnic differences in status are unjust and that one's own ethnic group is targeted with discrimination is associated with a greater tendency to discount the validity of academic assessment procedures and, for African American students, to devalue the importance of academic success. Among European American students, on the other hand, perceiving ethnic injustice in the system and against one's own ethnic group are unrelated to one another and do not predict disengagement processes. This asymmetry is not surprising given that when European Americans perceive the current status system of ethnic groups to be unjust, they are most likely acknowledging the disadvantaged position held by *other* ethnic groups, rather than by themselves personally or their own ethnic group as a whole.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research addresses factors that predict academic discounting and devaluing among ethnic-majority and -minority students. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine relationships among general perceptions of ethnic injustice and processes of disengagement from the academic domain among students in a large multiethnic sample. Furthermore, this research goes beyond a description of ethnic differences in levels of valuing and discounting to discuss variables that account for variation *within* each of the three different ethnic groups tested.

In spite of these strengths, however, there are some limitations to this research that we hope future studies will address. First, because of space limitations in our questionnaire, we were restricted to using a single-item measure of discounting. This item referred specifically to the perception of test bias rather than to a more general mistrust of academic feedback and test scores. Because this item was correlated with more generalized items of discounting used in other research (Major &

Schmader, 1998), however, we believe that results on this single item would be replicated on the more general scale, particularly among ethnic-minority students. We recognize, however, that test bias might evoke the notion of racially biased tests, making this particular measure of discounting more applicable to ethnic-minority students than to ethnic-majority students. A broader measure of discounting might have yielded a stronger relationship between academic performance and discounting among European American students.

Future studies are also needed to examine potential consequences of these self-protective strategies for both self-esteem and academic performance. Like many other theorists (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; James, 1890/1950; Rosenberg, 1979; Tesser, 1988), we conceptualize discounting and devaluing as processes by which students might detach their self-esteem from the academic outcomes they receive. If these processes are successful in this regard, then upon receiving negative academic outcomes, students who devalue academics or discount the validity of those outcomes should have higher academic self-esteem than students who engage in neither of these strategies. Experimental research is required to test systematically the usefulness of both discounting and devaluing for protecting self-esteem from negative outcomes. Furthermore, we suggest that ethnic-group differences in discounting might account for ethnic-group differences in psychological disengagement of self-esteem from academic outcomes, but additional research is required to test this hypothesis empirically.

In addition to their consequences for self-esteem, the impact of academic discounting and devaluing on a student's motivation and academic performance also requires further investigation. Just as some theorists assume that processes of psychological disengagement are self-protective, others assume that psychological disengagement from a domain decreases one's motivation and performance in that domain (e.g., Major & Schmader, 1998; Steele, 1992, 1997). If one eliminates a domain as a source of self-esteem, it is assumed that one loses motivation to excel in that domain and that performance drops as a consequence. Thus, ethnic-group differences in psychological disengagement might account for differences in academic performance, although this causal relationship has not yet been established. Future longitudinal investigations must assess how processes of psychological disengagement eventually affect a student's motivation and performance, particularly given findings that ethnic-minority students disengage from academics to a greater extent than their European American peers.

Conclusion

In sum, we have provided evidence that broader beliefs about social injustice are related to ethnic-minority students' attitudes toward academic outcomes, regardless of their actual performance in school. Thus, the most successful African American students might place little value on academic success and gifted Latino/a

students might distrust intellectual tests if they believe the larger social system is unjust in its treatment of ethnic groups. If detaching one's self-esteem from the academic domain leads to decreased motivation and performance (as suggested by Major & Schmader, 1998; Steele, 1992, 1997), then perceiving ethnic injustice might have a paradoxical mixture of costs and benefits. Perceiving injustice plays an important role in prompting collective action aimed at eliminating ethnic bias and discrimination. In addition, perceiving ethnic injustice predicts psychological coping strategies such as discounting that are thought to buffer self-esteem from negative outcomes (Crocker & Major, 1989). These same coping strategies, however, might result in poorer academic performance that could perpetuate ethnic-group differences in academic achievement. For ethnic-minority students trying to cope with negative stereotypes they face in the academic domain, balancing these costs and benefits can be a challenging endeavor.

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