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## **ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS**

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This study ascertains how positive and negative life events are viewed by stigmatized youngsters. The causal attributions of a sample of 139 at-risk African American adolescents are analyzed in a doubly multivariate repeated measures design. These students were participants in either the federally funded Summer Training and Education Program or the Student Academic and Leadership Enhancement Program funded by the Detroit Compact. Previous research on these students indicated that they have higher than norm global self-concepts and their locus of control is more external than would be expected for their age. The findings of the current study suggest that the attributions these youngsters ascribed to positive events were significantly more internal, stable, and global than the attributions for negative events. An ancillary outcome of this study is to report psychometric information regarding the use of The Attributional Style Questionnaire.

The review of Taylor and Brown (1988) noted, "Overly positive self-evaluations, exaggerated perceptions of control or mastery, and unrealistic optimism are characteristics of normal human thought" (p. 193). This indicates that inaccurate perceptions of self do not necessarily constitute poor mental health. In traditional theories of mental health, emotionally healthy individuals are characterized as having an accurate awareness of both the positive and negative aspects of self. Nevertheless, Taylor and Brown's review showed that most individuals have a very positive concept of themselves. (See also Greenwald, 1980). Taylor and Brown cited several

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reasons for this: (a) positive information about self appears to be more easily processed and recalled, while negative information appears to be more difficult to recall and more poorly processed (Kuiper & Derry, 1982; Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982; Kuiper, Olinger, MacDonald, & Shaw, 1985), (b) success experiences are more easily recalled than failure experiences (e.g., Silverman, 1964), and (c) recollections of performances tend to be more positive than they actually were (e.g., Crary, 1966).

The content of these three reasons serve an adaptive function for the individual's adjustment. It appears that mechanisms of the cognitive process provide filters through which information can be biased in a positive direction. Taylor and Brown (1988) noted, "positive illusions may be especially useful when an individual receives negative feedback or is otherwise threatened and may be especially adaptive under these circumstances" (p. 193). These positive illusions are an example of a cognitive filtering process.

Individuals are also likely to engage in behaviors and social relationships that establish and reinforce a positive self-perception. Taylor and Brown (1988) stated that, "People select friends and intimates who are relatively similar to themselves on physical resources, nearly equal on ability and achievement, similar in attitudes, and similar in background characteristics" (p. 201), ostensibly for the purpose of increasing the likelihood of receiving positive feedback. The deliberate attempt to construct the context of the social relationship environment has the benefit of maintaining a positive self-esteem.

In managing negative feedback, Taylor and Brown (1988) claimed that the following factors, among others, are influential: (a) admitting to, but diminishing, the importance of negative feedback, (b) lessening the credibility of negative feedback due to a strong positive self-image, and (c) in addition to the possible use of cognitive, behavioral, and social filters, mitigating negative effects on self-perception by regarding it as negligible. Moreover, ambiguous feedback is interpreted to be consistent with that person's prior belief (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). (For further discussion of this and related issues, see Gollob & Dittes, 1965; Shrauger & Kelly, 1981; Snyder, Shenkel, & Lowery, 1977; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983.)

The foregoing discussion has introduced the management of negative feedback for the general population. Crocker and Major (1989) further developed this with regard to stigmatized individuals. They are people about whom others have negative or stereotypical beliefs. As a result of this discrimination, they may be disadvantaged in terms of economic, interpersonal, and other outcomes.

Among other readily apparent characteristics (e.g., gender, facial disfigurement, physical disability), Crocker and Major (1989) noted that people might be stigmatized due to their race. If an individual is stigmatized due to race, the person might attribute negative feedback to prejudice against that race. Crocker and Major (1989) suggested that stigmatized individuals use self-protective mechanisms in "attributing negative feedback to prejudice against their group" (p. 612) in order to preserve their self-esteem. This permits the person to dismiss negative feedback without undergoing a self-assessment. This general concept was previously mentioned by Goffman (1963), who noted the presence of a prejudicial perspective may become a readily available explanation that can be used to dismiss negative feedback and thereby protect self-esteem. This, in turn, may lead to an external locus of control (e.g., Rotter, 1990; Strickland, 1989) personality style.

There are other perspectives on how self-protective cognitions maintain self-esteem. One example is provided by excuse theory (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Mikulincer and Marshand (1991) noted that people may use "excuse[s] strategies and try to put forward alternative explanations for the causes of failure" (p. 135), as a method of managing negative feedback. Another perspective is provided by attribution theory (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Weiner, 1986, 1993) discussed more fully below.

#### ATTRIBUTION THEORY

The reformulated learned helplessness model of Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) posits that experiencing the uncontrollability of events leads to the creation of explanatory cognitions for these events. The model, which they used to understand depression and concomitant responses to uncontrollable events, hypothesizes attributions along the following dimensions:

- a) Internal - External. Causes of events are attributed to something about the individual vs something about the situation.
- b) Stable - Unstable. Causes of events are attributed to nontransient vs transient factors.
- c) Global - Specific. Expectations are that the same event or result will occur in a variety of situations vs a more limited number of situations.

Individuals develop consistent patterns of attributions over time. Thus, Peterson, Semmel, Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky & Seligman (1982) stated that attributional style, or explanatory style, is an individual's predictable and regular pattern of cognitions. More recently, Peterson, Colvin, and Lin (1992) noted that explanatory style is one's habitual way of explaining bad events.

There has been a research focus on attribution style of African-American male children (Hudley & Graham, 1993), middle school age youngsters (Graham, Hudley, & Williams, 1992), and adolescents (e.g., Arntz, Gerlsma, & Albersnagel, 1985; Turk & Bry, 1992). To date, however, there is a paucity of research on the attributional style of African-American adolescents. Studies on this population of youngsters are needed because (a) an understanding of their attributional style would be helpful in addressing attendant psychological and educational problems (e.g., school dropout, over-representation in the court system, single parent family structures), (b) they represent a specific example of a stigmatized population, which presents an opportunity for exploring issues of general stigmatization theory, and (c) as Graham (1992) noted, the preponderance of empirical research in American Psychological Association journals from the previous two decades used samples of "White" middle class subjects. Published research including African-Americans, in fact, diminished during the same period.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE SAMPLE

The study reported below is the third in a series exploring how African-American adolescents maintain positive self-esteem, and interpret and use negative feedback. In the first study (Wood, Hillman, & Sawilowsky, 1992) it was noted that global self-esteem of African-American adolescents was higher than reported norms. These findings are consistent with the review by Porter & Washington (1979). One of the hypotheses offered by Crocker and Major (1989) (and derivable from Taylor & Brown, 1988) is useful in interpreting the findings of Wood et al. (1992): externalization may be a mechanism by which stigmatized individuals interpret information in the protection of self-esteem. Therefore, in a second study (Hillman, Wood, & Sawilowsky, 1992), the students' locus of control was measured with the Nowicki -Strickland Scale to gather information on beliefs regarding their control of life events. The second study found that the same sample of youngsters exhibited a locus of control that was more external than might be otherwise expected from Nowicki and Strickland (1973). It appears that being a member of a stigmatized group promotes the use of externalization to protect self-esteem. Measurement of locus of control in the second study, however, could not yield separate scores for positive and negative life events.

### THE CURRENT STUDY

Considering the above reviewed theory and research on the manner in which individuals process feedback, and the above described limitation of the Nowicki-Strickland Scale to yield separate scores for positive and negative life events, the purpose of this study is to ascertain if positive and negative events were viewed differently by stigmatized youngsters. Specifically, we (a) describe the causal attributions of this sample of African-American adolescents, and (b) provide information on attribution style by gender, because males are considered to be more at-risk for behavioral and school problems than females. Further, because we have not seen its use reported with a sample of urban African-American adolescents, an ancillary outcome of this study is to report psychometric information regarding the use of The Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ).

### DESCRIPTION OF THE ASQ

Based upon the reformulated learned helplessness model (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), The Attributional Style Questionnaire was developed by Peterson et al. (1982). This questionnaire purports to measure attributional styles along the previously defined dimensions of internal - external, stable - unstable, and global - specific.

The ASQ elicits responses to both positive and negative life events. The responses are further organized by combining these two with the internal, stable, and global dimensions, yielding six subscales: (a) Internal Composite Positive, (b) Internal Composite Negative, (c) Stable Composite Positive, (d) Stable Composite Negative, (e) Global Composite Positive, and (f) Global Composite Negative. By combining the positive internal, stable, and global subscales, a Composite Positive attributional style score is generated. A Composite Negative attributional style score is constructed by combining the negative subscales.

### PARTICIPANTS

There were 139 African-American students participating in the current study, of which 73 were male (52.5%) and 66 were female (47.5%); the mean age was 13.9 years ( $sd = .9$ ). These students were obtained from a larger group of youngsters participating in university-based summer programs for at-risk adolescents. The programs are described below.

### PROGRAMS (STEP, SALE)

One hundred and seventy-five students participated either in the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP), federally funded through the Job

Training and Partnership Act (1982, as amended 1988), or the Student Academic and Leadership Enhancement program (SALE), which was funded through the Detroit Compact (a metropolitan Detroit collaborative program of business, government, and public schools to provide certainty of opportunity for higher education or employment). Participants in STEP met the following criteria:

- a) family documented to be below the federally-defined poverty level via participation in Aid to Families of Dependent Children or federal income tax return
- b) unsatisfactory academic achievement scores (1 to 4 years behind grade expectation) on the reading and mathematics portions of the California Achievement Test
- c) determined by school counselor to be at-risk for dropping out of school due to factors such as truancy, low grades, mild to moderate behavioral problems, family trauma and dysfunction, or multiple grade retentions
- d) age 14 or 15 at the beginning of the summer program.

Participants in the SALE program met the following criteria:

- a. failed to meet one or more commitments to the Detroit Compact relating to attendance, homework completion, or grade point average
- b. age 13 or 14 at the beginning of the summer program

Thirty-six of the 175 students were not included in the current study for a variety of reasons, including incomplete test protocols used in this study, absence when tests were administered, and four students were not African-American.

## RESULTS

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for attribution style positive and negative life event items. Three means and standard deviations are reported for each item of the ASQ, one each for internality, stability, and globality. This table is included for comparative purposes with Peterson et al. (1982) for future research.

In Table 2, each dimension and subscale computed from the 48 item ASQ is followed by the number of items, the item mean and standard deviation, Cronbach Alpha (a measure of internal consistency), and the Spearman - Brown prediction of internal consistency based on increasing each subscale to a full test length of 48 items. This table indicates that the full test length reliability estimates for the dimensions and subscales had a minimum value of .76 and a maximum value of .93, with an average of .85. For comparison purposes, related information from Peterson et al. (1982) is also tabled. Note the similarity of reliability estimates with the two samples.

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ASQ ITEMS

<i>Event</i>	<i>Internality</i>		<i>Stability</i>		<i>Globality</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Rich	5.04	2.34	4.49	2.15	4.71	2.14
Position	5.58	1.83	5.06	1.90	4.96	1.94
Raise	5.93	1.73	5.19	1.74	4.56	2.13
Compliment	5.52	1.80	4.76	1.93	4.40	2.15
Praise	5.37	1.93	5.11	1.68	4.42	2.08
Loving	5.27	2.13	5.32	1.80	4.36	2.29
Dimensions for						
Good Events	5.45	.98	4.99	.99	4.57	1.25
Unsuccessful	4.53	2.13	3.48	2.13	3.80	2.14
Negative Talk	3.91	2.30	3.42	1.92	3.46	2.07
Can't finish work	4.46	2.23	4.24	1.88	3.66	2.03
Friend's problem	3.52	2.20	3.99	1.81	3.40	2.09
Hostility	3.91	2.26	4.19	2.00	3.59	2.14
Bad Date	3.53	2.26	3.63	2.06	3.32	2.04
Dimensions for						
Bad Events	3.97	1.21	3.83	1.10	3.54	1.11
TOTAL	56.55	9.42	52.89	8.74	48.65	10.79

In Table 3, descriptive data and a series of *t* tests performed on the three dimensions by gender are reported. The mean scores for each of the subscales are similar to the magnitude of scores reported in Peterson et al. (1982). The three multiple *t* tests were corrected with Bonferonni modifications to guard against potential family-wise Type I error inflations ( $\alpha = .05/3 = .017$ ). The results indicate no significant differences between males and females in this sample. Thus, further analyses were conducted without regard to gender. However, we note that Arntz, Gerlsma, and Albersnagel (1985) did find gender differences in their use of a translated version of the ASQ with 278 Dutch high school students.

Table 4 contains subscale means, standard deviations, and an intercorrelation matrix. Comparative intercorrelations from Peterson et al. (1982) are also provided in parenthesis. Note the similarity of intercorrelations for the two samples.

A series of one-mean *t* tests were conducted to compare the dimension scores reported in Tables 1 and 3 with the means reported in Peterson et al. (1982). The obtained *t* values (*d.f.* = 138) and associated probabilities follow.

TABLE 2  
ASQ DIMENSION AND SUBSCALE PROPERTIES

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Current Study		Peterson, et al. (1982)	
				<i>CA</i>	<i>SB</i>	<i>CA</i>	<i>SB</i>
Internal - External	12	56.55	9.42	.44	.76		
Stable - Unstable	12	52.89	8.74	.46	.77		
Global - Specific	12	48.65	10.79	.59	.85		
<i>Subscale</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>CA</i>	<i>SB</i>	<i>CA</i>	<i>SB</i>
Composite Positive	18	15.01	2.36	.68	.85		
Composite Negative	18	11.34	2.33	.63	.82		
Internal Positive	6	5.45	.98	.39	.84	.50	.89
Internal Negative	6	3.97	1.21	.52	.90	.46	.87
Stable Positive	6	4.99	.99	.48	.88	.58	.92
Stable Negative	6	3.83	1.10	.56	.91	.59	.92
Global Positive	6	4.57	1.25	.62	.93	.44	.86
Global Negative	6	3.54	1.11	.49	.88	.69	.95
Hopefulness	12	9.56	1.81	.65	.88		
Hopelessness	12	7.37	1.81	.64	.88		
Achievement Positive	9	45.52	8.32	.54	.86		
Achievement Negative	9	34.97	7.94	.42	.76		
Affiliation Positive	9	44.53	8.20	.53	.86		
Affiliation Negative	9	33.07	8.10	.44	.81		

Note: *CA*=Cronbach Alpha, *SB*=Spearman-Brown

TABLE 3  
THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF THE ASQ ANALYZED BY GENDER

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df.</i>	<i>p</i>
Internal - External	Boys	55.27	10.05	73	-1.70	137	.092
	Girls	57.97	8.51	66			
Stable - Unstable	Boys	52.64	7.45	73	-.35	137	.726
	Girls	53.17	10.03	66			
Global - Specific	Boys	49.03	11.01	73	.44	137	.664
	Girls	48.23	10.61	66			

Internal Positive:  $t = 2.30$ ,  $p = .023$ ; Stable Positive:  $t = -4.43$ ,  $p = .000$ ; Global Positive:  $t = -5.10$ ,  $p = .000$ ; Internal Negative:  $t = -3.06$ ,  $p = .003$ ; Stable Negative:  $t = -3.34$ ,  $p = .001$ ; Global Negative:  $t = -3.54$ ,  $p = .001$ . The

TABLE 4  
ASQ POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SUBSCALE MEANS, STANDARD DIVISIONS, AND  
INTERCORRELATIONS

Subscale	M	SD	Subscale				
			1	2	3	4	5
<i>Positive</i>							
1. Internality	5.45	.98					
2. Stability	4.99	.99	.39** (.62*)				
3. Globality	4.57	1.25	.23** (.38*)	.30** (.59*)			
<i>Negative</i>							
4. Internality	3.97	1.21	ns (ns)	ns (ns)	ns (ns)		
5. Stability	3.83	1.10	-.25** (ns)	ns (ns)	ns (ns)	ns (.18*)	
6. Globality	3.54	1.11	ns (ns)	ns (ns)	.16* (.24*)	.18* (.28*)	.35** (.45*)

Note: ns=not significant ( $p > .05$ ). Intercorrelations in parenthesis are comparative results for Peterson, et al. (1982). \*\*= $p < .01$ . \*= $p < .05$ .

students in this study had significantly lower dimension scores on the ASQ than those in the study by Peterson et al. (1982). The only exception was for Internal Positive, where they had significantly higher scores.

Attributional style differences for positive and negative life events, the primary focus of this study, were analyzed with the doubly multivariate repeated measures analysis of variance. An orthonormalized transformation of the original scores resulted in a significant Hotelling's  $T^2$  of 1.27 (approximate  $F = 57.69$ , d.f. = 3,136),  $p < .000$ . An inspection of means indicated Internal Positive > Internal Negative, Stable Positive > Stable Negative, and Global Positive > Global Negative. This shows attributional style for positive events to be significantly more internal, stable and global than for negative events for this sample of youngsters.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how at-risk African-American adolescents attribute cause as a result of positive and negative feedback. Previous research on our sample indicated that these youngsters have higher than norm global self-concepts and their locus of control is more external than would be expected for their age. A limitation of Hillman, Wood, and Sawilowsky (1992) was that the measure of locus of control did not differentiate between feedback as a result of positive vs negative life experiences. Below, we discuss the (a) similarities of psychometric properties of The Attributional Style Questionnaire with the findings of Peterson et al. (1982), (b) substantive findings of positive and negative attributional style of the youngsters in this study, (c) theoretical implications for both attributional

style and stigmatization, and (d) implications for practice.

The internal consistency of dimensions and subscales of the ASQ with our sample was comparable to the Peterson et al. (1982) sample. The Spearman-Brown corrected Cronbach Alpha averaged .85, indicating a high level of internal consistency. The two studies also report very similar subscale means, standard deviations, and intercorrelation matrices. Thus, this instrument has been shown to yield stable scores with a 100% African-American sample.

The scores of the African-American youngsters in this study were lower on five of six dimensions in comparison with the means cited in Peterson et al. (1982). This suggests that for both positive and negative life events, our sample of students perceived the events to be more external, unstable, and specific than the students in their sample. A possible explanation for these differences is that our sample contained academically at-risk students, whereas their sample contained successful high school graduates (i. e., college students). Note, however, Arntz et al. (1985) previously found no relationship between high and low mental ability and ASQ scores. Other possible explanations for the differences might be (a) a developmental pattern largely influenced by age, (b) a more readily available explanation (race) than would be found in a nonstigmatized sample, and (c) an interaction of age and stigmatization, because as people mature, there may be a differential effect of stigmatization.

Attributional style differences for positive and negative life events were examined via a repeated measures analysis of variance. The attributions these youngsters ascribed to positive events were significantly more internal, stable, and global than the attributions they ascribed for negative events. This is consistent with the results of Peterson et al. (1982). These results also support Taylor and Brown (1988), who provided substantial theory and research on tendencies to bias negative feedback in order to produce and sustain a sense of emotional well-being. This cognitive processing (mediational style) may be helpful in maintaining the emotional adjustment of individuals. Support for this possibility may be found in a recent study that indicated internal, stable, and global attributions following negative outcomes can threaten self-esteem and promote self-inhibiting processes and deficits in social-emotional functioning (Joseph & Kuyken, 1993). However, the failure to take into account appropriate negative feedback does not allow individuals to alter behavioral patterns when appropriate and necessary.

Externalization and the biasing of negative feedback from the perspective of Taylor and Brown (1988) is a mechanism for the maintenance of emotional well-being among otherwise reasonably well adjusted individuals. The same psychological mechanism, however, following negative feedback when used by individuals who are either not well adjusted, or educationally, emotionally, and developmentally at-risk, or stigmatized (i.e., Crocker & Major, 1989) may lead to unhealthy, maladaptive, and counter-productive ways of thinking for the purposes of emotional and educational growth. Although the discounting of appropriate negative feedback may result in a short-term sense of emotional well-being, it can result in the failure of at-risk youngsters, such as the students in our study, to profit from the educational guidance of parents and teachers. Empirical support for this may be found in a recent study on college students by Peterson, Colvin, & Lin (1992). They found that students with an internal explanatory style were more likely to use an active coping style following classroom setbacks.

In their paper on ethnic differences in adolescent achievement, Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1992) reported that, in general, two of the most important factors related to adolescent achievement in school are (a) peer-group support for achieving and (b) parental practices that are authoritative as opposed to authoritarian. They concluded, however, "Among African-American youngsters, the absence of peer support for achievement undermines the positive influence of authoritative parenting" (p. 723). Thus, peer support must be considered the essential factor related to achievement for African-American students (although it can be augmented by appropriate parenting factors).

What is the relationship between the importance (but apparent lack of support of the peer group) of academic achievement and the attributional style of the youngsters in this study? In general, people deliberately construct homogeneous social groups for maintaining positive self-esteem and sense of well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Further, when the stigmatization explanation is available, youngsters may use it in order to diminish the importance of negative feedback from others outside their group. A likely consequence of these two factors, given the results of the current study, is a continually inaccurate self-perception through the discounting of negative feedback. This leads to a circular process of mutual reinforcement by peer group members of an attributional style that is counterproductive to academic achievement, which in turn, is further maintained by resistance to outside feedback.

The at-risk African-American adolescents in this study viewed causes of positive events in their lives as significantly more internal, stable, and global

than causes for negative events. This, along with previous findings of their higher than norm self-esteem (Wood, Hillman, & Sawilowsky, 1992), indicates a healthy adjustment to being a member of a stigmatized group. It is consistent with the conclusion of Taylor and Brown (1988), who stated, "Research on self-serving bias in causal attribution documents that most individuals are more likely to attribute positive than negative outcomes to the self" (p. 195). Also, as predicted by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) and Crocker and Major (1989), the students' self-esteem was protected by perceiving negative events (hypothesized in the current study as resulting from social stigma) as external, unstable, and specific. This implies that cognitions which maintain emotional well-being have greater influence on at-risk African-American adolescents than those cognitions which impact behavior toward successful academic performance.

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