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## AN ATTRIBUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON MOTIVATION IN ETHNIC MINORITY YOUTH

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Almost 30 years ago (Graham, 1988), I published an article with the title “Can Attribution Theory Tell Us Something About Motivation in Blacks?” That article appeared early in my academic career and still relatively early in the development of an attributional theory of motivation. But as an intellectually still maturing scholar conducting motivation research with an emergent theory, it was evident to me even in 1988 that many of our concerns about motivational patterns of African American youth—such as the relationships between self-esteem and academic achievement, expectations and aspirations, perceptions of powerful others, and coping with academic failure—were amenable to attributional analyses. We were just scratching the surface at the time.

In this chapter, I draw on my history as an attribution researcher for more than 30 years to describe some of my research that has used attribution theory as a framework for addressing the achievement motivation and social outcomes of ethnic minority youth, with a particular focus in some cases on African American youth. Researchers who study academic and social outcomes of ethnic minority youth are often studying challenges of enormous complexity—for example, the racial achievement gap and, increasingly, the racial discipline gap. I want to make the case that a good theory can help us manage some of that complexity. A good theory can help us choose the research problems that we study, frame those problems as questions that can be empirically studied, and guide our thinking about change. My goal is to illustrate some of the ways in which my research uses an attributional lens to shed light on the school experiences of ethnic minority youth and how we can help make those experiences better.



## A Brief Summary of Attribution Theory

To lay the conceptual groundwork for the research presented in this chapter, I begin with an overview of the main principles of an attributional theory of motivation. Attribution theory originated with the publication of Fritz Heider's book, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (Heider, 1958). Many theorists associated with attributional analyses followed Heider, but in this chapter I focus on attribution theory as formulated and elaborated by Bernard Weiner (see reviews in Weiner, 1986, 1995, 2006). The main principles of the theory are depicted in Figure 2.1. Think of the linkages as a temporal sequence that begins with an outcome interpreted as a success or failure. Following an initial reaction of happiness or sadness (outcome-dependent emotions), individuals then undertake a causal search to determine why that outcome occurred. Attributions are answers to those "why" questions, such as "Why did I fail the exam?" when the motivational domain is achievement, or "Why don't I have any friends?" when the motivational domain is affiliation. Individuals make attributions about other people as well as themselves. For example, the American public continues to be riveted by a string of lethal police shootings of unarmed Black youth like 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and most recently 17-year-old LaQuan McDonald in Chicago. Most of the commentary associated with these shootings implicitly or explicitly asks "why?" Did the victims engage in threatening behavior? Did the perpetrators have malicious intent? Individuals especially make attributions about themselves and about other people following negative or unexpected outcomes (Gendolla & Koller, 2001; Stupnisky, Stewart, Daniels, & Perry, 2011). Causal search can therefore help us impose order on an unpredictable environment.

In the achievement domain, which has served as a model for the study of causality in other contexts, Figure 2.1 shows that success and failure often are attributed to an *ability* factor that includes both aptitude and acquired skills, an *effort* factor that can be either temporary or sustained, the difficulty of the task, luck, mood, and help or hindrance from others. Among these causal ascriptions, in this culture at least, ability and effort are the most dominant perceived causes of success and failure. When explaining achievement outcomes, individuals attach the most importance to how smart they are and how hard they try.

Because specific attributional content will vary among motivational domains as well as between individuals within a domain, attribution theorists have focused on the underlying dimensions or properties of causes in addition to specific causes per se. Here we ask, for example, how are ability and effort similar and how are they different? Are there other attributions that share the overlapping and non-overlapping properties of ability and effort? As I will illustrate, understanding the conceptual distinctions between ability and effort, or *can* and *want*, as attributions about oneself or other people provides insight into a number of important achievement-related experiences of ethnic minority youth.



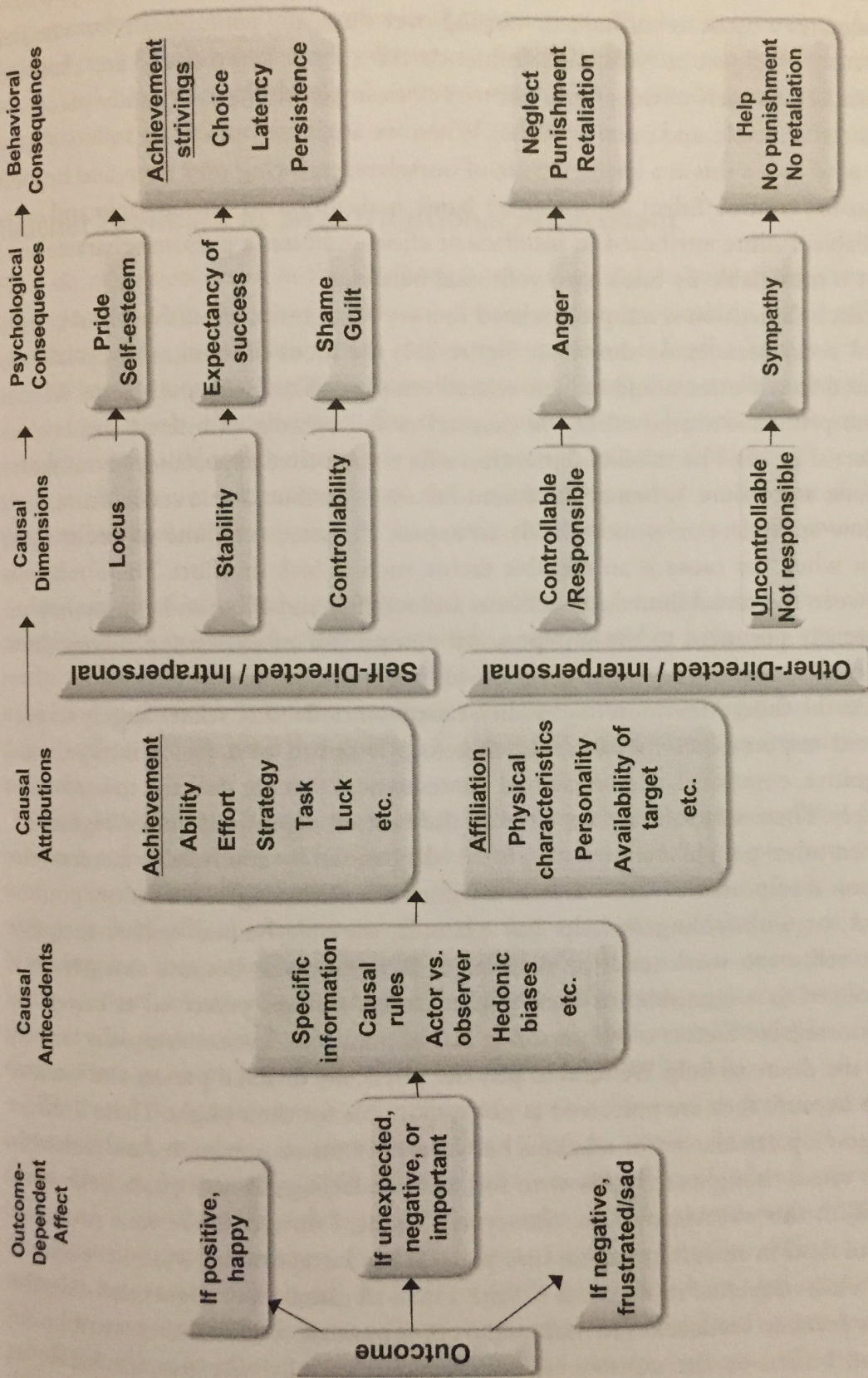


FIGURE 2.1 An attributional theory of motivation



Three causal dimensions have been identified with some certainty. These are *locus*, or whether a cause is internal or external to the individual; *stability*, which designates a cause as constant or varying over time; and *controllability*, or whether a cause is subject to volitional influence. All causes theoretically are classified according to each of these dimensions. For example, ability is typically perceived as internal, stable, and uncontrollable. When we attribute our failure to low ability, we tend to see this as a characteristic of ourselves, enduring over time, and beyond personal control. Effort, on the other hand, is also internal but unstable and controllable. Failure attributed to insufficient effort indicates a personal characteristic that is modifiable by one's own volitional behavior.

Each dimension is uniquely related to a set of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences. As shown in Figure 2.1, the locus dimension of causality is related to self-esteem and esteem-related emotions like pride and shame. We feel more pride and shame when we succeed or fail because of internal rather than external causes. The stability dimension affects subjective expectancy about future success and failure. When achievement failure is attributed to a stable cause, such as low aptitude, one is more likely to expect the same outcome to occur again than when the cause is an unstable factor, such as lack of effort. These relations between the causal dimension of locus and stability and affect and expectancy are especially pertinent to the intrapersonal component of attribution theory (how I feel about myself; top right quadrant of Figure 2.1).

As the third dimension of causality, causal controllability relates largely to perceived responsibility in *others* and therefore is linked to a set of interpersonal cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences that are directed toward other people. These relations are depicted in the bottom right quadrant of Figure 2.1. When other people's failures are perceived as caused by controllable factors—the person is responsible—such as lack of effort, this elicits anger, retaliation, punishment, or withholding of help. For example, the able-bodied welfare recipient who refuses to work tends to elicit anger from taxpayers because that person is perceived as responsible for their plight. Others' failures perceived as caused by uncontrollable factors—the person is not responsible—evokes sympathy or pity and the desire to help. We tend to pity the physically disabled person and want to help because they are perceived as not responsible for their plight. These linkages suggest a particular set of relations between attributions, emotions, and behavior. Our causal thoughts tell us how to feel and our feelings in turn guide behavior.

With this overview of the theory as a guide, I now describe four programs of attribution research that capture parts of the intrapersonal and interpersonal sequences depicted in Figure 2.1. First, I turn to causal antecedents and describe how teacher feedback can indirectly communicate a low ability attribution. Next, I turn to the consequences of causal controllability (responsibility) as I describe research on African American boys labeled as aggressive and our efforts to change their maladaptive attributions about responsibility in others. Because children labeled as aggressive are at risk for involvement in the juvenile



justice system, I then examine the controllability attributions that adults in that system make about adolescent offenders and how these attributions might help us understand racial disparities in the treatment of juvenile offenders. And finally I return to intrapersonal processes to study the attributions of victimized youth and how the school racial context can be an antecedent to particular attributions.

### Teacher Feedback as an Attributional Antecedent

How do perceivers arrive at the attributions that they make about themselves or other people? One source of attributional information, particularly about effort and ability and especially relevant to motivation in school, is feedback from teachers. Teachers no doubt often directly and intentionally tell their students that they did not put forth enough effort, for trying hard has moral implications and is certainly compatible with the work ethic espoused in school. Although teachers typically do not intentionally tell their students that they are low in ability, this attributional information may be subtly, indirectly, and even unknowingly conveyed.

In a series of laboratory-experimental studies, we drew on basic attribution principles to document that three seemingly positive teacher behaviors can indirectly function as low ability cues (see Graham, 1990). The particular behaviors examined in these studies were communicated sympathy following failure; unsolicited offers of help; and the giving of praise following success, particularly at easy tasks.

We know from attribution theory that failure attributed to uncontrollable factors such as lack of ability elicits sympathy from others, and sympathy, in turn, promotes offers of help. This is in contrast to failure attributed to controllable causes such as lack of effort, which tends to evoke anger and the withholding of help. Now suppose that a teacher does respond with sympathy versus anger toward a failing student or with an unsolicited offer of help rather than neglect. It might be the case that students will then use these affective and behavioral displays to infer the teacher's attribution and his or her own self-ascription for failure.

We tested the attribution cue function of expressed sympathy and anger in a laboratory task involving manipulated failure (Graham, 1984). About 180 sixth-grade African American and White students were given four trials of repeated failure on a novel puzzle-solving task. The puzzles were tangrams requiring the student to construct geometric forms from sets of seven pieces (five different-size triangles, a square, a rhomboid). Each form to be constructed was depicted on a  $7 \times 11$  in card with no indication of how the piece fit together. Participants had to put all the pieces in place to match a design within a limited amount of time—in this case 1 minute. All the puzzles were solvable but not within 1 minute based on pilot testing. Following "failure," a female experimenter posing as a teacher conveyed either mild sympathy, anger, or no affect. Children were randomly assigned



to one of the three affect conditions. After the failure trials, four attributions were rated on nine-point scales including low ability and lack of effort.

Figure 2.2 shows the attributions to low ability and lack of effort as a function of the affect condition. The findings were the same across African American and White participants, so the data are combined. It is evident that affective displays of "teachers" communicated attributional information. Participants in the sympathy condition were more likely to attribute their failure to low ability. In the anger condition, compared to the other conditions, attributions to lack of effort were elevated. Thus, as predicted, a teacher display of sympathy can indirectly communicate low ability information.

Too much praise, like sympathy, can also function as a low ability cue. Two attribution principles are relevant here. First, praise is related to perceived effort expenditure in that the successful student who tries hard is maximally rewarded. Second, effort and ability are often perceived as compensatory causes of achievement: in both success and failure, the higher one's perceived effort, the lower one's perceived ability, and vice versa. Thus if two students achieve the same outcome, often the one who tries harder (and is praised) is perceived as lower in ability. George Barker and I had 5- to 12-year-old students watch videotapes of two students solving math problems, and both got the exact same number right (Barker & Graham, 1987). The teacher publically praised one student and gave only neutral feedback to the other student. Participants were then asked to rate the ability and effort of each student. It was documented that older students who were praised for success at a relatively easy task were inferred to be lower in ability

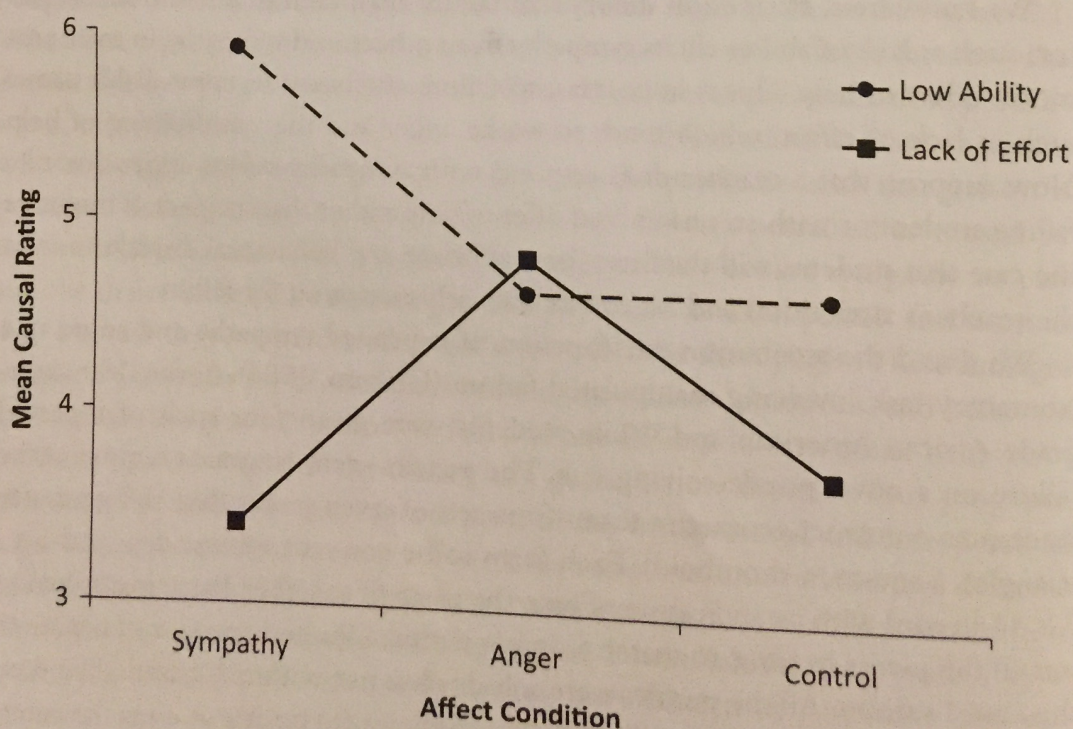


FIGURE 2.2 Teacher sympathy and anger as attributional cues (from Graham, 1984)



than their counterparts who received neutral feedback. In other words, the offering of praise following success, like communicated sympathy following failure, functioned as a low ability cue. Barker and I conducted a similar study in which we manipulated whether a teacher offered unsolicited help to one student and ignored the other (Graham & Barker, 1990). The student who was helped by the teacher, like praise and sympathy, was a low ability cue.

I believe these findings are just as relevant today to understanding some of the motivational challenges of ethnic minority youth as they were when I carried out the studies more than 20 years ago. Although not grounded in attributional analyses, there is quite a bit of contemporary research from social psychologists documenting how teacher behaviors similar to those I highlight can undermine motivation and performance of ethnic minority students. For example, in research on social stigma, African American students reported lower academic self-esteem when they received what the authors called *assumptive help* (help that is given without clear evidence of need) on an intelligence test from a White confederate than did their African American counterparts who received no such help (Schneider, Major, Luhtanen, & Crocker, 1996). Consistent with our attributional analysis, these authors proposed that help that is not requested can confirm a "suspicion of inferiority" among African Americans who regularly confront the negative stereotypes about their group's intellectual abilities.

Too much praise and, by implication, too little criticism for poor performance seems to be particularly directed toward ethnic minority students. For example, Harber and colleagues have documented a "positive feedback bias," defined as a tendency for teachers to provide fewer critical comments to African American and Latino students compared to White students with the same low achievement (Harber et al., 2012). The teachers in Harber's research appear to have been motivated by egalitarian concerns about not appearing prejudiced and the desire to protect the self-esteem of vulnerable minority students. The downside was that the minority students were not the beneficiaries of ability-confirming constructive feedback that communicated high expectations and more clarity about where to exert effort.

In summary, principles from attribution theory help explain how some well-intentioned teacher behaviors might sometimes function as low ability cues. Teachers might be more likely to engage in such feedback patterns when they desire to protect the self-esteem of failure-prone students. I am not suggesting that teachers should never help their students or that they should always be angry rather than sympathetic or critical as opposed to complimentary. The appropriateness of any communication, or what has been labeled "wise" feedback (criticism but with communicating high expectations; Yeager et al., 2014), will depend on many factors, including the characteristics of both students and teachers. Rather, the general message is that attribution principles can facilitate our understanding of how some well-intentioned teacher behaviors can have unexpected negative effects on the motivation of ethnic minority students.



## Attributions of African American Boys Labeled as Aggressive

In this section I integrate social motivation and academic motivation to describe a program of research on African American boys labeled as aggressive. Here I draw on a set of attribution principles about relations between perceived responsibility, anger, and retaliation. As someone who began her career studying academic motivation, what led me to research on childhood aggression? The answer is simple. I was at the time and continue to be concerned about the serious consequences of antisocial behavior for young African American males. Black males are much more likely than their White counterparts to be labeled as aggressive by teachers and to be suspended or expelled from school for so-called aggressive behavior (e.g., Howard, 2014). Furthermore, a large empirical literature has documented the stability of aggression from childhood to young adulthood as well as its relation to a host of negative outcomes including low academic achievement, school dropout in adolescence, juvenile delinquency, and even adult criminality and psychopathology (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). And most of these known correlates of childhood aggression are disproportionately prevalent among ethnic minorities, particularly African American males. The 20-year-old Black male dropout, inmate, or gang member is often the 10-year-old boy labeled as aggressive by teachers and peers.

When I first became interested in aggression in the early 1990s, I was drawn to the findings of developmental psychologists John Coie and Kenneth Dodge. A very robust finding in the peer aggression literature is that aggressive youth (primarily boys) display what is called a *hostile attributional bias* (Dodge et al., 2006). Aggressive boys overattribute negative intent to others, particularly in situations of ambiguously caused provocation. To illustrate, imagine a situation in which a youngster experiences a social transgression, such as being pushed by a peer while waiting in line, and it is unclear whether the peer's behavior was intended or not. Aggressive boys are more likely than their nonaggressive classmates to report that the push occurred intentionally ("he did it on purpose," he is *responsible*). Attributions to hostile intent then lead to anger and the desire to retaliate. Even among socially competent children, the individual who believes that another acted with hostile intent can feel justified in endorsing aggressive behavior. This goes back to basic attribution principles depicted in Figure 2.1 about responsibility inferences, feelings of anger, and their relations to punitive behavior. The problem with aggressive children is that they often inappropriately or prematurely assume hostile peer intent in ambiguous situations.

We started with the hostile bias finding and embraced an attributional lens to reason as follows: If attributions to others' negative intent instigate a set of reactions that leads to aggression, then it might be possible to train aggression-prone children to see ambiguous peer provocation as less intended. This should mitigate anger as well as the tendency to react with hostility. By the early 1990s, there



were many successful attribution change programs in the achievement domain—training students to infer that failure was due to lack of effort rather than low ability or to unstable factors more generally (Wilson, Damiani, & Shelton, 2002). We reasoned that the same principles of attribution change could apply to the social domain and changing the perceived causes of others' aggression.

In dissertation research, my student Cynthia Hudley developed a school-based attributional intervention to alter the responsibility attributions of African American boys labeled as aggressive (Hudley & Graham, 1993). The fundamental goal of the intervention was to train aggressive boys to accurately detect responsibility and intentionality from social cues and to assume nonmalicious intent in ambiguous situations. The specific curriculum, *Brainpower*, consisted of 12 lessons clustered into three components. The first component strengthened aggressive participants' ability to detect others' intentions accurately. To achieve these skills, students learned to search for, interpret, and properly categorize the verbal, physical, and behavioral cues exhibited by others in social situations. After the participants gained skills in discerning social cues, the second component trained them to attribute ambiguous negative outcomes (i.e., when social cues are inconsistent or not interpretable) to uncontrollable or accidental causes. For example, students role-played ambiguous peer interactions (e.g., a peer spills your milk in the lunchroom). Students then brainstormed possible causes for the actions, categorized those causes as deliberate or unintentional, and then decided which attributions would be good decisions given uncertainty about the peer's intent. The third component linked negative social outcomes to appropriate nonaggressive behavioral responses. For example, lessons taught children to develop decision rules for potentially dangerous situations (e.g., "If someone threatens me, find an adult right away") to minimize the possibility of aggressive confrontations.

*Brainpower* was successful in changing the attributions and anger-related emotions of African American boys labeled as aggressive (see Hudley, 2008). We identified a particular population of African American males labeled as aggressive. We were able to conceptualize their status in terms of a motivational sequence relating feelings of anger to biased responsibility attributions and subsequent behavior. And by changing their causal thinking, we were able to show changes in the feelings and behavior that theoretically follow such thoughts. I think *Brainpower* may still be one of few programs to document the success of an attributional intervention with children in the social domain.

The success of *Brainpower* encouraged us to think more broadly. Social behavior problems and academic motivation problems often go hand in hand. Children who aggress against others often have histories of low achievement motivation, characterized by failing grades and school disengagement in general. So we began to think about whether we could combine a focus on both social and academic motivation: an intervention that could both *decrease* the motivation to aggress, as in *Brainpower*, but also *increase* the motivation to achieve as pathways to improving social and academic outcomes.



The organizing theme for this broader intervention approach was still the causal construct of perceived responsibility—in both other people and the self. We considered whether peers are perceived as responsible for negative events, which has implications for reducing the motivation to aggress against those peers; and we examined the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as responsible for their academic outcomes, which has implications for increasing their own motivation to achieve.

The intervention that we developed, titled *Best Foot Forward*, was designed for elementary school children who have been labeled as aggressive by their teachers and peers. It consisted of a 32-lesson curriculum with two separate but interrelated components. The social skills component focuses on reducing the tendency to infer hostile intent in others. We elaborated on *Brainpower* by also considering whether aggressive children are aware of the causal inferences that peers make about them and whether they have the social skills to manage the impressions of others through strategic account giving. Accounts are explanations or reasons for social transgressions, and they include apology (confession), excuses, justifications, and denials (Scott & Lyman, 1968). We included a set of lessons on account giving following a social transgression. We wanted participants to learn the adaptiveness of accepting responsibility for their own misdeeds (i.e., confession or apology) and of honoring the accounts of others by displaying greater forgiveness toward others who apologize for their transgressions.

The academic component of the intervention shifts the focus from holding others responsible for social dilemmas to holding oneself responsible for academic outcomes. That is, we use the same conceptual framework to guide both the social and the academic components of the intervention. Our basic assumption is that within an achievement context, like many social contexts, an individual is faced with the option (decision) to ascribe responsibility for outcomes to the self (e.g., to lack of effort following failure) or to factors for which the individual cannot be held responsible (e.g., low aptitude, poor teaching). That decision influences expectancy for success, affective reactions to task performance, and subsequent achievement strivings. It is further assumed that self-responsibility is the more adaptive motivational state because it is more likely to result in high expectancy, positive affect, and sustained effort. Strategies were taught in *Best Foot Forward* that encouraged participants to choose tasks of intermediate difficulty, be realistic goal setters, be task focused, and attribute academic failure to lack of effort rather than to factors that are not within their control. All of these strategies derive from principles of motivation, including attribution theory, that are known to increase academic motivation.

Participants were African American boys in third through fifth grades who were identified by their peers and teachers as most aggressive and by their teachers as having serious motivational problems. We recruited 66 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade boys who met the eligibility criteria and whose custodial parent(s) or guardian provided informed consent. Thirty-one boys were randomly assigned to



the intervention, and 35 were assigned to a no-treatment control group (a few parents only agreed to allow their son to participate if he was a control subject).

Although our sample was small and the effects therefore were modest, the results were encouraging. First, boys in the intervention learned the social skills of strategic account giving. Second, they learned the academic motivation skills of intermediate risk taking, realistic goal setting, task focus, and attributions for failure to factors within their control. Figure 2.3 shows the attribution data. Participants were asked at pretest and posttest to recall a time when they did poorly on a test and to rate the importance of four attributions for failure, including external factors (teacher bias or difficult test) and the internal factors of low ability and lack of effort. For boys in the control group (right panel), there were no changes in attributions for failure from pretest to posttest. However, boys in the intervention were significantly less likely to endorse external factors and low ability as causes for failure from pretest to posttest. Thus by the end of *Best Foot Forward*, intervention boys endorsed the most adaptive attribution pattern in terms of self-responsibility for achievement: few attributions to uncontrollable factors and more attributions to factors within one's control such as lack of effort.

Regarding actual behavior, boys in the intervention were rated by their teachers as showing more cooperation and persistence than control-group boys. They were also judged as having improved more in the social and academic domain based on end-of-semester written comments by teachers (see Graham et al., 2015, for a full description of findings).

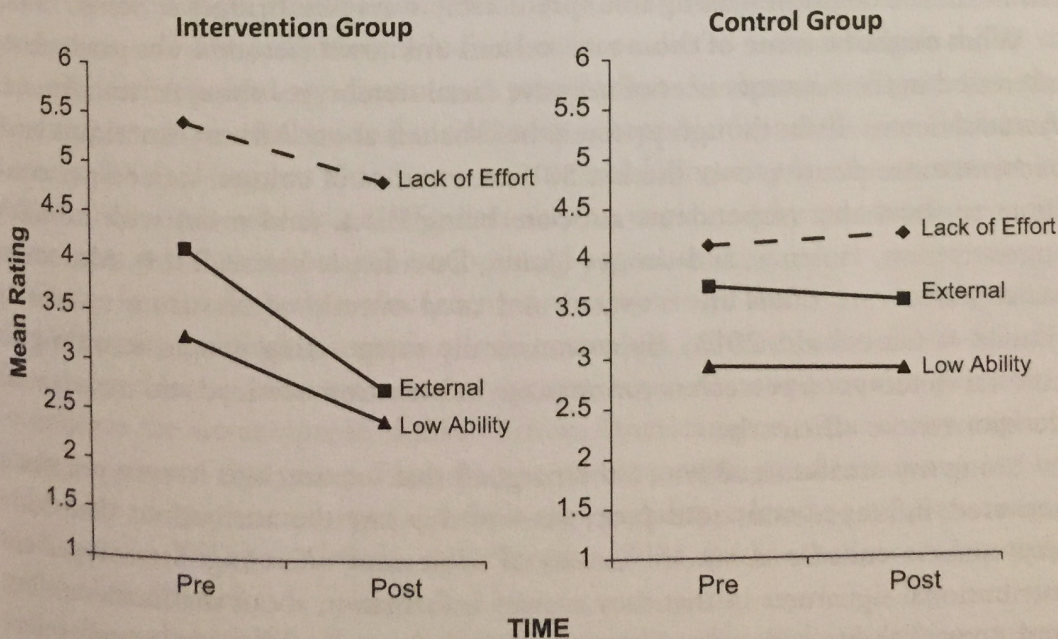


FIGURE 2.3 Attributions for failure pre- and postintervention as a function of treatment condition (from Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 2015)



As currently implemented, *Best Foot Forward* was a pilot intervention, and we recognize that there are many things that we need to do better. But to my knowledge, this is the first successful intervention with aggressive youth that blended social skills training with motivation skills training under one unifying theoretical framework. If one's goal is to improve social behavior and academic achievement, altering maladaptive attributions about the self and others might be a reasonable starting point.

## **Stereotypes and Attributions About African American Adolescent Offenders**

Because childhood aggression is a risk factor for juvenile delinquency, over the years I developed an interest in the plight of youth who have entered the juvenile justice system. This is the system in which the racial gap involving Black youth looms large. For example, African American youth ages 10 to 17 comprise about 16% of their age group in the population, yet they represent about 30% of all juvenile arrests, 35% of referrals to juvenile court, 40% of those incarcerated in juvenile facilities, and close to 60% of waivers to adult criminal court (National Research Council, 2013). Stated in comparative racial terms, Black youth are three to five times more likely than White youth to be confined in the criminal justice system. Moreover, African American youth often experience harsher treatment than White youth even after controlling for legal variables like crime severity and prior offense history. Some criminologists have argued that legally relevant variables account for only about 25% of the variance in the disposition of juvenile cases, which raises the possibility that race and other unknown factors can influence decision making in unpredictable ways (see Bridges & Steen, 1998).

What might be some of those race-related unknown factors? I was particularly interested in the consequences of negative racial stereotypes about African American adolescents. Even though privately held beliefs about African Americans have become more positive over the last 50 years, studies of cultural stereotypes continue to show that respondents associate being Black (and male) with hostility, aggressiveness, violence, and danger (Jones, Dovidio, & Vietze, 2014). Moreover, racial stereotypes often are activated and used outside of conscious awareness (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). By automatically categorizing people according to cultural stereotypes, perceivers can manage information overload and make social decisions more efficiently.

Using my attributional lens, I then argued that unconscious stereotypes, once activated, influence conscious processes—in this case the attributions that decision makers endorse about the causes of adolescent offending. Stereotypes are attributional signatures in that they convey information about the locus, stability, and controllability of causes (Reyna, 2008). Stereotypes often evoke trait inferences, which are known to be internal, stable, and controllable (e.g., he's a violent person). Attributions to causes that are internal, stable, and controllable lead to



greater expectations that that crime will occur again, more anger and blame, and harsher punishment. Thus racial disparity in the juvenile justice system might be the end result of a complex attributional process that begins with automatic activation of a negative racial stereotype and ends with a more punitive stance toward African American offenders.

Using a priming methodology with actual police officers and probation officers in the juvenile justice system, we examined the unconscious activation of racial stereotypes about adolescent males and their attributional consequences (Graham & Lowery, 2004). Participants in one condition were unconsciously primed to think about the construct *Black* using well-validated procedures from the cognitive priming literature (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). These methods allow a researcher to activate a stereotype without any awareness on the part of the subject and then demonstrate that the activated stereotype influenced that subject's judgment or behavior in a completely unrelated task. Following the priming, officers were presented with hypothetical vignettes, written like actual crime reports, that described a juvenile allegedly committing a misdemeanor or felony with the cause of the crime portrayed as ambiguous. No information about the race of the alleged offender was provided. Participants then made inferences about the offender's traits, his culpability or blameworthiness, the likelihood that he would recidivate (commit the crime again), and severity of deserved punishment. Results showed that police officers and probation officers in whom racial stereotypes were unconsciously primed judged the hypothetical adolescent offender as more dangerous and violent, more responsible and blameworthy for his alleged offense, and more deserving of harsh punishment than did participants in an unprimed control condition. Using structural equation modeling, we tested a temporal sequence based on attribution principles in which unconsciously priming race influenced attribution-relevant judgments which in turn predicted perceived culpability of the offender, expected recidivism, and punishment. As shown in Figure 2.4, the data supported our attributional model with acceptable fit indices (see Graham & Lowery, 2004). I suggest that some of the racial disparity in the treatment of African American adolescent offenders can be explained by unconscious racial stereotypes and their associated attributional processes.

Our priming effects were documented irrespective of the respondents' gender, race/ethnicity, political orientation, or consciously held attitudes about African Americans. Hence, automatic stereotype activation does not require perceivers to endorse the stereotype, to dislike African Americans, or to hold any explicit prejudice toward that group. Even decision makers with good intentions can be vulnerable to racial stereotypes and their responsibility-related consequences (see Goff, Jackson, DiLeone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014, for another recent example with police officers).

I believe that such findings also have implications for decision makers in our schools who make judgments about the social (mis)behavior of African American youth. Mirroring racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, reviews of school



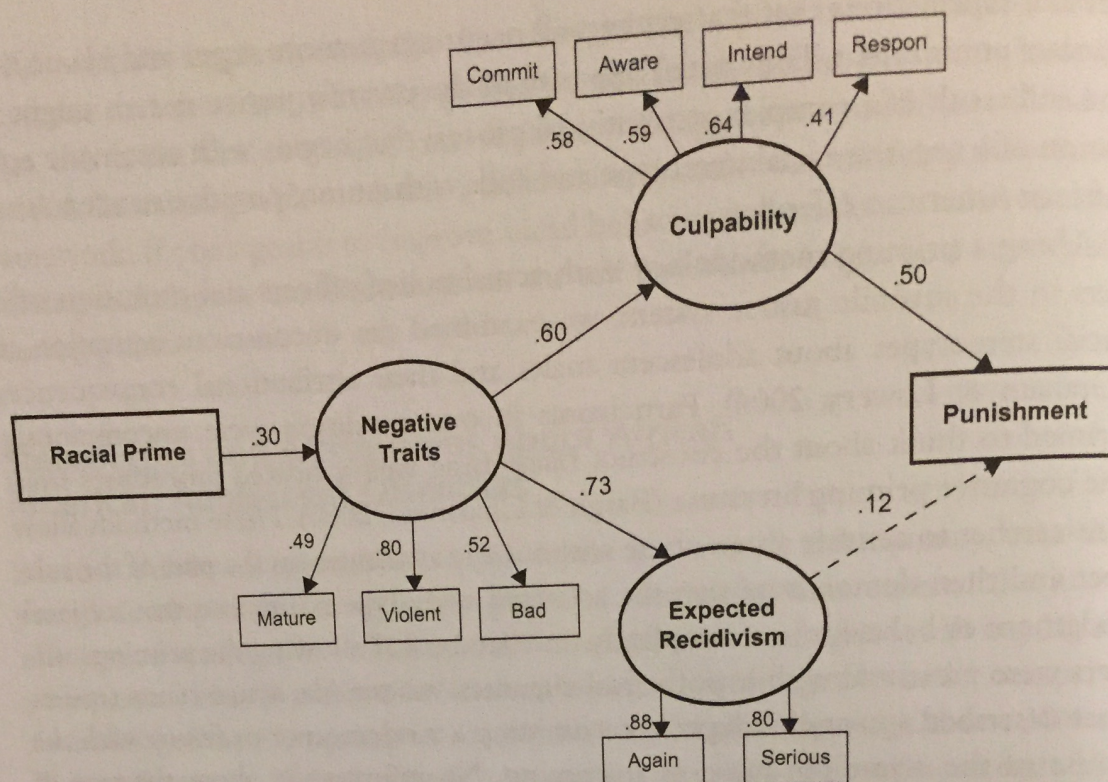


FIGURE 2.4 Structural model of relations among racial prime, attribution, expectancy, and punishment (from Graham & Lowery, 2004)

discipline policies reveal that African American youth are much more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than White youth who engage in similar or even more serious transgressions (e.g., Skiba et al., 2011). Particularly among perceivers at the front end of a system, like teachers dealing with classroom disorder, decisions often must be made quickly, under conditions of cognitive and emotional overload, and where much ambiguity exists. These are the very conditions that are known to activate unconscious beliefs (Fiske, 1998). Attributional analyses provide an ideal context for examining the unconscious racial stereotypes of well-intentioned teachers and administrators.

### Attributions for Peer Victimization and School Racial Context

For my final topic, let me turn to the victims rather than the alleged perpetrators of peer-directed antisocial behavior. By peer victimization—also labeled peer harassment or bullying—I mean physical, verbal, or psychological abuse of a victim by a perpetrator who intends to cause harm. The critical features that differentiate peer victimization from simple conflict between peers are an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim and the intent to cause harm (Olweus, 1994). Hitting, name calling, racial slurs, spreading of rumors, and social exclusion by powerful others are all examples of behaviors that constitute peer victimization. These types of harassment affect the lives of many youth and have



been labeled a public health concern by the American Medical Association. Not only is peer victimization quite prevalent, it also is associated with a host of adjustment difficulties. Students who are chronic victims of school bullying often are rejected by their peers, and they feel depressed, anxious, and lonely (see Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Why is it that victims of bullying feel so bad? In our work we have been bringing attributional analyses to the study of victimization-maladjustment relations. Repeated encounters with peer victimization, or even an isolated yet particularly painful experience, might lead that victim to ask, "Why *me*?" In the absence of disconfirming evidence, such an individual might come to blame him- or herself for their predicament, concluding, for example, that "I'm the kind of kid who deserves to be picked on." Self-blame and accompanying negative affect can then lead to many negative outcomes, including low self-esteem and depression. In the adult literature on causal explanations for rape (another form of victimization), attributions that imply personal deservingness, labeled characterological self-blame, are especially detrimental (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). From an attributional perspective, characterological self-blame is internal and therefore reflects on the self; it is stable and therefore leads to an expectation that victimization will be chronic; and it is uncontrollable, suggesting that there is no response in the victim's repertoire to prevent future harassment. Attributions for failure to internal, stable, and uncontrollable causes lead individuals to feel both hopeless and helpless (Weiner, 1986). Several researchers in the adult and child literatures document that individuals who make characterological self-blaming attributions for negative outcomes cope more poorly, feel worse about themselves, and are more depressed than individuals who make attributions to their behavior (Anderson, Miller, Riger, Dill, & Sedikides, 1994; Cole, Peeke, & Ingold, 1996; Tilghman-Osborne, Cole, Felton, & Cisela, 2008).

In the first study to directly examine attributions for peer victimization (Graham & Juvonen, 1998), we presented sixth-grade participants with a hypothetical vignette describing a typical harassment incident. We asked the students to imagine that the incident actually happened to them and to respond to a number of statements about what they would think, feel, or do if the incident indeed happened. Embedded in these statements were characterological self-blame attributions (e.g., "If I were a cooler kid, I wouldn't get picked on." "This kind of thing is more likely to happen to *me* than to other kids.>"). We also had information about which students in the sample were actual victims of bullying based on a combination of peer and self-report measures. We found that victims more so than nonvictims were especially likely to endorse characterological self-blame attributions and that self-blame partly explained the relationship between victimization and psychological maladjustment as measured by depression symptoms and social anxiety. It is as if the victim is saying to himself or herself, "It is something about me, things will always be this way, and there is nothing I can do about it." Those causal thoughts are then predicted to result in greater psychological distress.



Where does ethnicity fit into this research? A good deal of peer victimization research, including our earlier studies of attributions, is conducted in urban schools where multiple ethnic groups are represented, but very little of that research has systematically examined ethnicity-related context variables. This is disappointing because the factors that exacerbate or protect against peer victimization are likely to be influenced by such context factors as the ethnic composition of schools and neighborhoods, as well as the social and ethnic identities that are most significant to youth. In our research we bring the ethnic context to the study of peer victimization. We do this by making a case for the importance of attributions as a theoretical framework and school ethnic diversity as a central context variable, both of which can aid our understanding of the dynamics of peer victimization (see Graham, 2006, 2010).

There are three parts to our analysis. First, we know that students feel less victimized in schools that are more ethnically diverse (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). We proposed that in more ethnically diverse schools, there is a greater numerical balance of power among different racial/ethnic groups. Recall that the definition of peer victimization requires that there be an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim. Second, in nondiverse schools, students who are both victims and members of the majority racial/ethnic group experience the most adjustment difficulties (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen, 2004). Here we reasoned that majority group victims feel especially vulnerable because they deviate from the norm of their ethnic group to be numerically powerful. And third, based on the prior findings, we hypothesized that victims whose behavior deviated from local norms (i.e., victim status when one's group holds the numerical balance of power) would be particularly vulnerable to self-blaming attributions. As the number of same-ethnicity peers increases in one's social milieu, it becomes less plausible to make external attributions such as to the prejudice of others, which can protect self-esteem and buffer mental health.

We tested this hypothesis in a sample of about 1,500 sixth-grade Latino and African American students recruited from 11 middle schools that varied in ethnic diversity (Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009). In some schools African American and Latino students were the numerical majority group in their school, in some schools each was a numerical minority, and in the remaining schools they were one of several relatively equal-sized groups (i.e., the schools were ethnically diverse). Students reported on their experiences with victimization, their attributions for victimization including characterological self-blame (cf. Graham & Juvonen, 1998), and their feeling of depression and social anxiety. We then examined the temporal relations among victimization, self-blame, and maladjustment as a function of three ethnic diversity contexts.

Figure 2.5 displays the results of these analyses. As hypothesized, the temporal relations among victimization, self-blame, and maladjustment were strongest among students who were the ethnic majority group in their school ("It must be me"). For ethnic minority group members, the relations among victim status,



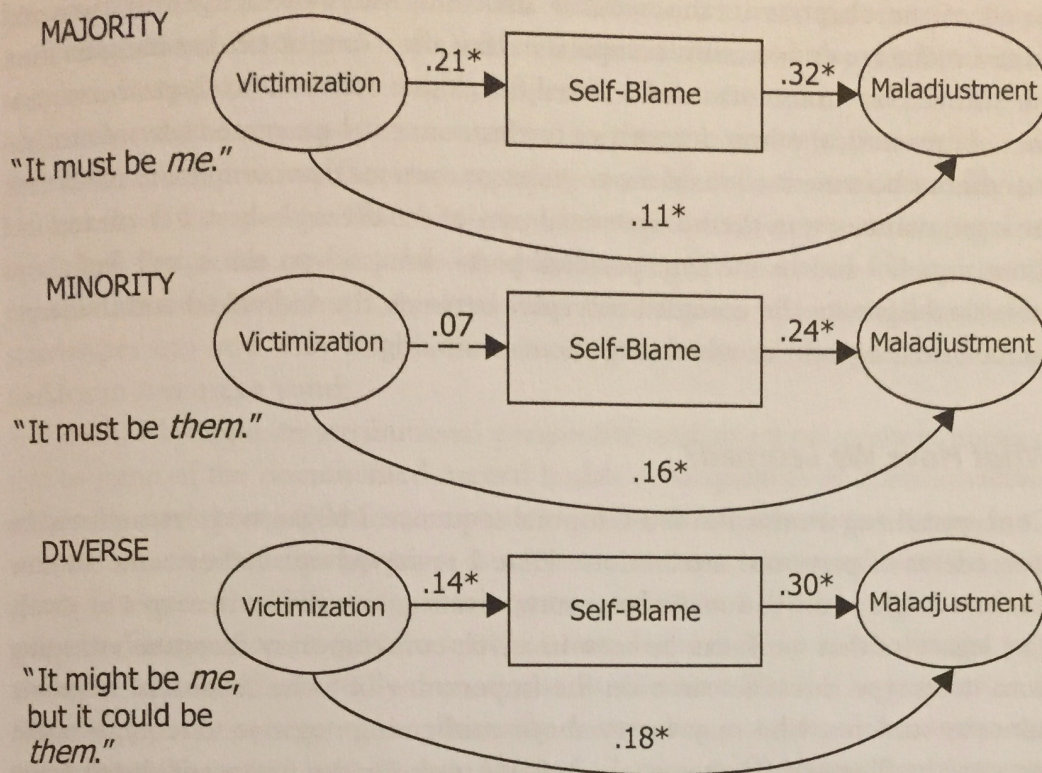


FIGURE 2.5 Attribution, self-blame, and adjustment relationships in three ethnic contexts (from Graham et al., 2009)

self-blaming tendencies, and maladjustment were the weakest. Being a victim and a member of the minority group can provide a context for external attributions to the prejudice of others that can protect self-esteem ("It must be *them*"). This goes back to a basic attribution principle of the relation between the locus of causes and esteem-related affect. Finally, in ethnically diverse contexts, with a greater balance of power, we found moderate relations between victimization and self-blame, which we interpreted as greater attributional ambiguity ("It might be me, but it could be them"). I suggest as a working hypothesis that ethnic diversity creates enough attributional ambiguity to ward off self-blaming tendencies, thereby allowing for attributions that have fewer psychological costs. In social contexts in which multiple social cues are present, attributional ambiguity can be particularly adaptive if it allows the perceiver to draw from a larger repertoire of causal schemes. Our analysis is one of few studies in the developmental literature to test whether ethnicity in context moderates a psychological process.

## Summary and Conclusions

A focus on race and ethnicity in the study of motivation needs to be guided by strong theory. The research presented in this chapter is guided by attribution theory, one of the most enduring and robust contemporary theories of motivation.



As all of the chapters in this volume illustrate, issues of race, motivation, and achievement are enormously complex in that they cannot be disentangled from the historical circumstances and cultural forces that continue to shape the experiences of numerical ethnic minorities in this country. I gravitated toward attribution theory because it allowed me to manage some of that complexity. Moreover, the main constructs in the intrapersonal part of the theory—how I think and feel about myself—and in the interpersonal part—how others think and feel about me—shed light on the complex interplay between the individual and the larger sociocultural context in which experiences unfold.

### ***What Have We Learned?***

Conceptualizing motivation as a temporal sequence, I began with research on the antecedents of particular attributions. Here I reviewed our earlier work on how teachers might unintentionally be communicating low ability messages to youth. The legacy of that work can be seen in a rich contemporary literature emerging from stereotype threat research on the importance of “wise feedback” to ethnic minority students, who may worry about confirming negative stereotypes about race and intelligence (Yeager et al., 2014). A task for the future will be to bring this feedback research into closer contact with the ways in which teachers deliver real (high-stakes) feedback to students in actual instructional settings.

Acknowledging the close interplay between academic and social motivation, in the next section I described our research on changing the maladaptive attributions and related beliefs of African American boys labeled as aggressive. Ours is one of few intervention approaches to blend social skills training with academic motivation training under the unifying attribution principle of perceived responsibility in self and others. In neither *Brainpower* nor *Best Foot Forward* were we able to document changes in the academic achievement of boys labeled as aggressive. That was disappointing but not surprising. The low performance of aggressive youth is the result of cumulative challenges and not likely to be amenable to motivational interventions in the short run. Our hope is that we are arming youth with a set of social and academic motivation skills that will be empowering and will benefit them over the long run. A next step for us will be longitudinal research on our intervention approach.

In the third section I turned from childhood aggression to tackle one of the most pressing social problems in our nation today—racial disparities in the treatment of African American youth in the juvenile justice system. (The problem is even worse in the adult criminal system but that is beyond the scope of this chapter.) Although the public discourse on racial disparities has widely embraced the notion of unconscious biases or stereotypes, very little of that discourse has theorized about how unconscious stereotypes exert their influence. Drawing on attribution principles, we tested a model suggesting that racial disparities in the treatment of African American youth are the end result of a complex attributional



process that begins with the automatic activation of unconscious stereotypes associating being Black and male with violence, threat, and danger. Black male teens are not perceived as the highly impressionable, immature, and less culpable adolescents that contemporary neuroscience research portrays them to be (see Steinberg, 2014). I worry that the emerging view of adolescent vulnerability and immaturity is trumped for Black male youth by racial stereotypes portraying them as violent, dangerous, and capable of adult-like negative intent. I focused on the juvenile justice system, but I think we also need studies of *teachers'* unconscious stereotypes and how they might affect the disproportionate discipline meted out to African American youth.

Finally, I brought an attributional perspective and an ethnic context perspective to some of the documented mental health consequences of chronic victimization by one's peers. Ethnicity matters in the study of peer victimization, but it is not so much ethnic group *per se* as ethnicity within context, or whether one's group is a numerical majority, minority, or residing in a diverse school with no numerical majorities. In other research, I have been making a case for the psychosocial benefits of ethnically diverse schools (Graham, 2010). The population in this country is becoming more ethnically diverse, but our schools are more segregated now than they have been in the last 40 years, with African American and Latino youth suffering the most academically from attending highly segregated schools (Ayscue & Orfield, 2015). I believe that many motivation-relevant experiences of ethnic minority youth will vary depending on overall school diversity as well as the numerical representation of their own ethnic group. In some cases numerical majority status might have challenges, as in our work on self-blame for victimization, whereas in other contexts there may be safety in numbers as, for example, when it comes to feelings of belonging (see Benner & Graham, 2009). Ethnic group representation is a context variable that is ripe for study in motivation research.

### **Motivational Methods**

The chapters in this volume illustrate not only different theoretical approaches to motivation in ethnic minorities but also the multiple methods that researchers use to address this topic. I would like to make the case that role-playing paradigms should have a place in the motivation researcher's methodological toolkit. Most of the studies I described used role playing or simulation methods to some extent. For example, we asked about the *likelihood* of aggression among grade school boys given attributions rather than studying aggression *per se* (Graham et al., 2015). Similarly, we asked police officers and probation officers how punitive toward a hypothetical offender they would be given beliefs about offender culpability and recidivism rather than measuring actual legal decision making (Graham & Lowery, 2004). And we asked about imagined experiences with peer victimization rather than assessing those experiences during their state of activation (Graham et al., 2009).



These choices grow out of a belief among attribution theorists that simulation studies are both appropriate and useful when testing hypotheses and developing theory. We believe that what individuals *say* they would think, feel, or do in a particular situation maps closely onto how they *actually* think, feel, and behave in real-world contexts. A task for future research is more creative measurement that better captures attributional processes as they occur in real time and in real social settings.

### **Motivational Interventions**

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that I was drawn to attribution theory because it can help guide our thinking about change. Our intervention research with aggressive youth illustrates our focus on attributional change. I believe that a logical next step is to target the victims of peer harassment with the goal of changing their maladaptive attributions about themselves. Interventions on school bullying have been so focused on a whole-school approach that the particular plight of the victim has not received adequate attention. Regarding my research on racial stereotypes in the juvenile justice system, a growing literature indicates that unconscious racial stereotypes are also amenable to intervention (see Lai et al., 2014). Just because biases get activated outside of conscious awareness does not mean that they cannot be changed. Experts on attribution theory and experts on reducing implicit racial bias should work together to determine what types of interventions show the most promise.

While the study of motivation in ethnic minority youth is ripe for intervention research, I believe that the best interventions will need to be multifaceted. A number of recent interventions emerging from social psychology research, some rooted in attributional analyses, have increased excitement about the potential of brief, even single-session treatments to increase achievement of stigmatized youth and college students (see Yeager & Walton, 2011). These interventions utilize constructs such as stereotype threat, mindsets, and self-affirmation to deliver short but powerful treatments that not only boost immediate achievement but also reduce the racial achievement gap.

I believe in theory-guided interventions, and I applaud the social psychologists engaged in new intervention approaches that can better uncover the mechanisms underlying motivational change. However, I am less convinced that changing one set of beliefs—be it worries about confirming racial stereotypes, mindsets, the importance of affirming personal values, or even causal attributions for failure—will have lasting effects on motivation and achievement no matter how powerfully they are delivered. Moreover, when the outcomes are pervasive problems like the racial achievement gap, effective interventions will need to address structural as well as psychological barriers to achievement.

The personality and motivation psychologist George Kelly reminded us that every good theory has a focus and range of convenience (Kelly, 1955). Focus refers