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Specifying Children's Educational Expectations

The Potential Impact of Institutions

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Specifying Children's Educational Expectations: The Potential Impact of Institutions

In this paper, we provide a conceptual framework for examining children's educational expectations. The framework helps explain how both social and individual factors interact to form expectations about the utility of the education path for achieving desired goals. Further, we postulate that expectations are children's internal representation of the educational institution. However, it is not until around fifth or sixth grade children begin to understand schools as impacting their capability for achieving desired goals. At this point, many minority and poor students begin to learn that effort and ability are not sufficient for academic success. Perceptions about what they can do are likely to decline and external explanations for success are more likely to be adopted.

Key words: *child development, academic, institutional, I Can Save*

Education is at the heart of modern American society. Most Americans perceive of education as being a key institution for lifting people out of poverty and into prosperity. For example, John Immerwahr (2004), who studies public attitudes about higher education, asked Americans, "If you had to choose one thing that can most help a young person succeed in the world today" what would it be? Having a college education (35%) was selected more than any other option, even over having a good work ethic (26%). More blacks (47%) and Hispanics (65%) than whites (33%) viewed receiving a college education as the most important factor in helping young people succeed. Seventy-six percent of Americans said that a college education is more important today than it was ten years ago (Immerwahr, 2004). Further, near all (94%) children aspire to attend college (ACSFSA, 2002).

Having a positive attitude toward school has been cited as an important determinant of educational attainment (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Marjoribanks, 1984). However, a positive attitude toward school has not translated into high achievement among minority and poor children. There was a 34 point gap in mathematics scores between black and white eighth grade children in 2005 and a 27 point gap between poor (based on eligibility for free or reduced lunches) and affluent children (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005a). Reading gaps in 2005 were at 28 points between black and white children as well as between poor and affluent children (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005b). The Education Trust (2006), a policy group in Washington D.C., reports that by the end of high school black children have math and reading skills of approximately the same level as a white eighth grade student. Further, the gap in college enrollment among white and black students has widened over the past thirty years (ACSFSA, 2002).

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In 1972 the gap between white and black students was only five percent (Wolanin, 2003). By 2000 it more than doubled to 11 percent (Wolanin, 2003).

How can we explain the seeming contradiction between positive attitudes toward school, and low achievement among some minority and poor youth? Or more importantly, how can we understand the different educational experiences of minority and/or poor students in comparison to white and/or affluent students? In an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing the educational experiences of students from different groups, Ogbu (1983) suggests that black children form negative perceptions about the possible return on education due to the job ceiling their parents face in the labor market. Ogbu (1983) defines the job ceiling as,

... the highly consistent pressures and obstacles that selectively assign minorities to jobs at a low level status, power, dignity and income, while allowing dominant-group members to compete more easily and freely for more desirable jobs above that ceiling on the basis of individual ability and qualifications. (p. 174)

According to Ogbu (1983), negative perceptions related to the job ceiling lead black children to disengage from school and under-perform academically.

Some researchers, such as Erickson (1987), Foley (2004), Gould (1999), and Trueba (1988) have raised questions about Ogbu's conceptual framework. Erickson (1987), for example, suggests that taken literally it leads to a kind of economic determinism. Erickson (1987) points to the exceptions as important:

Even though, in the majority of cases, domestic minority students do not show high rates of school success, enough exceptions to that general pattern can be found so as to raise serious questions about the adequacy of the perceived labor market explanation as it has been articulated presently (pp. 342, 343).

In other words, Erikson (1987) suggests that the perceived labor market explanation does not explain within-group variations, such as why some black children succeed while others fail (Erickson, 1987). According to Gould (1999), Ogbu's conceptual framework leads to the culture of blacks as part of the problem. For example, Ogbu (1978) says,

On the one hand, the dominant white caste maintains the adaptation by providing blacks with inferior education and then channeling them mainly to inferior jobs after they finish school. On the other hand, the adaptation is also maintained by certain structural and cultural features of the black environment which have evolved under the caste system. (p. 213)

What this implies, according to Gould (1999), is that change cannot occur without changing the culture of blacks which aids in creating attitudes and motivations that foster disengagement.

To remedy this problem, building on Luhmann and Albrow's (1985) work, Gould (1999) suggests that a distinction must be drawn between normative expectations and what he calls cognitive expectations. According to Gould (1999) normative expectations are maintained even when the

individual's environment changes while cognitive expectations are more responsive to changes in the environment. When Gould (1999) speaks of cognitive expectations he has in mind expectations that are formed by a particular group:

Their cognitive status is manifest in the fact that if that factual situation is modified, and if that modification is known and accepted within the group, the cognitive expectations will be adapted to the new set of circumstances.... Both normative and cognitive expectations are found in all groups. (p. 179)

He does not, however, explicitly account for individual variations within groups.

A similar argument is made by Mickelson (1990). Building on Ogbu's framework, she suggests that the contradiction between (some black children's) attitudes and academic achievement exists because researchers have not clearly specified children's attitudes toward education. According to Mickelson (1990) all students' attitudes toward education are multidimensional consisting of (1) abstract attitudes, popularly held beliefs about education found in the dominant ideology of American society, and (2) concrete attitudes, peoples' perceptions of actual experiences of a particular group with the education institution. From Mickelson's (1990) perspective, concrete attitudes are the most important for understanding children's choice of behavior. However, she suggests that researchers have focused on abstract attitudes when assessing student's performance in school. The examination of abstract attitudes as opposed to concrete attitudes has led to the seeming contradiction between positive attitudes and low achievement among black youth (Mickelson, 1990).

Mickelson (1990) underscores Ogbu's thesis that because of their common knowledge of the job market, blacks do not believe that school pays off:

Consequently, students' concrete attitudes vary in accordance with their perception and understanding of how adults who are significant in their lives receive more equitable or less equitable wages, jobs, and promotions relative to their educational credentials. (p. 45)

However, there is a lack of empirical evidence that low labor market expectations lead to disengagement in school (Trueba, 1988). For example, in a study of boys living in the inner-city (predominately black) and boys living in the suburbs (predominately white) Cook and colleagues (1996) find that inner-city boys have higher expectations in relation to the payoff from education than suburban boys. This finding leads Cook and colleagues (1996) to suggest that, contrary to the labor market argument explanation, blacks believe that school will pay off for them.

Cook and colleagues (1996) also find that child and parent's educational expectations mediate child's occupational expectations. They suggest that an "... implication of this [finding] is that interventions to raise the occupational sights of inner-city boys should concentrate on how far they expect to go in school and on how well their parents think they will do there" (Cook et al., 1996, p. 3383). Engagement in school (choice of behavior), therefore, might be more about the child's expectations for attending college than on the possible returns from education as Ogbu suggests.

Building on the preceding research, we attempt to provide a conceptual framework for understanding engagement that examines both social and individual aspects of children's educational expectations and how they interact. Moreover, we suggest that expectations are a child's internal representation of the institutional environment she faces. As such, expectations might serve as proxy for institutions. We begin with institutions. Institutions are the formal and informal rules, compliance procedures and standard operating practices that structure the relationships between individuals in various interactions between the polity, economy, and society (Hall, 1986). This understanding of institutions is not only concerned with "rules and regulations" but with organizations and the resources they provide.

Knight (1992) sheds light on the link between institutions and expectations. He (1992) suggests that strategic actors (actors motivated by a desire to maximize their own goals) make choices to achieve desired outcomes (Knight, 1992). People are strategic in the sense that they make choices based on their expectations about the choices of others (Knight, 1992). Further, according to Knight (1992), institutions provide information about the choices of others. In this way, institutions impact the decision making process of an individual by providing her with information about the choices of others and by providing some form of sanction when an individual does not behave as expected (Knight, 1992). In this paper we draw a distinction between the different types of social expectations and the role they play in shaping an individual's educational expectations.

The Basis for Forming Individual Expectations

We suggest that expectations, generally, can be understood as the individual's perception of her power to bring institutional resources (including organizations) under her control as she attempts to achieve certain ends. A person's expectations consist of three main types. The first is normative expectations. Normative expectations are a society's claim/promise about how a person can expect an institution to respond to her investment of effort and ability based on an *ideal* (see, generally, Cook et al., 1996; Gould, 1999; Luhmann & Albrow, 1985; Mickelson, 1990). The second is role expectations. Role expectations are a person's perception of how an institution will respond to her investment of effort and ability based on being a member of a particular social group (see, generally, Cook et al., 1996; Gould, 1999; Knight, 1992; Luhmann & Albrow, 1985; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1983). The third is individual expectations. Individual expectations are how an individual expects an institution to respond to her investment of effort and ability based on personal experiences with institutions as resources she uses to achieve certain ends. We suggest that by further specifying educational expectations to include individual expectations we are able to move away from a purely social explanation for why expectations vary and begin to explain within group variations that account for external realities.

Normative Expectations

Normative expectations are defined as a set of shared *ideas* about how a social institution should respond to an individual's investment of effort and ability. Normative expectations are counterfactually formed; that is, people absorb these expectations before they gain the knowledge needed to question what they are being taught (Luhmann & Albrow, 1985; Wittgenstein, 1969). They are learned and reinforced through the social reproduction process. The social reproduction process is the process whereby socially desirable patterns of behavior are reproduced in people's

expectations about the future. Normative expectations reflect societal norms. Democratic societies teach that normative expectations apply to everyone not only to a dominant group or groups in society. They are legitimated by mainstream values and shared by most people within a society (Gould, 1999; Luhmann & Albrow, 1985).

Within our conceptual framework we place emphasis on three normative expectations: (1) the American dream (Hochschild, 1995), (2) individualism/human agency (Gilens, 1999; Hochschild, 1995) and (3) education as a path to economic mobility (Immerwahr, 2004; Ogbu, 1983). These normative expectations are specific to understanding educational differences within the American educational context and how change might come about. That is, we suggest that they provide the basis for a blueprint to reduce academic disengagement and to stimulate social development through education. We say in America, because the appropriate normative expectations for understanding academic engagement and social development will likely vary from society to society and at different times.

The first normative expectation is the belief in the idea of the American dream. According to Shapiro (2004), the American dream "... is the promise that those who work equally hard will reap roughly equal rewards" (p. 87). The American dream is an expression of a shared *ideal* about people's expectations for how American institutions will respond to their investment of effort and ability. Hochschild (1995) finds that "Americans are close to unanimous in endorsing the idea of the American dream" (p. 55).

In a liberal democratic society, such as the United States, to be legitimate, normative expectations must adhere to the *idea* that all people have the opportunity to reach their full capabilities. The American dream serves the functional purpose, at least in pretext, of providing everyone with equal opportunity. Under such an understanding, effort and ability are seen as the determining factors in who succeeds and who fails (i.e., we live in a meritocracy).

This leads us to the second normative expectation – of individualism, or the belief that individuals not institutions are causes of things that matter. For example, Gilens (1999) finds that 96 percent of Americans agree in response to the question, "People should take advantage of every opportunity to improve themselves rather than expect help from the government" (p. 35). This suggests that people believe opportunities generally exist for everyone and that it is up to the individual to take advantage of those opportunities.

Because people maintain their belief in the basic idea of the American dream, they resist institutional explanations for explaining variations in individual outcomes. There is ample evidence in the literature that it does not matter whether a person is black or white, poor or rich they almost unanimously hold the normative expectation that individuals are causes of things that matter in their own lives (Gilens, 1999; Hochschild, 1995; Rank, 1994). Even people for whom effort and ability in their own lives has proven to be ineffective, maintain the belief in the idea of human agency as the primary cause of success and failure. This is illustrated in examples of welfare recipients who when asked why they personally are on welfare blame the system, but when asked why others are on welfare, they blame the recipients (Rank, 1994). For example, in speaking about welfare recipients, Rank (1994) writes, "Many recipients also subscribe to the common stereotypes surrounding welfare: that most recipients are minorities; that those on welfare are there for long periods of time;

that women have more children to get higher welfare payments; and so on” (p. 142). However, Rank (1994) notes that welfare recipients are careful to distinguish between themselves and others.

The third normative expectation is the belief in the idea of education as a path to social mobility (Ogbu, 1983). There is strong reason to believe that people do see education as a path to economic mobility. According to Mel Elfin (1993), “Of all the truths that this generation of Americans holds self-evident, few are more deeply embedded in the national psyche than the maxim ‘It pays to go to college’” (Elfin, 1993, p. 1). Researchers find that almost all students aspire to attend college (94%) and most parents (96%) want their child to attend college (Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003). The 1996 Gallup Poll showed that 92% of parents regard a college education as the most important investment they can make for their children (Miller, 1997). These data provide strong evidence that most people see education as a path to economic mobility.

Normative expectations help maintain people’s belief in the legitimacy of American institutions. They make up a system of beliefs that allow individuals to maintain at least a faint hope that they can overcome their current situation or their children can. However, the question becomes if people buy into these normative expectations, why does their behavior (particularly minority and poor persons) to often seem to contradict these commonly shared ideals? In short, normative expectations are based on a promise by society, not on an individual or group’s experiences. As we know from our own personal experiences, some promises are carried out right away while others are not carried out for years if ever. While promises can be important for motivating people, at some point if the promise is not fulfilled or they see no signs that it will be fulfilled anytime soon, people adapt their behavior to fit their experience. This does not mean that they lose hope all together. They maintain hope because people want to believe they live in a just society (Lerner & Miller, 1978), the alternative is anarchy. However, they begin to realize that there is a competing set of expectations that better represent their experiences – role expectations.

Role Expectations

In contrast to normative expectations, role expectations are based on the historical and contemporary experiences of a particular social group with institutions and their resources for achieving desired ends. In addition to role expectations being associated with a particular group’s position in society, they are shared by most people within society for that group. They define the ways that people can anticipate members of a particular group to act in a social setting.

There are three different categories of role expectations: those that advantage some, those that create equality for all, and those that disadvantage some. Role expectations that create advantage for some students unevenly increase the amount of return a student can expect to receive from investing effort and ability into schooling. Role expectations that disadvantage some students reduce the amount of return a student can expect to receive from investing effort and ability into school. In the ideal scenario, institutions would be held constant and variation in outcomes would be the result of personal capabilities – effort and ability.

Role expectations come into existence through a struggle between individuals (strategic actors) over the distributional advantage that institutions provide (see, generally, Knight, 1992). Those who have wealth are in the position of power over those who do not when it comes to the bargaining

situation. To maintain her advantage those who have wealth must transform this power into right. They do this by structuring role expectations so that they constrain the actions of the poor. Knight describes the struggle between strategic actors in this way,

In any single social interaction the task of a strategic actor is to establish those expectations that will produce his desired distributional outcome, to constrain those with whom he interacts in such a way as to compel them by the force of their expectations to choose that strategy that will lead to the outcome he prefers.

Based on a growing body of historical and contemporary experiences with unequal power in using institutions and resources for achieving desired outcomes, groups begin to recognize and institutionalize a set of competing expectations – role expectations. On the one hand, groups that have experienced institutional advantage institutionalize role expectations because they appear to them to reflect reality – some groups historically outperform others. On the other hand, disadvantaged groups institutionalize role expectations because they reflect their experiences with using effort and ability to achieve desired outcomes.

Individual Expectations

Normative and role expectations play a particularly important part in early childhood prior to the individual having developed the cognitive capacity to make a capability judgment (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Much of what young children consider to be fact is accepted at face value because they do not yet have sufficient grounds for doubting (Wittgenstein, 1969). Young children have not developed cognitively enough to form abstract concepts (Harter, 1990; Piaget, 1955; Vygotsky, 1986). This does not mean that there will be no variation in behaviors between different groups of young children who have different experiences with the educational institution as a result of social, political, and economic factors. However, these differences are better explained as a response to the environment at this early age of development. These responses will readily change with changes in the environment. That is, these responses are not an integrated part of the young child's self-concept.

When children gain the ability to form abstract concepts, such as an individual expectation, they are freed to a lesser or greater degree from the world as they are born into it, and can begin to construct a world of their own. Normative and role expectations provide the developing child with a script for action. Rather than understanding them as deterministic, we suggest that they are important sources of information for the child to begin understanding the social implications of her experiences with institutions.

Normative and role expectations are not predictive of a person's behavior because people are thinking beings. People are not forced to immediately respond to stimuli in their environment. As thinking beings people are able to mediate their action through forethought and planning (Bandura, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978) which develops around the age of twelve (Gudiano, 1987; Piaget, 1955). Planning has been, "... characterized as a process consisting of setting subgoals, constructing plans, and realizing these plans" (Nurmi, 1991, p. 10). The act of planning is an internal function of speech whereby a person anticipates constraints to performance and opportunities to perform based on her perception of what she is capable of doing (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, & Matusov, 1994; Vygotsky,

1986). Internal speech refers to the capability of people to count in their minds, for example, as opposed to using their fingers (Vygotsky, 1978).

The ability to plan actions allows individuals to alter normative and role expectations to form a unique mental representation of an institution based on personal experiences. These unique mental representations might be referred to as *individual expectations*. Individual expectations are focused on norms for the self – what an individual's perception is of an institution's power to augment her capability for making organizations and agents a part of the resources she has available to achieve desired ends. What should not be lost in this discussion is the fact that people have several different ways of representing institutions: (1) an idealistic form – normative expectations, (2) a group representation – role expectations, and (3) an individualized representation. It is when people are able to form individual expectations that it becomes possible for institutions to become an integrated part of the self-concept.

While normative and role expectations do not determine individual behavior, they affect how people understand their capabilities. Normative and role expectations form a kind of continuum with normative expectations on one end and role expectations on the other end. Individual expectations will most often fall somewhere on the continuum between the two.

People develop individual expectations by making judgments about what they are capable of doing. People make judgments not only about their personal capabilities – their effort and ability (Bandura, 1997), but also about their capability of influencing institutions. Both the promises captured in normative expectations and the group experiences captured in role expectations serve as valuable information for understanding personal experiences and making judgments about what one is capable of doing. The more personal experiences support normative expectations and are in conflict with role expectations, the more likely people are to have elevated perceptions of their capability (personal and institutional). Further, the capability to form individual expectations provides the individual with the ability to view normative and role expectations through the lens of personal experience. In this manner we see the emergence of the individual from her social beginnings and institutional change becomes possible. The formation of individual expectations allows the individual to extend her personal understanding of social institutions beyond inherited conceptions of institutions.

Individual Expectations Fall on a Continuum

Because normative and role expectations are socially shared they take on an existence independent of any one individual. Normative and role expectations do not determine behavior. They do, however, reflect the collective perception of a society about the kinds of behaviors a member of a group is capable of performing. Given this, they set the parameters for forming individual expectations. That is, we suggest that people typically form individual expectations that fall somewhere on the continuum between normative expectations and disadvantageous role expectations.

Individual expectations are gradually constructed throughout childhood as part of the process of testing normative and role expectations while evaluating an accumulating set of facts, or life experiences related to what the child “can do” (Gould, 1999; Luhmann & Albrow, 1985). We

suggest that it is during adolescents the child develops individual expectations about the education institution based on their experiences in schools. If role expectations of disadvantaged children are confirmed by a child's school experiences, individual expectations are likely to develop that fall farther away from normative expectations on the continuum.

The closer a group's role expectations are to normative expectations the more control individual's within the group are given over institutions and their resources (and the outcomes they can achieve). Therefore, the closer a group's role expectations are to normative expectations, the more forming individual expectations appears to individual's within the group to be based on their own use of effort and ability and the less institutions matter as causes of things. The farther away a group is from the center of the continuum, the more forming individual expectations appears to individual's within the group to be based on institutions and the less effort and ability matter as causes of things. This might help explain why, in a review of literature on motivation, Graham (1994) reports that researchers often find that blacks are more likely to believe that external forces are the cause of outcomes and reinforcements in comparison to their white counterparts. Similar to Graham, we suggest that beliefs in external control are rational (not maladaptive) given the social and economic constraints disadvantaged groups face.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper provides a conceptual framework that uses normative, role, and individual expectations to better understand the educational experiences of disadvantaged children. According to Neisser and colleagues (1996), we lack a framework that adequately addresses the impact of different educational experiences.

Around fifth or sixth grade children begin to understand how institutions affect their ability to achieve their goals. At this point they learn that individual effort and ability are not sufficient for academic success. Therefore, increases in ability are likely to diminish because academic achievement is increasingly being understood by the child as something more than the investment of effort and ability; it is equally about the kinds of institutional assistance that is accessible to the child.

If a child's experiences with the educational institution are teaching the child that her investment of effort and ability will be undervalued relative to other children (both in school and later in the labor market), the decision to invest in education becomes less likely. That is, a negative individual expectation is formed which suggests that for them, investing effort and ability into education will not result in a just return. This is very important to people in liberal democratic societies like America where the idea of equality and individualism are strongly valued (see for e.g., Mitchell, 1998).

While the benefits of education might outweigh the costs, minority and poor children are denied the ability to compete in a fair game. Most people if asked to join a game that they perceive is unfair, particularly if it puts them at a disadvantage, will look for a different game in which they have an equal or better than equal chance for success. This might be particularly true in a society where success and failure are ultimately thought of as being caused by individual effort and ability. If a person perceives that at the end of the game, they are going to be ultimately blamed or praised for

the final outcome, regardless of how much their individual effort and ability accounted for the outcome, it is less of a benefit to say I am better off than I would have been if I did not play at all.

In essence, minority and poor children are robbed of the motivation democratic institutions are meant to provide, the motivation that comes from knowing if you work hard and have the necessary ability you can and will succeed. It is well established in the education literature that motivation is a key factor in academic achievement (see for e.g., Dweck, 1989; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). While research has shown for example, that black children have equal or higher levels of motivation for performing academic work once environmental factors are controlled for (Graham, 1994), what we are talking about is not motivation derived from levels of individual effort and ability, but motivation derived from the education institution itself. Inequitable educational institutions leave minority and poor children lacking in the kind of motivation that democratic institutions are meant to provide.

In addition to lacking the motivation democratic institutions provide for investing high levels of effort and ability into education, poor and minority children are made to feel devalued by the educational institution. In some important way, when schools reward minority and poor children less (for e.g., by giving them C's when they deserve B's, by giving them fewer classes to take, by not making sure they have the money to attend college by not providing them with by not providing the with a safe school environment) than it rewards other children who put forth similar levels of effort and ability, the educational institution is telling these children that they value them less. Children (like all people) want to feel valued. They will seek out institutional environments that make them feel valued even if these institutions do not produce the highest reward for their investment of effort and ability. The decision to invest in school is not simply about costs and benefits from an economic perspective. It is also about the motivation institutions provide and feeling valued by these institutions. We suggest that the primary way a child evaluates whether an educational institution values her is by the child judging how the educational institution responds to her investment of effort and ability relative to normative and role expectations.

What we are proposing is that motivation and engagement in school is as much about institutions as it is about individual effort and ability. As Neisser and colleagues (1996) point out, the evidence is clear, the one environmental factor that is important for increasing a child's I.Q. or more generally their academic achievement, is the presence of formal schooling. We suggest that whether formal schooling is present in a child's life cannot simply be determined by whether or not they spend time in a school each day, but by the quality of their engagement in school activities. The fading of early gains from participating in programs like Head Start (Currie & Thomas, 1995; McKey, 1985) might simply be the result of children drifting away from the educational institution. Maybe instead of drifting away, it is more appropriate to say that they are drifting toward institutions that provide them the opportunity to use effort and ability to succeed and that value them as contributors to the overall well-being of the institution through their investment of effort and ability.

The conceptual framework outlined in this paper provides insight into how social scientists can evaluate differences in educational experiences among children combining macro and micro components. While this conceptual framework appears to be promising, further conceptual specification and empirical research is necessary.

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