Gender, Race, and Performance Expectations of College Students

Matthew W. Mayo
Nicholas Christenfeld

Women often have low performance expectations for themselves but expect other women to succeed. We found minority students think not only that they will do worse than other minority group members, but also that their group will do poorly. Low individual and group success expectations make the results for minorities doubly troubling.

There is considerable evidence that women tend to have lower expectations about their own performance than do men (Crandall, 1969). These low expectations seem to be especially pronounced when task standards are ambiguous (Feather & Simon, 1971), when tasks are competitive (Benton, 1973), and when social comparison is salient (Lenney, 1977). However, women’s lower expectations about their probable success do not apply to their expectations about women in general. Collis (1985), for example, found that although teenage girls felt they could not learn to use computers, they thought that other women could. Collis called this the “We can, but I can’t” paradox (p. 209). Clark and Zehr (1993) also found that individual women college students predicted they would do badly on a test, yet, again, the women reported that they expected other women to do well. Men did not show this pattern. Rather, they believed that they would do well individually and that men in general would also do well.

Studies have also found a relationship between minority racial group membership and personal self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the degree to which an individual expects to be able to master a particular task (Bandura, 1977, 1997). One study found that although race did not predict college performance, it did influence self-efficacy, with racial minority students having lower expectations of success (Hackett,}

Matthew W. Mayo is the assistant director and leadership specialist at the Center for Student Leadership at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California. Nicholas Christenfeld is an associate professor of psychology at the University of California, San Diego. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Nicholas Christenfeld, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093-0109 (e-mail: nicko@ucsd.edu).

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Betz, Casas, & Rocha-Singh, 1992). McCarthy and Meier (1983) found that although a writing course raised the writing ability of African-American students to that of White students, the former group's self-efficacy for writing remained weaker. In contrast, there are numerous reports that self-esteem is at least as high in African Americans as in Whites, and often higher (Harris & Stokes, 1978; Hoelter, 1983; Taylor & Walsh, 1979).

Tashakkori and Thompson (1991), in a longitudinal study of high school students, found that African American students rated themselves more positively than Whites on general self-esteem. The African American students, however, displayed less confidence in their ability to control external events, and lower personal efficacy than the White students. However, these differences were quite small, and the African American students did indicate very slightly greater expectations about future academic success. In later work, Tashakkori (1993) again found that African Americans, this time middle school children, had higher self-esteem than Whites. Consistent with some of the earlier research, these same African American children also reported lower self-efficacy and control of events that happened to themselves than did Whites.

In general, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the relationship between minority versus majority status in society and self-esteem or self-efficacy beliefs. It therefore seems worth investigating when beliefs about self-efficacy apply only to the particular individual and when they generalize to the group of which that individual is a member. Views of the capabilities of other members of one's own group could be considered a form of collective efficacy beliefs. Collective efficacy, in contrast to self-efficacy, is the belief that one's group, rather than oneself, can achieve a given task (Bandura, 1982, 1997).

In this article we explore whether the "We can, but I can't" pattern found for women is present also for students who are members of racial minority groups. In other words, is the pattern of having low performance expectation for oneself but high expectations for other members of one's group a response to being female, or is it a product of not being part of the dominant group? In addition, we investigate the implications of being both a woman and a member of a minority racial group. Munford (1994) has suggested that African American women report unusually high levels of distress because of the combination of being both female and a member of a minority racial group. Finally, this article investigates whether patterns of self- and collective efficacy are different depending on whether people are estimating how they are about to do on a task or evaluating how well they have just done.
METHOD

Participants

The experiment was performed in two large classes at a major Californian university. These classes had a total attendance of about 160 students. Of these, 150 agreed to participate and completed the experiment. These classes were required general education writing courses, and therefore the participants should be representative of the undergraduate population.

Participants were divided into two racial categories based on self-reports. The first category consisted of all groups that fall into affirmative action minority racial categories. Thirty-three were in this group (20 Hispanic, 6 African American, 6 Filipino, 1 Native American). The 117 nonaffirmative action participants can be further divided into White (70) and Asian American (47). At the university where these data were collected, Filipino and other Asian American students were regarded as separate groups for affirmative action purposes, with Filipino American students categorized with Hispanic, African American, and Native American students. Our categorization reflects this policy. One-hundred-three of the participants were female, and 47 were male. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 26, with a median age of 18. Almost all of them were first-year students (89%).

Materials

Participants received a printed packet containing a demographic survey, task instructions, and three questions asking for performance predictions. In addition to questions about age, gender, and racial/ethnic status, participants were asked to indicate, on a five-point Likert-type scale, whether they identified with the majority/dominant culture or the minority/nondominant culture. Half of the participants were given packets containing a reading comprehension task, and half were given a creativity task. These tasks followed the model presented by Clark and Zehr (1993). The reading comprehension task required students to read two paragraphs about economic class in Jacksonian America, and to answer three multiple choice questions about the passage in 5 minutes. The creativity task required participants to come up with novel uses for a common household item. They were presented with a labeled picture of a spatula, and given 5 minutes to write down as many uses as they could devise.
The other section of the packet asked participants to make three performance predictions. For half of the participants this section came before the task, though after the task explanation, so that they were rating how well they thought they would do. For the other half, these questions came after the task, and asked how well they thought they had done. In both cases, this section asked participants to make three judgments: how good they thought their performance would be (or had been), how good the performance of other people of their own culture would be, and how good the performance of the average undergraduate would be. Participants indicated their answers on 5-point scales, labeled very poor, poor, average, good, and very good.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted during two classes. It was presented as pretesting of possible new material for standardized aptitude tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). Participants were told that they would complete a brief demographic survey and a simple task. They were then given test packets and told to wait for further instructions after completing the demographic survey. When all of the students had completed the survey, they were told to follow the printed instructions and work for 5 minutes.

The two manipulated independent variables were which task they performed, and whether they rated their performance before or after completing the task. There were two additional nonmanipulated independent variables: male versus female and minority versus nonminority racial status. The dependent variable consisted of the three performance ratings: participants’ estimates of their own success, the success of other members of their own group, and the success of students in general. The three ratings were treated as a three-level repeated-measures variable.

RESULTS

Before examining students’ performance expectations, it is worth investigating the actual performance of the various groups. The reading comprehension task, performed by half the students, could be scored by simply counting how many of the three questions they answered correctly. On average, students answered 1.74 of the three questions correctly (SD = 0.68). There were no effects of race, F(1, 75) = 0.81, ns, or gender, F(1, 75) = 0.002, ns, on the number of correct responses for this task. The other task, which involved thinking of
as many uses as possible for a spatula, was scored by counting the number of uses generated. On average, students listed 8.64 possible uses (SD = 4.21). Again, there were no effects of race, $F(1, 73) = 0.59$, ns, or gender, $F(1, 73) = 0.99$, ns. For neither task was the estimate of performance correlated with actual score. Given these results, any differences between races or genders in performance expectations cannot reflect actual differences in ability for these tasks.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was done on the performance expectations using the full model with gender, race, task, and order as the between-subjects variables, and whether the rating was of self, same-group other, or the average undergraduate as the between-subjects variable. This analysis revealed that which task the participants were assigned and whether they rated their performance before or after the task had no effect, either main or interactive. Therefore, both of these factors were dropped from all subsequent analyses. The effects that will be reported for gender and race did not vary based on whether they involved prediction for the reading comprehension task versus the creative task, nor based on whether they were predictions about how well they would do on an upcoming task or judgments about how well they had just done at the task.

A three-way ANOVA was computed, with gender, race, and rating target (i.e., whether the success expectation was for self, same group other, or average undergraduate) as the factors. Students from minority racial groups gave lower ratings than students from majority racial groups, across the three rating targets, $F(1, 145) = 8.56$, $p < .005$. Students in general also gave lower ratings for themselves than for other members of their group, and lower ratings for same-group others than for the average undergraduate, $F(2, 290) = 56.02$, $p < .0001$. There was also a significant two-way interaction of race with rating target, with minority students seeing a bigger discrepancy between themselves and others than did majority students, $F(2, 290) = 26.0$, $p < .0001$. There was also a significant three-way interaction, $F(2, 290) = 3.55$, $p < .05$, between gender, race, and rating target. The pattern of results is shown in Figure 1.

Because of the complexity of the three-way interaction, it is worth discussing each group individually. Within each, the scores from each of the three performance questions (self, same group other, and average student) were compared, using Scheffe corrections to control for multiple comparisons. For these tests, the alpha level was set to .05.

Men from nonminority racial groups (Whites and Asian Americans) were the simplest group to interpret. They predicted that they would do as well as other members of their group and that this would be the same level of performance as the average undergraduate. On the per-
FIGURE 1

Expectations of Racial Minority and Nonminority Men and Women for Their Own Performance, the Performance of Others of Their Group, and the Performance of Students in General (With Standard Error Bars)

Note. Within groups, a different letter indicates that the means differ significantly (Scheffe’s post hoc test).

formance scale, with 1 being very poor, and 5 very good, the majority males on average rated themselves 3.75 (SD = 0.95). They rated their group 3.75 (SD = 0.84), and the average student 3.69 (SD = 0.74).

Women from non-minority racial groups, as has been reported in the literature, predicted lower scores for themselves individually, and they predicted that other students of their group would do as well as did the men. This is consistent with the “We can, but I can’t” finding; however, because they were not asked specifically about the performance of other women, the “We can” part may refer to their view of the performance of other non-minority students regardless of gender, rather than to the performance of women as a group. This ambiguity is one about whether participants viewed gender as a component of their group membership or culture. Racial majority women also thought that undergraduates in general would do better than their own group. Their ratings for themselves averaged 3.24 (SD = 0.68), for their group 3.74 (SD = 0.70), and for students in general 4.00 (SD = 0.52). The “We can” part of previous findings
seems to depend on the comparison group. Compared with the report of the men, women were no lower, but compared with their estimate of other undergraduates, women students regarded their group as being at a disadvantage. This difference, although significant, was quite small (0.26 on the 5-point scale); far smaller than the differences that emerged for minority students.

Men from minority racial groups believed that they would do very badly at the task, reporting lower self-evaluations than even the racial majority women. In contrast to the racial majority women, they expected other members of their group to do badly, compared to estimates of the performance of students in general. They also thought their group would do badly compared to how well racial majority male and female students thought their own groups would do. The racial minority men reported that other members of their group would do poorly and that they individually would do even worse. The self ratings averaged 2.57 ($SD = 0.53$), the ratings of their group 3.43 ($SD = 0.79$), and the ratings of students in general 4.29 ($SD = 0.76$). The finding for them was “We can’t, and I really can’t.”

Women from racial minority groups showed a similar pattern to that of racial minority men. They expected they would do very badly, reporting scores very close to racial minority men’s estimates. They also believed their group would do dramatically worse than the average student, and rated themselves 2.46 ($SD = 0.86$), their group 3.04 ($SD = 0.77$), and students in general 4.08 ($SD = 0.63$). In other words, racial minority women reflected the racial minority male “We can’t, and I really can’t” pattern rather than the racial majority female “We can, but I can’t” pattern. There was no significant additional pessimism related to being both a woman and a minority racial group member.

The further division of non-minority students into White and Asian-American subgroups revealed no differences in performance predictions. In the ANOVA with the three performance predictions as the repeated-measures dependent variable, there was no difference between White and Asian-American students, either as a main effect, $F(1, 114) = 2.17$, ns, or an interaction, $F(2, 228) = 0.15$, ns. Apparently the division of the racial groups into minority and nonminority status based on affirmative action categories captured the essential differences regarding performance expectations. Further evidence came from responses to the question about to what extent students identified with the majority or minority culture. Where a rating of 1 indicated the majority culture, and 5 the minority culture, White students averaged 2.0, the Asian American group averaged 3.1, and the minority racial groups averaged 4.2. This difference between groups is highly significant, $F(2, 73) = 42.10$, $p < .0001$. 

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The further division of the minority group participants into specific racial/ethnic groups also revealed no differences. The Hispanic, African American, and Filipino American students all showed significantly lower expectations for themselves than for their group and lower expectations for their group than for the average student. The expectations of one Native American student also reflected this pattern. An ANOVA with specific minority racial group as the independent variable and the three performance predictions as the repeated dependent variable, revealed no main effect of racial group. \( F(3, 29) = 0.79, \text{ ns}, \) nor any interaction, \( F(6, 58) = 1.73, \text{ ns} \).

**DISCUSSION**

This experiment replicates previous findings that women tend to have low performance expectations for themselves, but not for women in general. It also indicates that these expectations do not depend on the point at which they evaluate their own competence: there is no difference between guessing how well they are about to do at the task or estimating how well they have just done at it. Furthermore, in these data, it does not matter whether it was a reading comprehension task with multiple-choice answers or an open-ended creativity task with no specified grading criteria. Nonminority women give performance estimates for others of their group that are no different from the estimates given by nonminority men for others of their group. This supports the previous "we can" findings for women (e.g., Collis, 1985). However, they do report that the average student would do marginally better than their own group, tempering slightly the optimism of the "we can" findings for women. This suggests that performance expectations for one group need to be compared not just with other's expectations but also with that group's expectations for others.

A much larger effect, however, is present for students from minority racial groups. They indicate that they expect to do dramatically worse than the average undergraduate. Furthermore, they believe that other members of their group are still not up to the standards of average students. Again, this effect does not depend on which task they perform, nor whether they are making the judgment before or after completing the task. This bias applies equally to men and women from minority racial groups.

It is worth noting that the differences between genders and between races are not absolute. Although on average, majority men reported an expectation for their own performance that was as high as their expectations for others of their group and for the average student, there were men who thought they would do worse
than the average student. Similarly, there were women and minority students who thought they would do well. The division is not a simple categorical one. Although gender and race are good predictors of people's expectations, they are not the only factors that determine them. It is also worth stressing that the performance expectations for individuals and groups do not at all reflect actual performance on the tasks. The women and minority students, having just completed the task, and having done just as well as the male majority students, still report that they believe they have performed poorly. This suggests that the reports are not abstract beliefs about abilities, nor are they indicative of actual skills, but instead reflect genuine differences in the way these groups of students evaluate their own efforts.

Although the results document clear differences between groups in the pattern of their success expectations for themselves and for their groups, they do not provide evidence about the historical or cultural origins of these differences. A few speculations, however, will be offered about what these differences could reflect. The finding for women from nonminority racial groups can be interpreted in two quite different ways. One is that these women have low levels of self-efficacy, and genuinely believe that they are less likely than others to succeed. This cannot be the result of simply applying derogatory stereotypes about their respective groups to themselves. If this were so, they should not only expect to do badly, but should also predict that other members of their group would do equally badly. It could be, however, that the subtle message that women are likely to fail has been combined with the view that women are the equal of men to produce the pattern. The female students then accept the view that, as an abstract group, women can do well, but that they as individual women will do poorly.

Another possibility is that women's low estimates of their own performance represent a stylistic difference from men, possibly defensive pessimism. This strategy, documented by Norem and Cantor (1986a; 1986b), involves setting low performance expectations to insulate the performer from failure and make success a pleasant surprise. Setting low expectations can also stimulate increased effort and thus improve performance. In this context, low expectations are not debilitating, but can actually be beneficial. The predictions for themselves could represent a short-term strategic approach, and the predictions for women in general could indicate their true level of aspiration. It is not clear, however, why the majority men would not also use this strategy.

Although defensive pessimism is a possible interpretation for the women from nonminority racial groups, it is improbable as an explanation of the pattern for students from minority racial groups.
Expecting members of the racial group in general to do badly is not a viable short-term strategy for a single test. Although low expectations for oneself can be disproved almost immediately, people rarely get short-term feedback on the performance of their racial group. That is, a single success cannot show that the low expectation for the group was wrong. It seems that the minority students, both male and female, accept the stereotyped view of their own group as being unlikely to succeed. If the expectations for the group represent the generally low level of aspiration for racial minority students, and they do not feel they have even achieved this low standard, these findings are doubly troubling.

The findings do suggest that the pattern of performance expectations for women are not simply a function of their not being part of the dominant group, because their pattern is different from that of racial minority groups. Furthermore, it seems that racial minority women do not bear a double burden from being both female and in the racial minority. Their expectations are no lower than for those of racial minority men. The effect of race thus seems to supersede the effect of gender—the minority female pattern matches that of minority men, not majority women.

Negative expectations can have real consequences. It has been repeatedly shown that people who do not think they can perform a task do less well than those with high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; 1997). They are prone to try less hard, to give up more easily, and ultimately to perform more poorly. Although this lack of self-efficacy did not damage performance for the specific tasks used, it is possible that it would for other tasks that require more persistence or have greater potential for frustration.

For majority women, the objective should be to find a way to translate women's collective self-efficacy into a personal success expectation. Formal and informal mentoring with female professors might increase women students' self-efficacy.

For the minority students, the task of increasing self-efficacy may be more difficult. Ways must be found to help them develop the sense that they are not inferior to others in their group, but also demonstrate that their group is not inferior to others. The first part of the issue may be addressed in a manner similar to that used for rectifying women's low personal success expectations, through exposure to peer and professional role models. Noel and Smith (1996) found that racial minority students were significantly more likely to self-disclose—a behavior essential in effective mentoring relationships—to faculty members who are of the same racial background, a finding linking institutional hiring practices to student success. A parallel process should be extended.
to the selection of undergraduate student paraprofessionals (e.g., resident assistants, orientation leaders, peer educators) and other highly visible student leaders. The enhancement of the perceived ability of the entire group similarly requires that institutions develop more intentional systemic and programmatic interventions. Programs such as racially specific graduation celebrations, promoted to all underrepresented students, provide opportunities to demonstrate and reinforce the success of fellow racial group-members. These programs must also be balanced with appropriate support services to allow students to achieve their full academic potential.

Institutions walk a fine line in providing essential academic and co-curricular support services without stigmatizing supported populations. In the context of academic support, it is important not to equate tutorial services with minority student programs because this connection essentially pathologizes minority racial identification as a learning disability. Although racial minority students have been found to prefer learning styles less traditional to academia (Grimes, 1995), broad-based academic success courses, programs, and services stressing learning styles over study skills and targeting the general student population rather than just racial minority students, may reduce the prevalence of remedial undertones to minority student services.

Finally, higher education has an obligation to promote—both illustrate and advance—the capability of all racial groups. To this end, it is essential to be mindful of both what we teach and how we teach it. Curricula should be inclusive of examples relevant to the vastly diverse experiences of students and use pedagogies based on theoretical models culturally relevant to such a diverse population. It is important to avoid merely training racial minority students to adapt to the ways of the academy, which can reinforce the perception of other ways of being as inferior, but rather to include strategies appropriate to the value orientations and stylistic differences of underrepresented students (Steward, Gimenez, & Jackson, 1995).

An awareness of the need and development of strategies to make higher education more responsive to underrepresented students, including women and students of color, is not new (see American Council on Education, 1989). However, the present findings further illuminate the depth of the effects of membership in nondominant groups on students and continued need for attention to these issues—including institutional response and continued research.

REFERENCES


