

Daphna Oyserman

Innovating to End Poverty: Commentary on early childhood, youth, and prisoner re-entry programs as innovative mechanisms to end poverty through identity-based motivation

Americans believe in the ethos of freedom of opportunity, that is, if one wants to get ahead, is willing to work hard and attain an education, then one should be able to succeed, or at least rise out of poverty. At the same time, parental advantage in the form of higher income and higher education is passed on to children so that the children of the highest earners and best educated are more likely to graduate high school, attend and graduate college and go on to an economically stable life than those of the lowest earners. Contexts matter as well. In urban centers half or fewer of entering first graders graduates high school in 12 years. At this level of education, employment opportunities are low and incarceration rates high, limiting current and future earning capacities. The questions for policy-makers looking for innovative ways to end poverty given this cycle are threefold. First, do children and their parents aspire to academic success, high school completion, and the kind of future education, certification and licensure needed to attain better futures for themselves and their future families and communities? Second, can small changes leverage these aspirations into better outcomes through more educational attainment, and over time, more persistent pursuit of employment? Third, should resources be invested at certain ages or life phases and not in others? The good news, first, most parents and children aspire to college. Second, small changes in how children imagine their future have disproportionately large effects on whether these aspirations are translated into a reality of finishing high school prepared for the next steps of education. And third, effects can be obtained at different points, with results depending on the outcome relevant at each phase (e.g., improving educational trajectory, improving connection to the world of work).

However, aspiring to college is not enough. Many children with high aspirations do not take sufficient action to work toward their school goals. Aspirations may not be on one's mind or feel irrelevant to the current situation, one may interpret difficulties along the way as implying that success is not in the cards so current tasks are not worth the effort, or one may feel that school success is incongruent with important social identities (gender, race-ethnicity, social class). Indeed the core predictions of identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman, 2009, 2013, in press) are that aspirations predict action if at the moment of judgment, they are accessible (come to mind) and feel relevant. Relevance is operationalized as: Feeling congruent with important social identities (e.g., race-ethnicity, social class), feeling connected with relevant behavioral strategies (studying, asking questions), and providing an interpretation of difficulties along the way as implying task importance, not impossibility. Hence, an aspiration may come to mind but feel irrelevant to the current situation, distal rather than proximal, and not requiring any current action.

Family assets and child savings are likely to influence each of these elements of identity relevance by influencing how close the future feels, how parents and children imagine their child's future and how difficulty is interpreted. Low resources might imply that

there won't be money for college so that a college bound future self feels distant. If so, it may not come to mind or feel irrelevant to current parenting and childrearing choices for parents. For children strategies (e.g., studying, asking questions in class) that would come to mind if the 'college-bound' self were on one's mind then don't. If the 'college-bound' self feels distal or does not come to mind at all, parents and children might interpret difficulties along the way as meaning that succeeding in school is an impossible goal rather than an important one.

Small interventions can have large effects if they change this mindset, for example, a set of group activities meant to make the future feel close and connected to the present, increase the feeling that schoolwork is identity-congruent, and inoculate children from interpreting difficulty as implying that investing in schoolwork is not worth their time, shows significant effects on grade point average, attendance, and grade retention over a two year follow-up (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). Another exciting possibility is to introduce child-focused savings accounts either at birth or linked to school entry (Oyserman, 2013). Saving even small sums might solidify the idea that the present is connected to the future so that what one does now matters for the future especially if saving is articulated as a future-focused activity and linked to other future-focused activities in school. Indeed, current evidence is that children from low-income families who have bank accounts and who mentally account at least part of the money in their account as 'for college' are more likely to attend college.

One of the issues these kinds of interventions address is the need to support at-risk individuals to notice opportunities as they arise to either stay on-track or become off-track. Educational programs and supports that do not engage the components of identity-based motivation are less likely to efficiently leverage the motivational capacity of recipients.

References and Further Reading

- Landau, M., Oyserman, D., Keefer, L., & Smith, G. C. (2014) The college journey and academic engagement: how metaphor use enhances identity-based motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, 679-698.
- Oyserman, D. (in press). Identity-based motivation. In Scott, R. (Editor-in-Chief) *Emerging Trends in the Behavioral and Social Sciences*, Wiley Press
- Oyserman, D. (2013). Not just any path: Implications of identity-based motivation for disparities in school outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 33, 179-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.09.002>
- Oyserman, D. (2009). Identity-based motivation: Implications for action-readiness, procedural readiness, and consumer behavior. Target Article. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. 19, 250–260.
- Oyserman, D. (2009). Identity-based motivation and consumer behavior. Response to commentary. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19, 276–279.
- Oyserman, D., Bybee, D. & Terry, K. (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 188-204.

Oyserman, D. & Destin, M. (2010) Identity-based motivation: Implications for intervention. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38, 1001-1043.

Oyserman, D, Fryberg, S., & Yoder, N. (2007). Identity-based motivation and health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93, 1011-1027.