Social stigma is a pervasive aspect of our culture. According to Goffman (1963), people who are stigmatized have a spoiled identity in the eyes of others; they bear a mark that renders them susceptible to social devaluation. Extensive research has shown that negative stereotypes about members of stigmatized groups are often widely known in a culture, even to individuals who do not endorse them (e.g., Devine, 1989) and even to those who are targets of these stereotypes (Steele, 1992; 1997). Recently, scholars have begun to examine how people who are targets of negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination understand and interpret their experience as members of socially devalued and disadvantaged groups (e.g., Frable 1989; Major, 1994), how they attempt to cope with this experience, and the consequences of these coping strategies (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Major & Crocker, 1993; Steele, 1992; 1997). The current chapter extends this focus by examining how negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination can lead members of stigmatized groups to psychologically disengage from a self-evaluative domain as a way of maintaining their personal and collective self-esteem. In this chapter we first describe the theoretical antecedents and consequences of psychological disengagement among the stigmatized. We then describe a program of research examining these processes among African American and European American students in the domain of academic performance.
PSYCHOLOGICAL DISENGAGEMENT AND DISIDENTIFICATION AMONG THE STIGMATIZED

Most theories of self-esteem formation, such as the theory of reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934), self-fulfilling prophecy (Darley & Fazio, 1980), and efficacy-based self-esteem (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983) imply that members of stigmatized groups on average will have lower self-esteem than members of nonstigmatized groups because of the social devaluation, prejudice, and discrimination that they often experience. On the basis of a review of more than 20 years of empirical research on this issue, Crocker and Major (1989) concluded that these theoretical assumptions are often incorrect. For example African Americans and Hispanic Americans typically have levels of self-esteem equal to or higher than that of European Americans; likewise, research has failed to find consistently lower self-esteem among those with facial disfigurements, physical disabilities, or mental disabilities, to name a few groups (see Crocker & Major, 1989, for a review). This does not mean that all members of stigmatized groups have levels of self-esteem equal to or higher than the nonstigmatized, however. Some stigmatized groups have levels of self-esteem that are on average lower than those of the nonstigmatized; furthermore, there is substantial within-group variability in levels of self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1994; see Quinn & Crocker, this volume).

Although a number of psychological processes can maintain self-regard in the face of threats to esteem (e.g., Baumeister, 1995; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988), our focus here is on self-esteem maintenance processes that may be particularly likely to occur among members of socially devalued groups. Crocker and Major (1989) attempted to explain the sometimes paradoxical relationship between stigma and self-esteem by examining three strategies that may afford members of stigmatized groups the opportunity to protect their self-esteem: (1) attributing negative outcomes to prejudice based on the stigma; (2) devaluing outcomes on which their group fares poorly relative to other groups; and (3) making ingroup social comparisons with similarly stigmatized others rather than with members of nonstigmatized and advantaged groups. The current chapter refines and extends this analysis of the coping strategies used by the stigmatized to protect their self-esteem.

We propose that an important determinant of whether individuals who are targets of negative stereotypes, prejudice, and disadvantage in particular domains maintain their self-image is whether or not they psychologically disengage their self-esteem from feedback received in those domains. We define disengagement as a detachment of self-esteem from external feedback or outcomes in a particular domain, such that feelings of self-worth are not dependent on successes or failures in that domain (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998). Individuals who are highly engaged in a domain link their self-evaluations and self-esteem to feedback received in that domain. Individuals who are disengaged from a domain, in contrast, are relatively impervious to feedback or outcomes received in that
domain. We assume that disengagement is motivated by the desire to maintain either personal or collective self-esteem and is typically triggered by anticipated or experienced threats to personal or social identity in a given domain. Although we propose that disengagement is typically a temporary and situationally specific response to threats, we recognize that chronic exposure to threats in a given domain may lead to chronic disidentification from that domain (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998).

Our framework assumes that individuals who are psychologically engaged in a domain draw upon domain-relevant social feedback and outcomes to make inferences about their own abilities and competencies in that domain. That is, they use social information received in the domain as a basis for making domain-specific self-evaluations. These domain-specific self-evaluations then direct their overall sense of self-worth and value (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979). Within this framework, psychological disengagement from a domain can occur at one of two points. First, the person may discount the diagnosticity, or validity, of social feedback received in the domain and thus reject this feedback as a true indicator of his or her competencies in the domain. Hence, the person may not use the feedback as a basis for making domain-specific self-evaluations. Alternatively, a person may regard the feedback as diagnostic and base his or her self-evaluations in the domain on this feedback, but reduce the centrality, or importance, of the domain in the self-concept and thereby break the connection between domain-specific self-evaluations and global feelings of self-worth. Either of these processes results in disengagement of self-esteem from domain-specific social feedback. These two processes are discussed more fully below.

**DEVALUING**

The proposition that the impact of evaluative feedback in a domain on self-esteem is moderated by the psychological centrality, or importance of the domain to the self-concept dates back at least to William James (1890/1950), who observed:

> I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest... So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review this list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation... I, who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek. My deficiencies there give me no humiliation at all. Had I "pretensions" to be a linguist, it would have been just the reverse.

This proposition is also central to more recent models of self-esteem such as those by Rosenberg (1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972), Harter (1986), Tesser (1988), and Pelham and Swann (1989). Each of these perspectives makes three assumptions: that individuals differ in the value they attach to various aspects of self, that individuals choose which self-aspects to value, and that the value accorded to any given self-aspect will determine the impact that success and failure
in that domain has on self-esteem. Some correlational evidence is consistent with this perspective (e.g., Harter, 1986; Pelham & Swann, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979). For example, Rosenberg (1979) showed that individuals who possessed negative self-conceptions were more likely to be low in global self-esteem if they considered the negative characteristics to be personally important. Other research, however, suggests that the value or importance attached to various domains does not moderate the impact of standing in that domain on self-esteem (e.g., Marsh, 1986).

External evaluations or performance feedback can also shape the value an individual attaches to a given domain. For example, individuals often regard as most important those domains in which they are most proficient (Rosenberg, 1979; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Likewise, Tesser and Campbell (1980) demonstrated experimentally that individuals will devalue, or regard as less personally relevant, attributes on which they compare unfavorably relative to a close (similar) other compared to those attributes on which they compare favorably. Furthermore, people experience more negative affect when outperformed by a close other on valued dimensions than when they are outperformed on dimensions that are not personally valued (Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988).

Several authors, including Crocker and Major (1989), Tajfel and Turner (1986), and Steele (1992; 1997), have applied the devaluing hypothesis to explain the often paradoxical relationship between membership in a socially devalued group and self-esteem. Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized that the stigmatized can protect their self-esteem by “selectively devaluing, or regarding as less important for their self-definition, those performance dimensions on which they or their group fare(s) poorly, and selectively valuing those dimensions on which they or their group excel(s)” (p. 612). Furthermore, they proposed that the psychological centrality of a given domain within the self-concept is socially produced, that is, results from performance feedback, comparisons with others, and treatment by others. In a similar vein, C. Steele (1992; 1997) hypothesized that individuals who are vulnerable to social devaluation and negative stereotypes in a specific domain (such as women in math courses and African Americans in school), and hence do not perceive “good prospects” in that domain, may alter their self-concepts such that the domain is no longer a basis of self-evaluation. Steele (1997) called this process disidentification, and observes that, “Disidentification offers the retreat of not caring about the domain in relation to the self.’’

Crocker and Major’s (1989) and Steele’s (1997) frameworks implicitly assume that the importance or centrality of a domain in the self-concept is affected to some extent by domain-relevant information about one’s group, such as domain-specific stereotypes or the standing of one’s own group in the domain relative to other groups. For example, Steele (1997) asserts that disidentification results from negative social stereotypes and social structures that limit group outcomes. There is surprisingly little evidence, however, that information about the performance of one’s group, in the absence of personal performance information, affects personal values.

Schmader and Major (1997) conducted a series of studies to examine this hypothesis. In one study, we assigned individuals randomly to one of two minimal
groups and gave them a test of a fictional personality trait. We then informed them that members of their own group tended, on average, to score either better than, worse than, or equal to the members of the other group on this personality trait. Importantly, their own personal score was ostensibly subtracted from the group averages, so that no personal performance feedback was provided. As predicted, individuals who learned that their group scored higher than the other group on the test valued the trait more and assumed that they personally had scored higher than did individuals who learned that their group scored lower than the other group. This study indicates that group-level performance information can shape personal values in the absence of direct evidence of personal standing in the domain.

The value that people attach to performance domains, however, occurs within a larger cultural context and cultural standards of what is important. Thus, it may be difficult for members of socially devalued groups to devalue domains in which they personally, or their group, are disadvantaged if those domains are highly valued in the larger culture. Evidence consistent with this hypothesis was obtained in a second study (Peterson, Major, Cozzarelli, & Crocker, 1988). Men and women were given a test of a fictional personality trait, and then were given bogus feedback that their own sex did better, the other sex did better, or both sexes scored equally on the trait. Again, their own score was removed from the group averages. Consistent with the above study, both men and women valued the trait most and were most likely to believe they were personally high in the trait when they were told that their own sex group had outperformed the cross-sex group. However, when told that their own sex scored more poorly than the other sex on the trait, only men devalued the trait. Women (a lower status group) did not devalue the trait when they believed that men scored higher than women on it, even though they assumed that their personal score on the trait test was low. We observed a similar status asymmetry in devaluing in a third study where we manipulated the perceived status of experimentally created minimal groups (Schmader & Major, 1997). Together, these three studies indicate that devaluing occurs in response to feedback about the relative performance of one’s group, but that it is more likely to be used by members of high status groups than by members of low status groups.

DISCOUNTING

A second route to psychological disengagement from a domain is to discount the extent to which social feedback or outcomes in that domain are valid and diagnostic indicators of one’s true personal abilities or merits (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1994; Major & Crocker, 1993). Discounting the validity of feedback produces psychological disengagement by breaking the connection between the external evaluation and one’s internal assessment of personal ability or competence. Because the evaluation is not internalized, it does not affect the individual’s global feelings of self-worth.

Theories of self-concept formation typically assume that individuals use evaluations or feedback from others, social comparison information, or observations of
their own performance to define their self-conceptions. For example, the theory of reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934) proposes that individuals’ evaluations of themselves are a reflection of how others evaluate them. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) assumes that people infer their own abilities by comparing them with those of others, and self-perception theory (Bem, 1970) assumes that people infer their own attributes through observation of their own actions.

The relationship between the external world and internal self-conceptions, however, is often more complex. For example, the relationship between others’ appraisals of an individual and the individual’s self-appraisals, often has been found to be weak or nonexistent (see Shrauger & Schoneman, 1979, for a review). Likewise, the effects of social comparisons on self-evaluations depend on how those comparisons are construed (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Tesser, 1988). For example, upward comparisons on dimensions perceived as controllable are less painful than upward comparisons on dimensions perceived as uncontrollable (Major et al., 1991). Furthermore, appraisals of the situational constraints on one’s behavior alter the extent to which inferences about the self are made from that behavior (Bem, 1970). An obvious question is, when is external feedback discounted as nondiagnostic, and when is it internalized as diagnostic of the self?

We believe that a critical determinant of whether socially distributed outcomes or evaluations are believed to be diagnostic of the self and/or one’s group, and hence internalized, is whether or not those outcomes or evaluations are believed to be deserved (see also Crocker & Major, 1994; Major, 1994). The sense of deserving is a cognitive judgment with affective and motivational implications, and refers to the relationship between a person and his or her outcomes (Lerner, 1987). The cognitive component of the sense of deserving is “the judgment, often tacit, that someone, or some category of people, is entitled to a particular set of outcomes by virtue of who they are or what they have done” (Lerner, 1987, p. 108). According to equity theory (e.g., Adams, 1965) outcomes are judged as deserved when they are believed to accurately reflect the relevant contributions or qualities of the individuals or groups receiving those outcomes.

Although there is a pervasive tendency for people to believe that outcomes are deserved, even when this belief is disadvantageous to the self (e.g., Homans, 1974; Lerner and Miller, 1978), several factors can break or diminish the perceived connection between outcomes and inferences about the self. For example, information that explicitly or implicitly suggests that outcomes or evaluations were obtained as a result of an unfair procedure (e.g., a prejudicial evaluator or discriminatory test), should lead individuals to question whether their own, or their in-group’s, outcomes are diagnostic of their own, or their in-group’s, abilities or qualities. Beliefs that one does not have control over one’s outcomes, or the conditions that produced them, also moderate whether one feels one’s outcomes are deserved (Crocker & Major, 1994; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Major, 1994). In addition, not all people endorse ideological frameworks that hold people responsible for their outcomes, and those that do not are less likely to believe that their own, or their group’s, outcomes or evaluations are genuinely diagnostic of their
internal qualities and/or attributes (e.g., Crandall, 1994). The less individuals internalize external evaluations as truly characteristic of self, in turn, the less likely they will be to base their self-esteem on those outcomes or evaluations.

The discounting route to disengagement is exemplified by Crocker and Major's analysis of the consequences of attributional ambiguity faced by the stigmatized. Crocker and Major (1989; Major & Crocker, 1993) hypothesized that people who are members of socially devalued and stigmatized groups experience more attributional ambiguity about the causes of their outcomes than do those who are not stigmatized, because for the former, prejudice based on their stigma is a plausible alternative explanation for their treatment by others. Furthermore, being able to attribute negative feedback to prejudice could potentially protect the self-esteem of members of stigmatized groups from negative feedback via the attributional process of discounting (Kelley, 1972). Positive feedback might also be discounted by the stigmatized if it is believed to be motivated by factors other than genuine deservingness, such as pity or the desire not to appear prejudiced.

A number of studies have provided support for the basic tenets of this attributional analysis (e.g., Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Major & Quinton, 1997; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). Collectively, these studies suggest that the perception that feedback or outcomes result from unfair procedures, such as a biased or prejudicial evaluator, or are based on outcomes not under one’s control (Major, Feinstein & Crocker, 1994) weakens the belief that outcomes are deserved, and hence leads people to disengage their self-esteem from that feedback, regardless of its valence. This perception can be temporarily induced in a specific situation, as in the above studies, or can reflect a more chronic ideological belief that the system is unfair (Major, 1994).

Because of their more frequent exposure to objective instances of prejudice, bias, and discrimination, as well as their knowledge of negative stereotypes about their group, it is likely that both chronic beliefs in system unfairness, as well as more temporary, situation-specific suspicions of unfairness, will be more prevalent among members of socially devalued groups. Consistent with this hypothesis, Major, Levin, Schmader, and Sidanius (1997), found that African American and Latino/a college students were less likely than Asian American and European American students to believe that the American system is just (i.e., that individuals have status mobility, that hard work pays off, and that group differences in status are fair). Furthermore, the less that ethnic minority students believed that the system is just, the more likely they were to perceive both themselves personally, and members of their ethnic group, as experiencing discrimination.

**SUMMARY**

In sum, we propose that either devaluing the importance of a domain or discounting the diagnosticity of outcomes in a domain can lead to psychological disengagement from that domain. It is not necessary for both of these processes to occur simultaneously for a person to disengage his or her self-esteem from a
domain. It is possible, for example, for people to disengage their self-esteem from a domain but still value that domain and see it as important. This should be especially likely to occur when feedback is perceived as biased, unfair, uninformed, or nondiagnostic of ability or merit. Likewise, it is possible for people to disengage their self-esteem from feedback that is perceived as highly diagnostic, if the domain is not valued or central to the self-concept. Although we maintain that either devaluing or discounting can result in disengagement of self-esteem from a domain, it is possible that other processes also produce disengagement.

Recall that at the outset of this chapter we noted that although members of many stigmatized groups have levels of self-esteem equal to or higher than the nonstigmatized, this is not true of all groups. Furthermore, there is substantial within-group variability in levels of self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1994; see Quinn & Crocker, this volume). The analysis that we have presented here suggests the conditions under which individuals who are members of stigmatized groups will have lower self-esteem, and the conditions under which they will not. Stigmatized individuals who receive negative feedback and who believe that feedback is diagnostic of their attributes or abilities (i.e., who do not discount the feedback) are likely to incorporate that feedback into their own self-evaluations. This alone will not be sufficient to result in lowered self-esteem, however, unless these individuals also consider the domain to be highly important (i.e., do not devalue the domain). Individuals are psychologically engaged in a domain when they neither discount nor devalue negative feedback in that domain. These are the individuals who are most likely to be vulnerable to negative feedback, outcomes, and social devaluation within that domain. For example, the overweight woman who believes that her stigma (her weight) is under her own control, that her scale is accurate, and that social prescriptions to be thin are valid, may find it difficult to discount negative feedback and stereotypes associated with her stigma. Hence, rather than blame social rejection on prejudice and discrimination, she is likely to internalize it and blame it on herself (e.g., Amato, Crocker, & Major, 1995; Crandall, 1994; Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993; see Quinn & Crocker, this volume). If in addition, the larger cultural context within which she lives places a high value on physical appearance and thinness, she may find it difficult to devalue the importance of this domain. Consequently, she is vulnerable to low self-esteem.

**COPING WITH NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES THROUGH DISENGAGEMENT: THE CASE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS AND INTELLECTUAL ABILITY**

In this section we describe a set of studies we have conducted to test several hypotheses derivable from the theoretical framework presented above. These studies examine whether African American students are more likely to disengage their self-esteem from self-evaluative feedback received in the context of perfor-
mance on intellectual tests. African Americans in the United States experience racial bias, prejudice, discrimination, and relative disadvantage across a number of domains (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). The domain in which the racial devaluation of African Americans is perhaps most apparent, however, is that of intellectual ability. According to Steele (1992; 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) negative stereotypes about the intellectual abilities of African Americans are so conditioned in our culture, and so collectively known, that even those who are not strongly prejudiced, and even African Americans themselves, are aware of them. Thus, this context is a particularly appropriate one within which to examine disengagement processes.

There is substantial evidence that African American students, on average, are more likely to experience poor school-related outcomes (e.g., Steele, 1992; Graham, 1994), and to score more poorly on standardized tests of intellectual ability (Simmons, Brown, Bush, & Blyth, 1978), than do European American students. Academic success is a domain that is highly valued in the larger culture, and is, on average, highly predictive of important life outcomes such as standard of living and professional success. Thus, one might expect the self-esteem and academic self-concepts of African American students to be lower than that of European American students. Available research, however, suggests that the self-esteem and academic self-concepts of African Americans students typically is equal to or higher than that of European American students (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Graham, 1994; McCarthy & Yancey, 1971; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972). Furthermore, several authors have reported that the correlation between global self-esteem and measures of academic achievement, such as GPA and SAT scores, is lower among African American students than it is for European American students, especially if the students are doing poorly in school (e.g., Demo & Parker, 1987; Lay & Wakstein, 1985; Osborne, 1995; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972).

Our theoretical framework posits that this pattern of results can be explained by examining the extent to which African American students, as compared to European American students, hinge their self-esteem on their performance in academic and intellectual domains. Specifically, we suggest that African American students are more likely to psychologically disengage their self-esteem from evaluative feedback on intellectual tests than are European American students.

Recall that disengagement is proposed to be a coping strategy adopted in response to threats to the self, such as the presence of negative stereotypes about one's ability, poor personal performance, observed poor performance of a group with which one is highly identified, or perceptions of unfairness directed toward oneself or one's group. Consequently, African American students, especially if they are doing poorly in school, must contend with a double threat to their self-esteem. For these students, a poor academic performance not only creates the threat to personal esteem that all students doing poorly might experience, but also creates what Steele (1997) calls "stereotype threat," that is, anxiety that their poor performance will confirm the negative stereotype of the intellectual ability of their
group. We suggest that in response to the greater threats they face in the academic domain, African American students may be more likely than European American students to enact defensive strategies that help to disengage their self-esteem from this domain. This observation is similar to one made more than 20 years ago by Rosenberg and Simmons (1972) in trying to explain their finding of higher self-esteem among African American children despite poorer school performance. They hypothesized that the social environments that African American children find themselves in more easily permit them to mobilize psychological defenses that protect them against the negative esteem implications of performing poorly in school.

We suggest that disengagement of self-esteem from academic domains may occur via one or both of the two processes we have discussed above: (1) African American students may be more likely to devalue, or reduce the importance of, doing well on intellectual tasks than European American students, and/or (2) African American students may be more likely to discount feedback on intellectual tests, that is, perceive it as biased and not diagnostic of genuine intellectual ability.

Although a number of authors have speculated that African American students may be less achievement motivated, or place less value on education than European American students, results of empirical research on this issue are equivocal (see Graham, 1994, for a review). Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown (1992), for example, demonstrated that parents of African American school children place just as much value on education as do parents of European American school children. Furthermore, African American and European American high school students are similar in their endorsement of the belief that getting a good education will pay off. Steinberg and colleagues (1992) also found, however, that African American students are less likely than European American students to believe that bad consequences will follow from not getting a good education.

An alternative pathway by which African American students may disengage their self-esteem from evaluative feedback in academic contexts is by discounting the diagnosticity of that feedback. That is, they may regard their performances on tests, evaluations by teachers, or performances relative to other students as not especially diagnostic indicators of their actual ability level, especially if it is negative. Several experimental studies have observed that African Americans are more likely to overestimate their future performance, increase their expectancies of success following a failure experience, and report higher expectancies for future success following a success or failure than are European American students, leading some authors to conclude that African American students’ expectancies for success and self-conceptions of ability are “overly optimistic” in light of their objective performance (see Graham, 1994, for a review). This disconnection of self-appraisals from external evaluations may occur in part because African American students are aware of negative stereotypes about their intellectual abilities, and have experienced the prejudice and discrimination that accompany those stereotypes. As consequence, they may expect intellectual tests and performance
evaluations to be biased and unfair, and not a true indicator of ability, at least when race is salient.

In the following sections, we describe three studies that we have conducted to examine whether African American students are more likely than European American students to disengage their self-esteem from evaluative feedback received in the academic domain, and if so, the mechanisms through which this occurs.

STUDY 1

Our first study had three goals. First, we attempted to develop a measure of disengagement from intellectual tests and academic domains that assessed both devaluing and discounting processes. Second, we examined whether there are differences between African American and European American college students on this measure. Third, we examined the associations among academic performance, disengagement with intellectual tasks, and global self-esteem among African American and European American students. Based on the theoretical framework presented above, we hypothesized that African American students would score higher on a measure of disengagement of self-esteem from feedback on intellectual tests than European American students. We also examined whether this hypothesized greater disengagement among African American students results from a tendency for African American students to devalue the importance of academic excellence, or from a tendency for African American students to discount the diagnosticity of intellectual test scores as indicators of actual ability. Finally, we examined whether disengagement from evaluative feedback on intellectual tests predicted global self-esteem.

Method

One hundred and eighty-nine college students participated in this study, 129 of whom were European American, and 60 of whom were African American. Students completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to assess global, personal self-esteem, and completed a measure of intellectual engagement (described below). Students were also asked to provide us with their current college grade point average (GPA) and to give us permission to access their academic records, as a measure of performance in the intellectual domain. GPA was obtained for 125 European American students and 47 African American students.  

1Our measures were also administered to a sample of Asian American students. Asian Americans are in the interesting position of being a relatively high-status minority group. Their status as a socially devalued group, therefore, is ambiguous. For this reason, we do not discuss their data here.

2To maximize the number of participants retained in our sample we used students' actual grade point average obtained from their records, when possible. If we could not retrieve students' actual GPA, we used their reported grade point average, if given. Reported GPA was highly correlated with actual GPA (r = .87).
<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Discounting</strong> ($a = .81$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that standardized achievement tests are fair tests of my abilities.</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, I feel that standardized achievement tests are a good measure of my intelligence.</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most intelligence tests do not really measure what they are supposed to.</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that standardized achievement tests are definitely biased against me.</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Devaluing</strong> ($a = .66$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always feel good about myself when I do well on an academic test.</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being good at academics is an important part of who I am.</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing well on intellectual tasks is very important to me.</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I care a great deal about performing well on tests of my intellectual ability.</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>-.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It usually doesn’t matter to me one way or the other how I do in school.</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disengagement</strong> ($a = .62$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really don’t care what tests say about my intelligence.</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No intelligence test will ever change my opinion of how intelligent I am.</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How I do intellectually has little relation to who I really am.</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.50</td>
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(®) Refers to reverse-scored.

**Measuring Domain-Specific Disengagement**

To assess engagement in the intellectual or academic domain, students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with twelve statements about intellectual test performance (see Table 10.1). Each statement was rated on a scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). The 12 statements were designed to assess the extent to which students said it was important to them to do well on intellectual tests, believed that standardized intellectual tests were diagnostic of genuine intellectual ability, and more generally based their self-regard on how well they did on intellectual tests.

Maximum likelihood factor analysis of this scale yielded three factors with eigenvalues greater than one. The 12 items of the scale, along with their factor loadings, are presented in Table 10.1. Items were included in a factor if they loaded above .50 on that factor and did not load that highly on any other factor.
The first factor consisted of 5 items, and appeared to measure the extent to which students said that it was important or unimportant to them to do well in academics. We labeled this factor *Devaluing*. The second factor consisted of the four items assessing the extent to which students discounted the diagnosticity of standardized tests of intellectual ability. We labeled this factor *Discounting*. The third factor consisted of three items that appeared to closely reflect the extent to which students say that their feelings about themselves are independent of their performance on intelligence tests. We labeled this factor *Disengagement*.

**Comparisons by Ethnicity and GPA**

The second goal of this study was to compare the responses of high and low performing African American and European American students on our intellectual engagement measures. Recall that we predicted that African Americans would be more disengaged from the intellectual domain than European American students, and that this might be especially true if they were doing poorly in school. To test this hypothesis, we divided the sample into those with relatively high (>2.5) and those with relatively low (<2.5) grade point averages. This resulted in an N of 47 European Americans and 27 African Americans in the low GPA cells, and an N of 78 European Americans and 20 African Americans in the high GPA cells. We then performed a series of 2 (Ethnic Group: European American/African American) × 2 (GPA: High/Low) ANOVAS on each of the three disengagement subscales, as well as on self-esteem.

**Disengagement Measures**

Analyses of the three disengagement subscales revealed significant main effects for ethnicity and GPA on all subscales, and no significant interactions on any subscale. As expected, African American students scored significantly higher on the disengagement subscale (M = 5.06; SD = 1.22) than did European American students (M = 4.48; SD = 1.38); F(1, 168) = 4.52, p < .05. African American students also discounted the validity of intelligence tests significantly more (M = 4.91; SD = 1.44) than did European American students (M = 4.33, SD = 1.30); F(1, 168) = 9.20, p < .01. However, African American students devalued doing well in school significantly less (i.e., valued the domain more) (M = 1.99; SD = .75) than did European Americans (M = 2.23; SD = .89), F(1, 168) = 4.20, p < .05.

As might be expected, students with low GPAs (M = 4.92; SD = 1.37) reported higher levels of disengagement than did students with high GPAs (M = 4.43;)

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3Results of a one-way ANOVA on GPA indicated that African American students had significantly lower GPAs (M = 2.30) than did European American students (M = 2.67), F(1,171) = 11.82, p < .001. This difference was significant regardless of whether ethnic groups were compared on reported, actual, or the combined GPA measure. The median combined GPA for African American students was 2.35, whereas the median for European American students was 2.67. A GPA of 2.5 was selected as a cutoff to create a more balanced distribution of low and high GPA African American and European American students.

4Regression analyses yield similar results to the ANOVA. The latter is reported for ease of interpretation.
$SD = 1.32$; $F(1, 168) = 3.89, p = .05$, and said that doing well in the academic domain was significantly less important to them (devalued the domain more) ($M = 2.30; SD = .88$) than did students with high GPAs ($M = 2.06; SD = .83$; $F(1, 168) = 4.61, p < .05$). Students with high GPAs, however, also discounted the validity of intelligence tests more ($M = 4.67; SD = 1.22$) than did students with low GPAs ($M = 4.24; SD = 1.50$), $F(1, 168) = 7.12, p < .01$.

**Self-Esteem**

Analysis of global self-esteem revealed that African American students ($M = 6.01; SD = 1.06$) had higher global self-esteem than did European American students ($M = 5.64; SD = 1.07$), $F(1, 168) = 3.75, p = .05$. This main effect was qualified, however, by a significant interaction with GPA, $F(1, 168) = 5.32, p < .03$. Student-Newman-Keuls tests indicated that African American students doing poorly in school had significantly higher global self-esteem ($M = 6.29, SD = .83$) than did European American students doing poorly in school ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.10$), $(p < .05)$. However, there were no significant differences in global self-esteem between African American students ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.23$) and European American students ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.05$) who were doing well in school.

**Relations among Disengagement and Self-Esteem**

The third goal of this study was to examine the relationships among the disengagement processes, academic performance, and self-esteem. We predicted that the more students discounted the validity of intellectual tests, and/or the more they devalued the importance of academics, the more likely they would be to say that their self-esteem was disengaged from (not dependent upon) evaluative feedback they received in the academic domain. Furthermore, we predicted that the more disengaged students were from evaluative feedback in this domain, the higher their self-esteem would be, especially if they were doing poorly in school.

Pearson correlation coefficients revealed that the relationships among the three disengagement subscales were quite similar for African American and European American students. As predicted, higher levels of discounting ($r = .33, p < .01$) and higher levels of devaluing ($r = .31, p < .01$) were positively and significantly correlated with higher levels of disengagement. Discounting and devaluing were positively but not significantly correlated ($r = .11$).

We next examined the association between global self-esteem and disengagement, devaluing, and discounting scores overall, and separately among African American and European American students doing well (GPA > 2.5) vs. poorly (GPA < 2.5) in school. Both Pearson correlation coefficients and moderator regression analyses indicated that the relationships between the three disengagement subscales and global self-esteem did not differ significantly by ethnic group or by GPA. Overall, higher disengagement was significantly associated with higher global self-esteem ($r = .32, p < .01$), whereas neither discounting ($r = .02$) nor devaluing ($r = -.06$) was related to global self-esteem. Contrary to our expectations, the correlation between disengagement and self-esteem was not signific-
cantly higher for students who were doing poorly in school \((r = .43, p < .001)\) than it was for students who were doing well in school \((r = .23, p < .05), z = 1.44, p = .13\).

**Summary**

In sum, this study confirmed that discounting the validity of intellectual tests and devaluing the importance of doing well on intellectual tests are distinct psychological processes. Furthermore, as expected, both devaluing and discounting were significantly related to higher disengagement, and this was true for both ethnic groups. Only disengagement, however, was significantly related to global self-esteem. Thus, discounting and devaluing appeared to have indirect relationships with global self-esteem, whereas disengagement appeared to have a direct relationship with self-esteem.

We also observed the predicted differences between ethnic groups on our measures of discounting and disengagement. African American students were more likely to discount the validity of intellectual tests and say that their self-esteem did not depend on their performance on such tests than were European American students. Contrary to the devaluing hypothesis, however, African American students valued the academic domain more, not less, than European American students. Consistent with findings of other studies, African American students had higher global self-esteem than did European American students. However, the significant interaction observed between ethnicity and GPA revealed that this difference occurred only among students who were doing poorly in school. African American students doing poorly in school had higher self-esteem than did European American students doing poorly in school, whereas African American and European American students doing well in school did not differ in self-esteem.

Consistent with the idea that disengagement is a response to perceived threat in a given domain, students with low GPAs scored higher on the disengagement subscale than did students with high GPAs. Furthermore, the more students disengaged their self-appraisals from intellectual feedback, the higher their self-esteem. Although the difference between low and high GPA groups was not significant, this relationship between disengagement and self-esteem was somewhat stronger for students doing poorly in school than it was for students doing well in school. Perhaps students with “high” GPAs wish they had still higher GPAs, and so need to engage in the self-esteem protection that disengagement affords.

Because the correlational nature of this study precludes definitive statements about cause and effect, we conducted two experiments to test the hypothesis that disengagement of self-esteem from performance feedback is more likely to occur among African American students than among European American students. In addition, we examined whether disengagement is especially likely to occur when expectations of racial bias are triggered, or is a more chronic response of African American students in the context of intellectual tests. These two studies are described below.
STUDY 2

In our first experiment (Major et al., 1998, Experiment 1), African American and European American college students were given predetermined success or failure feedback on a supposed standardized test of intellectual ability by a European American experimenter. Prior to taking the test, half of the students were told that the test was known to be biased against certain racial and ethnic groups, whereas the other half were told that the test was culturally unbiased. A pretest measure of global trait self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and postfeedback measures of global trait self-esteem and performance state self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) were administered. In addition, students were asked to rate their performance on the test, and to rate the extent to which they felt that their performance on the test was affected by a biased test and disadvantages due to their race. In this study we operationalized disengagement as a relative nonresponsiveness of self-esteem to performance feedback. That is, we hypothesized that students who were disengaged from the intellectual domain would be less reactive to success and failure feedback on a supposed test of intellectual ability.

Based on the disengagement hypothesis, our first prediction was that the self-esteem of African American students would be less affected by negative and positive test score feedback than would that of European American students. That is, we predicted that European American students' performance self-esteem would be higher after success than after failure, whereas African American students' self-esteem would be less reactive to performance feedback. Our second prediction was that these differences in responsiveness of self-esteem to performance feedback would be especially apparent when the test was described as racially biased as opposed to culture fair. Our reasoning was that describing a test as racially biased against certain ethnic groups would be likely to prime negative stereotypes of racial abilities and anticipation of poor performance among African American students, but not among European American students. Furthermore, we reasoned that describing a test as racially biased would also be more likely to lead African American students, but not European American students, to discount the diagnosticity of performance feedback on that test. Either of these processes should result in African American students being more likely than African American students to disengage their self-esteem from performance feedback in the racially-biased condition than in the culture-fair condition.

Results were consistent with the disengagement hypothesis. Corrected for initial self-esteem, European American students' performance state self-esteem was more affected by feedback on the test (success or failure) than was that of African American students. Specifically, whereas European American students tended to have higher performance self-esteem following success than failure, African American students did not. European American students' perceptions of their performance also were more affected by the performance feedback they received than were those of African American students.

Contrary to our expectations, describing the test as racially biased or culture fair did not moderate the effect of performance feedback on European American
and African American students’ responses on the self-esteem measures. One interpretation of this surprising finding is that African American students already may have chronically disengaged their self-esteem from feedback on intelligence tests more than European American students. Consequently, regardless of whether we described the test as biased or not, their self-esteem would be less affected by performance feedback. This interpretation would be consistent with our finding, described in Study 1, that African American students score higher on a measure of chronic disengagement from feedback in the intellectual domain. A second interpretation of this finding is that our African American students may not have believed the culture-fair test description—they may have perceived the test, in both its biased and unbiased forms, as racially biased, and hence discounted its diagnosticity. This perception may have been buttressed by the presence of a European American evaluator. Consistent with this idea, African American students were more likely to attribute their performance (success or failure) to a biased test and to racial disadvantages than were European American students, regardless of how the test was described. A third explanation is that we caused African American students to temporarily disengage their self-esteem from their performance in both conditions simply by raising the issue of race and ethnic differences in performance in descriptions of both the biased and unbiased test conditions. Such an interpretation is consistent with Steele and Aronson’s (1995) finding that simply priming race can raise stereotype threat among African American college students taking a difficult test of intellectual ability. Our third experiment was designed to investigate these alternative explanations.

STUDY 3

In this experiment (Major et al., 1998, Experiment 2), African American and European American students again completed a supposed standardized test of intellectual ability and received bogus performance feedback on it. In this experiment, however, all participants received feedback that they had done poorly on the test. Prior to taking the test, half of the participants were told that the test might be biased against certain minority groups, whereas no mention was made of race or test bias to the other half of the participants. Participants also were pretested on the disengagement subscale of our Intellectual Engagement Inventory, described above, and scores on this measure were used to divide them into two groups of chronically intellectually engaged and chronically intellectually disengaged students. Pretest and postfeedback measures of self-esteem and postfeedback perceptions of the racial bias of the test were also assessed.

Our first hypothesis was that when the possibility of racial test bias was primed, African American students’ self-esteem would be less negatively affected by a poor performance on the test than would that of European American students. When race was not primed, however, we expected African American and European American students’ self-esteem to be similarly affected by negative performance feedback. Our second hypothesis was that the self-esteem of students
who are chronically disengaged from their performance in intellectual domains, as assessed by our disengagement subscale, would be less negatively affected by failure feedback on the test than would that of chronically engaged students.

Results were consistent with our first prediction. After receiving failure feedback, African American students’ self-esteem was higher if race had been primed than if it had not been primed, whereas European American students’ self-esteem was unaffected by the prime. African American students had higher self-esteem than did European American students if race had been primed, but lower self-esteem than did European American students if race had not been primed. Our second prediction also was supported, but only among African American students. Adjusted for initial self-esteem, African American students who scored high on the chronic disengagement premeasure had higher self-esteem after failure than did African American students who scored low on this premeasure. In contrast, scores on this premeasure had no effect on the self-esteem of European American students. Regardless of whether racial bias was primed or not, and regardless of level of chronic disengagement, however, African American students were more likely to perceive the test as biased against minorities, to report having an unfair racial disadvantage on the test, and to believe that nonminorities do better than minorities on the test.

Summary

Taken together, the results of these studies provide support for the idea that under certain circumstances, African American students are more likely than European American students to disengage their self-esteem from performance feedback received in intellectual testing situations. This disengagement is especially likely to occur, we believe, in situations in which either negative stereotypes, expectations of racial bias, or expectations of poor performance are primed, but may take on more chronic features as African Americans continually confront prejudice and discrimination in their environment. European American students, in contrast, who are not affected by the same negative stereotypes and social devaluation, are relatively unaffected by primes of racial bias and are more likely to remain engaged by intellectual tasks. Although we were unable in these studies to specify the mediational pathway by which disengagement occurs, we suspect that African American students are likely to believe that intellectual tests are biased against them, especially when racial bias is primed, and thus do not consider their performance on these tests to be a legitimate basis on which to evaluate their self-worth.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our goal in this chapter is to articulate the processes through which members of socially devalued groups disengage their global feelings of self-worth from external evaluations, feedback, and outcomes, and to present initial evidence in
support of this general process of disengagement. Several interesting issues deserve further mention and research.

**IS DISENGAGEMENT CHRONIC OR TEMPORARY?**

Psychological disengagement from a domain may be conceptualized as a relatively fixed aspect of a person's self-definition, or as a context-specific response to particular situations (Crocker et al., 1998). The former, "trait," conceptualization is consistent with the way that many self theorists, including James (1890/1950), Rosenberg (1986), Harter (1986), and Pelham and Swann (1989) conceptualized the process of defining, or redefining, the self, and is more consistent with Steele's (1992; 1997) concept of disidentification. The latter, "state," conceptualization of disengagement is consistent with more fluid views of the self (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987; Tesser, 1988) and research showing that individuals alter their self-definitions in response to the social environment (Markus & Kunda, 1986). It is likely that both forms of disengagement are demonstrated by members of stigmatized groups. The stigmatized may temporarily disengage their self-esteem from performance feedback in situations in which negative stereotypes are salient and poor outcomes are anticipated, and/or when feedback is suspected to be biased, unfair, or otherwise nondiagnostic of personal merit. Over time, repeated exposure to such situations may lead the stigmatized to chronically disengage, or disidentify, with those domains (see Crocker et al., 1998). Whether temporarily induced or chronically experienced, disengagement from a domain should reduce emotional reactivity to evaluations in that domain.

**DISENGAGEMENT AS A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE TO DISADVANTAGE**

Our discussion of disengagement and our own research has focused on individual-level reactions to negative stereotypes, feedback, and outcomes. We believe that disengagement can also evolve into a collective response to negative stereotypes, feedback, and outcomes. That is, socially devalued groups may develop a subcultural value structure that allows them to devalue and disengage from domains in which their group experiences prejudice and discrimination. Ogbu (1991) labels this phenomenon cultural inversion and describes it as occurring when a minority group develops norms against engaging in behaviors or holding beliefs that are characteristic of the dominant culture and instead places greater value on behaviors and beliefs that are uncharacteristic of the dominant culture. In ethnographic studies of African American teenagers, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) observed that African American students tend to define school success as "acting White" and not "African American" and thus are caught in a bind between performing well in school and being popular among their peers.

Interestingly, our data do not suggest that African Americans devalue success in the academic domain, a domain that is dominated and controlled largely by
European Americans, but may actually value academic success more than their European American counterparts. This finding must be interpreted with caution, however, because our sample consisted of African Americans college students, individuals who are likely to be invested in academic success. It is possible that this tendency for African Americans to value academic success more than European Americans would not generalize to the greater population.

Another way that members of socially devalued groups may collectively disengage from a given domain is by developing shared beliefs that discount the legitimacy of the status structure or the established system of reward allocations. Consistent with this idea, members of ethnic minority groups are less likely than are European American students to endorse ideologies that legitimate the system, such as the belief in individual mobility, the belief that hard work pays off, and the belief that group differences in outcomes are fair (Kleugel & Smith, 1986; Major et al., 1997).

IS DIENGAGEMENT ADAPTIVE?

Although we conceptualize disengagement as a response to perceived threats to the personal or collective self, this should not be construed as implying that we believe that disengagement is a pathological or nonnormative response. Rather, as James' (1890) quote indicates, disengagement of self-esteem from domains in which one does not perceive good prospects is a normal process of healthy identity maintenance that all individuals, regardless of stigmatized status, may adopt (see also Crocker et al., in press; Steele, 1992; 1997). Because the stigmatized face discrimination, prejudice, and objective disadvantage in domains that are negatively affected by their stigma, disengagement of self-esteem from feedback received in those domains is likely to be a highly appropriate and highly effective coping strategy. Both Crocker and Major (1989) and Steele (1992; 1997), however, have noted that disidentification from a domain, may over time, reduce motivation to achieve in that domain. Thus, disengagement can have costs: the stigmatized may protect their self-esteem by disengaging from domains in which they are targets of negative stereotypes and social devaluation, but pay for this protection through its negative impact on their motivation to achieve in those very domains. If these domains are not ones that are highly valued by the wider social context, or are very limited in their scope (such as James' ignorance of Greek), disengagement is unlikely to have maladaptive consequences. If success in the domain is highly central to important life outcomes, however, the price tag of disengagement can be steep.

REFERENCES


