Expectancy Value Theory:

Racializing Values in Motivation Theory Using Racial Opportunity Cost

Chris Seals
Michigan State University

Abstract

Expectancy value theory (EVT) of motivation is used to better understand student cognitive processes and achievement. The theory has expanded to be more inclusive of various motivational experiences since its origin in 1964 by John Atkinson. However, the work can be further expanded to examine how EVT can better conceptualize achievement behavior for underrepresented students. Racial opportunity cost (ROC; Chambers et al., 2014) has similarities that overlap with EVT, but uses constructs having to do with racism to define the student experience. In this conceptual paper, I used those same constructs to redefine the four value types of EVT. This exposes the gap, in theory, by using constructs from ROC to nuance values so they can be applied directly to the educational experience of underrepresented and urban students. This paper shows that racializing the motivational experience of underrepresented students is complex and influences all elements within the EVT model.

Keywords: expectancy value theory, motivation

Introduction

Human behavior is impacted by many factors. Some factors include where you are from or what groups you identify with, and even when those factors are shared between two people, it's only human for those two people to still have varying behaviors. In the field of education, there are several major theories of motivation that are used in research to evaluate and interpret student motivations and behaviors, and these theories have vastly different approaches concerning the explanation of behavior and the inner mechanisms of human decision making. Some of these theories in motivation include attribution theory, ability beliefs, achievement goal theory, self-determination theory, and expectancy value theory. The use of these theories has been both effective and successful in the research community, but with a racial academic achievement gap that still looms over our education system (Becker & Luthar, 2002), it brings to question how effective these theories have been when studying underrepresented students of color.

To discuss how students of color fit or do not fit into every theory in motivation would be too dire of a task for this paper. While the use of different motivation theories is dynamic in evaluating and understanding behaviors of students from all backgrounds, there are, however, nuanced elements of the underrepresented student groups' experience that are not fully considered when studying the motivation of these populations. The purpose of this paper is to expand Expectancy Value Theory (EVT), so that it can be directly used to analyze the experience of underrepresented students of color in educational settings. In this paper, I first discuss the basic background of both EVT and Racial Opportunity Cost (ROC) by Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler (2014), and how I came to bring these two theories together. Next, I use the theoretical model of ROC to reframe the four subjective value types of EVT. I go on to share how racially nuanced value types can be developed in research and practice.

The broader goal of this paper is to blatantly use the lens of underrepresented students of color to broaden the implications of EVT. Using this reframed theory could be very effective in understanding the educational needs of K12 & higher education students who are not in the dominant or White ethnic group, therefore, helping educators better serve urban and underrepresented students.

Linking Motivation to the Racial Experience

Expectancy value theory (EVT) is a theory of motivation, where John Atkinson (1964) described variables that linearly produce one's behavior or motivation. EVT includes two variables that produce one's behavior (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). *Expectancy* is the first variable, which is described as the belief about how well you can do on an upcoming task (Wigfield & Ecclees, 2000), and the second variable, *value,* is the person's desire for accomplishment in a task or the importance of achieving the task.

When EVT was created, social and cultural aspects were not taken into consideration (Parsons & Goff, 1978), therefore the oppressions, views, and needs of underrepresented students of color are not theoretically integrated within expectancy value theory. The value component of EVT, however, has been studied more in-depth since the theory originated. Wigfield and Eccles (2000) discuss four types of task values, including (a) *cost beliefs* (effort cost), the perceived negative consequence of engaging in an activity, (b) *utility value,* the perceived future usefulness, (c) *attainment value,* the perceived importance in completing a task, and (d) *intrinsic value,* the enjoyment someone has from an activity or their overall interest in the subject (Trautwein, 2012).

Perez, Cromley, and Kaplan (2014) encouraged more research about the role of cost beliefs in motivation and they used academic identity to understand motivation. My interests lead me to read about racial opportunity cost (ROC) which explores the consequences that

students of color face to pursue educational success in a predominantly White normed school structure (Chambers, et al. 2014). Throughout my read, I noticed that the authors of ROC do not label themselves as motivation researchers but were using ethnic/racial identity to explain the behavior of students, instead of using academic identity, like Perez et al. (2014).

Chamber et al. (2014) inspired me to take a second look at EVT and compare ROC specifically to the concept of cost beliefs. Though cost beliefs consider the negative consequences of engaging in an act, it does not share the racialized lens and nuanced framework that supports ROC (see Table 1). Wigfield, Tonks & Eccles (2004) suggests that more work must be done on the value constructs of EVT, so they can be developed for use in different cultures. In summary, the focus of this paper is to reframe the value component of expectancy value theory so that specific needs and challenges that underrepresented students face will be considered when using EVT to assess and view their academic experiences.

Table 1

Comparing EVT to ROC

	EVT	ROC
Is a theory	✔	✔
Used to discuss and understand the behaviors & experiences of students in an educational setting.	✔	✔
Used on all student populations	✔	
Originally normed from dominantly White student group population	✔	
Created for students of color		✔
Considers values of students	✔	✔
Directly addresses expectancy of students	✔	
Directly addresses needs and experiences of students of color		✔
Used for students of all grade levels	✔	
Used for college level students		✔
Used as measurements/scales in research	✔	

Racially Nuancing the Values of EVT

Racial opportunity cost especially focuses on the relationship between student and his/her school climate and culture while specifically exploring the price African American and Latino students pay to pursue educational success in a predominantly White normed school structure (Chambers et al., 2014). ROC is effective at detailing the experience of the underrepresented student because it is derived from four assertions that provide it with a racially sensitive detailed lens. The four assertions can be summarized as (a) the expectations that the dominant society places on a person of color conflicting with expectations from their own racial/ethnic community, (b) intersectionality, which is the crossroads of one's identity so that the student is not only using one's race to describe their identity, (c) academic persistence in relationship to the school climate and elements outside of the classroom that impact students' success, and (d) mental and emotional bearing that students of color carry when having to navigate a white middle class normed education system.

Next in this paper, I use this framework of ROC to racially nuance the four value types of EVT. Racially nuanced values do not lose meaning or purpose from their original meaning, they rather broaden their scope to include aspects suggested by the ROC theory.

Cost Beliefs

"Cost refers to what an individual has to give up to do a task" (Wigfield et al., 2004, p. 172). As mentioned before, ROC explores the price that students pay to pursue educational success. Despite being the concept that directly links EVT to ROC, cost beliefs only loosely consider all the racialized costs that play a role when an underrepresented student of color is pursuing an academic goal in a White normed education system.

The four assertions of ROC give emphasis to oppression, racial identity, stereotypes, and the mental/emotional impact of these factors, which shall be

emphasized in EVT. When considering cost beliefs of an underrepresented student, the values of his/her racial subculture, culture of minority racial/ethnic group, may clash with the values of the White normed education system. A clash in values between two systems (i.e. school, community, family) may put the student in a position where they have to make a choice of which value system to ascribe. Making a choice however means that the student may be abandoning the other value system that they are apart of. Leaving one value system behind comes with a consequence, and this is not always fully considered in the study of cost beliefs.

Examples of students who suffered from the described consequence is highlighted in the study by Chambers, et al. (2014), where the authors interviewed 18 African American and Latino high achieving students. Many of those students discussed the difficulty of taking high-level courses because they were one of very few students of their race who were taking honors courses. They reported feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging, which harm intellectual achievement (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and perception of wellbeing, playing a serious role in the education of the student. The students from the study by Chambers et al. (2014) are living with the consequence and paying the cost of educational success. This type of racialized cost must be considered in the study of cost beliefs, showing that day-to-day decisions that are influenced by a student's perception of cost value can be rooted in much deeper racial phenomena.

I used the previous example to illustrate how complex cost beliefs can be for a student of color. There is, however, more to consider when analyzing the cost beliefs of an underrepresented student. The intersectionality, or multiple endorsed identity groups, makes an experience convoluted. A student could be juggling the value systems of more than two groups making the costs potentially higher, if forced to choose between groups. This alone could impact behavior and decision-making. The same can be said about the external and the school

environments, which also socialize the underrepresented student in a way that endorses choices

that may not be analogous to White normed educational success. Finally, there is a mental and

emotional impact that a student feels because of managing these mentioned factors. The cost

seems to compound because of these additional racialized factors, and it comes with

psychological strain on the student.

Prior to reading the remaining racialized values, it is important to view Figure 1. Figure

1 represents EVT in a model that illustrates the inner working mental process of a student

regarding making and acting on a choice. Cost beliefs, attainment value, and utility value are

under the *subjective task value* component of the EVT model, so there are many items that are

considered before the student assesses the value of the task. Some of those items include

student's perceptions, cultural environment, student's aptitude, and more. This means that

these items influence how a person values a task or task goal. Though these components are

part of the model, the racially oppressed experience of a student cannot simply fall into one of

the boxes in Figure 1. Instead, that experience starts with *cultural milieu* and circulates

throughout the entire EVT model.

Figure 1.

Expectancy Value Theory Model
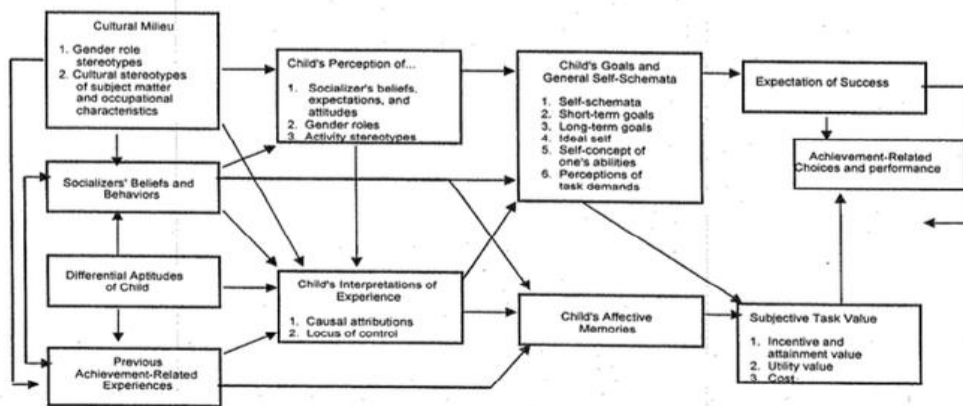
Note: (Wigfield et al., 2004, p. 170)

Cultural milieu of the EVT model (see Figure 1) refers to social environment including stereotypes, gender roles, and characteristics that are shared and perpetuated by the culture and by structured institutions (i.e. government, religion, school). Cultural milieu influences every component in the model, directly and indirectly, and is where cultural beliefs are shared and cultural norms are practiced. The racialized lens begins here, because race is embedded in the structures and discourses that guide daily practices (Taylor, 1999). This racialized cultural milieu then influences the *socializers' beliefs and behaviors*, the *previous related experiences of the student*, and the *student's perception of* the social world around him/her and their place in that world (i.e. gender roles, stereotypes). Within these four components of the model, the student is impacted by (a) their racial identity, along with other intersectional identities (b) the differences in their racial subculture versus the dominant culture and, (c) socializers in those settings, prior to determining value. Specifically, the racially influenced components impact the *subjective task values* and *expectations of success*, which directly impact *achievement related choices* of the student, within the EVT model (Figure 1).

Utility

"Utility value or usefulness, refers to how a task fits into an individual's future plans" (Wigfield et al., 2004, p. 171). Utility value is often a means to an end, so a student may choose to not invest in their chemistry work if they do not see how it relates to their future career or hobbies. Fordham & Ogbu (1986) discussed African American students who perceive limited future job opportunities and lack academic motivation as a result. This is an example of low utility value that guides us to question why an underrepresented student of color may perceive low usefulness of school success. When studying utility value one must explore the purpose of schooling from the point of view of the student. Intersectionality could play a strong role in determining the use of a task when race, gender, socioeconomic status, or age is taken

63

into consideration. A low SES student may have a different immediate usefulness for mathematics compared to his/her affluent counterpart. Or since African American students face stereotype threat in academic settings (Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia & Cohen, 2012), they may evaluate the usefulness of STEM related courses differently than their White counterparts. Both are examples of the importance of identity and culture when determining utility value. Lastly, Wigfield et al. (2004) make the point that utility value ties to a student's personal goals and views of self. Ethnic racial identity is connected to how a person views self and the world around him/her (Lee, 2014). Wigfield et al. (2004) discuss how a person who lives in a collectivist culture may look at usefulness in a way that helps the community. Racial minority students may also look at usefulness in a different way, but instead, usefulness may be perceived as something that could be a protectant in a stereotypically threatening environment (i.e. school).

Attainment

Attainment value is the "importance of doing well on a given task" (Wigfield et al., 2004, p. 171). Wigfield, et al. (2004) go further to say that attainment value incorporates identity issues and that tasks are important when people include them within their own definition of self. Similarly, Steele (1997) asserts that to sustain academic success, a student's schooling must be part of their self-definition. Maintaining school as part of your self-definition, however, can be difficult for a student who faces stereotype threat in their school environment. Attempting to be productive in an academic environment that promotes negative stereotypes can lead to disidentification, which is a "reconceptualization of the self and of one's values to remove the domain as a self-identity, as a basis of self-evaluation" (Steele, 1997, p. 614). Disidentification is a protective factor that one uses to maintain their self-concept. Cook, et al. (2012) found that self-concept has an important impact on student achievement and values when facing stereotype threat. Therefore, a student that is struggling to identify with a threatening activity

can begin to disidentify with that threatening activity or domain. The separation that a student experiences allows them to maintain their positive view of self all while lessening the importance of the activity, which means that they would be assigning a low attainment value to that activity.

Wigfield et al. (2004) described that people within a culture "internalize the culturally proscribed identity components" (p. 189) and will place a high importance on items that are consistent with their identity groups. Those items could include career, sports, music, school, etc. This however, could serve to be a complex phenomenon when an underrepresented student identifies with more than one culture or if the student identifies with a culture that has a separate value system than that of his/her school culture. Similar to what was discussed in previous sections, these factors are important when putting a racial lens on how a student determines the attainment value of a task.

Intrinsic

"Intrinsic value is the enjoyment one gains from doing the task" (Wigfield et al., 2004, p. 171) and is like interest. The meaning of a goal is culturally influenced (Ryan & Deci, 2000) so in the case of education, an underrepresented student could lack interest in specific subject matter if their culture or immediate community does not endorse it.

When considering intrinsic value with a racial lens, stereotype threat can play a role. Being in an environment that excessively promotes negative stereotypes creates an environmental threat (Steele, 1997), and that can negatively impact a student's sense of belonging over time (Walton & Cohen, 2007). If a student feels that they do not have autonomy, relatedness, or competence in a task, then they often lack enjoyment in the task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As unsatisfying and threatening experiences compound, students can associate discrimination, feelings of isolation, and lack of enjoyment to a given threatening task or

domain. Moreover, these negative feelings could easily become the representation of the activity and create a lack of interest and perhaps create disdain toward an activity. When the activity is schooling or school related, then one must consider the long-term effects that have created the disinterest and not just assume that all students in one subcultural group are naturally turned off by schooling. Furthermore, one must consider that the subculture did not, by choice, become a breeding ground for disliking that activity, but that the dominant culture has influenced the shaping of the subculture.

After applying a racial lens to the four value components, it is important to revisit Figure 1. ROC includes and highlights the psychological state of the student after choosing to pursue educational goals (strain of costs). The authors of ROC then emphasize how the perceived costs impact school and environmental factors, while environmental and school factors are impacting ROC, synchronously. When racializing the values of EVT it's important to use the same cyclical pattern. This would create a new component within the EVT model, named *social psychological impact of choice and performance*, emphasizing the immediate trauma that an underrepresented student deals with. This new component, within the model, receives an arrow only from *achievement related choices*, and sends one arrow to *cultural milieu*. This highlights the circle like pattern of a racial experience and shows that a racialized experience cannot be shoved into one component (or box) of the EVT model, but that it is represented throughout the entire theory.

Racially Nuanced Values for Practice & Research

For future studies, I would model the qualitative study that was done by Chambers et al., (2014) when ROC was developed. By interviewing a group of underrepresented students, I can use these data to help validate this reframing of EVT and to build items to place on instruments and surveys when measuring value. Additionally, I would adapt value questions from

previously validated value scales so that they better fit the experience of the underrepresented student for future research measurements.

Racializing the values of EVT is useful for expanding and nuancing a well-used theory of motivation, but it especially has practical implications. If researchers and educators can use this reframing to better understand underrepresented student needs, this could, in turn, help educators identify targets for intervention efforts in schools. This would be especially effective in urban school environments where underrepresented students represent most of the population.

Conclusion

When I racialized the values of EVT, I used the theory of ROC to nuance the model in a way that can change how EVT is used for underrepresented students. The questions that were always considered when determining the value assessing process for students were: How does that student identify? How many identity groups does that student ascribe to? What is the culture of these identity groups? Do these various cultures have conflicting value systems? Do these value systems conflict with the values of the White normed education system? What messages are the school and the external environment sending to the student because of their subscribed cultural groups? Finally, what is the mental/emotional impact on the student when having to process all of these questions and answers prior to placing value on a task? Moreover, these questions were all inspired by the framework and assertions of ROC.

EVT is dynamic and can be applied to student behavior across numerous circumstances. However, the same constructs used to create ROC have been used to reframe the value types of EVT so that it is theoretically equipped to address motivation of Black, Brown, and underrepresented students. During the reframing process of the value types, the common theme was that no student experience was as simple as changing a few words in a theory to reflect

their racialized experience. Like the chapter by Wigfield, et al. (2004), I endorsed an emic

approach, assuming expectancies and values may have a different meaning to students from

underrepresented backgrounds, which opens up the use of EVT, and allows EVT to be more

ethnically accurate in addressing the academic motivational needs of students.

References

Atkinson, J. W. (1964). *An introduction to motivation*. Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand.

Becker, B. E., & Luthar, S. S. (2002). Social–emotional factors affecting achievement outcomes among disadvantaged students: Closing the achievement gap. *Educational Psychologist, 37,* 197–214.

Cook, J. E., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., & Cohen, G. L. (2012). Chronic threat and contingent belonging: protective benefits of values affirmation on identity development. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102,* 479-496.

Fordham, S. & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students school success: Coping with "the burden of 'acting white.'" *The Urban Review*, 18, 176206.

Lee, R., Rivas-Drake, D., Syed, M., Umaña-Taylor, A., Markstrom, C., French, S., & Schwartz, S. J. (2014). Feeling good, happy, and proud: A meta-analysis of positive ethnic-racial affect and adjustment. *Child Development, 85* (1), 77-102.

Parsons, J. E., & Goff, S. B. (1978). Achievement motivation: A dual modality. *Educational Psychologist, 13*, 93-96.

Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and wellbeing. *American Psychologist, 55,* 68-78.

Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*, 613-629.

Taylor, E. (1999). Critical race theory and interest convergence in the desegregation of higher education. In L. Parker, D. Deyhle, & S. Villenas (Eds.), *Race is... race isn't: Critical race theory and qualitative studies in education* (pp. 181204). Boulder, CO: Westview.

Trautwein, U., Marsh, H. W., Nagengast, B., Lüdtke, O., Nagy, G., Jonkmann, K. (2012). Probing for the multiplicative term in modern expectancy–value theory: A latent interaction modeling study. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 104,* 763-777.

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92,* 82–96.

Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25,* 65-81.

Wigfield, A., Tonks, S., & Eccles, J. S. (2004). Expectancy value theory in cross-cultural perspective. *Big theories revisited*, *4*, 165.

Chris Seals is a doctoral student in Educational Psychology Research Assistant & Teacher Assistant at Michigan State University. His research interests include motivational aspects in learning and achieving, specifically for students of color. Recently, he has focused on social psychological interventions, based on self-affirmation theory, particularly studying how the mechanisms of student belongingness and student view of ability (fixed versus growth) impact students' achievement.