Daphna Oyserman, Ph.D.
Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248, USA
Phone +1.734.647.7622
Daphna.Oyserman@umich.edu
http://sitemaker.umich.edu/daphna.oyserman

Daphna Oyserman is a social scientist at the University of Michigan, where she holds appointments as Professor of Psychology, Edwin J. Thomas Collegiate Professor of Social Work, and Research Professor in the Institute for Social Research. She was recently a fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences (2009-2010); other honors include a W.T. Grant Faculty Scholar Award, the Humboldt Scientific Contribution Prize of the German Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, two “Best Research Paper” awards from the Society for Social Work Research, and Fellow status in the American Psychological Association, Association for Psychological Science, Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and Society for Experimental Social Psychology. Following her 1987 PhD at the University of Michigan, she held faculty appointments at a number of universities before returning to the University of Michigan.

Oyserman examines how small changes in context can shift mindsets, and so, the perceived meaning of behaviors and situations, with large downstream effects on important and consequential outcomes, including health and academic performance. Her theoretical and experimental work conceptualizes the underlying processes, which she then translates into real-world interventions. One line of work focuses on cultural differences in affect, behavior, and cognition – how people feel, act, and think about themselves and the world around them. A related second line of work focuses on racial, ethnic, and social class gaps in school achievement and health. Throughout, she examines how apparently “fixed” differences between groups may in fact mask highly malleable situated processes that can be profoundly influenced through small interventions that shift mindset.

In her culture work, she first documented large between country differences in cognitive processes in a comprehensive meta-analysis (Oyserman et al., 2002). While these differences mapped onto cross-national and cross-regional differences in individualism and collectivism, her subsequent work challenged the assumption that people need to be socialized within a culture to acquire its cognitive style. She argued that every society needs to socialize its members for independence (individualism) as well as interdependence (collectivism), making it likely that all people have command of the cognitive procedures that support these approaches to the world. If so, their performance on tasks that show large cross-country differences should be easily shifted by situational influences that activate an individualistic or a collectivistic mindset. A series of experimental studies (Oyserman et al., 2009, see also Oyserman & Lee, 2008) confirmed this prediction. Something as minor as circling the pronouns “I” or “mine” vs. “we” or “ours” is sufficient to trigger the associated individualistic vs. collectivistic mindsets and to eliminate cross-country differences in cognitive performance, making temporarily “collectivist” Americans, Germans and Norwegians perform like typical Chinese or Koreans, and temporarily “individualistic” Chinese and Koreans like typical Westerners. Both mindsets can be useful and can enhance or impair performance, depending on the specific characteristics of the task at hand. However, once a mindset is situationally triggered, it will be used, even if it is suboptimal for the task. The resulting shifts in performance are large, including 10-15% shifts up and down on SAT tasks.
Oyserman uses the same approach to illuminate how mindsets contribute to the health and achievement gaps. Children want to do well in school and attend college, but their actual attainment often lags behind their aspirations. This aspiration-attainment gap is a problem both for the children themselves and for society at large and affects some groups (e.g., boys, low income children, African American and Latino children) more than others. Macro-level as well as micro-level processes contribute to its emergence. From a macro-level perspective, the aspiration-attainment gap is a function of social structural differences that are relatively impossible to change without large-scale, long term and financially intensive intervention to change children’s opportunity structures. However, a number of studies suggest that the social structural factors influence the aspiration-achievement gap, in part, through their influence on children’s perceptions of what is possible for them, and people like them, in the future. Accordingly, interventions that focus on this macro-micro interface can help children overcome the constraints imposed by social structural variables (see Oyserman et al. 2006).

Oyserman’s theory of identity-based motivation (IBM, Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b) conceptualizes the underlying processes and guides the development of interventions that have been tested in experiments as well as randomized trials in public schools in Detroit and its environs as well as Chicago, with some studies also conducted in other sites in the U.S. as well as Israel and France. The IBM model assumes that identity is multifaceted and dynamically constructed in context. People interpret situations in ways that are congruent with their currently active identity and prefer identity-congruent actions over identity-incongruent ones. Future self goals such as school may or may not be salient in the moment: when cued to see the future self as congruent with the current self, students are more likely to take action to attain their goals. Felt congruence also influences the interpretation of any difficulties students encounter: when the behavior is identity congruent, experienced difficulty highlights that it is important and meaningful; when the behavior is identity incongruent, the same difficulty suggests that it is pointless and “not for people like me.” These perceptions have important downstream effects on important behaviors including in-class disruptions vs. engagement, time spent on homework, standardized test scores and grades in school.

Findings from experiments and randomized trials she conducted with her students illustrate the dynamic construction of identity and its influence on how people make sense of the world around them. As theoretically expected, feeling that school success is identity-congruent fosters behaviors that can reduce the aspiration-achievement gap, highlighting the promise of small interventions to improve the lives of at-risk children.

For example, one set of experiments manipulated whether children thought of their future as adults as close or distant in time. Children as young as eight worked harder on their classwork when their adult future seemed to start soon. In other studies, some low income African American middle school children were randomly assigned to questions that induced them to see their adult future as education-dependent (i.e., depending on how far they would go in school) rather than education-independent (e.g., depending on other factors such as athletic or other skills and talents). The former children were nearly eight times more likely to hand in extra-credit homework on the following day. Based on experimental findings of this type, Oyserman developed a brief intervention (10 sessions of 45 minutes each during weekly elective periods), which was implemented in Detroit schools as a randomized trial. Children participated during the first grading period of eights grade and their academic performance was tracked across eighth and ninth grade (Oyserman et al., 2006). Children assigned to the IBM intervention attained better standardized test scores, better school grades, skipped less, and were more actively engaged in the classroom. Moreover, the effects of the middle school intervention were long lasting and increased in size as children transferred to high school, indicating that improved
performance is self-reinforcing. As theoretically predicted, changes in behavior, grades and test scores were mediated by changes in the salience of education in children’s future identities.

This perspective can be applied to other aspiration gaps, including the gap between aspirations for health and everyday behavior (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). It can also be used to make sense of how social structures get under the skin to influence health disparities (Oyserman, Smith, & Elmore, in press).

Readings are available at: http://sitemaker.umich.edu/daphna.oyserman

Selected recent publications: