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# ETHNIC GROUP DIFFERENCES IN LAY PHILOSOPHIES OF BEHAVIOR IN THE UNITED STATES

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This study tested whether national representative samples of Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites in the United States varied in their endorsements of dispositionist, situationist, and interactionist lay philosophies of behavior. Results were generally inconsistent with a lay philosophy of behavior account for ethnic differences in attribution tendencies. Specifically, Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics more strongly endorsed a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior than did Whites. The only other ethnic group difference the authors found was that Blacks endorsed a situationist lay philosophy of behavior more strongly than did Whites. Endorsements of an interactionist lay philosophy did not differ across ethnic groups. Results also revealed that age, income, and education had more consistent and sometimes larger effects than ethnic category on endorsement of different lay philosophies of behavior. Implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** lay philosophies; ethnicity; race; attribution

**A major focus of social psychological research** is understanding how people explain others' behavior. One especially productive subcategory of this research program finds that people often attribute behavior to dispositional rather than situational causes, a phenomenon known as lay dispositionism, dispositional bias, correspondence bias, or the fundamental attribution error (e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Heider, 1958; Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). For many years, social psychologists assumed that lay dispositionism was a fundamental (i.e., universal) feature of social perception. However, more recent research has found that cultural and ethnic groups differ in their tendencies to make dispositional and situational inferences (for a review, see Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). For example, people in Western cultures tend to provide dispositional whereas people in Eastern cultures tend to provide situational explanations for behaviors (Miller, 1984). Moreover, a few studies suggest that attribution tendencies also differ as a function of ethnic group within the United States. Specifically, Whites are more likely than Hispanics to make dispositional inferences (Newman, 1991; Zárate, Uleman, & Voils, 2001). In sum, cultural and ethnic groups are differently likely to explain behavior in terms of underlying dispositional or situational causes, and White Americans appear to be especially likely to make dispositional attributions.

Some accounts of differences in attribution tendencies proceed from the assumption that attribution is a top-down process driven by the application of implicit theories about behavior

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(Heider, 1958; Kelly, 1955; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Related research has identified traitlike dimensions that predict group differences in the tendency to attribute behavior to dispositions or situations. According to one view, differences in attribution tendencies are related to ethnic group differences in lay philosophies of behavior, or implicit theories of causality that speak to whether behavior is viewed as fixed and trait based or dynamic and situation based (Nisbett, 2003).

A body of research supports the idea that lay philosophies of behavior guide people's understanding of others' behavior (e.g., Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Knowles, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 2001) and that a relationship between lay philosophies of behavior and attributions exists in multiple cultures (Chiu et al., 1997, Study 4; Knowles et al., 2001; Norenzayan, Choi & Nisbett, 2002). Although some research has investigated East-West cultural group differences in lay philosophies of behavior, no research to date has explored how lay philosophies of behavior differ across ethnic groups within the United States. If group differences in lay philosophies of behavior cause group differences in attribution, then groups should differ in the extent that they endorse different lay philosophies of behavior. In particular, Whites should be especially likely to endorse a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior because they seem more likely than other groups to make dispositional attributions.

A second unexplored issue related to lay philosophies of behavior is that past research has been limited to convenience samples, typically college students. As Sears (1986) pointed out, college students differ from the general population both psychologically and demographically. Therefore, it is unclear how well previous work on lay philosophies of behavior generalizes to explain how the mass public thinks and behaves and whether or how demographic differences other than culture or ethnicity might contribute to group differences in lay philosophies of behavior.

The goals of this study were therefore to (a) explore whether self-identified Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites in the United States differently endorse dispositionist, situationist, or interactionist lay philosophies of behavior; (b) test hypotheses with national probability samples of these different ethnic groups; and (c) evaluate the effects of age, level of education, and income, and the effects of ethnic group when controlling for age, level of education, and income on people's endorsements of different lay philosophies of behavior.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

The study sample was drawn from a panel of respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks (KN).<sup>1</sup> Using a multilevel-sampling design, we collected data from a national random sample ( $n = 763$  out of 1,000 invited to participate) and oversamples of self-identified Asian, Black, and Hispanic KN adult panel members (respective  $n$ 's = 280, 292, and 290 out of 400 each who were invited to participate). Asian, Black, and Hispanic respondents from the national sample were added to our oversamples of these groups to yield total samples of Asian ( $n = 309$ ), Black ( $n = 368$ ), and Hispanic ( $n = 335$ ) respondents that could be compared to the White respondents from the national sample ( $n = 553$ ).<sup>2</sup> Respondents who did not classify themselves as Asian, Black, Hispanic, or White were excluded from analyses.<sup>3</sup> Cooperation rates did not vary significantly across samples, and nonrespondents were not different in demographic makeup from those who responded to the invitation to participate in the study.

## MEASURES

*Lay philosophies of behavior.* As part of a larger survey, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with statements that reflected dispositionist, situationist, or interactionist lay philosophies of behavior, using the slightly abbreviated descriptions of the lay philosophies of behavior used by Norenzayan et al. (2002).

The dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior stated,

How people behave is mostly determined by their personality. One's behavior is remarkably stable across time and consistent across situations because it is guided by personality. Therefore, if we know the personality of a person, we can easily predict how the person will behave in the future and explain why that person behaved a particular way in the past.

The situationist lay philosophy of behavior stated,

How people behave is mostly determined by the situation in which they find themselves. Often, people in a particular situation behave very similarly despite large individual differences in personality. Therefore, to predict and explain one's behavior, we have to focus on the situation rather than personality.

The interactionist lay philosophy of behavior stated,

How people behave is always jointly determined by their personality and the situation in which they find themselves. Therefore we cannot predict and explain how someone will behave by personality or situation alone. To predict behavior, one has to know something about both the situation and the person's personality.

Order of presentation of the lay philosophies of behavior was randomized across participants. Participants read each statement and were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each view of why people behave as they do on  $-3$  to  $+3$  scales with point labels of *strongly disagree*, *moderately disagree*, *slightly disagree*, *neither agree or disagree*, *slightly agree*, *moderately agree*, *strongly agree*.

*Demographic measures.* KN surveys their panelists for background demographic information when they join the KN panel. In addition to using profile information about self-reported ethnic group membership to guide sampling, we also had other profile information available to us about participants, including gender, age, level of education, and total household income. Gender was coded so that high values represented females. Level of education and income were measured using the same scale intervals used in the General Social Survey. More specifically, education was measured on a 9-point scale, and total household income was measured on a 17-point scale.

## RESULTS

The results section is organized into two major subsections. The first subsection reports bivariate relationships between various demographic variables and endorsements of lay philosophies of behavior. In addition to finding some evidence of ethnic group differences in endorsements of lay philosophies of behavior, we found that age, level of education, and income were related to endorsements of lay philosophies of behavior and also varied as a

function of ethnic group. Therefore, the second subsection reports multivariate analyses that were conducted to gain a better understanding of the unique effect of ethnic group membership on endorsements of lay philosophies of behavior.

#### WHAT PREDICTS ENDORSEMENTS OF LAY PHILOSOPHIES OF BEHAVIOR? THE BIVARIATE APPROACH

We first investigated the relationships between dummy variables that represented ethnicity, age, level of education, income, and agreement with lay philosophies of behavior. As can be seen in Table 1, several important results emerged. First, ethnic group memberships were related to agreement with dispositionist and situationist lay philosophies of behavior. Specifically, Blacks more strongly endorsed a situationist lay philosophy of behavior than other groups. In addition, Hispanics endorsed both dispositionist and situationist lay philosophies of behavior more strongly than other groups. Second, age, level of education, and income were related to agreement with dispositionist and situationist lay philosophies of behavior. Specifically, greater age and less education were associated with stronger agreement with a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior. Less education and smaller income were associated with stronger agreement with a situationist lay philosophy of behavior. Third, age, level of education, and income also were associated with ethnicity. Our Black or Hispanic samples were younger, less educated, and had smaller incomes than other groups. Asians were on average more educated and had larger income than other groups. Taken together, these results suggested that at the effects of age, level of education, and income should be controlled if one is interested in isolating true ethnic variability in agreement with lay philosophies of behavior.

#### WHAT PREDICTS ENDORSEMENTS OF LAY PHILOSOPHIES OF BEHAVIOR? THE MULTIVARIATE APPROACH

Following the correlational analyses, standard regression models were used to test for ethnic differences in agreement with each lay philosophy of behavior, controlling for age, level of education, and income. Each model included dummy variables representing ethnicity, age, level of education, income, and interactions of the ethnicity dummy variables and age, education, and income (see Table 2).

*Dispositionist lay philosophy.* As can be seen in Table 2, the results of a standard regression analysis indicated that Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics each more strongly agreed with a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior than Whites. In addition, stronger agreement with a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior was positively associated with age, negatively associated with education, and unassociated with income. Also notable, Asians' agreement with a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior varied as a function of education. To investigate the source of this interaction, the simple slope of the dummy variable representing Asians versus Whites was investigated at both high and low levels of education (Aiken & West, 1991). Results indicated that the difference in agreement with a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior between Asians and Whites was smaller when education was high (unstandardized  $B = .11$ ) than low (unstandardized  $B = .15$ ).

*Situationist lay philosophy.* Results of a standard regression analysis indicated that when controlling for age, income, and education, Blacks, but not Asians or Hispanics, agreed with a situationist lay philosophy of behavior more than Whites (see Table 2 for

**TABLE 1**  
**Zero-Order Correlations of Dummy Variables Representing Ethnicity, Age, Education, Income, Gender, and Agreement With Dispositionist, Situationist, and Interactionist Lay Philosophies of Behavior**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Asian	—	-.28**	-.26**	-.04	.22**	.13**	.00	.04	-.01	.00
2 Black		—	-.29**	-.06*	-.09**	-.17**	.03	.03	.08**	.01
3 Latino			—	-.11**	-.23**	-.08**	-.01	.07**	.05*	.01
4 Age				—	-.08*	.03	.06*	.07**	-.01	.03
5 Education					—	.34**	.02	-.12**	-.20**	.05
6 Income						—	-.04	-.05	-.13**	.05
7 Gender							—	.00	-.01	-.04
8 Dispositionist								—	.18**	.18**
9 Situationist									—	.27**
10 Interactionist										—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 2**  
**Standardized Regression Coefficients of Predictors of Agreement With Dispositionist, Situationist, and Interactionist Lay Philosophies of Behavior**

Predictor	Dispositionist	Situationist	Interactionist
Asian	.09**	.05	.01
Black	.09**	.08**	.04
Hispanic	.11**	.05	.05
Age	.08**	-.01	.05
Education	-.11**	-.17**	.06*
Income	.00	-.06*	.04
Asian $\times$ Age	-.05	-.06	-.02
Black $\times$ Age	.01	-.01	.04
Hispanic $\times$ Age	.01	-.07**	-.04
Asian $\times$ Education	.08**	.05	-.01
Black $\times$ Education	.03	.06	.04
Hispanic $\times$ Education	.05	.06	.05
Asian $\times$ Income	-.02	.07*	.02
Black $\times$ Income	-.02	-.01	.01
Hispanic $\times$ Income	-.03	.03	.02

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

additional detail). Education and income, but not age, were negatively related to agreement with a situationist lay philosophy of behavior. Moreover, Asians' agreement with a situationist lay philosophy of behavior varied as a function of income, and Hispanics' agreement with a situationist lay philosophy of behavior varied as a function of age. Analyses of simple slopes indicated that the difference in agreement with a situationist lay philosophy of behavior between Asians and Whites was smaller when income was high (unstandardized  $B = .09$ ) than low (unstandardized  $B = .11$ ), and the difference in agreement with a situationist lay philosophy of behavior between Hispanics and Whites was smaller for younger (unstandardized  $B = -.10$ ) than older (unstandardized  $B = -.12$ ) participants.

*Interactionist lay philosophy.* Results of a third standard regression analysis found a positive relationship between level of education and agreement with an interactionist lay philosophy of behavior. No other predictors were significant.

## DISCUSSION

This study tested whether ethnic groups in the United States differed in relative endorsements of various lay philosophies of behavior using nationally representative samples of self-identified Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites in the United States. Contrary to expectations, we found that Whites exhibited the weakest endorsement of a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior of all the ethnic groups studied. The only other ethnic group difference we found was that Blacks endorsed a situationist lay philosophy of behavior more strongly than Whites. Although demographic variables besides ethnicity also were associated with the degree to which people endorsed different lay philosophies of behavior, ethnic group differences in endorsement of dispositionist and situationist lay philosophies of behavior still existed after controlling for age, level of education, and income. That said, the group differences detected were quite small in magnitude. Therefore, how important or meaningful they are for predicting how any one person may think or behave is limited.

It is particularly important to note that differences detected between ethnic groups in the United States were inconsistent with the lay philosophy of behavior account for group differences in attributions for others' behavior. Theory suggests that Whites in the United States should be the poster children for a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior. However, we found that Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics each more strongly endorsed dispositionist lay philosophies than Whites. In short, our results represent a theoretical conundrum. Perhaps Whites are more painfully aware of the structural aspects of current U.S. culture that facilitate their continued economic success relative to other groups and therefore are reluctant to (at least explicitly) endorse a dispositionist philosophy of behavior. In addition, or instead, Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics may be painfully aware that there are not good structural supports to facilitate their success and therefore the only way to get ahead is to accept personal responsibility for doing so even in the absence of structural support, or despite the presence of structural obstacles. Regardless of what might explain the observed results, they clearly did not support the lay philosophy of behavior account for ethnic group differences in attribution tendency.

The study also found that other, less frequently studied demographic variables were associated with the degree to which people endorsed different lay philosophies of behavior. Specifically, age, level of education, and income each had effects on agreement with lay philosophies of behavior that were as strong as or stronger than the effects of ethnic categories. Level of education in particular had strong effects. Higher education was associated with less agreement with dispositionist and situationist lay philosophies of behaviors and more agreement with an interactionist lay philosophy of behavior, a finding that suggests that higher education may promote a more complex understanding of the causes of behavior.

Also important, age, level of education, and income moderated the effects of ethnicity on endorsements of lay philosophies of behavior. Whites' and Asians' endorsements of a dispositionist lay philosophy of behavior were more similar when level of education was high than low, and Whites' and Asians' endorsements of a situationist lay philosophy of behavior were more similar when income was high than low. In addition, Hispanics' and Whites' endorsements of a situationist lay philosophy of behavior were more similar for

younger than older respondents, results that might represent the effects of cultural assimilation. Younger Hispanics may be more likely to have been born in the United States, and more highly educated and richer Asians may live in less segregated areas (Massey & Fischer, 2001), leading to assimilation and therefore greater similarities to Whites. Overall, the fact that demographic variables besides ethnicity were associated both with ethnicity and with differential endorsement of lay philosophies of behavior highlights the importance of using representative samples in cross-cultural research, and psychological research in general. If cross-cultural research continues to rely primarily on data from college student samples, the resultant corpus will be incomplete, limited in terms of generalizability, and may suffer from a number of biases (Sears, 1986).

As with all research, there were some limitations to this study. First, although we studied a wider number of ethnic groups than previous research, there is ample reason to believe that even more refined operationalizations of ethnicity would be informative. We relied on very inclusive categories that undoubtedly failed to capture nuances associated with the many ethnic identities captured by these umbrella terms (Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001). For example, Black as a category misses important potential differences in the cultural experiences and orientations of Black Americans who descended from slaves relative to those who more recently, and voluntarily, immigrated to the United States (Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001). Second, this research investigated differences in lay philosophies of behavior across ethnic groups but did not test whether differences in lay philosophies of behavior in fact lead to different attributions for others' behavior. Future research should explicitly test whether lay philosophies of behavior mediate the relationship between ethnic group membership and attributions and also explore other domains that lay philosophies of behavior may affect.

In conclusion, ethnic group differences in lay philosophies of behavior in the mass public were inconsistent with both previous research with college student samples and theoretical predictions. Other demographic variables, such as level of education and income, were as important if not more important predictors of how people explained the causes of others' behavior.

## NOTES

1. KN recruits panelists using random-digit-dialing telephone selection methods to obtain a random sample of the US population (see <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp> for additional details).

2. Because we collected probability samples, we could calculate the degree of sampling error and weight the data according to census information to correct any deviations of our samples from the respective populations they were meant to represent. Sample weights were estimated separately for each ethnic sample; that is, the sample weights for the White sample were calculated to adjust for deviations from census figures for White Americans, and the sample weights for the Black sample were adjusted for the deviations from Black census figures, and so on. The analyses reported in this article were conducted using the weighted data.

3 For analysis, dummy variables were created to represent ethnic group membership. Dummy codes were scored so that minority groups were compared with Whites, that is White = 0, and Ethnic Group (Asian, Black, Hispanic) = 1.

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