The Effects of an At-Risk Label on the Attribution of Student Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Students who are enrolled in intervention programs associated with the ability to graduate from high school on time have been referred to as "at-risk" students. Though high school students labeled "at-risk" can access beneficial opportunities, they may also be recipients of social stigma due to the label. In this study, participants viewed a video of a student engaging in three different behaviors and made attributions about the causes of the behaviors. The student depicted in the video was either labeled "at-risk", "college-bound", or unlabeled (control). Participants consisted of approximately 90 college students as well as 20 high school students who were currently attending an alternative education school. Data showed that college student participants in both the "at-risk" and "college-bound" conditions were more likely to attribute the behaviors to external causes than participants in the unlabeled condition. Also, the high school at-risk student participants in the "at-risk" condition were more likely to report the target individual's behaviors as being more stable than the college student participants in the "at-risk' condition. This study starts to uncover more about the effects of an "at-risk" label and the consequences of applying this label to an individual.

INTRODUCTION

As a high school senior, you observe a fellow student in your class continuously glancing at the clock. Is he repeatedly checking the time because he is anxious to get to work? Is he anxious to go smoke a cigarette? Is he counting down the minutes until he can leave the classroom? How might your perceptions change if you knew this student was being assigned to an alternative high school for students who were at risk of not graduating or if you knew that he had just been accepted to a prestigious college?

In the example above there are three important aspects to consider. First, you are being asked to make an attribution about the cause of a behavior. Second, you are being asked to consider the characteristics of the person enacting the behavior. Third, the descriptions provided about the student, although brief, activate a host of stereotypes and beliefs about the causes of the student's behaviors. The purpose of this study was to explore how labels, particularly the at-risk label, can impact views of peers' behavior.

Students who take part in intervention programs designed to assist them in graduating from high school on time have commonly been referred to as "at-risk students". There are numerous intervention programs in place for students susceptible to dropping out, including late intervention or "last chance" programs for students who do not have sufficient credits to graduate or who are presenting severe behavioral issues in a traditional classroom setting (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2009). Many of the students who are enrolled in these programs are of ethnic minority groups and from families of lower socioeconomic status (James, 2001; Ronda & Valencia, 1994). However, the "at-risk" label is relatively new and thus may conjure up different meanings depending on the individual and the situation.

A label is a socially constructed explanatory frame that is often placed upon people of devalued statuses (Becker, 1963). Our reactions to other people and their behaviors can be greatly affected by the presence of a label. On the one hand, labels may make a student eligible for services, but they can also have stigmatizing effects. For example, Stanley (1988) found that when participants made attributions of an individual's behaviors, those who were only informed of a negative label had unfavorable perceptions of that individual, though these perceptions were non-existent when the participants were able to observe the target's behavior as well. This shows that a label, when presented alone, leads to much more adverse effects than when presented in combination with information. Regarding the at-risk label, Ronda and Valencia (1994) found that students labeled as "at- risk" were more likely to be called stupid by their peers and concluded that these students purposely failed academically for the amusement of their fellow students and would often misbehave for the sake of "being bad" (Ronda & Valencia). In addition, Stanovich, Jordan, and Perot (1998) found that students labeled as "at-risk" were perceived by their classmates to have lower academic ability, though they were more socially accepted in comparison to other labeled groups such as mentally retarded students and English language learners.

These findings are particularly concerning because many times labels can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Self-fulfilling prophecies start out as perceptions of a situation or person that eventually become accurate due to a change in the situation or in that person (Larsen & Ehly, 1978; Merton, 1948). Jussim & Harber (2005) found that, although self-fulfilling prophecies (positive or negative) only affect five to ten percent of students, these effects can accumulate over time and Madon, Jussim, and Eccles (1997) found that low achieving students were more affected by teacher expectations than were high achieving students. Thus, student who are labeled "at-risk" have additional challenges due to self-fulfilling prophecies generated by their label.

Attribution

One way that labels can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies is through their effects on attributions. The process of attribution involves making sense of the situation by considering plausible causes for the behavior observed (Kelley, 1972). Attributions are commonly classified along three dimensions: locus (internal or external), controllability, and stability. When making an internal attribution, one assumes a person's behavior is caused by something internal about that person—such as attitude, character or personality (Heider, 1958). When individuals make attributions about the behaviors of someone other than themselves, they tend to make internal attributions (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013). Alternatively, an external attribution is assuming a person's behavior is due to the situation he or she is in—such as test difficulty or other environmental characteristics (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert). Perceived control refers to the belief that one can influence his or her environment in a way that increases the chance of a positive or negative outcome (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert). For example, if an individual believes they will do well on a test, they will perform better than if they believe they will perform poorly. Stability involves whether or not a person's behavior is consistent. A behavior regarded as stable would suggest it is something fixed within the individual, such as a personality trait, while a behavior regarded as unstable would suggest it is something that varies by the situation and individual. For example, when attributing individual's perceived outcomes on a test, "ability" would be an internal-stable attribution, "effort" would be an internal-unstable attribution, "task-difficulty" would be an external-stable attribution, and finally, "luck" would be an external-unstable attribution (Loos, Bridges & Critelli, 1987).

In the absence of a motive to be careful and judicious, most attributions are made quickly without a high level of cognitive expenditure (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2013). Consequently, information that is "easy" to detect is used heavily in the attribution. Prominent aspects about the individual being judged, such as a label, are used as convenient cues regarding the attribution of their behavior.

Negative labels are especially prominent in attribution schemas and have been shown to result in more internal attributions than external attributions in regard to "negative" behaviors (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2013). For example, a student who is labeled "at-risk" and has been truant will often receive more internal attributions (such as they purposely skipped school) than a non-labeled peer. If a behavior was viewed positively, then it is more likely to be conceived as having an external cause rather than being due to an internal disposition. Stanley (1988) demonstrated this in an experiment that analyzed the influence of the label "mentally retarded" on attribution patterns. Stanley compared participants' attributions for the performance outcome of individuals labeled as mentally retarded and those without that label. Successes of the individual labeled as mentally retarded were often attributed to the unstable-internal attribute of effort, whereas their failures were attributed more to the stable-internal attribute of ability.

The present study explored factors associated with attributions of students labeled as "at-risk" in an educational setting. We looked at peers' attributions made about a student labeled either as "at-risk" or "college-bound". Participants include at-risk high school students and college students. We hypothesized that participants would make more internal and stable attributions about the classroom behaviors of the individual labeled an "at-risk" student. Through this study we hoped to uncover more about the effects of an "at-risk" label and how students are viewed by their peers with applications to school settings.

METHOD

Participants

The study involved 90 college students (71% female) with ages ranging from 17-30 years (M = 19.26, SD = 1.98). The majority of these participants were White (93 %) and the rest identified as Hispanic/Latino (3%), Asian (2%), and Biracial (1%). These students predominantly estimated their family's social class as middle class (57%) as well as upper middle class (22%), working class (17%), wealthy (2%) and poor (2%). Participants were recruited

from an introductory psychology course at a small Midwestern University. Eight of the students in the college sample reported being considered "at-risk" in an educational setting.

In addition, we recruited 14 high school students (36% female) with ages ranging from 16-19 years old (M = 17.36, SD = 1.01). The majority of these participants were White (64%) and the rest identified as Hispanic/Latino (21%), African American (7%) and Biracial (7%). Similar to the college students, the high school students also predominantly estimated their family's social class as middle class (43%) as well as working class (29%), upper class (14%), and poor (14%). These participants were enrolled in an alternative school that is a part of a midsized high school in southern Wisconsin. Two of the high school students reported not being considered an "at-risk" student.

All the participants received course credit for their participation. Informed consent (college) or assent (high school) was secured from the participants. For the high school participants under the age of 18, parental consent was obtained by sending a letter home with the student that described the study and its purposes wherein parents could withdraw their consent for the student to participate.

Materials and Procedure

Data was collected using an online Qualtrics survey. After obtaining informed consent, participants were given a brief overview of the study. They were told that their participation would involve watching three brief video segments and answering questions about a student (i.e., the "target") depicted in these videos after each segment. The first video took place in a classroom and depicted the target individual cheating off the math exam of the student beside him. The second video showed a busy hallway scene with the target individual at his locker. When the target individual left his locker and started to proceed down the hallway, he bumped into a student walking in the opposite direction, causing the student to drop of his books. The target individual turned back and looked at the student picking up their books, but did not offer to help and continued down the hallway. The third video (also set in a classroom) showed a teacher handing back the students graded papers. When the target individual received his, a large red F was shown at the top of the paper with many corrections and notes from the teacher.

College participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions where the target individual was described as "at-risk", "college-bound", or an unlabeled target. Due to limited access to participants of this population the alternative school students only received the profile of the "at-risk" student. All other information provided in the profile remained constant in order to reduce variability (see Appendix A,). After reading the profile, all participants watched the first video. Upon completion of the video, participants were asked to explain the most likely reason for the target individual's behavior shown in the video. They were then asked to complete an edited version of the Revised Causal Dimension Scale consisting of 12 items (McAuley, Duncan & Russell, 1992; refer to Appendix B). The scale assessed whether the type of attribution made about the target is internal or external as measured on a scale from 1 (*mostly internal cause)* to 9 (*mostly external cause)*, controllable or uncontrollable as measured on a scale from 1 (*high personal control*) to 9 (*low personal control),* and stable or unstable as measured on a scale from 1 (*high stability*) to 9 (*low stability).* This process was repeated for the second and third video segments.

Additional measures were included in the survey. These measures asked the participants to evaluate their own impressions of the target individual, estimate the target individual's GPA on a four-point scale, likelihood of attending and also graduating college both measured on a scale from 1 (*very likely*) to 7 (*very unlikely*), as well as asking for their personal definition of an "at-risk" student.

RESULTS

Quantitative

Effects of academic labels on attribution categories. The results of a between-participant one-way ANOVA revealed a significant relationship between academic label and locus of causality attributions $F(2,88) = 4.77$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 < .01$. Tukey post-hoc tests showed that participants who were informed that the subject as an at-risk student were significantly more likely to attribute his behavior to external causes (M = 3.26, SD = 1.07) compared to participants in the unlabeled condition (M = 2.62, SD = 1.63, p = .04). Participants who were informed that he was a college-bound student were also more likely to attribute his behavior to external causes (M = 3.36, SD = .90) compared to participants in the unlabeled condition (p = .02). No differences in locus of causality were found between participants in the "at-risk" and the "college-bound" label conditions (p = .92).

The results of a second between-participant one-way ANOVA revealed a significant relationship between academic label and attributions of personal control $F(2, 88) = 3.30$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 < .01$. Tukey post-hoc tests showed that participants who were informed that the subject was an at-risk student were more likely to perceived that he had

less control over his behaviors (M = 2.34, SD = .93) compared to participants in the unlabeled condition (M = 1.83, SD = .73, p = .05). No significant differences were observed in attributions of personal control between participants who were informed that the subject was a college-bound student and participants in the unlabeled condition (p = .92), nor between participants who were told he was a college-bound student and participants who were told he was an at-risk student (p = .12).

The results of a two additional between participant one-way ANOVAs indicated that there were no significant relationships between academic label and attributions of external control $F(2,87) = .74$, $p = .48$ nor academic label and attributions of stability $F(2,88) = 2.76$, $p = .07$.

Effects of academic labels on predictions of educational achievement. . A one-way between subjects ANOVA, corrected for unequal variance, revealed a significant relationship between the academic label condition and participants' perceptions of the likelihood of the subject attending college $F(2,88) = 3.12$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Tukey post-hoc test indicated that participants who were told the subject was an at-risk student thought he was less likely to attend college (M = 4.47, SD = 1.24) than participants who were told that he was a college-bound student (M = 3.50, SD = 1.55, p = .04). There were no significant differences in the responses between participants in the unlabeled condition and participants who were told that the subject was an at-risk student (p = .62) or between participants in the unlabeled condition and participants who were told that he was a college-bound student (p = .27).

Further, a one-way between subjects ANOVA revealed a significant relationship between the academic label condition and how likely participants thought the subject was to graduate from college $F(2,88) = 4.20$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Tukey post-hoc tests showed that participants in the unlabeled condition thought he was less likely to graduate college (M = 5.38, SD = 1.40) than participants in the "college-bound" condition (M = 4.23, SD = 1.68, p = .01). There were no significant differences between the responses of participants who were told the subject was an at-risk student and participants who were told he was a college-bound student (p = .53) nor between the responses of participants who were told he was an at-risk student and participants who were not given any information regarding an academic label (p = .62).

Effects of educational background. The results of three independent samples t-tests indicated that there were no significant relationships between participants' level of education (high school or college student) and perceived locus of causality, $t(45) = .16$, $p = .88$, personal control, $t(45) = .11$, $p = .92$, or external control, $t(45) = -.03$, $p = .98$. However, an independent samples t-test corrected for unequal variance showed a significant relationship between participants' level of education and attributions of stability $t(45) = 2.23$, $p = .04$, $d = .75$, 95% CI [.04, 1.25]. Participants who attend a four-year college reported the subject's behaviors as being more unstable (M = 4.88, SD = .61) compared to participants who attend an alternative high school (M = 4.24, SD = 1.04).

Independent samples t-tests indicated there were no significant differences between high school and college participants' ratings of the likelihood that the subject would attend college $t(45) = -1.01$, $p = .32$ or graduate from college $t(45) = -1.22$, $p = .23$.

Qualitative Results

Attributions. Using a deductive approach based on predetermined attribution dimensions (Kelley, 1972) qualitative data regarding participants' attributions were sorted into internal and external categories. Due to ambiguity within participant responses, responses could not be sorted based on the other attribution types (stability, locus of causality, and personal control).

Overall, participants across all label conditions made more internal attributions regarding the subject's behaviors (i.e., cheating, bumping into someone, receiving a bad grade). However, we found that college participants in the "at-risk" condition were more likely than participants in the unlabeled or "college-bound" conditions to *also* state external causes for his behaviors across all three videos.

The data from the first video (depicting the subject cheating on a test) showed a very consistent preference for participants to make internal attributions about the causes of this behavior across all label conditions. A common theme throughout the participant responses involved the subject being unprepared for the test, as well as not understanding the material. The response of not understanding the material, as a reason for him cheating, was clearly more frequent in the college participants who thought he was an at-risk student.

The data from the second video (depicting the subject bumping into a student in the hallway, causing the student to drop his books) had much less disparity between internal and external attributions about the causes of his behavior. The high school participants, participants in the "at-risk" condition and those in the unlabeled condition all made more internal attributions about the causes of this particular behavior. Across all conditions, participants were most likely to attribute the cause of the subject's behavior to negative personality traits such as being "a jerk" or "too arrogant." However, participants who were told he was a college-bound student made more external attributions about the cause of this behavior. They were more likely to say he was in a rush or that the student who

dropped his books didn't need help, for example: "He was rushing to get to an activity/class."

Qualitative data from the third video (the subject receiving a failing grade on his paper) showed that participants across all conditions commonly reported the cause of his behavior to be a general lack of preparation, "He may not have studied or done research for it." Participants in the "college-bound" condition were also more likely to report external factors as part of the reason of why he received a poor grade than all other conditions, "He could have other conflicting situations in his life, or he did not put enough time into his essay."

Definitions of an at-risk student. Participants were also asked to give their definition of an at-risk student, which varied widely across all conditions. Using an inductive approach, the most prominent theme that emerged within the definitions involved students with a higher likelihood of failing, "My definition of an at-risk student is a student that is more likely to fail academically than others." Notably, there were also many other definitions that reflect more internal characteristics about an at-risk student, "Someone who lacks the skills necessary to make a good citizen. A person who falls behind and isn't very nice." Also, "My definition of an at-risk student is one that is not trying hard in school, is threatening the studying or education of others, and has no respect for those around him." The high school at-risk participants were also asked to give their definition of an at-risk student. Their definitions often suggested that an at-risk student is one who needs extra help, "A student who needs help because he can't learn at the same rate as others."

DISCUSSION

Through the use of an experimental design, this study explored how the use of academic labels such as "at risk" may cause differences in peers' attribution of classroom-related behaviors. In examining the results, qualitative data were used to better understand the quantitative findings, particularly in regard to attribution categories. The results of this study were examined in four main categories: effects of academic labels on attribution, effects of educational background on attribution, predictions of future academic achievement, and definitions of an at-risk student.

Effects of Academic Labels on Attributions

As is well demonstrated in the research literature, attributions are made quickly and without much thought, making convenient cues, such as labels, heavily used in attributions (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2013). Also consistent with research on attributions, academic labels provide information to the individual making an attribution through the individual's perception of the label (Stanley, 1988). More research exploring how people attribute the behavior of students with different academic labels is necessary so that we may better understand how stereotypes associated with such labels affect others' perceptions, which may in turn affect the opportunities that certain students receive. Thus, the purpose of this study was to further investigate the effect an "at-risk" label can have on student perceptions of their peers' behavior.

Our hypothesis that participants in the "at-risk" condition would make more internal attributions (such as the target individual is stupid) was not supported. Participants in the "at-risk" condition were instead more likely to attribute all three of the target's behaviors to external causes (such as a lack of preparation or not understanding the content) compared to participants in the unlabeled condition. Surprisingly participants in the "college-bound" condition also demonstrated the same pattern. Since the participants were all in college (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse), it was surprising to see that they did not view the "college-bound" target as someone similar to themselves. A potential explanation may that the target's behavior was undesirable and therefore they did not want to identify themselves with him. According to self-presentation theory, individuals seek to maintain a positive social identity (Schlenker & Goldman, 1982). So when confronted with evidence of their own poor behaviors, a person may change their public attitude of those behaviors so as to sustain a more positive public image. Another possible explanation is that since both groups of participants were students themselves, one could assume that they may relate or identify with each other. If so, they would be less inclined to see the target students' behaviors as a result of personal shortcomings, and preferred to attribute his behavior to factors outside of his control, a finding consistent with research on the self-serving bias (Cucina, Martin, Vasilopoulos & Thibodeuax, 2012).

However, although participants in both conditions attributed the target's behaviors to external pressures, the *sources* of this pressure were perceived to be quite different. Participants in the at-risk label condition were more likely to emphasize hardships such as having a poor home life or needing to graduate. A response from a participant in the "at-risk" condition highlights the reasoning behind their views of Chris's behavior, "Chris really needs to graduate in the next year but because he is and at-risk student, chances are he didn't study so instead he cheats on the test to get the grade he wants." Participants in the college-bound label condition seemed to focus more on pressures due to the expectations of others. For example, "Because he feels pressure to get good grades, he feels that if he

doesn't achieve high enough grades he will not get into college and disappoint his parents."

Effects of Academic Labels on Predictions of Educational Achievement

By asking the college student participants if they believed the target individual would attend college, we were better able to depict their perceptions of an "at-risk" and "college-bound" student, particularly how these labels may play a role in perceived future educational outcomes. Our hypothesis was that students in the "at-risk" condition would perceive the target to be less likely to attend and graduate from college than participants in the unlabeled and "college-bound" conditions.

It was clear that participants in the "at-risk" and "college-bound" conditions used the label given to decide whether or not the target student would attend college, even though his behaviors (getting a bad grade and cheating) may not demonstrate that idea. Specifically, participants in the "college-bound" condition reported that the target was more likely to attend college in comparison to participants in the "at-risk" condition. These findings are consistent with research on labeling (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2013; Kelley, 1973).

No differences were found between college student participants' and high school student participants' answers to this question. Thus, *actual* at-risk high school students as well as college students did not expect that a student labeled "at-risk" would attend college. This finding may reflect a bias or self-fulfilling prophecy effect based on the label. Alternatively, this finding may reflect a realistic interpretation of the ability and desire for at-risk students to attend college. Indeed, research on self-fulfilling prophecies suggest that beliefs about others' potential may be at least partially be rooted in realistic perceptions (Jussim & Harber, 2005).

In regards to graduating college, there was only a significant difference between participants in the unlabeled and "college-bound" condition with participants in the unlabeled condition perceiving the target as less likely to graduate college than participants in the "college-bound" condition. This demonstrates the influence of the "college-bound" label since without it, the participant's perception of the student changed. Also, it is interesting that there was no difference between participants in the "at-risk" and either "college-bound" or unlabeled conditions. This shows that though there was a difference in whether or not an at-risk student may attend college, their predicted graduation is seemingly unrelated to if they were an at-risk or college-bound high school student.

Effects of Educational Background

The results of this study show that high-school at-risk participants reported more stable attributions about the target's behavior than the college "at-risk" participants, demonstrating that they believe that the target's behavior to be more permanent and reflective of his personality. We expected to find the opposite, that college participants would be more likely to make stable attributions while the high school at-risk participants would be more likely to make unstable attributions. We hypothesized that the high school at-risk student participants would identify with the target individual and recognize his behaviors, like their own, to vary depending on circumstances. If this hypothesis held true, we would have seen responses that would be consistent with the research done on the actor -observer bias (Jones & Nisbett, 1969). Assuming that the high school at-risk participants identified with the actor, they would have attributed the actor's behavior towards reasons in the situation (such as a challenging exam). The observer, who does not identify with the actor, would attribute the actor's behavior to personal dispositions (such as a poor test taker) (Jones & Nisbett). One possible explanation as to why our hypothesis was not supported is that the at-risk students and college students have different personal theories regarding the stability of behavior and ability. It is possible that the at-risk students possess entity beliefs—they believe that abilities and behaviors are relatively fixed and not changeable by any amount of effort (Dweck, 1999). The college student participants may have incremental beliefs: they are more willing to believe that ability and behaviors are changeable and if someone tries to alter the way they behave, they can successfully do so (Dweck). This may be because college students have learned that it is predominantly effort that determines academic success. Thus, the high school at-risk participants viewed the target's actions as being stable and the college student participants viewed the target's actions as unstable.

This result suggests that giving students a label such as "at-risk" may change their perceptions of themselves and alter their identity, a notion that fits with deviant identity theory. According to Willey, Slocum & Esbensen (2013), labeling theory maintains that youth who are labeled delinquent (similarly to those who are labeled at-risk) are more likely to be excluded from conventional activities, adopt a deviant identity, and spend time with delinquent peers. They found that public labeling often leads to secondary deviance or the individual engaging in deviant behaviors due to the label that they have been given (Wiley, Slocum & Esbensen). Application of a deviant label can lead to social exclusion. This in turn can encourage the development of a deviant identity which then leads to the individual spending more time with other same-labeled individuals and more deviant actions (Wiley, Slocum & Esbensen).Through this process, it is clear that there is a relationship between the application of a label and subsequent deviance. Thus, a similar chain of events may occur for those students who are labeled "at-risk". When

given the label, at-risk, that these students are then excluded from other peer groups and school activities by being placed in a separate classroom where they spend more time same labeled peers. This may begin the creation and adoption of a deviant identity.

Definitions of an At-Risk Student

In order to shed more light on individuals' perceptions of such labels and stereotypes about "at risk' students, we asked participant's to provide an explanation of what it means to be an "at-risk student". To date, no research has fully explored this issue. The creation of an at-risk student label is a fairly new and thus conjures up different meanings depending on the individual and situation. A few "standard' definitions have been proposed, but vary from state to state (National High School Center, 2009). For example, the definition of an at-risk student provided by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction states that these are students who do not have sufficient credits to graduate or who are presenting severe behavioral issues in a traditional classroom setting (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2009). The definition provided by the West Virginia Department of Education is much more specific. It states that such alternative educational programs are designed to be a temporary placement that provides academic and social support for students whose behavior puts them at risk of not doing well in school and in life in general (National High School Center, 2009). As shown through these two definitions, state guidelines for who is considered to be an "at-risk" student are subjective to the school's understanding of their state definition.

As expected, in this study, participants provided a variety of responses when asked to define an at-risk student. Many of their definitions coincided with or included aspects of the Wisconsin Department of Public Institution's criteria, but many did not. For example, one participant defined an at-risk student as "one that is not trying hard in school, is threatening the studying or education of others, and has no respect for those around him." Another participant responded as "a student who doesn't care about their future. A student coming from a home that meets the 'criteria' of producing children who will not graduate and/or succeed." The fact that there are such different conceptions of the term "at-risk" make performing research and gaining a better understanding of this label difficult, especially since the label is often used a catch-all for students who are struggling. With so many different understandings of the at-risk label, it's hard to discern to what extent participants' attributions and beliefs were due to the at-risk label alone, or due to different perceptions about what "at risk" means.

Interestingly, there were differences between academic label conditions in their definition of an at-risk student. Participants in the unlabeled condition provided definitions that were more "severe" in nature and that tended to deviate more from the Wisconsin Department of Public Institution's definition in comparison to participants in the "at-risk" and "college-bound" condition. For example, a participant in the unlabeled condition reported, "My definition of an at-risk student is someone that is on the brink of disaster. He is close to failing and could crack under pressure at any time." A participant in the "at-risk" condition stated, "A student that has unfavorable situations that negatively affect the way they go through their life and school." Having actual high school at-risk students provide definitions of an at-risk student allowed for a better understanding of not only their idea of what the label is, but also their relationship with the label and possibly how they view themselves. Interestingly, when asked if they had ever been considered an at-risk student, two of the high school participants responded no. These two participants who are currently attending an alternative at-risk school don't consider themselves to be under the label of "at-risk." This further demonstrates the misunderstanding of the label as even the students who meet the criteria of the at-risk label, do not necessarily believe the label applies to them. Also, a majority of the high school at-risk participants responded with a definition involving a student that needs extra help or learns differently than others compared to the college participants who were less likely to state that an at-risk student needed extra academic help. This, again, highlights a difference in the perception of the at-risk label.

LIMITATIONS

It is possible that there are varying perceptions of the at-risk label between cultures, age and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, this study is limited due to lack of diversity in the college participant sample. Being able to collect data from a more diverse sample would provide more information about the at-risk label and the varying perceptions. Another limitation is that the number of at-risk participants was small in comparison to the number of college student participants. Having more at-risk participants would allow data to be collected regarding each of the academic labels used and provide more insight into their views of at-risk students.

To better understand the at-risk label, it would be beneficial to further investigate at-risk students' perceptions of themselves, including an exploration of their perceptions, before and after receiving the label (i.e., prior to being placed in special programs or receiving special services for "at risk" students). Such studies would provide information about how the label directly affects those students when applied. Also, more work should be

done to educate students about what the at-risk label indicates and possibly encourage the use of a different language to identify these students to, ideally, reduce the negative perception. As we know through stereotype threat theory, when a person is aware of a negative stereotype about a group to which they belong, they run the risk of acting in ways that confirm the stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In other words, an at-risk student's behaviors and academic performance may be viewed stereotypically due to their label. When a student is aware that they are being viewed in this manner, it can promote stereotypical performance and behaviors. In order to reduce stereotype threat on at-risk students, an incremental view of intelligence and behavior should be emphasized in the school environment (Cohen, Steele & Ross, 1999) as well as emphasizing high standards with reassurances about the student's ability to meet them (Goff, Steele & Davies, 2008).

In conclusion, the academic label of "at-risk" is relatively new and therefore, not well understood by students, educators, and society in general. More work needs to be done to better understand the consequences of being labeled as at-risk, especially on the student's identity.

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APPENDIX A

List of Experimental Profiles

At-Risk Profile:

Chris (the blonde male student in the video wearing a maroon colored shirt) is a 17 year old male at-risk student who attends an alternative high school in the Midwest. He has attended this alternative school for the past three years. In his free time, Chris enjoys spending time with friends and playing video games. Chris plans to graduate from high school in the next year.

College-Bound Profile:

Chris (the blonde male student in the video wearing a maroon colored shirt) is a 17 year old male college-bound student who attends high school in the Midwest. He has attended this high school for the past three years. In his free time, Chris enjoys spending time with friends and playing video games. Chris plans to graduate high school in the next year and then start college in the fall.

Unlabeled Profile:

Chris (the blonde male student in the video wearing a maroon colored shirt) is a 17 year old male student who attends high school in the Midwest. He has attended this high school for the past three years. In his free time, Chris enjoys spending time with friends and playing video games. Chris plans to graduate high school in the next year.

APPENDIX B

The Revised Causal Dimension Scale

Think about the reasons you stated for Chris's actions. The items below are asking about your impressions and opinions of the causes of Chris's behavior.

Is the cause something that...

	Strongly Agree	<<	<<	<<	Neutral	>>	>>	>>	Strongly Agree	
Reflects an aspect of Chris	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Reflects an aspect of the situation
Manageable by Chris	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Not manageable by Chris
Permanent	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Temporary
Something Chris can regulate	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Something Chris cannot regulate
Something over which others have control	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Something over which others have no control
Something due to Chris's personality	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Something not due to Chris's personality
Stable over time	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Not stable over time
Under the power of other people	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Not under the power of other people
Something about Chris	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Something about others
Something over which Chris has power	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Something over which Chris has no power
Changeable	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Unchangeable
Other people can regulate	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	__	Other people cannot regulate