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Stereotype threat and the cognitive performance of adolescent immigrants: The role of cultural identity strength

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ABSTRACT

In many world regions students with certain immigrant backgrounds underperform in educational settings. Theory and research suggest that this achievement gap could be partially explained by stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is a detrimental psychological state that inhibits individuals who belong to a negatively stereotyped group at times of learning and performance. The aim of this work was to examine both the influence of students' residence culture identity strength and ethnic identity strength on their cognitive performance under threat. Two experimental studies, conducted in European secondary schools, are reported. Experiment 1 ($N = 132$) showed that in a situation of explicit stereotype threat, high identification of immigrants with their residence culture predicted better cognitive performance, independently of ethnic identity strength. Residence culture identity strength was unrelated to cognitive performance in a control condition or a more implicit threat condition. Experiment 2 ($N = 152$) included an experimental manipulation of residence culture identity strength. The results show that highlighting similarities with the residence culture (vs. highlighting differences) positively influences immigrant students' performance under threat. This research connects the stereotype threat framework with acculturation research, and points at ways to increase the educational achievement of immigrant students.

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1. Introduction

Students with certain immigration backgrounds score lower in achievement tests than non-immigrant students, and they leave school earlier, in Europe and the US alike (OECD, 2010; US Department of Education, 2010). This immigrant achievement gap is a challenge for politicians, the general public as well as social scientists. Language problems and low socio-economic status explain parts of the achievement gap, but substantial variance remains to be explained. Our work is based on prior research that highlighted the impact of negative achievement-related stereotypes on the performance of minority students.

Negative stereotypes against immigrants have a longstanding history. Benjamin Franklin, for example, thought that immigrants of German background, these "swarthy", "Palantine Boors" (Franklin in Labaree, 1959), were too stupid and lazy to make a positive contribution to the English society overseas (Feer, 1952). Today, negative stereotypes against certain ethnic groups about low cognitive abilities exist in many world regions, including stereotypes about people with a Latino background in the US, or people with a North African or Balkan immigrant background in parts of Europe. In recent years, psychological theory and research showed that negative stereotypes can lead to an aversive, stress-related state called stereotype threat (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat has a detrimental influence on cognitive performance in testing situations and at times of preparation and learning (e.g., Appel & Kronberger, 2012; Taylor & Walton, 2011). This makes stereotype threat a highly relevant phenomenon in the educational context, and provokes further questions of how to reduce its negative impact. The aim of this work is to connect the stereotype threat framework with an acculturation perspective (cf. Berry, 1997, 2001). In the latter line of research, different acculturation profiles, based on the strength of immigrants' ethnic identity as well as the strength of immigrants' identification with the culture where they live (i.e., residence culture identity strength), are considered key predictors of immigrants' adaptation, well-being, and educational success. The goal of the present studies is to examine the influence of residence culture identity strength and ethnic identity strength on immigrant students' cognitive performance under stereotype threat.

1.1. Stereotype threat among immigrant groups

Stereotype threat is conceived as a detrimental psychological state that impairs cognitive functioning in challenging tasks when a

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negative group stereotype is activated. More broadly, any situation in which the setting implies animosity toward or devaluation of one's group may impair cognitive performance (social identity threat, cf. Aronson & McGlone, 2009; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Prior research showed that the interplay of several psychological processes results in a performance decrement under stereotype threat (Schmader et al., 2008). In a situation in which a negative stereotype supposedly applies for a student, this student is likely to have negative thoughts and worries, to experience negative emotions, and to engage in emotion regulation. These processes, along with a physiological stress response elicited under threat, consume cognitive resources, which are unavailable for whatever cognitive activity a person undertakes (Schmader & Beilock, 2012). Due to reduced cognitive resources the task performance of the student belonging to a stereotyped group is impaired (Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell, 2007; Johns, Inzlicht, & Schmader, 2008).

An additional line of research focused on the preconditions and boundary conditions of stereotype threat. Integrating previous research, Schmader et al. (2008) proposed that stereotype threat is a consequence of a cognitive imbalance between a person's concept of the self, the concept of a group the person belongs to, and the concept of the ability domain. More specifically, this imbalance involves a) a positive link between an individual's self-concept and the concept of a group (individual identifies with a group), b) a positive link between an individual's self-concept and the concept of an ability domain (individual identifies with a domain), but c) a negative link between the domain and one's group.

Theory and research further highlight that not all individuals who belong to a negatively stereotyped group are equally prone to the detrimental influence of stereotype and social identity threat. Previous research showed that the more participants endorsed the negative ability stereotype themselves (negative link between domain concept and in-group concept), the more they were susceptible to stereotype threat (Schmader, Johns, & Barquissau, 2004). Likewise, participants who are more aware of the stereotype are more vulnerable to stereotype threat effects, because ambiguous cues may be interpreted as an expression of the negative stereotype (i.e., stigma consciousness, Brown & Pinel, 2003; McKown & Strambler, 2009). Other studies focused on the link between the self and the ability domain, showing that stereotype threat effects increase along with students' identification with the ability domain (e.g., Appel, Kronberger, & Aronson, 2011; Aronson et al., 1999).

In the typical experimental stereotype threat design, individuals who belong to a negatively stereotyped group are randomly assigned to either a condition in which the negative stereotype is activated in an evaluative context or a control condition (where either no stereotype is activated or where stereotype threat is removed). Thereby, the activation of the stereotype can occur in explicit (i.e., priming individual's group-based inferiority or blatant statement about the subgroup inferiority on tests, e.g., "women score lower in math than men"), moderately explicit (i.e., statement about subgroup differences in performance, but direction of the difference is left open, e.g., "this test has shown gender differences in the past"), or more indirect and subtle ways (i.e., no statement about subgroup differences, instead, the context of tests, test takers' subgroup membership, or test taking experience is manipulated, e.g., a race or gender prime, or framing a test as "diagnostic" vs. "not diagnostic"; for an overview see Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). Ultimately, mean performance of the conditions is compared. Usually, a comparison group with no prevalent negative stereotype in the domain of interest is included (e.g., men, Whites).

Since stereotype threat has been introduced to the research community (Steele & Aronson, 1995), several hundreds of studies have examined the influence of negative stereotypes on test performance and related measures. Most of these studies focused on either African Americans or women in contexts, in which their intellectual ability is met with stereotypic expectations (e.g., Huguet & Régner, 2007; Plante, de la Sablonnière, Aronson, & Théorêt, 2013). Prior meta-analyses yielded a significant and substantial stereotype threat effect (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Walton & Spencer, 2009). The meta-analysis by Nguyen and Ryan (2008) highlights that, while there are strong similarities in how stereotyped groups react to stereotype threat, there are important differences as well. Women, for example, suffer more detrimental effects in reaction to subtle threat-activating cues, while for ethnic minorities, stronger stereotype threat effects are observed for moderately to blatant stereotype activation.

Initial evidence has been gathered that stereotype threat might also impair the performance of negatively stereotyped immigrant groups. Studies showed that stereotype and social identity threat can impair the performance of Latino Americans in the US (e.g., Armenta, 2010; Hollis-Sawyer & Sawyer, 2008; Schmader & Johns, 2003), and of various immigrant groups in Europe (e.g., from North Africa or the Balkans), who are also confronted with a low-intelligence stereotype within the new residence country (e.g., Appel, 2012; Berjot, Roland-Levy, & Girault-Lidvan, 2011; Chateignier, Dutrévis, Nugier, & Chekroun, 2009). In other studies including immigrant participants, the main effect of the stereotype threat treatment could not be replicated, or findings were mixed (e.g., Wicherts, Dolan, & Hessen, 2005).

It remains an open question to what degree it is warranted to presume stereotype threat effects in general for immigrants. Furthermore, it is questionable to what degree the group of immigrants is comparable to other affected groups such as women in math-related fields or African Americans in academic contexts. Some immigrant groups (e.g., Turks or North Africans in European countries, who are often referred to as "guest workers") are given the blame for economic and social problems, and thus, have to deal with signals of rejection and non-belonging (cf. Zick, Pettigrew, & Wagner, 2008), whereas other immigrant groups are perceived more positively (e.g., Asians in the US, who are regarded as rather competent; cf. Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). While it is plausible that those immigrant groups, who are confronted with negative expectations concerning their intellectual abilities, are as likely to react to stereotype threat in similar ways as other stereotyped groups, it is also clear that the category 'immigrant' may be more heterogeneous as well as less stable and clear-cut than other group-defining categories (e.g., gender). Due to differences in the trajectory of different immigrant groups, stereotype threat effects can diverge, for example in the special cases of Caribbean immigrants to the US (Deaux et al., 2007) or Asian Americans in the US (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999).[1] It hence may be particularly important to consider individual differences—or moderator effects—for immigrants. Individual differences of interest in this work are residence culture identity strength and ethnic identity strength, both being relevant aspects of the social identity of immigrants (cf. Berry, 1997, 2001).

[1] Deaux et al. (2007) showed that the duration of time spent in a country does not necessarily improve the situation for immigrants. It was shown that while there were no differences between the test performances of first- and second-generation Caribbean students under neutral testing conditions, it differed significantly under conditions of stereotype threat. First-generation students increased their performance, while second-generation Afro-Caribbeans were more rather than less susceptible to stereotype threat and showed decreased performance. The occurrence of stereotype threat effects in second-generation Afro-Caribbean students might be the result of assimilating to US culture; they show similar characteristics to African American students, supposedly because of being continuously stereotyped as Black (Deaux et al., 2007). In contrast to the performance inhibiting effects of stereotype threat due to negative ability stereotypes against one's group, it was also shown that positive stereotypes regarding certain immigrant groups, for example high math ability among Asian Americans, can enhance their performance (e.g., Shih et al., 1999).

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