



# The interaction of vertical collectivism and stereotype activation on the performance of Turkish-origin high school students



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## ABSTRACT

The activation of negative stereotypes in achievement situations can lead to decreased performance (i.e., *stereotype threat effect*). Research has shown that stereotype threat effects increase when performance outcomes become more important. Cultural value orientations such as vertical collectivism can influence the perceived importance of performance outcomes. For this reason, we investigate the interaction between vertical collectivism and the activation of negative stereotypes on the academic performance of migrant students. More precisely, we argue that the more Turkish-origin students endorse vertical collectivism (i.e., the willingness to sacrifice individual interests for their group's interests), the more they try to meet their group's high achievement expectations after negative stereotype activation. This increases performance pressure and thus impairs their performance. We further argue that vertical collectivism increases migrants students' motivation to temporarily join a high performing outgroup in order to achieve high performance outcomes in the future. An experiment conducted in classrooms ( $N = 94$ ) with Turkish-origin students confirmed our hypotheses. Implications for dealing with stereotype threat in educational contexts are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges in modern schools is to create learning environments that allow all students to optimally develop their individual abilities (e.g., Corno & Snow, 1986; Jurik, Gröschner, & Seidel, 2014). Creating optimal learning environments can be difficult because students differ not only in terms of their cognitive abilities and motivation, but also in their cultural backgrounds. In Germany, the number of migrant students has increased steadily in recent years (Eurostat, 2015); Turkish-origin migrants are the largest ethnic minority group (18.5%; Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Statistical Office], 2012). Turks were recruited by the German government as unskilled workers in the 1960s and often settled in Germany (Worbs, 2003). Today, children of Turkish-origin migrants perform more poorly in standardized tests than Germans and other migrant groups (e.g., Bos, 2012; Klieme et al., 2010; Mok, Martiny, Gleibs, Keller, & Froehlich, 2016) and are less likely to attain higher education (e.g., Kristen, Reimer, & Kogan, 2008). On the one hand this underperformance is surprising, because research shows that the Turkish culture strongly values achievement motivation (e.g.,

Phalet & Claeys, 1993; Verkuyten, Thijs, & Canatan, 2001), and high achievement motivation and good performance outcomes are expected from Turkish students by their families (Phalet & Claeys, 1993). On the other hand, research has shown that negative stereotypes about Turkish-origin migrants are widespread in Germany and can hinder the performance of this group (Froehlich, Martiny, Deaux, Goetz, & Mok, 2016; Martiny, Mok, Deaux, & Froehlich, 2015). For this reason, in the present work we aim at examining the interplay of cultural values and the activation of negative stereotypes on the performance and coping strategies of Turkish-origin students in German high schools.

### 1.1. Negative stereotypes and their effects on performance

In Germany, negative stereotypes about Turkish-origin migrants are widespread (Asbrock, 2010; Froehlich, Martiny, Deaux, & Mok, 2016; Kahraman & Knoblich, 2000). Research has shown that the activation of negative stereotypes in performance situations can hinder the performance of targeted group members (*stereotype threat effect*; e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995). This effect has also been shown for Turkish-

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origin students in Germany (Froehlich, Martiny, Deaux, Goetz et al., 2016; Martiny et al., 2015) and thus might contribute to the observed performance differences between German and Turkish-origin students (e.g., Martiny, Götz, & Keller, 2013; Schauenburg, 2011; Schofield, 2006; Strasser, 2012). However, the effect of stereotype threat for Turkish-origin students may depend on individual students' cultural value orientation. Thus, in the present work, we aim to extend earlier research by taking into account the cultural value orientation of Turkish-origin students as an important individual difference when investigating the effect of stereotype activation on performance.

### 1.2. Cultural values and vertical collectivism

Cultural values refer to “shared conceptions of what is good or desirable in the culture” (Schwartz, 2006, p. 139). One important aspect for characterizing differences in cultural values pertains to how individuals define themselves and their relationships with others (Brewer & Chen, 2007). Whereas in most Western countries one's self-definition is based on individual autonomy (i.e., individualism), in most Eastern cultures one's self-definition is mainly based on social embeddedness (i.e., collectivism; Brewer & Chen, 2007; Varnum, Grossmann, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2010). Thus, for people endorsing collectivistic values, interpersonal connectedness and social belonging are important (Güngör, Karasawa, Boiger, Dinçer, & Mesquita, 2014) and social behavior is best predicted by group norms, perceived duties, and obligations (Miller, 1994). However, not all collectivistic cultures endorse all aspects of collectivism to the same extent. For example, the Japanese culture highlights conformity, whereas the Turkish culture stresses relatedness (Güngör et al., 2014). Relatedness means that people think of themselves as connected to significant others and try to fulfill their expectations (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). This focus on fulfilling the expectations of others and adapting one's behavior to group norms is best represented by the cultural value orientation of *vertical collectivism* (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). In detail, vertical collectivism describes the willingness of a group member to sacrifice individual interests for the sake of the group's interests, especially when a higher-status group member requires him or her to do so (Komarraju & Cokley, 2008). As mentioned earlier, research has shown that the Turkish culture strongly values achievement motivation and Turkish families expect high achievement motivation and good performance outcomes from their children (e.g., Phalet & Claeys, 1993; Verkuyten et al., 2001). Meeting the group's and family's high achievement expectations is important for Turkish-origin students because the fulfillment of these expectations is associated with loyalty (Phalet & Claeys, 1993). Thus, Turkish-origin students who strongly endorse vertical collectivism should be motivated to fulfill the high achievement expectations of their family and ethnic ingroup. Because vertical collectivism is an important value orientation in the Turkish culture, in the present work we will investigate the interplay between vertical collectivism and stereotype activation on the performance of Turkish-origin migrant students.

### 1.3. The interaction of vertical collectivism and stereotype activation on performance

To predict how vertical collectivism may moderate the effect of negative stereotype activation on performance, one first needs to consider the mechanisms underlying the stereotype threat effect. Even though researchers have not yet fully agreed upon the underlying processes, empirical evidence shows that the activation of negative stereotypes can increase distracting cognitions (e.g., worry, rumination, and mind-wandering; Mrazek et al., 2011; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008) and thereby occupy working memory capacity. This leads to reduced working memory resources for the task at hand (e.g., Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012; Schmader & Johns, 2003) and thus decreases performance, especially in difficult tasks (Keller, 2007). In line

with this, research has shown that some individuals who face negative stereotypes show an increased motivation to work on the task, but this increased motivation does not necessarily result in a positive performance outcome (e.g., Jamieson & Harkins, 2007). In addition, research has found that stereotype threat effects increase along with the importance of the performance situation for the stereotyped group member. For example, the more important the group membership (i.e., group identification) or the performance domain (i.e., domain identification) is for the stereotyped group member, the more the performance is hampered by the activation of negative stereotypes (Aronson et al., 1999; Schmader, 2002). This is the case because in a stereotype threat situation the value attached to the group or the domain adds to the pressure to perform well, which increases distracting cognitions and thereby impairs performance. In accordance with this earlier research, we argue that migrants who endorse high levels of vertical collectivism will be especially worried about the negative stereotypes that are activated in a stereotype threat situation. This should be the case because they fear that their performance outcome will reflect poorly on their group and show that they do not endorse the values (i.e., achievement motivation) of their group. Thus, vertical collectivism should increase pressure, leading to more distracting cognitions and subsequently less working memory capacity, resulting in poor performance in difficult tasks. For this reason, we postulate that the more vertical collectivism Turkish-origin migrants endorse, the more their performance will be hindered by the activation of negative stereotypes.

### 1.4. The interaction of vertical collectivism and stereotype activation on coping strategies

In addition to investigating the effects of stereotype activation and vertical collectivism on performance, we are also interested in the combined effect of the two variables on strategies to cope with negative stereotypes. In line with Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002), we argue that making a negative stereotype salient in a performance situation is a form of social identity threat. According to social identity theory, people try to cope with threats in order to maintain a positive self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). As people endorsing a collectivistic value orientation feel especially connected to their group, they should perceive the activation of a negative group-related stereotype as a major threat to their positive collective self-esteem. Earlier research has shown that one of the most prevalent strategies to cope with social identity threats is to leave the group and join the higher-status outgroup when group boundaries are permeable (i.e., individual mobility; Ellemers, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990). In the present work, we sought to investigate the interaction of negative stereotypes and vertical collectivism on motivation to use this coping strategy by providing participants with the opportunity to temporarily join a high-performing outgroup after working on a performance test under stereotype threat. This would potentially improve their own performance outcomes in the future. This mobility motivation may be seen in an individual's desire to represent a successful outgroup or to collaborate with that outgroup as part of a collective team (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). As outlined above, achievement motivation is an important value for many Turkish-origin migrants and is expected from Turkish children by their parents (e.g., Phalet & Claeys, 1993). Employing such a strategy to fulfill expectations of achievement should therefore be in line with strong vertical collectivism endorsement. Moreover, findings by Van Laar, Bleeker, Ellemers, and Meijer (2014) have shown that a group member's individual upward mobility (i.e., toward a successful outgroup) is accepted by one's original group when it leads to benefits for their group. Taken together, we argue that Turkish-origin students who strongly endorse vertical collectivism will try to fulfill their group's achievement expectations and therefore will be motivated to choose a temporary individual mobility strategy after stereotype threat.

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