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Implicit Black identification and stereotype threat among African American students

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ABSTRACT

This study detects statistically significant and substantively large stereotype threat effects that would remain hidden if Black identification were measured only explicitly. Three hundred and fifty-one students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were tested on an implicit Black identification measure in an online survey, and stereotype threat was manipulated beforehand by randomly presenting one of three introductory screens: an all-White research team (high-threat condition), an all-Black research team (low-threat condition), or no team picture (control condition). The implicit Black identification measure predicted pro-Black political opinions (regarding affirmative action and government aid to Blacks, slavery reparations, and the Racial Resentment Scale), high performance on a political knowledge test, and high self-reported political participation. However, under the high-threat condition, Black students with the highest implicit Black identification scores answered 25% fewer political knowledge questions correctly, and reported 25% fewer acts of political participation, compared with students operating under the low-threat conditions.

1. Stereotype threat

1.1. Evidence of stereotype threat among African American students

In stereotype-relevant performance domains, stereotype threat has been demonstrated to systematically disadvantage strongly identified members of groups targeted by derogatory stereotypes (Davis et al., 2006; Steele and Aronson, 1995, 1998). According to Steele (1997), negative stereotypes against a group may threaten group members' perception of their own competence, since people are motivated to appear competent and to avoid conforming to negative stereotypes (Oyserman and Swim, 2001), and these concerns can distract group members from the task at hand and lead to lower performance than might otherwise be achievable. Steele and Aronson (1998) used the example of African Americans, who have long been targeted by derogatory stereotypes regarding academic performance:

> Any test that purports to measure intellectual ability might induce stereotype threat in African-American students. These feelings may interfere with performance in several ways. The emotional arousal that accompanies them can

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> reduce the range of cues that students use to solve test problems. It can divert attention from the task at hand to irrelevant worries. It can also cause self-consciousness or overcautiousness. (p. 404)

Several conditions must be met for stereotype threat effects to occur (Steele and Aronson, 1998): an individual must identify with a group that is negatively stereotyped, that group identity must be made salient by the testing situation, and the task at hand must be perceived as relevant to the stereotype. While group identification and perception of stereotype relevance are characteristic to each individual, the salience of group identity can be experimentally manipulated. For example, Steele and Aronson (1998, study 4) experimentally manipulated the race of the test administrator by having a Black[1] professor administer a test to one random subset of the sample, and a White one administer it to another random subset (see also Blascovich et al., 2001; Danso and Esses, 2001).[2] But even in survey research outside of an academic setting, it is possible to elicit stereotype threat effects by, for example, experimentally manipulating the race of an interviewer in a survey on political knowledge. Davis and Silver (2003) found such race-of-interviewer effects in a telephone survey of adults in the general population. They discovered that African American respondents interviewed by White interviewers scored significantly lower on a series of political knowledge questions than those interviewed by Black interviewers (Davis and Silver, 2003). The present study contributes to the survey research literature the finding that race-of-interviewer effects can occur even in the absence of an interviewer in a self-administered survey. This was done by randomly assigning Black participants in an online survey to one of three welcome screens that either showed a picture of an all-Black research team (low-threat condition), showed a picture of an all-White research team (high-threat condition), or showed no picture of a research team at all (control condition) before asking a series of political knowledge questions.

To provide a particularly conservative test of stereotype threat effects, this study used a self-administered online survey with a relatively subtle experimental manipulation, on a sample of Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Such students have more exposure to counter-stereotypical experiences with African American peers and professors in positions of academic authority and to curricula that focus more on African American matters (Bennett and Xie, 2003), and thus would be expected to be less susceptible to stereotype threat effects.

The strength of stereotype threat can depend on how strongly an individual identifies with a stereotyped group. For example, Davis et al. (2006) used an explicit survey scale and found that individuals who more strongly identify with a group were more prone to stereotype threat effects. Schmader (2002) as well as Kiefer and Sekaquaptewa (2007a) applied explicit survey scales to measure group identification strength in their research on gender-related stereotype threat effects, and the more strongly identified members of a given group tended to experience stronger stereotype threat effects in stereotype-relevant testing situations. The present study measured group identification at the implicit level, and demonstrated significant and substantially large stereotype threat effects that would remain invisible if group identification were to be measured only explicitly.

1.2. Psychological mechanisms of stereotype threat

Two seemingly contradictory mechanisms have been investigated experimentally: distraction of conscious attention from the task (Schmader and Johns, 2003), and focused conscious attention on the task (or “explicit monitoring”; Beilock et al., 2006, p. 1061). Distraction of conscious attention applies to aspects of a task that require conscious attention, such as working memory capacity when solving a difficult math problem (Schmader and Johns, 2003). Focused conscious attention applies to aspects of a task that are so well rehearsed that they have become automatic, such as the sensorimotor coordination of an accomplished golfer (Beilock et al., 2006). In other words, distraction of attention should be the main mechanism of stereotype threat for particularly difficult tasks, and focused conscious attention the main mechanism of stereotype threat for particularly easy ones. What the two mechanisms share is the self-relevance of the stereotype: worries about disconfirming the stereotype may both take up the working memory capacity required to solve difficult problems and focus attention on the automatic aspects of an otherwise easy task. Beilock et al. (2006, p. 1069) wrote: “Given the fact that stereotype threat likely both consumes working memory and prompts individuals to try and control performance, tasks that concurrently load on working memory and rely on proceduralized skills might be susceptible to both effects at once.”

Compared with answering the difficult math questions investigated by Schmader and Johns (2003), it should be relatively easy for college students to perform well on a political knowledge test of basic civics questions. However, students may not be sufficiently well rehearsed on the material to bring it to mind as automatically as the experienced golfers investigated by Beilock et al. (2006) could apply their putting skills. Performance on such a test may thus involve a combination of both working memory and proceduralized skills. Similarly, reporting one's own political behavior should be easy, and some salient

[1] In order to emphasize the socially constructed character of the race concept, we capitalize names of racial and ethnic groups even if they refer to colors (e.g., Black, White, Black Americans, White Americans).

[2] Stereotype threat is not limited to African Americans or academic testing. For example, Stone et al. (1999) found that Whites performed worse on tasks described as assessing natural athletic ability. Furthermore, stereotypes do not always impair performance; Shih et al. (1999) demonstrated that female Asian students showed diminished performance on quantitative tests only when their female identity was made salient. However, when their Asian identity was made salient, they performed significantly better than students under the female-identity or control conditions. This effect was replicated among children as young as 5 years old (Ambady et al., 2001).