



Combating stereotype threat: The effect of self-affirmation on women's intellectual performance [☆]

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Abstract

The present studies were designed to investigate the effects of self-affirmation on the performance of women under stereotype threat. In Study 1, women performed worse on a difficult math test when it was described as diagnostic of math intelligence (stereotype threat condition) than in a non-diagnostic control condition. However, when women under stereotype threat affirmed a valued attribute, they performed at levels comparable to men and to women in the no-threat control condition. In Study 2, men and women worked on a spatial rotation test and were told that women were stereotyped as inferior on such tasks. Approximately half the women and men self-affirmed before beginning the test. Self-affirmation improved the performance of women under threat, but did not affect men's performance.

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Introduction

A growing body of research on stereotype threat has demonstrated that stereotypes not only exert their influence by affecting how people are perceived and treated, but also by directly affecting those to whom they apply. According to Steele and his colleagues (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002), stereotypes can constrain behavior when a member of a stereotyped group is placed in a situation in which poor performance could be evaluated as evidence that the individual possesses stereotypic group deficiencies. This situational "stereotype threat" then may disrupt the individual's performance and produce the feared deficient performance.

In an initial test of this idea, Steele and Aronson (1995) demonstrated that African Americans, a group stereotyped as intellectually inferior, performed significantly worse on a difficult verbal ability test compared to White students, but only when the test was described as a measure of intelligence. Thus, participants underperformed when placed in a situation that made relevant their negatively stereotyped identity. This finding has since produced a flurry of research demonstrating that relevant stereotypes can diminish performance of members of other stereotyped groups, such as women (Brown & Josephs, 1999; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999), the economically underprivileged (Croizet & Claire, 1998), Black and White athletes (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999) and White men (Aronson et al., 1999).

However, less work has focused on how individuals might overcome the threat. In one study, African American college students appeared to overcome consequences

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of their negative intellectual stereotype—they received better grades and were more engaged in school—when they were encouraged to view intelligence as malleable instead of an ability that cannot be modified (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002). Two sets of studies also suggest that stereotype threat performance deficits can be alleviated when people think about members of their stereotyped group who are competent role models (Marx & Roman, 2002; McIntyre, Paulson, & Lord, 2003). The studies we present join these efforts and investigate the efficacy of self-affirmation as a psychological strategy that might work to alleviate the performance deficits found under stereotype threat.

Self-affirmation

According to self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988; Steele & Liu, 1983), achieving and maintaining self-integrity and a sense of self-worth is a primary source of human motivation. Furthermore, consistent with early theory and research on compensatory processes (e.g., Allport, 1961; Murphy, 1947), self-affirmation theory proposes that there is a great deal of flexibility in the way people can achieve the need to see themselves as decent, moral, and competent when faced with information that would imply otherwise (e.g., Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993). Research derived from self-affirmation theory has shown that defensive reactions to situations that pose a threat to self-integrity can be reduced or eliminated by focusing on an alternative path to meeting overarching self-esteem needs (i.e., self-affirming). Following self-affirmation, for example, people seem less concerned with failure on a purported intelligence test (Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999) are less apt to rationalize behavior through attitude change (Steele & Liu, 1983), and are more open to acknowledging threats to personal health and mortality (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). In sum, self-affirmation findings are consistent with the idea that self-integrity is fundamental—that when threatened, it is not the particular threat per se that is the problem, but the implications of the threat for one's global sense of self-integrity (Steele, 1988).

In like fashion, a threatened sense of self-integrity is also posited to be a crucial component in generating stereotype threat. As Steele, Aronson and others have noted (e.g., Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998; Steele et al., 2002), stereotype threat is a phenomenon most likely to affect individuals whose self is invested in the stereotyped performance domain. Consistent with this idea, Stone et al. (1999) found that White participants who were told that a task was diagnostic of an ability for which they were negatively stereotyped (“natural athletic ability”) performed worse than participants in the control condition *only* if general performance in athletics was important to their sense of identity. Research by Aronson et al. (1999; Study 2) also reported a similar

identification effect with White men in the domain of math ability.

When linked to self-integrity, performance is likely imbued with exaggerated significance and so the possibility of failure is of exaggerated concern. Under stereotype threat, people's sense of competence and integrity is threatened from the outset as their behavior, if less than perfect, might be construed and judged in a stereotypical and negative light. And it is this threatened sense of self-integrity that is most likely their undoing. The mechanism or process by which performance deteriorates may be due to any number of, or combination of phenomena, such as reduced working memory capacity (Schmader & Johns, 2003), arousal (O'Brien & Crandall, 2003), apprehension (Aronson et al., 1999), or implicit anxiety. But the point we wish to make is that at its inception, stereotype threat comes from a threat to self-integrity, from the stereotype implying one's potential for inferiority or incompetence. Thus, we wished to determine whether stereotype threat effects could be reduced or eliminated by attacking its apparent root with a self-affirmation induction. We hypothesized that by directly addressing the need to maintain a sense of self-integrity through affirming a valued characteristic that is not under threat, we would reduce or eliminate the impact of the stereotype threat, allowing people to more fruitfully deal with the situation and perform better.

Study 1

Study 1 was designed to test whether self-affirmation would eliminate decrements in women's math performance resulting from the threat posed by the negative stereotype that women are mathematically inferior. To test this hypothesis, male and female students completed a difficult math test under one of two stereotype threat conditions. In the control condition, participants completed a math test framed as a non-diagnostic measure. In the stereotype threat condition, participants completed the same difficult test framed as a measure of math intelligence. To assess whether self-affirmation would reduce the effect of stereotype threat on performance, one group of women under stereotype threat was given the opportunity to affirm a valued attribute before taking the test. A second group under stereotype threat served as a comparison for the intervention strategy and wrote about an attribute they did not value before taking the test. We predicted that women who were self-affirmed would perform as well as women not under stereotype threat.

Method

Participants and design

The participants were 77 female and 70 male introductory psychology students who completed the study

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