

OVERVIEW: Stanford Professor Geoffrey Cohen administered a self-affirmation intervention to reduce the psychological threat African American students experience in an educational setting where they are being evaluated. The intervention reduced the racial achievement gap by 40% across two randomized control trials.

BACKGROUND

Research suggests that students experience a reduction in potential performance if their identity is associated negatively with the context at hand.¹ For example, Steele (2010) found that, after controlling for existing content knowledge and performance, female students, who were told that a math assessment “did not show any gender differences”, performed **as well as male students** and better than female students who were not told this statement. The female students who were not provided the gender equal prompt experienced “stereotype threat”; fear of confirming the stereotype that “girls are bad at math,” and consequently experienced psychological stress that depressed their potential performance. Cohen extends this research to identify interventions to reduce the stereotype threat that some students may experience in the classroom.

INTERVENTION

Self-affirmations relieve the stress from threatening performance situations by providing individuals with the opportunity to reaffirm their self-worth. **In this study, seventh grade students – approximately half European American and half African American-- were asked to write about their most important values in a fifteen**

minute writing exercise at the start of the academic year. The control group was asked to choose their least important values and write about why those chosen values may be important to someone else.

RESULTS

Academic performance was measured on a 4.0 scale (i.e., A=4.0, B= 3.0, etc). Therefore, a 1.0 increase/decrease would be equivalent to one letter grade. In all levels of analysis, European Americans did not experience a significant increase/decrease between treatment and control groups. Similarly, the control group of African American students also did not experience a significant effect.

European Americans, in either group, did not experience any significant increase or decrease in academic performance.

On the other hand, African Americans who wrote about their most important values earned higher fall-term grades (+0.34) in the course where the self-affirmation intervention was administered. The treatment group also had a significantly smaller percentage (9%) of African American students performing poorly (D or lower) than the control group (20%). **Given that the average performance gap in the intervened classroom between African**

¹ Steele, C. M. (2010). *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect us and what we can do (Issues Of Our Time)*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Americans and European Americans was 0.75 grade points in the previous years, the treatment reduced the racial achievement gap by 0.30 point, a roughly 40% reduction. When looking at which African American students benefited from the treatment, nearly 70% of all ability levels experienced an increase.

If the affirmation truly reduced feelings of psychological threat, then a shift in outcomes would also be observed beyond the intervened classroom, which was found to be the case. African American students who received the self-affirmation intervention earned a higher GPA, approximately a 0.23 point increase. Again, European Americans did not experience any significant change.

The treatment was found to reduce the average performance gap between African Americans and European Americans by 0.30 grade points in the intervened classroom, reducing the existing achievement gap by 40%.

EXPLANATION: Why did such a small intervention have such a large effect? The study posits possible explanations. First, they noticed that the control students who performed poorly before the intervention, performed even worse at the end of the year, which was not present in the treatment group. The intervention may have ***interrupted a “negative recursive cycle”***

between psychological threat and poor performance, where high level of threat leads to poor performance then poor performance increases level of threat. Similarly, a small reduction in psychological threat may have set off a positive cycle where ***improved performance lessens psychological threat*** and so forth. This was seen in the treatment group where students experienced an upward performance trend and early poor performance did not predict worse performance later in the year.

The results rested on a series of existing preconditions in the school context (adequate material, social, and psychological resources) to support and maintain positive outcomes.

Third, the large intervention effect may have been an ***accumulated sum of small performance increases*** on assignments over the year. Lastly, the results may have rested on a series of ***existing preconditions*** in the school context. The school had adequate material, social, and psychological resources and support to permit and sustain the positive academic outcomes. Students also had the skills to perform better. Thus, the intervention may have served as a missing element in a preexisting context set for success.