

REDUCING THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP: A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

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The drive for self-integrity—seeing oneself as good, virtuous, and efficacious—is a fundamental human motivation. Membership in valued social groups is often a major source of individual's sense of self-integrity. Consequently, negative characterizations of one's group can prove threatening. When chronic stress is created at school or work, it burdens people with an extra psychological threat not experienced by those who are not minorities.

This research study was conducted to test the feasibility of buffering people against threat and stress by allowing them to reaffirm their self-integrity. Self-affirmations, such as reflections on personally important, over-arching values, such as the importance of family or a self-defining skill, can buttress their self-worth and serve to alleviate the stress, thereby enhancing performance.

In a normal school setting negative recursive cycles occur, where psychological threat and poor performance feed off one another, leading to ever-worsening performance. This downward spiral effect is indicated by the steep decline in African Americans' academic performance.

The research reported here tested whether a self-affirmation intervention to lessen threat would enhance academic achievement of negatively stereotyped minority students. Participants were middle school students from middle to lower-middle class families. Control and experimental groups were set up at the beginning of the year. Those in the experimental group were asked to indicate their most important value, while those in the control group were asked to indicate their least important value. Those in the experimental group were then asked to write a paragraph about why their selected value was important to them. Those in the control group were asked to write why the value they selected might be important to someone else.

Findings demonstrate that alleviating psychological threat can improve intellectual achievement in a real-world environment. Targeted students in the experimental groups who engaged in the positive intervention ended up performing significantly better than those in the control groups. Unlike most other interventions, this benefited the targeted students, including those most at risk, reducing group-based inequality while not adversely affecting non-targeted students. Researchers concluded that even brief psychological interventions can help reduce what many view as an intractable disparity in real-world academic outcomes.