Stereotyping affects school engagement

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When Muslim students believe that they are being treated equally, they become more engaged and do better on school tests.

As cultural diversity increases in today’s schools, immigrant children find themselves vulnerable to negative stereotyping, social exclusion, and discrimination. This often affects their engagement with school and their educational performance.

My colleagues and I conducted a study in Belgium in which we examined negative experiences of Turkish and Moroccan adolescents, most of whom are Muslim, and the consequences of these experiences for their academic engagement and performance. Focusing on adolescence is important because this is the age at which young people’s views on society and diversity are formed.

We found that minority adolescents disengaged and underperformed on a test when they perceived discrimination in school or were faced with stereotype threat, i.e. negative stereotypes about their group’s competence.

However, when minority students perceived that they were being treated equally or fairly in school, they were more engaged and performed better on the test. Equitable treatment appeared to protect them from the detrimental impacts of discrimination and stereotype threat.

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For this study we selected random samples of Muslim adolescents (mean age = 14.5) and their majority group peers in the same classrooms of 47 Belgian secondary schools to participate in a large field experiment. Out of the 2,022 participating adolescents, 735 were Muslim. Students were randomly assigned either to an experimental condition, in which they were exposed to stereotype threat (272 Muslim minority and 648 majority students), or to a control condition (425 Muslim minority and 590 majority students) prior to taking a non-verbal performance test. They subsequently reported to what extent they had disengaged from the test.

To manipulate stereotype threat, we made their minority identity salient prior to the test by asking questions about ethnicity and religion. The idea behind this manipulation is simple: Answering questions about their ethnicity and religion would remind them of commonly held negative
stereotypes about their group’s competence. In the control condition, they first took the performance test and then answered the questions about ethnicity and religion.

“Perceptions of equal treatment can protect minority adolescents from disengagement.”

The analysis confirmed our expectations: Compared with those in the control condition, minority students in the experimentally manipulated stereotype-threat condition were more likely to disengage, which in turn had a negative impact on their performance. Moreover, we found that the performance of older students was hurt more by discrimination, but also benefited more from fairness and equality cues at school. We did not find any stereotype effects on majority students’ engagement or performance.

Thus, stereotype threat and perceived personal discrimination at school combine to undermine minority success, whereas perceived equal treatment provides a buffer against such threat effects. For the first time, we have shown how personal and peer perceptions of equal treatment can protect minority adolescents from disengagement in the face of stereotype threat.

“Introducing measures to promote fairness and equal treatment in schools could help to break this recursive cycle of devaluation and underachievement, thereby promoting a more inclusive and egalitarian society.”

The widespread prevalence of discrimination and negative stereotypes faced by many minority groups in today’s world conveys a message of devaluation, paving the way for academic disengagement and underachievement. Our study shows that introducing measures to promote fairness and equal treatment in schools could help to break this recursive cycle of devaluation and underachievement, thereby promoting a more inclusive and egalitarian society.


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