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## The Effects of Social Psychological Concepts on Academic Performance

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## The Effects of Social Psychological Concepts on Academic Performance

Nicole Zomer\*

Stereotype threat, motivation, self-handicapping, and self-esteem are factors that are found to affect student education and academic ability. The following literature review examines each factor individually and addresses the costs and benefits relating to education. Stereotype threat and self-handicapping are found to affect academic performance negatively. Intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation are also found to influence academic ability. Intrinsic motivation serves as a positive influence, while extrinsic motivation is found to affect academic ability negatively. The type of motivation a student develops depends on the learning environment of the student, including the type of encouragement or pressure a student receives from parents, teachers, and peers. Different levels of self-esteem in students are also related to different levels of achievement, academic perseverance, and social anxiety. The factors examined in this literature review address concerns for biased and unsupportive classrooms. It also considers future implications of this psychological research to improve student education and promote more successful learning environments.

An education system is of utmost importance to youth's instruction in today's society. Through academic achievement, students work hard to reach their career goals and to ensure a successful future for themselves. Good grades help with admission to prestigious schools and career options are widely available for those who persevere in their efforts to achieve success. It is, therefore, very important that students can learn and study in an environment that allows them to attain the best grades possible. Unfortunately, there are numerous factors that interfere with academic achievement and may hinder student performance. Social psychological research has looked at stereotype threat, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-handicapping, and low self-esteem as some factors that can influence how well a student does in school. These factors can negatively affect any student if the educational system does not strive to eliminate them from the learning environment.

### Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat is a social psychological concept that affects members of various disadvantaged groups. It occurs when these members, who are aware of the stereotype that their particular group performs poorly in academics and other personally relevant milieus, try to disprove it. Unfortunately, their attempt tends to backfire because the anxiety that individuals face about disproving the stereotype actually leads to behaviour that confirms the stereotype. This anxiety reduces memory capacity, especially when the individual faces a problem of personal relevance. The reduced memory capacity causes the individual to remember less of the material and not perform very well on an academic test, which confirms the above-mentioned stereotype. According to Olson, Breckler, and Wiggins (2008), individuals facing this pressure do not perform as well as they could have. They cannot think as clearly while worrying

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about confirming a stereotype; the worry actually impairs their performance. Black students are one of the disadvantaged groups affected by stereotype threat. In a study conducted by Steele and Aronson (1995), both Black and White students were tested on the verbal section of the Graduate Record Examination. Those in the stereotype threat condition were told that the test would produce group differences and that they would receive feedback. Students in the control condition were not told this. Black students performed just as well as White students in the control condition. However, when Blacks were reminded of the stereotype in the stereotype threat condition, they performed significantly worse than Whites. The White students in the stereotype threat condition were not affected by the stereotype. Similarly, Keller and Dauenheimer (2003) found that women are also affected by stereotype threat, especially with regards to male dominated subjects, such as mathematics and science. Women are seen as less competent in these subjects. In their study, Keller and Dauenheimer (2003) tested boys and girls in mathematics. In the stereotype threat condition, the students were told that the test produced gender differences. Girls in this condition performed significantly worse than boys. They also attempted fewer questions and rated the test as being much more difficult than boys did. The researchers concluded that the girls knew they would not perform as well as boys in a male dominant subject and therefore confirmed the stereotype. The boys performed much better as a result of receiving a stereotypical boost; they knew that they were perceived as better in mathematics and therefore performed well.

Fortunately, there are many steps teachers can take to reduce stereotype threat in a classroom. Smith and Hung (2008) suggest that educators should be careful to make the learning environment as unbiased as possible. These suggestions include removing any stereotypical posters from the walls and being careful not to imply that any tests produce personal differences. Teachers are also urged to construct challenging, but not too difficult, tests to avoid perpetuating a belief that a student is incompetent. It is important for students in a disadvantaged group to realize that success is closely related to their ability and hard work, not to any stereotypes. Role models also provide a good influence for disadvantaged students. Marx and Roman (2002) found that when a female mathematics instructor administered the test to a group of boys and girls, there was no difference in the test scores. Females performed just as well as males because they were positively influenced by the role model. They believed they could also succeed when they saw another successful woman. Therefore, stereotype threat can be eliminated in a classroom to provide a safe and unbiased study environment.

### **Motivation**

Another factor that influences academic achievement is motivation. A highly motivated student will work hard in school in order to receive good grades. There are two ways students can be motivated, although one is substantially better than the other. If students are intrinsically motivated, they will work hard on a task because it is enjoyable and fun. Intrinsic motivation makes the task gratifying and rewarding for individuals. On the other hand, if students are extrinsically motivated, they

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will strive to do well because there is some external reward waiting for them. One performs the task not for oneself but in order to get a prize or reward. This second type of motivation provides fewer benefits for an individual (Olson, Breckler, & Wiggins, 2008). In an article written by Simon A. Lei (2010), a number of pros and cons are listed for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Individuals who are intrinsically motivated take initiative when completing tasks and do not have to be bribed by a reward. This type of motivation is positively correlated with high academic achievement, a positive self-image, as well as ongoing perseverance through difficulties, and is negatively correlated with such emotions as anxiety, depression, and frustration (Lei, 2010). These students tend to enhance their learning skills and apply their knowledge to the outside world. They work hard to reach their goals and are not discouraged by failure. They also gain pleasure from completing enjoyable tasks and are not burdened by any pressure that may come from an external goal or prize. These are the students who excel academically and succeed in reaching their goals. Conversely, extrinsically motivated students only work hard to achieve an external reward. They are motivated by this idea that hard work will always be rewarded and therefore do not experience much joy in the task itself. They only perform the task to get a prize and may even stop halfway through if a prize is no longer available. In order for these students to be motivated, there must always be an incentive for them to pursue academic goals. Rewards have to be offered frequently or students will lose interest. As compared to intrinsically motivated individuals, extrinsically motivated

students are not as satisfied with their student life and have lower degrees of self-esteem and self-actualization. These students are less cooperative and can become more frustrated in an academic situation when there are no rewards offered. They also tend to have a prejudice towards intrinsically motivated students (Lei, 2010).

To avoid or circumvent extrinsic motivation, students must be careful of the overjustification effect. This effect occurs when individuals receive a reward for performing a task and decide that they only performed the task because of that reward. One concludes that the task was not enjoyable intrinsically because of the reward when it potentially could have been gratifying if the reward was not present. This effect can occur when students are constantly given prizes by teachers for completing homework or assignments. Students infer that they must only be doing homework because of that reward and not because it is enjoyable or personally gratifying. Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett (1973) demonstrated this effect in their study with nursery school children. They provided children with fancy markers and told one group of children that they would receive an award if they played with the markers. The other group of children was not informed of an award. The researchers found that the children who were not promised an award played with the markers many more times than the children who were expecting an award. Children who were promised an award played less with the pens. Thus, the expectation, once satisfied, stopped motivating the children to play with the markers – a result referred to as the overjustification effect. The other group of children, however, continued to play with the markers many times because

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they were not motivated by the expectation of an award. They were intrinsically motivated and saw the markers as toys and not just a way of getting a prize. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to teach students to be intrinsically motivated. Teachers should set goals for students to reach in order to teach them academic skills and the importance of learning. Rewards should be given very rarely. Only in this way will students learn to take initiative and find satisfaction in learning and achieving high grades. Their academic abilities will not be dependent on some external reward.

### **Self-Handicapping**

A third factor that researchers have studied is the effect of self-handicapping on academic achievement. When individuals self-handicap, they deliberately seek out elements that interfere with academic performance so that there is an excuse available if they fail. By self-handicapping, individuals can use the sought out excuse to justify their failure, thereby preventing others from perceiving it as a reflection of incompetence. Students tend to self-handicap when they have to perform a difficult task or write an exam in which they do not feel confident. By self-handicapping they have an excuse ready in case they do fail. In a study conducted by Berglas and Jones (1978), university students were given a set of difficult analogical reasoning tests to complete. The questions were very hard, so most students constantly had to guess the answer. After completing the test, the instructor notified the students that they actually performed very well. They were also told that the researcher wanted to test the influence of drugs on performance, so the students were told to

take another similar test after ingesting either a drug that would improve performance or a drug that would hinder their performance. The choice of which drug they took was up to the students. The researchers found that most students chose the drug that would impede performance on the next test. The researchers believed these students inferred that they performed well on the first test because of luck and did not want to risk looking incompetent on the second test. Taking the drug that impaired performance allowed the students to have a ready excuse about why they failed the second test, and therefore their failure could not be then blamed on incompetence. Similarly, Ommundsen (2004) found that both males and females self-handicapped approximately the same number of times when it came to physical education. He did observe, however, that boys tended to see themselves as less competent when it came to certain tasks. For example, students were asked to answer a series of questions about how often they self-handicap during a physical education class. The questions elicited self-reports on how often students make up excuses or do not pay attention during a lesson in order to self-handicap. Ommundsen found that students with lower self-esteem wanted to avoid failure, and therefore were more likely to self-handicap. He concluded that self-handicapping is a self-protective method, especially in a physical education class where physical appearance and ability is most noticeable. Students want to protect their image and avoid being humiliated in front of their peers. Self-handicapping would provide the perfect excuse as to why an individual cannot perform well on a certain activity.

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Olson, Breckler, and Wiggins (2008) describe two different types of self-handicapping strategies. The first is referred to as behavioural self-handicapping. This type of self-handicapping actually involves generating a physical excuse or barrier an individual can later blame their failure on. Students partying the night before an exam because they know they cannot do well on the exam is an example of behavioural self-handicapping. The students can later blame the bad exam mark on the fact that they partied the night before instead of attributing it to incompetence. The second type of self-handicapping is called self-reported self-handicapping. In this case, students make up a verbal excuse for bad performance instead of actually creating the physical excuse. Students can tell their peers that they partied the night before when, in fact, they did not. In both cases of self-handicapping, there is an excuse prepared. Researchers have found that both men and women self-reportedly self-handicap an equal number of times, while men are more likely than women to self-handicap behaviourally. Men are found to be more threatened by the idea of failure and, therefore, produce excuses to prevent being viewed as incapable. The stereotypes against women's abilities generate a lower amount of behavioural self-handicapping among females (Janes, 2003). Stereotypical portrayals of women as weaker and helpless without men, especially prevalent in the media, seem to suggest that failure can be expected of the less competent sex. Arguably, women tend to accept the implications of such stereotypes and consequently do not find behavioural self-handicapping as effective.

### **Self-Esteem**

The final factor in academic achievement to be discussed in this paper is self-esteem. Self-esteem can be described as an individual's judgment of his/her own self-worth. People with high self-esteem see themselves positively and have a high opinion of themselves. They feel good about who they are as a person and are rarely influenced by others' views of them. People who have low self-esteem view themselves negatively and are not happy with who they are as a person. They may feel incompetent, disliked, and worthless. They are greatly affected by others' negative comments about them (Lei, 2010). Individuals' self-esteem is usually influenced by the opinion of peers and past experiences where performance was either positive or negative. If individuals constantly face challenges and never succeed, they will start to develop a negative image of the self. As well, if individuals always hear negative comments directed towards them, they may start to believe these comments and internalize them (Olson, Breckler, & Wiggins, 2008). When it comes to academics, an individual's achievement is greatly influenced by one's self-esteem. Students with high self-esteem believe they can achieve good grades and are less likely to blame failure on themselves. They expect to succeed and tend to persevere through hardships. They take on academic tasks hoping to receive praise for their hard work and skills. Students with low self-esteem tend to internalize failure in academic tasks and blame their abilities. They feel very anxious in academic settings because they believe others will judge them on their performance. Overall, they have a very negative view about themselves and their abilities, so they

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tend to stay away from difficult tasks or activities that may make them look even worse (Olson, Breckler, & Wiggins, 2008).

Self-esteem is also found to affect the social psychological factors mentioned earlier. For example, an individual with low self-esteem is more likely to be anxious and succumb to stereotype threat. The result of this combination further influences a loss of confidence and a negative belief in ability (Smith & Hung, 2008). These factors, in turn, influence the frequency of self-handicapping an individual employs. Students with low self-esteem self-handicap more often than students with high self-esteem. They are not confident in their abilities, so they constantly feel they need an excuse to protect their image (Ommundsen, 2004). Similarly, individuals with low self-esteem were found to be extrinsically motivated when performing academic tasks. These students have high frustration and anxiety levels and low satisfaction when it comes to their academic abilities. They only tend to feel better about themselves when they are rewarded with a prize (Lei, 2010). Therefore, high self-esteem is one of the paramount factors that determine whether an individual excels in academics. It is of great importance that educators take the time to promote healthy self-esteem and help students build a positive image of their self-worth and abilities.

In summation, for students to be successful at school, stereotype threat, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-handicapping, and self-esteem levels need to be addressed in academic settings. All educational systems should work hard to eliminate these threats to

ensure that every individual has a fair chance to demonstrate ability and attain good grades. Since educating students is very important to the future of any society, these social psychological concepts need to be considered in order for educators to provide an unbiased learning environment for all individuals. All students should feel equal and competent in the classroom. Stereotypes should be disproved and all stereotypical material eliminated from the learning environment. Positive motivation should also be emphasized. Students perform best when guided by positive role models who encourage good behaviour and ability. Also, encouraging students to learn and pursue their interests without any rewards will help students excel academically. Then, they will not only see themselves as successful in school but will also have higher levels of self-esteem. Future research in this area can also be beneficial to examine how students of different ages are affected by the above-mentioned psychological concepts. What is more, exploring stress and physical health as influential variables in one's academic performance and self-esteem should also prove worthwhile. Finally, looking at individual factors, such as mental health, personality, culture and ethnicity may also be worth pursuing as they may explain why some individuals struggle academically and some do not. Future research could allow for the construction of a more supportive and accepting learning environment. Having the advantage of such an environment, students would then be more likely to succeed and achieve high academic goals, as well as gain confidence in their competence and acquire higher levels of self-esteem.

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