



Self-affirmation reduces the socioeconomic attainment gap in schools in England

Ian Robert Hadden^{1,2*} , Matthew John Easterbrook² ,
Marlon Nieuwenhuis² , Kerry Jane Fox³  and Paul Dolan¹ 

¹London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

²University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

³University of Brighton, UK

Background. Studies in the United States show that school students from some ethnic backgrounds are susceptible to stereotype threat, that this undermines their academic performance, and that a series of virtually zero-cost self-affirmation writing exercises can reduce these adverse effects. In England, however, socioeconomic status (SES) is a much stronger predictor of academic success than is ethnic background.

Aims. This study investigates whether self-affirmation writing exercises can help close the SES attainment gap in England by increasing the academic performance of low-SES (but not higher-SES) school students.

Sample. Our sample consisted of students aged 11–14 in a secondary school in southern England ($N = 562$); of these, 128 were eligible for free school meals, a proxy for low SES.

Methods. Students completed three short writing exercises throughout one academic year: those randomly assigned to an affirmed condition wrote about values that were important to them, and those assigned to a control condition wrote about a neutral topic.

Results. On average, the low-SES students had lower academic performance and reported experiencing more stereotype threat than their higher-SES peers. The self-affirmation raised the academic performance of the low-SES students by 0.38 standard deviations but did not significantly affect the performance of the higher-SES students, thus reducing the SES performance gap by 62%. The self-affirmation also reduced the level of stress reported by the low-SES students.

Conclusions. The benefits of this virtually zero-cost intervention compare favourably with those of other interventions targeting the SES academic attainment gap.

Self-affirmation is a theoretically precise psychological intervention that has been shown to improve the academic performance of students who are negatively stereotyped and thus experience stereotype threat. There is extensive evidence that stereotype threat can inhibit the ability of members of negatively stereotyped groups to perform well at relevant tasks (see meta-analyses Lamont, Swift, & Abrams, 2015; Picho, Rodriguez, & Finnie, 2013). Studies in the United States have suggested that stereotype threat can significantly reduce the academic performance of Black and Latino school students and is estimated to

*Correspondence should be addressed to Ian Robert Hadden, School of Psychology, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QH, UK (email: i.hadden@sussex.ac.uk).

account for 20–28% of the attainment gap between these groups and European Americans (Walton & Spencer, 2009). We are interested in how stereotype threat translates from schools in the United States to those in England. This is a crucial question because, in contrast with the United States, poor educational outcomes in England are associated much more strongly with low socioeconomic status (SES) than they are with ethnicity.

To investigate stereotype threat in England, we draw on evidence demonstrating that self-affirmation interventions can effectively reduce its adverse effects on the academic performance of underachieving groups (e.g., Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Sherman *et al.*, 2013). We thus conduct the first ever study in a school in England that investigates whether a self-affirmation intervention can raise the performance of low-SES school students and thus reduce the academic attainment gap between them and their higher-SES peers. We also investigate psychological processes that might underpin any effects of the self-affirmation.

Background

Educational inequalities

Educational inequalities rightly receive much attention in academic research and policy formulation. In the United States, there are large gaps in educational outcomes between White students and lower-performing minority ethnic groups, in particular Black and Latino students, and between students of lower and higher SES. Both these gaps are substantial at ages 13–14: the SES gap is of a similar magnitude to the corresponding gap between Black students and White students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2016).¹

In England, by contrast, the largest education gap by far is associated with SES. As a result, this gap is a major focus of educational policy spearheaded by the £2.4bn per annum Pupil Premium initiative (Foster & Long, 2017). Only 34% of school students in England who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), an indicator of low SES, meet a standard threshold measure of academic attainment, compared with 61% of those whose parents are better off, a difference of 27% (Department for Education, 2015). The corresponding differences between the four major ethnic classifications—Black, White, Asian,² and Mixed—are much smaller. In fact, the difference between the lowest performing major ethnic classification (Black students) and the majority classification (White students) is only 3% (Department for Education, 2015).

Although there are important interactions between SES and ethnicity in both countries (Brannon, Higginbotham, & Henderson, 2017; Department for Education, 2015; Harackiewicz, Canning, Tibbetts, Priniski, & Hyde, 2016; Strand, 2014), it is clear that in England, SES is a significantly stronger predictor of academic success than is ethnicity, while in the United States, it is not. Why should this be so? We suggest that stereotype threat might be an important factor.

Stereotype threat

Although definitions vary (Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007), in broad terms stereotype threat is the sense of threat that people feel in a given context when they believe that they risk

¹ Details and limitations of these and the other calculations in this section are available in Appendix S1.

² In England, 'Asian' refers to students mainly of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani backgrounds.

conforming to a negative stereotype about a group of which they are a member (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat reduces performance in a wide range of contexts including academic performance. A meta-analysis (Walton & Spencer, 2009) showed that negatively stereotyped students who were under conditions of stereotype threat performed on average more than 0.5 standard deviations worse than those who were not (Walton & Spencer 2009; Figure 1).

However, other studies have found more limited evidence that stereotype threat reduces performance. For example, while a meta-analysis showed that stereotype threat had a significant negative effect of 0.22 standard deviations on girls' performance in mathematics tests, it also found evidence of publication bias that is likely to have inflated the effect (Flore & Wicherts, 2015). One potential source of such publication bias may be null effects in studies that have not taken into account specific social contexts such as the local relative size of the stereotyped group, an area that we explore in the following section on self-affirmation theory.

In particular, stereotype threat has been shown to reduce the academic performance of students of low SES. In one study, French undergraduate students were given a difficult verbal test (Croizet & Claire, 1998). Low-SES students who were told that the test was a measure of verbal intelligence performed worse than those who were told that it was an investigative tool for studying hypotheses about lexical processes, whereas higher-SES students performed the same regardless of what they were told. Other studies have found similar effects in low-SES students ranging from 6-year-olds to college students (Browman, Destin, Carswell, & Svoboda, 2017; Désert, Préaux, & Jund, 2009; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Spencer & Castano, 2007).

Self-affirmation theory

The negative effects of stereotype threat are thought to result from maladaptive responses aimed at protecting a person's 'self-integrity', their view of themselves as a 'good and adequate' person (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). These maladaptive responses include denial of the threat (Epton, Harris, Kane, Van Koningsbruggen, & Sheeran, 2015), concretization of construal levels (Sherman *et al.*, 2013), increased vigilance (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007), increased stress (Creswell, Dutcher, Klein, Harris, & Levine, 2013), and allocation of executive function, thus reducing its availability for other tasks (Hall, Zhao, & Shafir, 2014; Johns, Inzlicht, & Schmader, 2008). People can avoid these responses by strengthening their self-integrity in domains unrelated to the threat, a process known as 'self-affirmation'. Studies have shown self-affirmation to be an effective buffer against psychological threat in many situations, including in educational settings such as colleges (see, e.g., Harackiewicz *et al.*, 2013; Kinias & Sim, 2016; Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006; Miyake *et al.*, 2010; Shapiro, Williams, & Hambarchyan, 2013; Silverman, Logel, & Cohen, 2013; Tibbetts *et al.*, 2016) and massive open online courses (Kizilcec, Saltarelli, Reich, & Cohen, 2017).

There is also an increasing body of evidence relating to the effectiveness of self-affirmation in reducing stereotype threat in schools. Here, studies have found evidence that self-affirmation increased academic performance in Black and Latino, but not White, middle school students aged 11–14 (Cohen *et al.*, 2006; Sherman *et al.*, 2013). Follow-up studies have found that positive effects of self-affirmation on ethnic minority students persist over time. Remarkably, one study found benefits to college enrolment up to 9 years after the self-affirmation intervention (Goyer *et al.*, 2017) and another found improvements in academic achievement up to 3 years after the intervention, including

spanning the transition from middle to high school (Borman, Grigg, Rozek, Hanselman, & Dewey, 2018). The authors argue that this occurs when the short-term benefits trigger a set of complex and interconnected processes that recursively build on themselves over long periods. Initial boosts in performance can increase confidence for future tests, reducing stress (Creswell *et al.*, 2005) and generating a greater sense that the individual belongs and fits in the academic world (Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012; Shnabel, Purdie-Vaughns, Cook, Garcia, & Cohen, 2013). Over time, this can change teachers' and peers' perceptions of ability, raising expectations and generating support for higher levels of academic challenge (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

However, other studies in schools have shown more nuanced effects, where self-affirmation provided benefits to minority ethnic students by some academic measures but not others (Borman, Grigg, & Hanselman, 2016), when certain conditions held (Dee, 2015; Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2014), or when used in conjunction with enhancements to the intervention (Bowen, Wegmann, & Webber, 2013; Covarrubias, Herrmann, & Fryberg, 2016; Hernandez, Rana, Rao, & Usselman, 2017). Yet other studies, in schools with a wide range of characteristics, have shown no significant effect of self-affirmation at all (Bratter, Rowley, & Chukhray, 2016; de Jong, Jellesma, Koomen, & de Jong, 2016; Hanselman, Rozek, Grigg, & Borman, 2017; Protzko & Aronson, 2016).

This variation indicates the possibility that there are important moderators that vary across school contexts of the extent to which stereotype threat is experienced by different groups and/or the effectiveness of self-affirmation (Borman, 2017; Ferrer & Cohen, 2018). For example, a follow-up to the study by Borman *et al.* (2016) found that self-affirmation was more effective at increasing the performance of Black and Latino students in schools where they were relatively few in number and had a relatively large attainment gap with White students, and where they used affirming language (such as 'care about') in their writing exercises (Borman *et al.*, 2018).

This brings us back to our earlier question of why, in England, SES is a significantly stronger predictor of academic success than is ethnicity, while in the United States, SES and ethnicity predict success with similar strength. Perhaps one factor is that differing national cultural contexts result in differing 'threats in the air' (Steele, 2010) between the two countries.

In the United States, race has historically been, and remains, a highly salient cultural divide with deep historical roots (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Steele, 2010), and both race and low SES have been shown to create threat and other psychological barriers to academic achievement (Jury *et al.*, 2017; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). In contrast, while there certainly remain important challenges in relation to educational inequalities arising from ethnicity in England (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015, 2016), the country's long history of striking disparities between classes is likely to mean that societal discourses around the educational performance of different social classes are more deeply rooted and thus more psychologically salient (Evans, 2006; Jones, 2016). It seems plausible therefore that low SES generates a higher level of stereotype threat within education in England than in the United States.³

³Such an overall higher level of threat for low-SES individuals might, however, be experienced differently by individuals of different ethnicities.

Present study

The present study tests our predictions over the course of an academic year in a comprehensive secondary school in southern England. The school is moderately large, is ethnically highly diverse, and has an above-average proportion of students eligible for FSM. Students completed three short writing exercises throughout the year: Students in a self-affirmed condition wrote about values that were important to them, and students in a control condition wrote about a neutral topic. As a primary outcome measure, we observed the effect of the self-affirmation on scores in a mathematics test that students undertook towards the end of the school year. To provide a secondary outcome measure, students completed a survey near the end of the school year measuring four psychological processes (stereotype threat experienced, stress, self-integrity, and sense of academic fit) that might help explain how self-affirmation improves academic performance.

We used students' eligibility for FSM as a proxy for low SES. Eligibility for FSM is based on current parental income, and nationally around 14% of school students are eligible⁴ (Department for Education, 2015). Although FSM has a number of limitations as a proxy for low SES (discussed in detail later), it was the best measure available to us (Gorard, 2012). Its key benefit is that it indicates that a student's family has a *current* low income; the student's low SES is therefore likely to be particularly salient and as a result create the highest levels of stereotype threat.

To summarize our argument: stereotype threat has been shown to reduce academic performance, self-affirmation has been shown to reduce stereotype threat, and low SES is a plausible cause of stereotype threat in England. Taking eligibility for FSM as a proxy for low SES, we therefore state our hypothesis as follows. FSM students in a self-affirmation condition will achieve higher grades in mathematics tests than FSM students in a control condition; however, non-FSM students will be unaffected by the self-affirmation.

Method

Participants

A comprehensive secondary school in southern England agreed to take part in the study during the 2015–2016 school year.⁵ No significant ethical issues were raised by the study, which therefore received ethical approval from the head of the relevant academic programme. Students in Years 7–9 (aged 11–14) participated. At the start of the autumn 2015 term, we randomly assigned individual students to two experimental conditions: affirmed and control.

Of the 722 students registered at the start of the academic year, 562 were included in the analysis (see Appendix S1 for details). Eliminations were mainly due to missing academic baseline ($N = 68$) and assessment data ($N = 49$) and non-completion of writing exercises ($N = 36$). Eliminations were not significantly heterogeneous across experimental conditions. Our sample size was thus determined by the number and characteristics of pupils in the participating year groups. Demographic and prior achievement variables of the sample are provided in Appendix S1.

⁴See Appendix S1 for FSM eligibility criteria.

⁵A second school also agreed to participate but for logistical reasons was unable to provide data on the primary outcome measure (percentage scores in academic tests), and so, we were unable to include it in our analysis.

Procedure

Figure 1 shows the timeline for the administration of the research activities.



Figure 1. Research timeline.

Materials

We based the wording of the writing exercises on that reported by Sherman *et al.* (2013). In the affirmed condition, the exercises were designed to invoke a self-affirmation; the student was asked to pick one or more values that are ‘the most important things for you, personally’ and to write about ‘why these things are important to you’. In the control condition, the exercises were designed to be psychologically neutral; the corresponding request was to write about values that are ‘the least important things to you, but might be important to someone else’ or about the student’s morning routine that day. At our request, a teacher informally pre-tested the exercises with three Year 9 students from another school and found no issues with comprehension. All experimental materials are available in Appendix S1.

To provide our secondary outcome measure, a short student survey was developed to record students’ self-reports in levels of the following: *stereotype threat experienced* (single item: ‘I worry that people judge me because of my background instead of who I really am’), *stress* (single item: ‘I often feel stressed at school’), *self-integrity* (single item: ‘I feel basically OK about myself’), and *sense of academic fit* (four items, e.g., ‘I fit in well at school and really feel like I belong here’, ‘I feel proud of being a student at [school name]’, $\alpha = .76$).⁶

These areas were drawn from emerging evidence or adapted from other measures related to the mechanisms by which self-affirmations protect people from stereotype threat. The *stereotype threat experienced* and *self-integrity* measures were designed to measure the degree to which prevalent negative stereotypes resulted in a subjective experience of threat and the degree to which the self-affirmation intervention reduced this by bolstering a student’s self-integrity (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman *et al.*, 2013). The *stress* measure was designed to examine whether the intervention reduced one of the maladaptive responses that stereotype threat is hypothesized to increase (Creswell *et al.*, 2013; Sherman *et al.*, 2013). Finally, the *sense of academic fit* measure was designed to measure the extent to which identity threat undermined students’ sense of belonging in school (Cook *et al.*, 2012; Sherman *et al.*, 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

We used mainly single-item measures in order to enable the survey to be completed within the constraints of the school timetable. Students were presented with a series of statements and asked to respond on a six-point rating scale from ‘Strongly agree’ to ‘Strongly disagree’. Responses were converted to a point score of 1–6 and reverse-coded where necessary so that higher scores reflected a higher level of the item measured.

⁶Items related to growth mindset were also included in the survey to provide input to a separate initiative being undertaken by the school, but these did not form part of the present study.

Self-affirmation procedure

English teachers (blind to the precise purpose of the study) were briefed near the beginning of the school year. Administration followed the method outlined by Sherman *et al.* (2013). In normal class time in English lessons, the teachers (blind to affirmation condition) introduced the exercises as a short piece of writing to give the opportunity to write more freely than usual, without worrying about spelling or grammar. Each exercise took around 15–20 min to complete.

Student survey procedure

The student survey was administered in June 2016 during ‘house time’, a period when small groups of students from all year groups engage in a range of activities.

Outcome measures

Our primary outcome measure was academic performance as measured by the school’s usual assessment procedures. Due to limited availability of baseline measures and practical constraints in collecting percentage scores for other academic subjects, our primary outcome measure was limited to the percentage score from the mathematics test that each student undertook towards the end of the school year. For Years 7 and 8, tests consisted primarily of questions from past General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Mathematics papers. For Year 9, tests consisted of an entire past GCSE Mathematics paper.

GCSEs are national standardized examinations used to assess academic performance at age 16. They have a high level of reliability (Bramley & Dhawan, 2010; Newton, 1996).

Each test for Years 7 and 8 also included a smaller number of questions taken from past papers of Key Stage 3 Mathematics SATs, national standardized tests undertaken by students at the end of Year 9 (usually at age 14) until the Department for Education (DfE) discontinued their use in 2009.

For each year group, the school assembled questions from the above sources into two tests at differing tiers of difficulty, and each student was assigned to take one of these two tests, based on their prior performance. No empirically validated means existed to establish equivalent levels of performance between the two tiers of tests taken within each year group or between year groups. We therefore standardized the percentage scores for each of the two test tiers within each of the three year groups, resulting in six sets of standardized scores.

Our analytical design allowed for the possibility that there might be interactions between test tier, FSM status, and affirmation condition. For example, FSM students assigned to the lower-difficulty tier might feel further threatened in respect of their academic performance, making the self-affirmation intervention more effective for them compared to FSM students assigned to the higher-difficulty tier.

In order to increase the sensitivity of the outcome measure, we used students’ mathematics scores measured in national standardized tests at the end of Key Stage 2 (Year 6, age 11) as the most reliable and relevant baseline measure of prior mathematics performance (Opposs & He, 2011).

The school also provided the following information for each student which we used as further covariates: year group, ethnicity, and markers for eligibility for FSM, gender, and English as an Additional Language (EAL).⁷

⁷A complete record of information provided by the school is in Appendix S1.

Our secondary outcome measure was students' responses to the student survey.

Results

Descriptive statistics of academic performance and raw survey responses are shown in Table 1. Correlations are provided in Appendix S1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of academic performance and raw survey responses of the analytical sample

	All		Free school meals		Non-free school meals	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Academic performance						
Standardized mathematics score	0.000	0.996	-0.235	0.896	0.069	1.014
Raw survey responses						
Stereotype threat	3.320	1.718	3.650	1.722	3.220	1.706
Stress	3.520	1.608	3.400	1.635	3.550	1.601
Self-integrity	4.470	1.315	4.370	1.387	4.500	1.294
Sense of academic fit	4.019	0.996	3.979	1.059	4.030	0.978

Primary outcome: academic performance

We subjected the standardized end-of-year mathematics scores to a 2 (FSM status: FSM vs. non-FSM) \times 2 (affirmation condition: affirmed vs. control) \times 2 (test tier: lower difficulty vs. higher difficulty) ANCOVA. We included the following covariates: baseline Key Stage 2 mathematics score, gender, year group (Year 8 and Year 9, with Year 7 as reference category), ethnicity (Black, Asian, Mixed, and Other, with White as the reference category), and the marker indicating EAL. We mean-centred the baseline Key Stage 2 mathematics scores for the FSM and non-FSM groups separately.⁸

Tests for non-influential outliers and homogeneity of variances were met, but tests for normal distribution of residuals were not.⁹ We therefore amended our ANCOVA to be robust to non-normal distribution of residuals by using the SPSS 'bootstrap' method with 2,000 random samples. For main effects, the standard errors (*SE*), 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals (BCa CI), and *p*-values reported below are based on these bootstrapped (robust) estimates. However, SPSS does not have the facility to report bootstrapped estimates for interactions and so these results are not robust to non-normal distribution of residuals, and we note this where relevant.

⁸In line with Sherman et al. (2013), we wanted to avoid apparently reducing the pre-existing gap between FSM and non-FSM students. Using unmanipulated baseline scores as a covariate could have given a misleading impression that the gap was smaller than it actually is (Sackett, Hardison, & Cullen, 2004). However, supplementary analyses using unmanipulated baseline scores yielded substantially similar results.

⁹Additionally, the following interactions violated the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes: FSM status * Black ethnicity; FSM status * mixed ethnicity; and affirmation condition * Year 8. Including these interaction terms in the ANCOVA model increased the significance of the focal effect (the affirmation condition * FSM status interaction). Therefore, given that the model without these interaction terms yielded substantively unchanged results while being somewhat more conservative and parsimonious, we report the results of the simpler model in the manuscript.

This analysis yielded a significant main effect of FSM status on academic performance, $F(1, 545) = 20.021, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .035$. The academic performance of students who were eligible for FSM ($M = -0.289, SE = .070, \text{BCa CI} [-0.420; -0.140]$) was significantly lower than those who were not eligible ($M = 0.075, SE = .051, \text{BCa CI} [-0.029; 0.178]$), a mean difference of $M_{\text{diff}} = -0.364$ ($\text{BCa CI} [-0.500; -0.215]$).

There was a significant main effect of affirmation condition on academic performance, $F(1, 545) = 7.202, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .013$. The academic performance of students in the affirmed condition ($M = 0.000, SE = .065, \text{BCa CI} [-0.128; 0.137]$) was significantly higher than those in the control condition ($M = -0.215, SE = .056, \text{BCa CI} [-0.328; -0.096]$), a mean difference of $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.215$ ($\text{BCa CI} [0.077; 0.363]$). There was also a significant main effect on academic performance of test tier, $F(1, 545) = 67.215, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .110$. The academic performance of students in the easier tier ($M = 0.328, SE = .072, \text{BCa CI} [0.189; 0.479]$) was significantly higher than that of those in the harder tier ($M = -0.542, SE = .070, \text{BCa CI} [-0.685; -0.400]$), a mean difference of $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.869$ ($\text{BCa CI} [0.666; 1.072]$).¹⁰

In line with our hypothesis, the significant main effect of affirmation condition was qualified by a significant two-way interaction between FSM status and affirmation condition, $F(1, 545) = 4.154, p = .042$ (non-robust), $\eta_p^2 = .008$. A decomposition of this interaction showed a significant simple main effect of affirmation condition for FSM students, $F(1, 545) = 7.192, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .013$, but not for non-FSM students, $F(1, 545) = 0.448, p = .497, \eta_p^2 = .001$. Academic performance was higher for FSM students in the affirmed condition ($M = -0.099, SE = .099, \text{BCa CI} [-0.280; 0.113]$) than for FSM students in the control condition ($M = -0.478, SE = .088, \text{BCa CI} [-0.645; -0.305]$), a mean difference of $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.379$ ($\text{BCa CI} [0.128; 0.642]$) or 0.381 SD (where $SD = 0.996$, Table 1). Thus, the gap of 0.527 (0.529 SD) between FSM and non-FSM students in the control condition was reduced by 62% in the affirmed condition (see Section 5 of Appendix S1 for detailed calculations). This is shown in Figure 2.¹¹

All interactions with test tier were non-significant: These consisted of the three-way interaction of test tier with FSM status and affirmation condition, and the two-way interactions of test tier with FSM status and with affirmation condition (all $F_s < 2.686$, all $p_s > .102$, non-robust).

Secondary outcome: self-reported measures

We subjected each of the self-reported measures of the end-of-year student survey to a 2 (FSM status: FSM vs. non-FSM) \times 2 (affirmation condition: affirmed vs. control) \times 2 (test tier: lower vs. higher) ANCOVA with 2,000 bootstrapped samples and the same covariates as for academic performance above. We also performed robust (bootstrapped with 2,000 samples) regression analyses using the PROCESS V2.16.3 SPSS macro (Hayes, 2013) to investigate mediation of students' academic performance by each of the self-reported measures.

¹⁰However, this effect is non-significant when covariates are not included in the model.

¹¹Appendix S1 contains a sensitivity analysis of these results without covariates. Unsurprisingly (since removing the covariates reduced the power of the analysis), the p -values and confidence intervals are expanded and, while the two-way interaction between FSM status and affirmation condition is non-significant, the simple main effect of affirmation condition on FSM students is substantially unchanged.

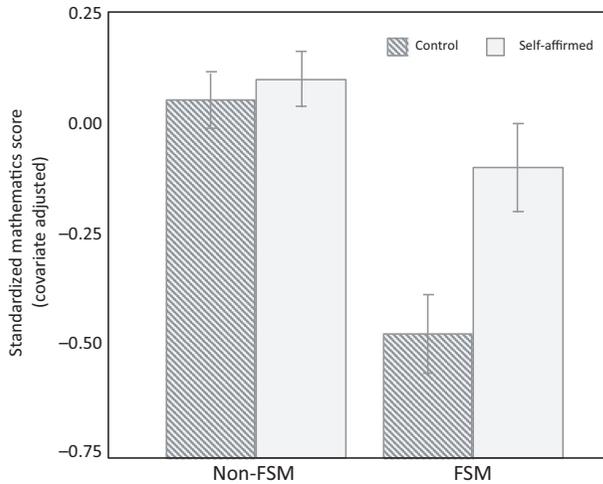


Figure 2. Academic performance as a function of free school meal (FSM) status and affirmation condition.

Our analysis yielded no main effects of FSM status for reported stress, self-integrity, or sense of academic fit (all F s < 2.238, all p s > .135), but it did yield a main effect for reported stereotype threat, $F(1, 508) = 7.339$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$. FSM students reported that they experienced significantly higher levels of stereotype threat ($M = 3.699$, $SE = .160$, BCa CI [3.373; 4.034]) than non-FSM students ($M = 3.212$, $SE = .084$, BCa CI [3.044; 3.392]), a mean difference of $M_{diff} = 0.487$ ($SE = .180$, BCa CI [0.147; 0.842]). No processes reported in the survey significantly mediated the FSM gap in academic performance.

There was a non-significant three-way interaction between FSM status, affirmation condition, and test tier for all four processes reported in the survey (all F s < 0.853, all p s > .356). There was a marginally significant two-way interaction between affirmation condition and test tier for reported stress, $F(1, 501) = 2.859$, $p = .091$ (non-robust), $\eta_p^2 = .006$, and a significant interaction between FSM status and test tier for reported self-integrity, $F(1, 501) = 3.872$, $p = .050$ (non-robust), $\eta_p^2 = .008$. All other two-way interactions between affirmation condition and test tier and between FSM status and test tier were non-significant (all F s < 1.342, all p s > .247). There were non-significant two-way interactions between FSM status and affirmation condition for reported stereotype threat, self-integrity, and sense of academic fit (all F s < 1.003, all p s > .311). However, there was a marginally significant two-way interaction between FSM status and affirmation condition for reported stress, $F(1, 501) = 3.004$, $p = .084$ (non-robust), $\eta_p^2 = .006$. A decomposition of this interaction showed a significant simple main effect of affirmation condition for FSM students, $F(1, 501) = 4.122$, $p = .032$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$, but not for non-FSM students, $F(1, 501) = 0.012$, $p = .919$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. Reported levels of stress were lower in FSM students in the affirmed condition ($M = 3.191$, $SE = .200$, BCa CI [2.796; 3.590]) than FSM students in the control condition ($M = 3.793$, $SE = .214$, BCa CI [3.388; 4.215]), a mean difference of $M_{diff} = -0.603$ ($SE = .288$, BCa CI [-1.172; -0.037]). This is shown in Figure 3.

No processes reported in the survey significantly mediated the interaction between FSM status and affirmation condition on academic performance.

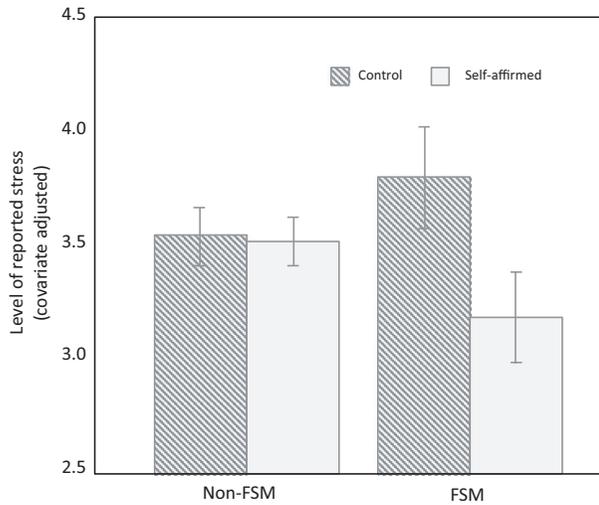


Figure 3. Reported stress as a function of free school meal (FSM) status and affirmation condition. Stress levels reported on a rating scale of 1–6.

Discussion

Summary of results

We tested whether, over the course of an academic year, a virtually zero-cost self-affirmation intervention reduced gaps in academic performance of school students aged 11–14 based on their SES. We also examined whether students' self-reports of a set of psychological processes were associated with any academic performance gaps and whether they helped explain any reduction in those gaps caused by the self-affirmation intervention.

We observed a significant gap in academic performance between FSM and non-FSM students, which in the control condition was 0.529 standard deviations; we also found that FSM students reported experiencing significantly more stereotype threat than their non-FSM peers.

As predicted, the intervention significantly improved the academic performance of the FSM school students and we found no evidence for any effect on their non-FSM peers. Specifically, the intervention increased the performance of FSM students by 0.381 standard deviations, reducing the FSM/non-FSM gap by 62% (Figure 2). We also found that the self-affirmation intervention reduced the levels of stress reported by FSM students, but not those reported by non-FSM students (Figure 3).

General discussion

This study represents the first direct evidence that self-affirmation can substantially improve the academic performance of low-SES students in a school setting, while not affecting their higher-SES peers.¹²

The effect size of 0.38 standard deviations for low-SES students in the present study lies within the 0.29–0.45 range of the effects for Black and Latino students in the earlier studies

¹²Such evidence has, however, been found in college settings (e.g., Harackiewicz et al., 2013).

(Cohen *et al.*, 2006; Sherman *et al.*, 2013), but is much greater than those of later studies where there were much smaller or no significant effects (see Hanselman, Rozek, Grigg, & Borman, 2017, Figure 1).

As we have speculated, it is possible that different countries might present different pictures of how stereotype threat operates within them (for a broad discussion of the effect of context, see Pettigrew, 2018). Such differences might help explain why, for example, no effects of self-affirmation were observed in students of Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds in a school in the Netherlands (de Jong *et al.*, 2016). Since many of the students chose to write about Islam, a religion about which there are popular associations with extremism in the Netherlands (Kamans, Gordijn, Oldenhuis, & Otten, 2009), the authors speculate that this could have actually *increased* their sense of stereotype threat. Future studies in a range of countries could help tease out these and other such effects of national and cultural contexts.

Our examination of the psychological processes provided some intriguing results related to SES. Firstly, FSM students reported experiencing higher levels of stereotype threat than their non-FSM peers; however, the self-affirmation intervention did not reduce this self-reported sense of threat. Since prior research suggests that self-affirmation is effective because it protects against threat (see Cohen & Sherman, 2014 for a review), it is possible that the intervention did reduce the sense of threat but that limitations in our survey measure meant that it failed to detect this reduction. For example, our measure asks students to self-report a largely unconscious process, is generic in relation to the source and context of threat, and consists of only a single item. However, it is also possible that the self-affirmation did not reduce levels of stereotype threat, but rather it improved academic performance through some other mechanism or helped the students to better cope with the threat, for example, by providing more effective access to psychological resources or by bolstering an aspect of their self-identity. Future research could attempt to distinguish between these possibilities, for example, by using a more sophisticated measure of stereotype threat such as daily experience sampling (Sherman *et al.*, 2013), or by examining the extent to which cultural mismatches rather than stereotype threat reduce low-SES students' performance (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

Secondly, the self-affirmation reduced the levels of stress reported by FSM students, and we found no evidence that it did so for their non-FSM peers. This observation is consistent with evidence that self-affirmation reduces stress (Creswell *et al.*, 2005) and improves problem-solving for chronically stressed individuals (Creswell *et al.*, 2013). It is particularly encouraging since it points to the potential of self-affirmation to reduce the chronic stress that disproportionately affects low-SES children and young people (Evans & Schamberg, 2009). Since in England one in 10 school students has a diagnosable mental illness and three in four mental illnesses start in childhood (MQ, 2017), with particular prevalence among lower-SES girls (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2018), any reduced susceptibility to such conditions arising from reduced stress could generate important benefits that are much broader than academic performance.

This reduced stress also suggests a potentially novel line of research. There is extensive evidence that school transitions are particularly threatening for students (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Rice, Frederickson, & Seymour, 2011; Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton, & Rice, 2013; Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003), and students have been shown to feel even higher levels of concerns about the primary–secondary transition towards the end of primary school than they do at the start of secondary school (Lester, Lisk, Carr, Patrick, & Eley, 2019). If self-affirmation does reliably reduce stress, it might therefore be particularly effective just before students

make the transition to secondary school at age 11. As far as we are aware, no study has yet examined this.

Since we needed to exclude students who performed none of the three writing exercises, we did so by excluding those who did not complete the first (in the autumn term). In two sensitivity analyses, we tested the effect of excluding students simply by whether they performed at least one or at least two exercises, regardless of their timing. This slightly reduced the extent to which the SES gap was reduced, from 62% to 60% and 56%, respectively (details in Appendix S1). This might be because the autumn exercise offered the longest period for the hypothesized recursive effects of self-affirmation to generate benefits, and/or because it took place at the start of a school year, a time that is likely to be particularly threatening (Sherman *et al.*, 2013).

A supplementary analysis, in which we extended the definition of low SES to students who had been eligible for FSM in any of the last 6 years, found no evidence of any benefit (details in Appendix S1). This suggests that low SES might cause stereotype threat only when it is currently of high salience. To the extent that this result can be generalized to the wider school population in England, it would mean that the potential benefits of self-affirmation would be restricted to the school population that is eligible for FSM at any given time (currently 14%). Given the almost zero cost of the intervention, and its focus on the most disadvantaged students, this could nevertheless represent an important opportunity from the perspective of educational policy.

Each student was assigned to their mathematics class based on prior performance (a practice known as ‘tracking’ in the United States and ‘setting’ in the United Kingdom), and so, almost all students in any given class took a test of the same tier of difficulty. However, we observed no significant two- or three-way interactions between test difficulty tier and FSM status or affirmation condition. If, as prior research suggests, self-affirmation is effective because it protects against threat, then this suggests that the practice of setting did not exacerbate feelings of stereotype threat in the lower sets. This is an encouraging finding, since it suggests that, at least in this school, the potentially disproportionately negative impact of setting on lower-SES students (Batrach, Autin, Bataillard, & Butera, 2018; Francis, Hodgen, Tereshchenko, & Archer, 2018) did not include the extra burden of further stereotype threat.

Five limitations of our study could be addressed in future studies. Firstly, our primary outcome variable was based on a single academic subject, mathematics, using tests administered by the school. Future studies using national standardized tests, such as GCSEs in a range of subjects at age 16, would provide results that are more robust and generalizable. For example, self-affirmation might benefit cognitive processes that are required more in some subjects than in others, a possibility suggested by one study where indicative benefits of self-affirmation were found in mathematics but not in reading (Borman *et al.*, 2016). Secondly, our study measured academic performance over a single academic year; a follow-up study could look at performance over an extended period in order to test for any long-term benefits of the complex recursive processes hypothesized by others (Borman *et al.*, 2018; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Goyer *et al.*, 2017; Sherman *et al.*, 2013).

Thirdly, we did not have a sufficient sample size to robustly examine moderating factors. These include the following: whether low-SES students of different ethnic backgrounds experience different levels of benefit from self-affirmation, an effect that is plausible given the important interactions between SES and ethnicity in academic performance (Harackiewicz *et al.*, 2016; Strand, 2014); the degree of stereotype threat present (Hanselman *et al.*, 2014); and the extent to which students are situated in a

learning environment that supports changes in their behaviour (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Ferrer & Cohen, 2018). A range of future studies could help build a robust picture of the extent to which the variability observed in the effectiveness of self-affirmation in schools is due to such moderators, or to experimental factors such as implementation constraints (e.g., Protzko & Aronson, 2016), the timing of the intervention (Cook *et al.*, 2012; Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010; Ferrer & Cohen, 2018), and sampling variation (see Gelman & Carlin, 2014; Hanselman *et al.*, 2017).

Fourthly, although eligibility for FSM is a reasonable proxy for current low SES (Gorard, 2012), it is an imperfect one. For example, for technical reasons some families outside the lowest income brackets are not eligible (Hobbs & Vignoles, 2010) and an estimated 14% of families who *are* eligible are not flagged as such (Department for Education, 2018; Iniesta-Martinez & Evans, 2012). It also does not take into account any cumulative effects of chronic poverty over an extended period (Andrews, Robinson, & Hutchinson, 2017; Michelmore & Dynarski, 2017) or important non-financial elements of SES such as parental education and parental occupation (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010; Reardon, 2011). Further studies could use more sophisticated indicators to examine the effect of these distinct components of SES.

Finally, in the context of long-term trends in the skills required for the future workforce (Chui, Manyika, & Miremadi, 2016; EY, 2015), evidence about whether self-affirmation improves non-cognitive abilities such as persistence and creativity will increasingly be of value to social and economic policymakers (Garcia, 2014; Gutman & Schoon, 2013).

Additionally, while we confirm that our hypothesis was set prior to gathering our outcome measures, we did not pre-register the study. We report analyses for all other relevant measures obtained from the school in Appendix S1 and would welcome future pre-registered studies investigating the role of SES in stereotype threat and self-affirmation in England.

Conclusion

With an effect size of 0.38 standard deviations on the academic performance of the most economically disadvantaged school students, a virtually zero-cost self-affirmation intervention compares favourably with other interventions aimed at reducing the SES gap (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.). However, evidence from other studies is mixed and we are still at an early stage of understanding the mechanisms by which self-affirmation works, and the contexts in which it is likely to be most effective. This is an exciting time for research into an intervention that has the potential to make a substantial difference to the lives of many young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

References

- Andrews, J., Robinson, D., & Hutchinson, J. (2017). *Closing the gap? Trends in educational attainment and disadvantage*. Retrieved from <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-gap-trends-educational-attainment-disadvantage/>
- Barber, B. K., & Olsen, J. A. (2004). Assessing the transitions to middle and high school. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19(1), 3–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558403258113>
- Batruch, A., Autin, F., Bataillard, F., & Butera, F. (2018). School selection and the social class divide: How tracking contributes to the reproduction of inequalities. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 45, 477–470. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218791804>
- Borman, G. D. (2017). Advancing values affirmation as a scalable strategy for mitigating identity threats and narrowing national achievement gaps. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(12), 3111–3116. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1616111114>

- Sciences of the United States of America*, 114, 7486–7488. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708813114>
- Borman, G. D., Grigg, J., & Hanselman, P. (2016). An effort to close achievement gaps at scale through self-affirmation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(1), 21–42. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715581709>
- Borman, G. D., Grigg, J., Rozek, C. S., Hanselman, P., & Dewey, N. A. (2018). Self-affirmation effects are produced by school context, student engagement with the intervention, and time: Lessons from a district-wide implementation. *Psychological Science*, 29, 1773–1784. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618784016>
- Bowen, N. K., Wegmann, K. M., & Webber, K. C. (2013). Enhancing a brief writing intervention to combat stereotype threat among middle-school students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105, 427–435. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031177>
- Bramley, T., & Dhawan, V. (2010). *Estimates of reliability of qualifications*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/578868/2011-03-16-estimates-of-reliability-of-qualifications.pdf
- Brannon, T. N., Higginbotham, G. D., & Henderson, K. (2017). Class advantages and disadvantages are not so Black and White: Intersectionality impacts rank and selves. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 18, 117–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.08.029>
- Bratter, J. L., Rowley, K. J., & Chukhrai, I. (2016). Does a self-affirmation intervention reduce stereotype threat in Black and Hispanic high schools? *Race and Social Problems*, 8(4), 340–356. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-016-9187-4>
- Browman, A. S., Destin, M., Carswell, K. L., & Svoboda, R. C. (2017). Perceptions of socioeconomic mobility influence academic persistence among low socioeconomic status students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 72, 45–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.03.006>
- Chui, M., Manyika, J., & Miremadi, M. (2016). Where machines could replace humans—and where they can't (yet). *McKinsey Quarterly*, (July). Retrieved from <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/digital-mckinsey/our-insights/where-machines-could-replace-humans-and-where-they-cant-yet>
- Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., & Master, A. (2006). Reducing the racial achievement gap: A social-psychological intervention. *Science*, 313, 1307–1310. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1128317>
- Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Apfel, N., & Brzustoski, P. (2009). Recursive processes in self-affirmation: Intervening to close the minority achievement gap. *Science*, 324 (17 April), 400–403. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1170769>
- Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65(1), 333–371. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115137>
- Cook, J. E., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., & Cohen, G. L. (2012). Chronic threat and contingent belonging: Protective benefits of values affirmation on identity development. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102, 479–496. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026312>
- Covarrubias, R., Herrmann, S. D., & Fryberg, S. A. (2016). Affirming the Interdependent Self: Implications for Latino student performance. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 38(1), 47–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2015.1129609>
- Creswell, J. D., Dutcher, J. M., Klein, W. M. P., Harris, P. R., & Levine, J. M. (2013). Self-affirmation improves problem-solving under stress. *PLoS ONE*, 8, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0062593>
- Creswell, J. D., Welch, W. T., Taylor, S. E., Sherman, D. K., Gruenewald, T. L., & Mann, T. (2005). Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses. *Psychological Science*, 16, 846–851.
- Critcher, C. R., Dunning, D., & Armor, D. A. (2010). When self-affirmations reduce defensiveness: Timing is key. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36, 947–959. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210369557>

- Croizet, J.-C., & Claire, T. (1998). Extending the concept of stereotype threat to social class: The intellectual underperformance of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *24*(6), 588–594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167298246603>
- Dee, T. S. (2015). Social identity and achievement gaps: Evidence from an affirmation intervention. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, *8*(2), 149–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2014.906009>
- Department for Education. (2015). *SFR 06/2015. GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics, 2013 to 2014 (Revised)*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/gcse-and-equivalent-attainment-by-pupil-characteristics-2014>
- Department for Education. (2018). *SFR 01/2018: Revised GCSE and equivalent results in England, 2016 to 2017*. Department for Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/revised-gcse-and-equivalent-results-in-england-2016-to-2017>
- Désert, M., Préaux, M., & Jund, R. (2009). So young and already victims of stereotype threat: Socio-economic status and performance of 6 to 9 years old children on Raven's progressive matrices. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *24*(2), 207–218.
- Education Endowment Foundation. (n.d.). *Teaching and learning toolkit: An accessible summary of the international evidence on teaching 5-16 year-olds*. Retrieved from <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit>
- Epton, T., Harris, P. R., Kane, R., Van Koningsbruggen, G. M., & Sheeran, P. (2015). The Impact of self-affirmation on health-behavior change: A meta-analysis. *Health Psychology*, *34*, 187–196. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000116>
- Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2015). *Is Britain fairer? The state of equality and human rights 2015*. London, UK: Equality and Human Rights Commission.
- Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2016). *Healing a divided Britain: The need for a comprehensive race equality strategy*. London, UK: Equality and Human Rights Commission.
- Evans, G. (2006). *Educational failure and working class White children in Britain*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Evans, G. W., & Schamberg, M. A. (2009). Childhood poverty, chronic stress, and adult working memory. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *106*, 6545–6549. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0811910106>
- EY. (2015). *EY transforms its recruitment selection process for graduates, undergraduates and school leavers*. Retrieved from <http://www.ey.com/uk/en/newsroom/news-releases/15-08-03—ey-transforms-its-recruitment-selection-process-for-graduates-undergraduates-and-school-leavers>
- Ferrer, R. A., & Cohen, G. L. (2018). Reconceptualizing self-affirmation with the “Trigger and Channel” framework: Lessons from the health domain. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014616728173007>
- Flore, P. C., & Wicherts, J. M. (2015). Does stereotype threat influence performance of girls in stereotyped domains? A meta-analysis *Journal of School Psychology*, *53*(1), 25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2014.10.002>
- Foster, D., & Long, R. (2017). *The pupil premium*. Retrieved from www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120197
- Francis, B., Hodgen, J., Tereshchenko, A., & Archer, L. (2018). *Dos and don'ts of attainment grouping*. London, UK: UCL Institute of Education.
- Gándara, P., & Contreras, F. (2009). *The Latino education crisis: The consequences of failed social policies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Garcia, E. (2014). *The need to address noncognitive skills in the education policy agenda*. Retrieved from <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-need-to-address-noncognitive-skills-in-the-education-policy-agenda/>
- Gelman, A., & Carlin, J. (2014). Beyond power calculations: Assessing Type S (sign) and Type M (magnitude) errors. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *9*, 641–651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614551642>

- Good, C., Aronson, J., & Inzlicht, M. (2003). Improving adolescents' standardized test performance: An intervention to reduce the effects of stereotype threat. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 24*, 645–662. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2003.09.002>
- Gorard, S. (2012). Who is eligible for free school meals? Characterising free school meals as a measure of disadvantage in England. *British Educational Research Journal, 38*, 1003–1017. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2011.608118>
- Goyer, J. P., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Binning, K. R., Cook, J. E., Reeves, S. L., . . . Cohen, G. L. (2017). Self-affirmation facilitates minority middle schoolers' progress along college trajectories. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 114*, 7594–7599. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1617923114>
- Gutman, L. M., & Schoon, I. (2013). *The impact of non-cognitive skills on outcomes for young people: Literature review*. Retrieved from https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/EEF_Lit_Review_Non-CognitiveSkills.pdf
- Hall, C. C., Zhao, J., & Shafir, E. (2014). Self-affirmation among the poor: Cognitive and behavioral implications. *Psychological Science, 25*, 619–625. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613510949>
- Hanselman, P., Bruch, S. K., Gamoran, A., & Borman, G. D. (2014). Threat in context- school moderation of the impact of social identity threat on racial/ethnic achievement gaps. *Sociology of Education, 87*(2), 106–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040714525970>
- Hanselman, P., Rozek, C. S., Grigg, J., & Borman, G. D. (2017). New evidence on self-affirmation effects and theorized success of heterogeneity from large-scale replications. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 109*, 405–424.
- Harackiewicz, J. M., Canning, E. A., Tibbetts, Y., Giffen, C. J., Blair, S. S., Rouse, D. I., & Hyde, J. S. (2013). Closing the social class achievement gap for first-generation students in undergraduate biology. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 106*, 375–389. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034679>
- Harackiewicz, J. M., Canning, E. A., Tibbetts, Y., Priniski, S. J., & Hyde, J. S. (2016). Closing achievement gaps with a utility-value intervention: Disentangling race and social class. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 111*, 745–765. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000075>
- Harwell, M., & LeBeau, B. (2010). Student eligibility for a free lunch as an SES measure in education research. *Educational Researcher, 39*(2), 120–131. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X10362578>
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hernandez, D., Rana, S., Rao, A., & Usselman, M. (2017). Dismantling stereotypes about latinos in STEM. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 39*, 436–451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986317731100>
- Hobbs, G., & Vignoles, A. (2010). Is children's free school meal 'eligibility' a good proxy for family income? *British Educational Research Journal, 36*, 673–690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903083111>
- Iniesta-Martinez, S., & Evans, H. (2012). *Pupils not claiming free school meals*. Retrieved from <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/16039/>
- Johns, M., Inzlicht, M., & Schmader, T. (2008). Stereotype threat and executive resource depletion: Examining the influence of emotion regulation. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 137*, 691–705. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013834>
- Jones, O. (2016). *Chavs: The demonization of the working class* (First). Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books
- de Jong, E. M., Jellesma, F. C., Koomen, H. M. Y., & de Jong, P. F. (2016). A values-affirmation intervention does not benefit negatively stereotyped immigrant students in the Netherlands. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00691>
- Jury, M., Smeding, A., Stephens, N. M., Nelson, J. E., Aelenei, C., & Darnon, C. (2017). The experience of low-SES students in higher education: Psychological barriers to success and interventions to reduce social-class inequality. *Journal of Social Issues, 73*(1), 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12202>
- Kamans, E., Gordijn, E. H., Oldenhuis, H., & Otten, S. (2009). What I think you see is what you get: Influence of prejudice on assimilation to negative meta-stereotypes among Dutch Moroccan

- teenagers. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 39, 842–851. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp>
- Kinias, Z., & Sim, J. (2016). Facilitating women's success in business: Interrupting the process of stereotype threat through affirmation of personal values. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 101, 1585–1597. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000139>
- Kizilcec, R. F., Saltarelli, A. J., Reich, J., & Cohen, G. L. (2017). Closing global achievement gaps in MOOCs. *Science*, 355, 251–252. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aag2063>
- Lamont, R. A., Swift, H. J., & Abrams, D. (2015). A review and meta-analysis of age-based stereotype threat: Negative stereotypes, not facts, do the damage. *Psychology and Aging*, 30(1), 180–193. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038586>
- Lester, K. J., Lisk, S. C., Carr, E., Patrick, F., & Eley, T. C. (2019). Associations between attention and interpretation bias and change in school concerns and anxiety symptoms during transition from primary to secondary school. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-019-00528-3>
- Martens, A., Johns, M., Greenberg, J., & Schimel, J. (2006). Combating stereotype threat: The effect of self-affirmation on women's intellectual performance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 42, 236–243. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2005.04.010>
- Micheltore, K., & Dynarski, S. (2017). The gap within the gap: Using longitudinal data to understand income differences in educational outcomes. *AERA Open*, 3(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858417692958>
- Miyake, A., Kost-Smith, L. E., Finkelstein, N. D., Pollock, S. J., Cohen, G. L., & Ito, T. A. (2010). Reducing the gender achievement gap in college science: A classroom study of values affirmation. *Science*, 330, 1234–1237. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1195996>
- MQ. (2017). *12 statistics to get you thinking about mental health in young people*. Retrieved from <https://www.mqmentalhealth.org/news-blog/post/12-statistics>
- Murphy, M. C., Steele, C. M., & Gross, J. J. (2007). Signaling threat: How situational cues affect women in math, science, and engineering settings. *Psychological Science*, 18, 879–885. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01995.x>
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2016). *Extracts from reports generated by the Nations Report Card website*. Retrieved from http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/
- Newton, P. E. (1996). The reliability of marking of general certificate of secondary education scripts: Mathematics and English. *British Educational Research Journal*, 22, 405–420.
- Opposs, D., & He, Q. (2011). *The reliability programme: Final report of the technical advisory group*. Ofqual. Retrieved from <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/2568/>
- Patalay, P., & Fitzsimons, E. (2018). *Mental ill-health and wellbeing at age 14 – Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study Age 14 Survey*. Retrieved from https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls_research/initial-findings-from-the-millennium-cohort-study-age-14-survey/
- Pettigrew, T. F. (2018). The emergence of contextual social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44, 963–971. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218756033>
- Picho, K., Rodriguez, A., & Finnie, L. (2013). Exploring the moderating role of context on the mathematics performance of females under stereotype threat: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 153, 299–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2012.737380>
- Protzko, J., & Aronson, J. (2016). Context moderates affirmation effects on the ethnic achievement gap. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7(6), 500–507. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550616646426>
- Reardon, S. F. (2011). The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations. In G. J. Duncan & R. J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools and children's life chances* (pp. 91–116). New York City: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Rice, F., Frederickson, N., & Seymour, J. (2011). Assessing pupil concerns about transition to secondary school. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81, 244–263. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709910X519333>

- Riglin, L., Frederickson, N., Shelton, K. H., & Rice, F. (2013). A longitudinal study of psychological functioning and academic attainment at the transition to secondary school. *Journal of Adolescence*, *36*, 507–517. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.03.002>
- Sackett, P. R., Hardison, C. M., & Cullen, M. J. (2004). On interpreting stereotype threat as accounting for African American-White differences on cognitive tests. *The American Psychologist*, *59*(1), 7–13. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087868>
- Shapiro, J. R., & Neuberg, S. L. (2007). From stereotype threat to stereotype threats: Implications of a multi-threat framework for causes, moderators, mediators, consequences, and interventions. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *11*(2), 107–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868306294790>
- Shapiro, J. R., Williams, A. M., & Hambarchyan, M. (2013). Are all interventions created equal? A multi-threat approach to tailoring stereotype threat interventions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *104*, 277–288. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030461>
- Sherman, D. K., Hartson, K. A., Binning, K. R., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Taborsky-Barba, S., . . . Cohen, G. L. (2013). Deflecting the trajectory and changing the narrative: How self-affirmation affects academic performance and motivation under identity threat. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *104*, 591–618. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031495>
- Shnabel, N., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Cook, J. E., Garcia, J., & Cohen, G. L. (2013). Demystifying values-affirmation interventions: Writing about social belonging is a key to buffering against identity threat. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *39*, 663–676. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213480816>
- Silverman, A., Logel, C., & Cohen, G. L. (2013). Self-affirmation as a deliberate coping strategy: The moderating role of choice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *49*(1), 93–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.08.005>
- Spencer, B., & Castano, E. (2007). Social class is dead. Long live social class! Stereotype threat among low socioeconomic status individuals. *Social Justice Research*, *20*, 418–432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-007-0047-7>
- Steele, C. M. (2010). *Whistling Vivaldi*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 797–811. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797>
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., & Markus, H. R. (2012). It's your choice: How the middle-class model of independence disadvantages working-class Americans. In S. T. Fiske & H. R. Markus (Eds.), *Facing social class: How societal rank influences interaction* (pp. 87–106). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *102*, 1178–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027143>
- Stephens, N. M., Hamedani, M. G., & Destin, M. (2014). Closing the social-class achievement gap: A difference-education intervention improves first-generation students' academic performance and all students' college transition. *Psychological Science*, *25*, 943–953. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613518349>
- Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Fryberg, S. A. (2012). Social class disparities in health and education: Reducing inequality by applying a sociocultural self model of behavior. *Psychological Review*, *119*, 723–744. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029028>
- Strand, S. (2014). Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: Intersectionality and 'getting it' for the white working class. *Research Papers in Education*, *29*(2), 131–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2013.767370>
- Tibbetts, Y., Harackiewicz, J. M., Canning, E. A., Boston, J. S., Priniski, S. J., & Hyde, J. S. (2016). Affirming Independence: Exploring Mechanisms underlying a values affirmation intervention for first-generation students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *110*, 635–659. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000049>

- Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *92*(1), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.1.82>
- Walton, G. M., & Spencer, S. J. (2009). Latent ability. Grades and test scores systematically underestimate the intellectual ability of negatively stereotyped students. *Psychological Science*, *20*, 1132–1139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02417.x>
- Zeedyk, M. S., Gallacher, J., Henderson, M., Hope, G., Husband, B., & Lindsay, K. (2003). Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: Perceptions of pupils, parents and teachers. *School Psychology International*, *24*(1), 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034303024001010>

Received 24 August 2018; revised version received 29 March 2019

Supporting Information

The following supporting information may be found in the online edition of the article:

Appendix S1. Supporting information.