Exploring Stereotype Threat for Latinx Elementary ELLs

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Introduction

According to stereotype threat theory, the prospect of being judged in terms of a negative stereotype triggers underperformance (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Targets need not personally subscribe to the negative stereotype to be affected but must simply be aware that others may subscribe to it. As an example, many researchers have demonstrated that the prospect of being judged according to a stereotype of intellectual inferiority has been shown to significantly depress the academic test performance of Latinx students of all ages (Chu & Brown, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2002; Schmader & Johns, 2003). Also, researchers have demonstrated stereotype threat effects for English as a foreign language students abroad (Hsu, 2015). However, no known studies have specifically investigated the effect of stereotype threat on English as a second language (ESL) students in the United States. In fact, studies looking at stereotype threat effects on Latinx students sometimes specifically exclude English language learners (ELLs) (Bratter et al., 2016; Howard & Anderson, 2010).

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Domain Identification

One factor demonstrated to moderate the performance effects of stereotype threat is the level of *domain identification*. Domain identification refers to the degree to which one places importance on one's achievement in a given domain (Steele, 1997). In stereotype threat settings, those most highly identified with a domain are at higher risk of underperformance (Aronson et al., 1999; Lawrence et al., 2010; Wasserberg, 2014).

Domain disidentification occurs when a formerly valued social identity is significantly reduced or abandoned. Specifically for Latinx college students, chronic exposure to stereotype threat has been shown to lead to disidentification from academic domains (Woodcock et al., 2012).

Elementary students have also been shown to be more adversely affected by stereotype threat when they are more domain identified (Wasserberg, 2014). Presently, educational policies emphasize standardized testing in elementary grades. These policies require high-stakes testing of ELLs in English, thereby pressuring schools to focus on assessing students in a language in which they are not proficient (Menken, 2010).

Specifically for Latinx immigrants, a consequence is that elementary schools with high numbers of ELLs are more likely to engage in rote test-centered instruction (Adair et al., 2017; Crosnoe, 2005). Given the potential for increasing levels of identification with standardized test scores, there is a need for research on how the related academic performance of ELLs is influenced by the situational pressures outlined by stereotype threat.

Anxiety and Self-Efficacy

Anxiety has been clearly linked to decreased academic performance for children (Hill & Wigfield, 1984; McDonald, 2001). ELLs have shown specific anxiety related to a fear of negative evaluation based on linguistic competency at college (Khan, 2015), high school (Mamhot et al., 2013), and elementary levels (Parra et al., 2014). It has long been speculated that this anxiety is a mediator of negative stereotype threat effects (Steele, 1997).

Studies have presented some evidence of this in college (Blascovich et al., 2001; Osborne, 2006), high school (Osborne, 2001), and elementary students (Wasserberg, 2014). Although no studies have looked specifically at stereotype threat effects on ELLs, research has shown that when Latinx high school students experience stereotype threat, they experience increased anxiety (Osborne, 2001).

The academic self-efficacy of children and adolescents has long been linked directly to performance (Bandura et al., 1996). Self-efficacy is a specifically strong predictor of academic performance for Latinx adolescents (Buriel et al., 1998), and it plays an important role in second language learning (Cave et al., 2018; Murad Sani & Zain, 2011).

In the seminal stereotype threat research, Steele and Aronson (1995) posited that self-efficacy is a mediator for stereotype threat effects. There has been some support for this hypothesis with college students (Burnette et al., 2010; Inzlicht et al., 2006; Milner &

Hoy, 2003) and for domain-identified elementary students (Wasserberg, 2014). To date, no known studies have specifically examined the relationship between stereotype threat and self-efficacy in ELLs.

Goal Orientation

Stereotype threat works to focus threatened individuals on seeking to avoid negative judgments about their ability in a particular performance domain (Steele, 1997). In achievement goal theory, a focus on avoiding negative judgments is characterized as a specific type of performance goal referred to as a *performance-avoidance* goal (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

A *performance-avoidance goal* has been shown to be a positive predictor of cognitive disorganization and a negative predictor of exam performance (Elliot et al., 1999; Middleton & Midgley, 1997). Ryan and Ryan (2005) have suggested a relationship between stereotype threat and achievement goals based on mediators including increased anxiety (Elliot & McGregor, 1999, 2001; Elliot et al., 1999; McGregor & Elliot, 2002; Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997) and decreased self-efficacy (Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997).

For second language learners, performance-avoidance goals are negatively linked to language competence from adolescence through college (Lee & Bong, 2019; Lin, 2019; Lou & Noels, 2020). Also, specifically for Latinx students, performance-avoidance goals are negatively associated with academic performance for high schoolers (Witkow & Fuligni, 2007) and with academic performance and depression for elementary and middle school students (Zychinski & Polo, 2012).

Stereotype Threat Performance Effects on Elementary Students

A number of studies have specifically examined stereotype threat effects on elementary students. As early as kindergarten, children demonstrate performance shifts in association with the both explicit (Ambady et al., 2001) and implicit (McKown & Strambler, 2009) activation of stereotypes.

Latinx elementary students specifically performed academically worse in stereotype threat situations when compared to nonstigmatized groups (McKown & Strambler, 2009) but not when compared to other stigmatized groups (Wasserberg, 2017). Although more research on the effects of stereotype threat on children is needed, much of the evidence suggests that children are prone to the same stereotype threat effects as older populations.

Method

The goal of the present study was to investigate potential stereotype threat effects in an ESL classroom.

Participants

Participants were the 18 students in an ESL classroom at a Title I elementary school in Eastern, North Carolina. The student composition of the school was 18% Black, 52% Latinx, and 30% White. All of the students in the ESL classroom were Latinx.

Measures

Domain Identification. Participants completed the English subsection of the Domain Identification Measure (DIM; Smith & White, 2001), which consisted of seven items on a 5-point Likert scale related to perceived academic ability and importance placed on reading performance. Scores were summed, and each participant was assigned a domain identification score ranging from 7 to 35. A median split was performed on the resulting scores to create more domain-identified and less domain-identified groups.

Academic Performance. Participants were given two reading passages from a district-provided sample with a format identical to the state test. The first passage was followed by 13 multiple-choice questions; the second passage was followed by 8 multiple-choice questions (for a total of 21 items). Performance was measured by percentage of questions answered correctly in 30 minutes.

Anxiety. Participants completed the State Anxiety Scale from the State Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (Spielberger et al., 1973) by responding to each of 20 items on a 3-point rating scale. For each item, participants checked one of three alternatives to describe how they felt before taking the reading test (e.g., *very happy*, *happy*, or *not happy*). Scores were summed, and each participant was assigned an anxiety score ranging from 20 to 60.

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy was measured for all participants using the academic self-efficacy component of the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS; Midgley et al., 1996), the validation of which was supported for use at the elementary school level as measurement of students' perceptions of their competence to do their classwork (Middleton & Midgley, 1997). A previous examination of internal consistency revealed an alpha coefficient of .74 (Midgley et al., 2000).

Achievement Goal Orientation. Goal orientation of participants was measured using the performance-avoid goal orientation (revised) component of the PALS, which has been validated for use at the elementary school level (Midgley et al., 2000). The particular component included four Likert-scale items and is publicly available. A previous examination of internal consistency revealed an alpha coefficient of .74 (Midgley et al., 2000).

Procedure

The English subsection of the DIM was administered, and a median split was performed on the resulting scores to create more domain-identified and less domain-identified groups. Following the administration of the DIM, stereotype threat conditions were manipulated by characterizing an academic task as either a practice standardized test diagnostic of ability or a nondiagnostic performance task.

The more domain-identified and less domain-identified participants were each randomly assigned to either a diagnostic or nondiagnostic testing condition. The academic task was administered in a small classroom setting in pullout groups of between three and five students. After the directions were given, but before the participants began working, the goal orientation, state anxiety, and self-efficacy of participants were assessed using the appropriate measures.

Results

Participants in the threat condition performed worse, were more anxious, and were more highly oriented toward a performance-avoidance goal than participants in the nonthreat condition. Levels of self-efficacy were similar in both conditions (see Table 1).

When taking the level of domain identification into account, it was revealed that these effects were specific to the most domain-identified participants (see Table 2).

Discussion

The current classroom-based investigation was designed to explore stereotype threat effects on Latinx children in an ESL classroom at a Title I elementary school. Building on prior research (McKown & Strambler, 2009; McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Wasserberg, 2014, 2017), findings provide further evidence that children are vulnerable to stereotype threat effects.

Specifically, Latinx ESL students performed worse on an academic task when it was characterized as diagnostic of ability than when the same test was characterized as nondiagnostic of ability. They also experienced a higher level of anxiety and a higher level of orientation toward a performance-avoidance achievement goal. These effects seemed to be, at least in part, moderated by the participants' level of domain identification, such that the effects were specific to students who were more domain identified.

In past research, Latinx children have been demonstrated to be similarly affected by stereotype threat when tested alone or in the presence of a White comparison group (McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Nader & Clark, 2011). This investigation, however, was the first to explore specifically the effects on Latinx second language learners.

The findings of this classroom investigation add to the extant literature by showing that Latinx ESL students may be susceptible to stereotype threat performance effects and that children who most highly value their performance may be most vulnerable. This small-scale exploration sets the stage for a larger study investigating the stereotype threat susceptibility of ELLs.

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Table 1

Mean Participant Scores on the Measures of Academic Performance, Anxiety, Self-Efficacy, and Goal Orientation by Threat Condition

	Academic task score	Level of anxiety	Level of self-efficacy	Performance-avoidance goal orientation
No threat	62.89	26.78	20.33	7.89
Threat	48.22	29.11	21.33	12.33

Table 2

Mean Participant Scores on the Measures of Academic Performance, Anxiety, Self-Efficacy, and Goal Orientation by Threat Condition and Level of Domain Identification

		Academic task score	Level of anxiety	Level of self-efficacy	Performance-avoidance goal orientation
Less domain identified	No threat	41.75	29.75	18.50	9.75
	Threat	53.00	29.80	20.80	11.80
More domain identified	No threat	79.80	24.40	21.80	6.40
	Threat	42.25	20.25	22.00	13.00

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