Latina Identity, Stereotyping Concerns, and Academic Achievement

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The present study investigates the relationship between ethnic identity and academic achievement among Latinas. A sample of Latina students at a liberal arts women’s college in the Southeast completed a questionnaire focused on their academic feelings and experiences, their feelings about their ethnic identity, and their concerns about stereotypes of their group. Results demonstrated a significant negative correlation between fear of racial stereotyping and college GPA. This relationship was quite strong in Latina students, who constitute a numerically small minority on the campus. The implications of this relationship and future research directions are discussed.

In academic settings, members of socially stigmatized groups are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to the issues of social belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007), which may contribute to racial disparities in achievement. Certain conditions may exacerbate the effect of social stigma. Environments in which ethnicity becomes highly salient due to under-representation of the minority group could heighten sensitivity to stereotypes. For example, being the only Latina in a classroom could sensitize an individual to cues that her identity is stigmatized. When Black, Latino/a, and Native American students observe schools in the United States, they see places in which members of their group are numerically under-represented (Walton & Cohen, 2007). How minorities view themselves and their environment can affect how they perform in an academic setting. The present study investigates the relationship between achievement, identity, and concerns with stereotyping for Latina students in an environment in which their numeric representation is quite small.

Stereotype Threat

When minorities feel as though their group is identified as not performing as well in academics and they are reminded of this stereotype, a stereotype threat might occur and minorities may find that this threat influences how they perform academically (Steele, 1997). Research on stereotype threat has demonstrated that when Black students are completing an intelligence test, they may fear that if they perform poorly that would add to the stereotype about the intelligence or intellectual inferiority of their racial/ethnic group. Also, if a Latina feels as though she is going to be judged for her performance at school she may in fact perform worse in school. The pressure to succeed on top of the expected pressure that they will not perform as well hinders minorities’ performance.

In addition to negotiating stereotype threat, many Latino/a undergraduate students may experience a culture shock in the academic environment, and as a result may display poor academic achievement (Valencia & Black, 2002). When Latino/as feel isolated or discriminated against on a daily basis, their confidence in themselves, their self worth, and the belief that they can complete tasks successfully suffer. Latino/as beliefs about themselves have been indicated as a reason for low enrollment and the relatively low number of Latino/a students who graduate from higher education institutions (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Identity Contingency Theory

Stereotype threat affects minorities in different ways. Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, and Crosby (in press) found that people who are a part of a negatively stereotyped group are affected by cues that signal identity contingencies, which they defined as possible judgments, treatments, and valuations that go with having that identity in a given setting. Therefore, a particular setting could make a person feel threatened. Minority students look for cues as to whether or not they belong or are welcomed in their academic setting. The size and location of a particular university and the
number of identity-relevant activities can impact whether students who are African American and Latino/a-American feel devalued due to their racial or ethnic identity (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). For Latinas, the limited number of other Latinas at a college or university can serve as a cue making them feel as though they do not belong on campus. Purdie et al. (in press) stated that the number or proportion of others who share their group identity might affect a sense of threat, which affects their trust in the setting. Minority students seem to count or observe how many other minority students are in the classroom. The minority status that is part of their social identity is a cue that is relevant to how much importance that identity is in the classroom or any particular setting in general.

**University Environment**

Lopez and Hasso (1998) compared ways in which Latina and Arab American women students experienced their racial-ethnic identity in the university setting. They found that Latinas struggled with messages that they were unqualified to be university students because of their racial-ethnic background. Some messages or cues that Latinas received that told them they were “unqualified” and did not belong in the university setting were that the university was a predominately White environment with a Eurocentric curriculum. Having a predominately White environment may contribute to the stress minorities may feel. The low representation of Latinas at the university sent out the message that they did not belong and were not welcomed. Janie, one of the Latina students who they interviewed, said “I was probably the only Latina in all of my classes. I felt really alienated” (Lopez & Hasso, 1998, p. 260).

Past research has focused on the persistence of Latino/a college students based on such factors as academic preparation and achievement. However, Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) have identified noncognitive factors (i.e., social, environment, and interpersonal) that help explain Latino/a academic persistence. They found that university comfort, social support, and self-beliefs were positively correlated with persistence in higher education. They also found that Latino/as experience extensive stress as a result of perceptions of an unwelcoming environment, cultural incongruence, or discrimination in their college environment.

**Ethnic Identity**

Phinney (1996) defined ethnic identity as a complex psychological construct that is an integral part of an individual’s self-concept influencing the perceptions, cognitions, affect, and behaviors of the individual. Individuals can vary in how much they identify with a particular ethnic group and how important their ethnicity is to them. For ethnic minorities, their identity formation is tied to their development and acceptance of their group in the face of lower status, stereotypes, and racism (Phinney, 1996). Ethnic minorities can consider themselves to have a high or a low identification with their ethnicity. The development of ethnic identity is particularly important for ethnic minority youth because their minority status makes their ethnicity more salient in the view of those in the larger society (Phinney, 1990). Ethnic minorities may struggle with their ethnic identities and may not know how to assert their ethnicity when a dominant group has negative views about them.

Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) developed a model of African American racial identity known as the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI). Their model provides a construct for understanding the significance of race in the self-concepts of African Americans as well as the qualitative meanings African Americans attribute to being members of their racial category. In order to determine the significance and the qualitative meaning that African Americans associate with, the MMRI takes advantage of four dimensions: racial salience, centrality of the identity, the regard in which the person holds the group associated with the identity, and the ideology associated with the identity (Sellers et al., 1998). Racial salience and centrality relate to the significance people attach to race when they define themselves. Racial regard and ideology on the other hand, refer to the way individuals perceive what it means to be Black. Although the MMRI model was developed to be used with African Americans, we suggest that it may also be relevant for Latinas.

**Ethnic Identity, Academic Achievement, and Persistence**

Fuligni, Witkow, and Garcia (2005) were interested in studying how ethnic identity affects academic motivation and achievement. They believed that when it came to schooling, ethnic minority groups in the United States are stereotyped in terms of their values and behaviors related to academic achievement. They found that the strength of adolescents’ ethnic identification was relevant to their academic achievement. Adolescents who reported that their ethnic identity was central to who they were, and who felt positive regard for their identity, believed that education and school success were important. They identified more with their
schools and felt that they were valued and respected in their schools when they had a positive attitude about their identity.

Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2006) hypothesized that three aspects of racial-ethnic identity (REI) promote academic achievement. The three aspects of REI measured on an ordinal scale were Connectedness, Awareness of Racism, and Embedded Achievement. Connectedness is when people feel connected to their racial-ethnic group. Awareness of racism refers to an understanding that others may not value the in-group. A high level of Embedded Achievement indicates an individual’s sense that his or her in-group is characterized by academic achievement. Their results showed that Latino and African-American youth who were high in all three aspects of REI attain better grades. They also found that even though over time REI increases and grades decrease, REI helps youth experience less of a steep decline in grades.

Castillo, Conoley, Choi-Pearson, Archuleta, Phoummarath, and Van Landingham (2006) found that students who feel strongly about their Latino/a ethnicity perceive their university environment as being more negative than those who do not feel as strongly about their Latino/a identity. Higher identified Latino/a ethnic students reported feeling less committed to finishing college than the lower identified Latino/a. Hurtado and Carter (1997) investigated how the college experiences and the Latino/a students’ background characteristics during their first and second year affected their sense of belonging in their third year. Latino/a’s reported feeling that they were being treated as though they were inferior. If Latino/a feel as though they belong in their environment and they experience less discrimination, they report an increase in college adjustment. Hurtado and Carter (1997) emphasized the importance of understanding Latino/a’s sense of belonging in college campus life to understand Latino/a students’ adjustment to college.

From these studies, it seems the existing studies are not all in agreement about the relationship between ethnic identity and achievement for Latino/as. As discussed above, Castillo et al. (2006), and Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that high ethnically identified Latino/as tended to perceive the university as being less welcoming, while, Fulgini et al. (2005) and Altschul et al. (2006) found that high-identified Latino/as actually perform better in education compared to the low identified Latino/as. One explanation for the discrepancies that were found is that the studies that found positive effects were on younger people while the studies that found negative effects were on college students. In addition, the researchers defined ethnic identity in several different ways. For example, Castillo et al. (2006) used the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Robets, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts & Romero, 1999), Hurtado and Carter (1997) used membership in ethnic clubs and organizations, Fulgini et al. (2005) used the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers et al, 1998), and Altschul et al. (2006) created their own 4-item measure. Given these differences, the relationship between ethnic identity and achievement seems to be in need of further study. The purpose of this present study is to investigate the relationship among ethnic identity, concerns about stereotyping, and academic achievement among Latinas.

Method

Participants

We recruited 131 students at a liberal arts women’s college in the Southeast to participate. Participants were compensated with $10.00 or psychology class credit. The sample was all female, and included 58 White, 45 African Americans, 21 Latinas, 5 Asian Americans, and 2 participants who identified as “other.” The focus of the current research is on the 21 Latina students, and how these students compared to White and African American students. (Other racial groups were not large enough to analyze). Latina participants ranged in age from 19-22 (M = 20.14, SD = 1.15), White participants ranged in age from 18-20 (M = 19.59, SD = 1.43), and Black participants ranged in age from 18-26 (M = 19.93, SD = 1.72).

Materials and Procedures

Participants completed a 15-page questionnaire in their dormitories or in a classroom of 1 to 3 individuals. The majority of the participants completed the questionnaire alone. All Latina participants were given the questionnaire by a Latina experimenter and completed it alone. The participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous. After completing the questionnaire participants were thanked and paid or given class credit.

The current analysis focuses on several measures in particular. First, ethnic identity was assessed through the racial centrality subscale of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) in which references to being African American were replaced with references to “my racial/ethnic group.” Second, concerns with stereotyping were assessed with five statements with which participants were asked to agree.
or disagree on a 9-point scale: “I’m very aware of my race/ethnicity when I’m in class.”; “I worry about how my academic performance might reflect on my racial or ethnic group.”; “Some professors may have lower expectations for me because of my racial or ethnic group.”; “I sometimes wonder if my professors hold stereotypes about my racial or ethnic group”; and “My grades don’t have a lot to do with how smart I really am.” Finally, participants completed basic demographic information and reported both the high school and current college grade point averages (GPA).

Results
Comparisons Among Groups
A one-way ANOVA was conducted on the racial centrality subscale, and a significant effect of race was found, \( F(2, 121) = 14.69, p < .05 \). A post-hoc Tukey revealed that all three groups were significantly different from one another (all \( p’s < .05 \)), with Whites showing the lowest levels of racial centrality (\( M = 3.76, SD = 1.07 \)), African Americans showing an intermediate level (\( M = 4.54, SD = 1.21 \)), and Latinas showing the highest level of racial centrality (\( M = 5.27, SD = 1.23 \)).

The measure of concerns with stereotyping showed acceptable reliability (\( \alpha = .76 \)). A one-way ANOVA of this measure again found a significant effect of race, \( F(2, 121) = 41.57, p < .001 \). A post-hoc Tukey revealed that African American students were highest in concerns with stereotyping (\( M = 5.76, SD = 1.54 \)), and that this group differed significantly (\( p < .001 \)) from both Whites (\( M = 3.11, SD = 1.40 \)) and Latinas (\( M = 4.98, SD = 1.67 \)), who did not differ significantly from one another (\( p = .13 \)).

Relationship to College GPA
Racial centrality was not significantly correlated with college GPA for any of the three groups. There was a marginal or significant negative relationship between college GPA and concerns with stereotyping for all groups (White \( r = -.31, p = .02 \); African American \( r = -.27, p = .08 \); Latina \( r = -.64, p = .003 \)). These results suggest that concerns with stereotyping may lead to poorer academic performance, especially when the racial or ethnic group is sparsely represented in the academic environment. An obvious alternate explanation is that students who come to college with weaker academic preparation develop concerns about being stereotyped in the classroom. In order to examine this possibility, we used a median split to divide participants into high versus low concern with stereotyping. A univariate ANOVA was conducted using high school GPA as a covariate. The relationship between concern with stereotyping and college GPA remained significant for Latinas, \( F(1, 17) = 6.11, p < .05 \), remained marginal for African Americans, \( F(1, 41) = 3.0, p = .09 \), and was no longer significant for Whites, \( F(1, 55) = 1.7, p = .20 \). Future studies should examine both GPA and concerns with stereotyping over a longer period of time, and/or look at how manipulating concerns with stereotyping might affect academic effort and expectations.

Discussion
Latinas’ concerns about being stereotyped in the classroom were significantly and negatively correlated with their college GPA’s, and this relationship remained even when high school GPA was used as a covariate. It is worth noting that even though African American students showed the highest levels of concerns with being stereotyped, the relationship between concerns with stereotyping and GPA was not as strong as it was for Latinas. This may be because at this particular college African Americans represent 22% of the student body, while Latinas represent only 4%. The low visibility of Latinas on campus, coupled with an awareness of racial stereotypes, may result in the strong negative relationship between concerns and grade point average.

It is worth noting that although Latinas were quite high in racial centrality, this measure did not correlate significantly with GPA. This does not help to inform our understanding about the relationship between racial identity and academic performance, but it may point to the need for further validation of the MMRI (Sellers et al., 1998) with non-African Americans, and/or the need to utilize scales of racial identity focused specifically on Latinos and Latinas.

Overall, the results show that minorities are greatly affected by settings that give off cues that seem threatening to them. Minorities who feel as though devaluation is plausible based on stereotypes about their race will perform worse in social institutions (i.e., the classroom). Certain messages or cues may signal information about possible judgments and treatments minorities may face because of their race. Cues suggesting that minorities are not welcome or are unqualified to be at college may arouse the psychological experience of threat.

Despite the relationship between concerns with stereotyping and academic achievement, Latinas reported quite positive feeling about college in other parts of the questionnaire. For example, they were indistinguishable from White students in their feeling

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about how happy they were to be at the college and whether they regretted choosing this college. This may at first seem to be at odds with the concerns with stereotyping, but make sense within their cultural context. In general Latinas are grateful for the opportunity to be at the college due to the fact that they are able to further their education, make their family proud, and because it may be seen as culturally inappropriate to report negative feelings about the institution that is providing the means of their education. Clearly there are cues that do affect Latinas because there was a negative correlation between stereotype concerns and GPA. Future directions for this study would be to determine what particular cues in the environment might be causing stereotype concerns and fear of being rejected because of one’s race. Finally, it may also be worthwhile to investigate how specific cues affect each individual.

One way of gaining insight into these questions could be to have focus groups led by a Latina student. Focus groups may allow Latina students to feel as though they are able to express their true feelings. Latinas may feel more comfortable explaining their answers in detail instead of just circling one answer on a questionnaire. A focus group would prevent the researcher from relying on closed ended questions and let Latinas express in detail how they feel their ethnicity is related to their academic experience. Overall, having a focus group would allow researchers to combine qualitative with quantitative data, which would give them an enriched understanding of what Latinas are feeling.

There are limitations worth noting in this study. The correlational nature of the analyses makes it impossible to establish causation. Future studies might manipulate concerns with stereotyping (such as with manipulations of stereotype threat) and/or the number of members of a minority group in a setting. Also, the small sample of Latinas and the unique characteristics of a liberal arts women’s college make it important that the relationship be investigated at additional locations. For the most part, the research reviewed in this paper did not find gender differences (Altschul et al., 2006; Castillo et al., 2006; Fuligni et al., 2005; Hurtado & Carter., 1997; Phinney, 1996; Zarate et al., 2005). However, given the all-female sample in our study, replication with samples of both men and women would be essential. In addition, the small, liberal arts setting may allow for more personal interactions between students and faculty, making comparisons with larger universities important as well. Since the study was conducted in a college campus with a small number of Latinas, it would be interesting to conduct this study at a larger university that has a large number of Latinas and compare the results. Are Latinas who attend a smaller university more attuned to the cues they may receive from the institution they attend? Does the perception of being a minority student differ when there are more minorities in the institution? In addition, it would be interesting to see if students’ responses will vary depending on what type of institution they attend. Would there be a difference in students’ report of stereotyping concerns among minorities who attend a private college or university and those who attend a large public state college or university, and between co-ed and single-sex schools? We might also look at high school students, to see if the same relationships are present.

The results of the present study are important because they carry implications for college and university settings. Colleges and universities need to understand that small minority group representation signal cues to minority groups that they are not welcomed or “unqualified” to be there. These cues may lead to fear of stereotyping, which may be related to lower academic achievement. If universities increase minority enrollment and offer support to minorities they may be able to decrease the ambiguity that minorities may feel. Having more minority students who are in their in-group may allow the students to lessen their fear of being rejected because of their race. Minority students need to sense that they will not be devalued or diminished in some way because of their group membership. If the institution provides positive cues that minorities are welcome and play an integral part in the institution, then maybe Latinas will not have to worry about stereotyping, which may lead to a rise in their academic achievement in that particular institution.

References


