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Session Title: Scaling up a Social-Psychological Intervention to Combat Stereotype Threat and Narrow Achievement Gaps: Enduring Impacts

Conference Section: Choice 1: Social and Emotional Interventions in Educational Settings
Choice 2: Education and Social Inequality

Symposium Justification (500 words):

Recent social-psychological theories emphasize the power that differing attitudes or mindsets have on the way people view themselves, interact with others, and, ultimately, perform in school and beyond (Dweck, 2006). There are many explanations for the educational inequalities separating racial/ethnic minority and majority students, but one compelling social-psychological theory is “stereotype threat” (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Negative stereotypes impugn non-Asian ethnic minorities’ intellectual ability and, indeed, a recent meta-analysis suggests that stereotype threat explains approximately one-quarter of the test-score gap separating Black and Latino students from their white counterparts (Walton & Spencer, 2009).

One means of protecting the self from perceived threats is to encourage affirmation of self-worth. The results of a randomized trial in three middle-school classrooms by Geoffrey Cohen and colleagues (Cohen, et al., 2006; Cohen, et al. 2009) suggested that a 15-minute self-affirmation writing exercise aimed at affirming students’ personal values reduced the Black–White grade-point-average (GPA) gap by as much as 40%, by improving African American students’ performance. By writing about characteristics, skills, values, or roles that they value or view as important, such as being a good friend, or having a sense of humor, the exercise helps students focus on other dimensions of their sense of self as good, virtuous, successful, and able to control important life outcomes.

In this large-scale replication across all 11 Madison, WI Metropolitan School District (MMSD) middle schools, we tested whether the Cohen et al. (2006; 2009) self-affirmation writing exercise could help close the gaps among the district’s seventh grade students on GPA and high-stakes achievement tests. Our work to date has shown that the self-affirmation intervention can have meaningful short-term impacts that narrow achievement gaps at scale across a school district (Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2014). The research papers presented in this symposium will address whether the initial treatment effects on GPA persist over time and whether such interventions may hold promise as sustainable solutions for narrowing persistent achievement gaps at scale. Second, we will explore whether the treatment effects may generalize beyond the academic domain to student behavioral outcomes, including disciplinary referrals in school. Third, we will discuss the extent to which we were able to achieve fidelity of implementation for this district-wide scale up, and what barriers may have affected treatment fidelity. Finally, we will explore variation in the content of the students’ written responses to the self-affirmation interventions and assess whether this variation may explain differences in the treatment impacts. Chris Hulleman, an expert on social-psychological interventions and treatment fidelity, who is independent from the study team, will then discuss
the set of presentations, commenting on our findings and addressing challenges for the field in eliminating stereotype threat and closing achievement gaps.

Historically, Wisconsin has shown some of the largest achievement gaps in the country (Vanneman, et al., 2009). If the results from this remarkably cost-effective, relatively simple intervention strategy can be replicated and better understood, it could hold tremendous potential for closing persistent achievement gaps in Madison and across the United States.

References


