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THE INFLUENCE OF CONCEALING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT ON THE SELF-ESTEEM OF ADOLESCENTS WITH LOW ACHIEVEMENT

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An examination was carried out of the influences of concealing academic achievement on self-esteem in an academically relevant social interaction based on the assumption that concealing socially devalued characteristics should influence individuals' self-esteem during social interactions. An interview paradigm called for school-aged adolescents who either were or were not low (academic) achievers to play the role of students who were or were not low achievers while answering academically relevant questions. The data suggest that the performance self-esteem of low achievers who played the role of good students was more positive than that of low achievers who played the role of low achievers. On the other hand, participants who played the role of good students had more positive performance self-esteem than did participants who played the role of low achievers.

Keywords: low academic achievement, adolescents, social stigma.

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Academic achievement is a key indicator in evaluating student performance. Many previous studies have shown that low academic achievement (LA) is associated with many social problems such as peer rejection and unpopularity in childhood (Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982). It is usually the case that low-achieving adolescents are more likely to be rejected, or neglected by others (e.g., Bakker, Denessen, Bosman, Krijger, & Bouts, 2007). As a result, LA adolescents often deliberately hide their lack of academic achievement during social interactions in order to avoid potential discrimination or rejection. Their strategies include concealing their failures (Singer, 2005), denying disabilities, and even inventing secret pictorial languages to communicate with others and get the information they need without letting teachers know what they are doing (Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001). This being the case, when adolescents try to conceal the stigma of LA, what will happen in relation to their self-esteem?

Many scholars believe that individuals who conceal socially devalued identities may benefit in terms of increased self-esteem by hiding negative information. For example, Goffman (1963) contended that being able to conceal a socially devalued aspect of the self may be viewed by the individuals with these devalued aspects as highly advantageous in social interactions. This may enable them to minimize the impact of their devalued identities on others' judgments and be accepted as "normal" (Goffman). Moreover, it has also been shown in some studies that simply claiming that they have passed protects individuals in stigmatized groups from prejudice and discrimination directed at their group (e.g., Quinn, Kahng, & Crocker, 2004). Thus, self-esteem would improve for individuals who concealed some key socially devalued information.

In the present study we investigated the relationship between concealing academic achievement and self-esteem for LA adolescents. Our hypothesis was that LA adolescents who are able to conceal their poor academic achievement information will have more positive self-esteem in social interactions.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 76 LA adolescents (53 boys and 23 girls) and 75 high achievers (HA) (34 boys and 41 girls) aged 13-15 (M_{LA} = 14.36, M_{HA} = 14.24) from a middle school (grades 7-9).

The LA participants were adolescents whose academic test scores were below 90% of their classmates in the last year (percentiles were computed by class). In the school situation these students were particularly likely to suffer from the constant disadvantages that stem from low achievement.

HA participants were randomly selected from students whose scores in academic tests were average to high, above the 60th percentile. These students were generally considered as good students by their teachers and peers.

MATERIAL

Generally, experimental manipulation only influences participants' state self-esteem rather than trait self-esteem (e.g., Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). In this study, we measured both types of self-esteem.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has been widely used to measure individual's trait self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). In our study participants rated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their feelings of self-esteem on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*).

State Self-Esteem Scale The State Self-Esteem Scale was developed to measure temporary changes in self-esteem, and has high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .92). It has been demonstrated to be sensitive to manipulations designed to temporarily alter self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The State Self-Esteem Scale contains subscales for performance, social, and appearance self-esteem. Six items assessing appearance self-esteem were excluded in the present study, because they were irrelevant to the experimental procedure. In our study participants related to what extent they felt right according to seven performance and seven social items. Each item was scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

PROCEDURE

In the preparatory stage that was conducted three days before the formal session, participants were asked to complete the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

In the formal stage, when participants arrived for the session, they were greeted by an assistant who introduced him/herself as a new teacher and were told that they would take part in an interview. The participants were then randomly assigned one of the two following experimental situations:

In the HA condition, the participants were told that, "Your interviewer in the laboratory is a respected expert in the field of education who has no information about your academic achievement. This expert wants to interview some students and give advice on learning strategies. Later, he (she) will interview a good student. Now, you know that I am a new teacher and I can't find a suitable student for him (her). So I'd like to ask you to play the role of a good student and have an interview with that expert. Then, you should follow the expert's instruction and do your best to complete all tasks. I will give you a wonderful present for completing your tasks successfully."

In the LA condition, the same instructions were given, substituting the phrase "low-achieving student" for "good student".

Those LA participants who were assigned to the HA condition were to conceal the information that they were low achievers academically. Those LA students assigned to the LA participant group did not need to conceal their low academic achievement. This was taken as the control condition.

After being given these instructions, participants were taken to the laboratory individually and each was introduced to the "expert" (experimenter) according to his or her assigned learning performance (real or bogus). The assistant then left the laboratory and the interview began with some neutral questions from the experimenter. As the interview progressed, participants were asked to describe themselves and answer some learning-related questions. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked to respond truthfully to the State Self-Esteem Scale. After completing this measure, the experimenter debriefed each participant and gave him/her a present.

RESULTS

In order to control the effect on the experiment result of trait self-esteem, we used trait self-esteem as a covariant in the data analysis. The result showed that trait self-esteem was a significant covariate, $F(1, 145) = 8.83$, $p < 0.01$. The results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant main effects of participants' types ($F = 3.27$, $p < 0.05$) and experimental condition ($F = 6.74$, $p < 0.01$); while the interaction between participants' types and experimental condition was also significant ($F = 6.06$, $p < 0.01$). Further analysis showed that, for performance self-esteem, the main effect of experiment condition was significant, $F(1, 145) = 4.27$, $p < 0.05$, performance self-esteem under HA condition ($M = 26.85$) was noticeably higher than that under the LA condition ($M = 24.95$); the interaction effect between student type and experiment condition was significant, $F(1, 145) = 11.69$, $p < 0.001$. The analysis result of the simple effect showed that the difference of the level of performance self-esteem was significant under the two experimental conditions for LA participants, $F(1, 73) = 15.38$, $p < 0.001$; the performance self-esteem of LA participant under HA condition ($M = 26.87$) was higher than that under the LA condition ($M = 22.24$).

TABLE 1
STATE SELF-ESTEEM MEASURES

	HA participants		LA participants	
	HA context ($n = 37$)	LA context ($n = 38$)	HA context ($n = 38$)	LA context ($n = 38$)
Performance self-esteem	26.84 (5.08)	27.73 (5.52)	26.87 (5.12)	22.24 (5.06)
Social self-esteem	21.97 (4.88)	19.54 (4.90)	22.71 (5.48)	19.12 (5.31)

Note: Numbers in the brackets denote standard deviations.

For social self-esteem, the main effect of the student type was not significant, $F(1, 145) = 0.59$, $p > 0.40$. There was a significant main effect of the experiment

condition, $F(1, 145) = 13.30$, $p < 0.01$. The level of social self-esteem under the HA condition ($M = 22.35$) was significantly higher than that under the LA condition ($M = 19.12$). The interaction effect between student type and experiment condition was not significant, $F(1, 145) = 0.73$, $p > 0.30$. Table 1 shows the mean scores of state self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

In many previous studies experimental manipulation has been shown to influence only participants' state self-esteem rather than trait self-esteem (e.g., Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). In order to eliminate the possible influence of trait self-esteem on the results of state self-esteem after the interview in this study, we considered trait self-esteem to be a covariate when we conducted the MANOVA for state self-esteem. The results revealed that state self-esteem of LA participants in the HA condition was higher than that of LA participants in the LA condition. These results indicated that the self-esteem of adolescents would be improved if they concealed information about low academic achievement. The results of the current study provide powerful evidence for the proposition that being able to hide socially devalued aspects of the self may enable individuals to minimize the impact of the devalued identity on others' judgments and protect them from prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Goffman, 1963; Quinn, Kahng, & Crocker, 2004). In this study LA adolescents in the HA condition had contextually valued identities because they concealed negative learning-relevant information and avoided the threat of negative expectation, possible discrimination, and prejudice and could participate in the interview as valued individuals (good students). Therefore, the self-esteem of LA adolescents in the HA condition had been protected and they recorded more positive results than LA adolescents in the LA condition.

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