Theoretical, Ethical, and Policy Considerations for Conducting Social-Psychological Interventions to Close Educational Achievement Gaps

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Educators and researchers alike are increasingly recognizing the potential for social psychological interventions to serve as inexpensive and potentially powerful means to foster equity and inclusion in education settings. While research has yielded a number of powerful results (e.g., in one case, brief self-affirmation writing exercises continued to exert benefits 7-9 years after the intervention), in some cases, the same interventions have yielded null or even negative effects. The present review (Binning & Browman, 2019) was motivated by a desire to highlight why, when, and how to deliver social psychological interventions in ways that will maximize their positive impact and minimize their negative impact.

We highlight a series of principles and guidelines for implementing these interventions in educational settings. Our core argument is that all interventions are not equal, such that some interventions will be more or less appropriate than others depending on the psychological state of the students’ receiving them. For example, in some cases, students are in a state of heightened threat, in which they feel they do not have adequate competence or psychological resources to handle the academic problems they face. However, in other cases, students will have the opposite problem, where they incorrectly perceive their resources to exceed the requirements of the task at hand, resulting in overconfidence or boredom. As a result, we argue against a one-size-fits-all
approach to intervention. Rather, we suggest that researcher and practitioners should seek to first
diagnose where students are along the psychological threat continuum and calibrate their
interventions according to those findings.

To aid in the diagnostic process, we offer a sample of psychological measures that may
be administered to students prior to interventions in an effort to identify where along the threat
curve students. Furthermore, we provide examples of how archival data analyses and qualitative
data collection (e.g., interviews with students and teachers) can provide rich sources of
information for understanding social contexts prior to intervention. Finally, throughout our
review, we highlight a variety of different interventions and discuss which students they may be
best suited to assist—for example, which interventions may be most helpful for students
experiencing high psychological threat, versus those best suited to help students who do not see
the value in school. In sum, the present review advocates for a more personalized approach to
intervention to foster equity and inclusion, similar to those currently being pursued in
personalized medicine.