

ABSTRACT

Stereotype Threat as an Explanation for Sexual Risk Taking Behavior in Gay Men: A Multi- Study Exploration of Mechanisms

by

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Stereotype threat is a hindrance in performance that occurs when an individual's awareness of negative stereotypes associated with his/her group results in inadvertent conforming to that stereotype. Stereotype threat research has been conducted on myriad group and domain identifications but gay men are strikingly absent from the stereotype threat literature. One of the most prevalent stereotypes about gay men indicates they are sexually promiscuous and that this promiscuity is linked to HIV infection. In a series of three research projects, a theoretical model proposing stereotype threat as a mechanism for sexual risk taking behavior in gay men is tested. In Study 1 we aimed to find evidence for a link between distinctiveness and threat and to explore whether gay men would endorse stereotypes about their group when exposed to threat, in Study 2, we aimed to find evidence for a link between message priming and threat and to explore if gay men would engage in stereotype avoidance by rejecting stereotypes *about themselves* and in Study 3, we tested the theoretical model as a whole in an experimental setting. First, we sought to establish a link between stereotype threat and working memory deficits. Second, we explored the ways in which stereotype threat induced working memory deficits lead to impaired decision making and attempted to provide preliminary evidence that sexual identity threat leads to increased physiological arousal and consequently impaired decision making. In study 1 our findings supported the claim that stereotypes about gay men's sexual behavior exist, and that gay

men are significantly more aware of them than straight men. In study 2, we did not find evidence for stereotype threat, but important findings about sexual identity differences in reaction to HIV advertisements emerged. Study 3 provided preliminary data to support stereotype threat as a mechanism for sexual risk taking behavior in gay-identified men. Future research will need to address the paths of the theoretical model which were not supported by the present research. Implications for intervening on stereotype threat in gay men are discussed.