

Research Paper

An Exploratory Study on Stereotype Threat among Mothers with Learning-Disabled Children

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ABSTRACT

Stereotype threat pertains to the situation in which an individual perceives a risk of conforming to prevalent societal stereotypes. Recent research has shed light on the challenges associated with identifying specific learning disabilities in children, particularly for mothers who predominantly assume the role of primary caregivers. Mothers, who commonly bear the majority of household responsibilities while caring for a child with a disability, are confronted with an increased likelihood of experiencing mental and physical health challenges compared to fathers. This study seeks to explore the influence of stereotypes on mothers of children with learning disabilities. A qualitative investigation was undertaken to delve into the psychological impact of stereotypes associated with mothers having children with specific learning disabilities. This exploratory study utilized qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, to examine the psychological experiences of 7 mothers. These mothers provided detailed narratives of their multifaceted roles, emphasizing that their parental obligations take precedence over all other responsibilities. The study's findings provide valuable insights for interventions tailored to mothers and caregivers, highlighting the significance of maternal self-care in navigating the demanding journey of parenting. Ultimately, mothers of children with learning disabilities are encouraged to seek support from groups and networks, potentially alleviating feelings of isolation within the unfamiliar terrain of disabilities.

Keywords: *stereotype threat, mothers, learning disabled children, exploratory study*

Stereotype threat occurs when individuals are worried that their behavior or characteristics might confirm negative stereotypes about their social group. This concern can negatively impact their performance and perpetuate the stereotype. It was first defined by researchers Steele and Aronson as the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one's group (Steele et al., 1995). Stereotype threat affects mothers of children with learning disabilities in various ways. The fear of being judged increases their stress levels and leads to self-doubt, while the pressure to disprove this threat can significantly affect their emotional well-being, often resulting in feelings of isolation and frustration. This issue is recognized to affect various aspects of life, including the

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professional environment, social interaction, and psychological well-being. The underlying mechanism involves an internalized fear that one's actions or characteristics might reinforce negative societal beliefs, leading to stress, diminished performance, and even withdrawal from the threatening situation (Steele, 1997).

Mothers of children with learning disabilities are often subjected to implicit and explicit societal judgments, which can have detrimental effects and lead to feelings of isolation. Regrettably, the condition of their children is at times unfairly attributed to inadequate parenting, resulting in presumptions about their children's potential academic and social struggles. These pervasive stereotypes can engender a prejudiced sense of low self-esteem, anxiety, and self-doubt among mothers, who may harbor concerns about being judged or held responsible for their children's challenges. Consequently, this anxiety not only exacts an emotional toll on these mothers but also influences their interactions with their children, families, educators, and the broader community. The task of raising a child with a learning disability gives rise to distinctive challenges that extend beyond the child's academic and developmental needs and significantly impact the psychological and emotional well-being of the mother, particularly due to her primary caregiving role.

Stereotype threat in parenting and motherhood

The existing body of research on stereotype threat predominantly centers on the experiences of individuals in educational and workplace settings. However, recent studies have brought to light its impact on mothers in the context of parental practices. Mothers, in comparison to fathers, frequently face societal judgments. Stereotype threat manifests in the form of questioning their parenting abilities, their children's potential for success, and even their moral or personal responsibility for their child's well-being (Shapiro, 2010; Green, 2003). These negative stereotypes often depict mothers as inadequate and hold them accountable for their children's challenges, resulting in heightened stress and anxiety.

In the realm of parenting, stereotype threats manifest in various ways. For example, mothers may experience intense pressure to demonstrate their competence as parents by excessively focusing on their caregiving duties, ultimately leading to burnout and emotional exhaustion (Gartrel & Bos, 2010). Moreover, they might choose to withdraw from social interactions to evade judgment, resulting in feelings of isolation and a lack of necessary social support (Gray, 2002). Importantly, these reactions affect both the mother and child, influencing the child's development and self-esteem (Lachman & Agrigoroaei, 2010).

A marginalized group: mothers with children who have learning disabilities

Learning disabilities represent a form of neurodevelopmental disorder that can hinder a child's capacity to process and comprehend information. Mothers of children with learning disabilities often grapple with societal marginalization, encountering a spectrum of challenges and stigmatization. Extensive research indicates that these mothers frequently confront stigmatization and censure from numerous quarters, including educators, healthcare professionals, and fellow parents (Hastings & Brown, 2002; Lalvani, 2011).

The stigma encircling learning disabilities frequently extends to families, whereby mothers are at times perceived as excessively protective and unduly immersed in their child's condition (McKeever & Miller, 2004). These adverse stereotypes compound the psychological burden experienced by these mothers, thereby elevating the risk of stereotype threat.

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In a study conducted in 2007, Green identified that mothers of children with learning disabilities routinely contend with chronic stress arising from the dual challenge of tending to their child's developmental needs while contending with societal judgments. Hasting et al. (2005) noted that the psychological well-being of these mothers is significantly impacted by societal perspectives, precipitating sentiments of culpability, diminished self-esteem, inadequacy, and helplessness.

Significance of the study

It sheds light on the broader understanding of the stereotype threat that mothers of children with learning disabilities encounter. The research emphasizes the emotional and psychological challenges these mothers experience, underscoring the need for tailored interventions and support systems for this demographic. This study illustrates the difficulties posed by stereotype threat and its influence on parenting and societal attitudes towards disability.

Objectives

1. To explore the Experience of Stereotyping Threat Among Mothers of Children with Learning Disabilities.
2. To understand the psychological and emotional impact of stereotypes on mothers having learning disabled child.
3. To examine how the stereotype threat affects parenting practices.
4. To investigate the impact of stereotype threat on social interaction.
5. To contribute to the development of a supportive intervention for mothers having learning disabled child.

Research questions

1. How do the mothers of children with learning disabilities perceive and experience stereotype threat in their daily lives?
2. What is the psychological and emotional impact of stereotype threat on mothers of children with learning disabilities?
3. How does stereotype threat influence the parenting practices of a mother of a child with a learning disability?
4. How does stereotype threat affect the social interactions of mothers of children with learning disabilities?
5. What insights can be drawn from the experiences of these mothers to inform the development of supportive interventions and policies?

Research gap

The existing body of literature provides valuable insight into the multifaceted challenges that mothers of children with learning disabilities encounter. However, there exists a notable gap in addressing the specific stereotype threat faced by this community. While most literature focuses on stress, anxiety, and stigma, it often overlooks the significant role of stereotypes and psychological threats, as well as the complex array of parental challenges. Additionally, there is a distinct paucity of qualitative research that effectively captures the nuanced and deeply personal experiences of these mothers, including their resilience in navigating the manifold struggles of parenting a child with learning disabilities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of stereotype threat, originally introduced by Steele and Aronson in 2005, constitutes a significant area of research in psychology. It is particularly focused on

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comprehending the detrimental impact of negative societal stereotypes on performance in professional environments, academic conduct, and the mental well-being of individuals. While initially confined to specific domains, it has now permeated all spheres of influence. Evidence suggests that stereotype threat and its aftermath contribute to heightened anxiety and stress. Moreover, such threats induce fear in mothers of children with learning disabilities and consequently influence parenting behaviors.

Stereotype threat can impair cognitive functioning, increase stress and anxiety, reduce motivation, and result in low performance (Schmader et al., 2008). Chronic exposure to stereotype threat can lead to disengagement, where individuals begin to distance themselves from the threatening domain (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Mothers of children with learning disabilities are especially susceptible to stereotype threat due to the prevailing social stigma associated with these disabilities. Learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and dysgraphia, are frequently misapprehended and stigmatized in various cultural contexts. This stigma impacts not only the children but also their mothers, who are often held accountable for their children's challenges or perceived as flawed upon societal scrutiny. Consequently, mothers experience intense psychological pressure when held responsible for their children's difficulties.

Mothers' conditions influencing children with learning disabilities

Upon discovering that their child has a learning disability (LD), parents commence a challenging journey fraught with intense emotions and arduous decisions (Kalek, 2008:20). Grounded in the social model of disability, as the theoretical framework, Harper et al. (2013) illuminate the multifaceted challenges inherent in raising a child with LDs. Children with learning disabilities typically demand heightened attention due to their additional needs in comparison to non-disabled children (VanPelt, 2007). Grobler (2012) observes that parents of children with LDs may grapple with persistent feelings of culpability, believing they may be directly responsible for the disability through genetics, stressful pregnancies, or alcohol abuse.

The dissemination of inaccurate information regarding learning disabilities (LDs) may dissuade extended family members from providing support to a child with LDs due to concerns about discrimination and stigmatization. Bayat (2014) delineates two notions that foster negative attitudes toward children with disabilities. Additionally, Resch et al. (2010) contend that when parents perceive the demands of caregiving for a child with LDs to outweigh the available support in terms of resources, it becomes burdensome. Financial strain is another challenge encountered by parents of children with LDs, as they generally face higher expenditures and an elevated likelihood of living in impoverished conditions. Furthermore, parents of children with disabilities confront challenges related to misconceptions and beliefs about parenting, including those specifically concerning parenting children with impairments. These challenges may elevate the risk of experiencing emotional and physical health issues. Emotional stress is further compounded by poverty, resource scarcity, or a lack of awareness regarding available resources.

The gap in the literature highlights the necessity to conduct research that explores the experiences and expectations of mothers with children having learning disabilities, particularly through qualitative methods. These methods can capture the complexity and nuance of their experiences.

METHODS

Participants

The study focused on participants from the Malappuram district, specifically on mothers of children with learning disabilities. The selection criteria required participants to be the primary caregivers and biological mothers of children aged 8-10 years who were currently attending school and facing challenges within the educational and social environment due to their learning disabilities. These mothers were affected by stereotype threat and were open to discussing this issue. The use of purposive sampling was considered the most effective approach for the careful selection and recruitment of informants exhibiting diverse specific characteristics. This method was chosen to gather comprehensive information regarding the subject matter and to provide optimal responses to the research inquiries (Munhall, 2000).

Exclusion criteria for this study included: mothers who were not primary caregivers, children outside the specified age range, and those with neural disorders other than learning disability.

The researcher conducted qualitative research with relatively small sample size, specifically choosing 7 mothers with a learning-disabled child experiencing stereotype threat. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration, with participants selected through purposive sampling. This restricted dataset enabled the collection of personal narratives. Parents were selected through parental support groups and networks within educational institutions.

Research design

The study is built on a qualitative narrative research design aimed at exploring the psychological stereotype threat experienced by mothers of children with learning disabilities. Through this approach, we delve into the personal emotions, stories, and coping strategies of individuals facing complex psychological issues, such as stereotype threat. Our research design focuses on capturing the lived experiences and emotions of the mothers, providing rich insight into how societal judgments and stereotypes affect their psychological well-being and parenting practices. To gather in-depth narratives from participants, we employed semi-structured interviews, allowing us to probe deeper into specific topics and understand how stereotype threat influences mothers' thoughts, behaviors, and interactions with others.

Each participant will engage in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes, conducted in person according to their preference. The interview guide is meticulously designed to delve into crucial areas related to stereotype threat, including the psychological and emotional impact on stress, anxiety, and guilt, influences on parenting practices and social interactions, stereotypes about parenting a learning-disabled child, as well as coping strategies and support systems to manage the pressures of stereotype threat effectively. All data was meticulously recorded.

Ethical consideration

The parents were informed about the purpose and procedure of the study, and each participant provided written consent before the interview. We assured the confidentiality of the data and committed not to discuss the interview content or data with any center staff. Participants also had the right to withdraw from the study without facing any negative consequences for their care.

Data analysis

The researcher thoroughly understands the study's objectives, research questions, and specific issues. By conducting interviews and keen observations, the researcher meticulously gathered data from a wide range of sources. Each session was carefully allocated 60-90 minutes to ensure data clarity, accompanied by relevant counseling sessions. The focus was to unveil the emotional and mental well-being of mothers dealing with stereotype threats while raising a learning-disabled child. The data encompassed various aspects such as caregiving, work-related challenges, family dynamics, relationship intricacies, and societal stigmatization - all crucial areas related to stereotype threat. This includes the psychological and emotional impact of stress, anxiety, and guilt, influences on parenting practices and social interactions, and stereotypes about parenting a learning-disabled child. The importance of psychoeducation and intervention arises as a remedy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The researcher conducted interviews with seven mothers who had experienced severe stereotype threats. All of them were biological mothers of children with learning disabilities who were 28 years old or older. Each counseling and interview session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Out of the seven participants, five worked in the private sector, while two worked in the government sector. The working mothers in the private sector described their lives as hectic, with heavy workloads. In a narrative study, the results and discussion sections overlap as the researcher presents findings and interpretations along with theoretical aspects. The discussion section reveals how crucially these mothers experience stereotype threat and their coping mechanisms. The narrative researcher explored hidden themes through the narrative research.

Fear of judgment and societal stigma

Example quote- "It's exhausting. I have to prove that I am a good mom all the time. It's not my fault that my child struggles"

The emotional and psychological toll reported by mothers due to stereotype threat in parenting is significant. Stereotype threat leads to self-blame, and feelings of inadequacy, and impacts mental health. This is especially concerning as mothers experiencing heightened anxiety and guilt are at an increased risk of burnout and depression. The constant fear of judgment results in psychological and emotional distress for mothers. Participants described their feelings and often questioned whether they were doing enough for their children or if they were good mothers.

Impact on parenting practices

Example quote – "I feel like I have to do everything in my child's everyday life, including helping with homework. If I'm not there, how can he manage all of this"?

Due to the fear of being judged, mothers have begun to overparenting and overcare for their children. They manage their children's school work and avoid social settings out of fear of judgment. This stereotype threat emphasizes defensive behaviors and social withdrawal, leading to avoidance of coping mechanisms. As a result, mothers limit their exposure to certain situations.

Coping mechanisms, and social support

Example quote- "I will not allow the school or anyone else to treat him differently because of his disability"

Many mothers have developed their ways of coping and being resilient to help them deal with stereotype threats. Social support can help reduce the negative effects of stereotype

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threats. Advocacy and self-empowerment can help mothers gain control over their experiences and reduce feelings of helplessness.

CONCLUSION

The study emphasizes the impact of stereotype threat on psychological and emotional well-being. Individuals facing societal judgment and stigma may internalize feelings of guilt and anxiety, which can affect their parenting practices. However, resilience can help build coping mechanisms. The findings call for greater awareness and support from professionals working with these families. The research advocates for the right advocacy and support system to help reduce stereotype threat. Establishing a robust support network is imperative for mothers in this caregiving context, as it facilitates their ability to negotiate the intricacies associated with raising a child with learning disabilities. Psychotherapy serves as a viable avenue for addressing various mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety. Through psychotherapy, individuals can access stress management, emotional regulation, relaxation techniques, and resilience training. Moreover, it offers personalized support, imparts self-compassion techniques, and normalizes emotional responses.

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Conflict of Interest

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