

Social Belonging

Excerpted from Yeager and Walton (2011)

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Intervention 4: Walton and Cohen (2007, 2011). One consequence of negative stereotypes is to cause people to wonder whether they will be fully included and valued in an academic environment. Anyone may wonder if he or she will get along with others in a new setting, like a transfer student at a new school. But students who face negative stereotypes may worry about their belonging more pervasively. This feeling of uncertainty about belonging can cause students to perceive negative social events in school—such as feelings of loneliness or receiving criticism from an instructor—as evidence that they do not belong in the school in general, an inference that undermines motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007; also see Mendoza-Denton, Purdie, Downey, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002).

Walton and Cohen created an intervention to forestall global inferences of nonbelonging in school (Experiment 2). Adopting procedures developed by Wilson and Linville (1982, 1985), they gave first-year college students information indicating that students of all ethnicities worried at first about their belonging in the transition to college but that these worries dissipated with time and eventually all students came to feel at home. This information was designed to convey that doubts about belonging and negative social events are normal at first in college and are nondiagnostic of an actual lack of belonging. Students then engaged in a series of activities designed to reinforce the treatment message—for instance, they wrote an essay for incoming students the next year about how their own feelings of belonging in college had changed over time (see J. Aronson et al., 2002). Control students went through the same exercises, but the information they were exposed to was irrelevant to issues of belonging. In total, the intervention lasted about an hour. The intervention had striking benefits for Black students. In two cohorts of students and relative to several control groups, the intervention improved Black students' grades in college from sophomore through senior year, halving the Black–White achievement gap (see Figure 3; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). This effect was statistically mediated by a change in Black students' construal of social adversity on campus. Daily diary surveys completed in the week following the intervention showed that, in the control condition, Black students' daily sense of belonging in school rose and fell with the level of adversity they experienced each day. To these students, negative social events seemed to convey that they did not belong in the

school in general. The treatment cut off this relationship—here, Black students experienced similar levels of adversity, but adversity no longer led them to question their belonging. For instance, consider a Black freshman who had a bad day. Say his teacher criticized him in class or he was not invited to dinner by dormmates. Already worried about his belonging, he is more likely than a White student to see it as proof that he does not belong. A student who goes through the intervention, however, still encounters such events but they no longer carry global meaning; they are negative, but not diagnostic. Statistically, Walton and Cohen (2011) found that it was this change in construal that mediated the effect of the intervention on the 3-year gain in Black students' GPA. In addition, 3 years posttreatment, the intervention also improved Black students' self-reported physical health and happiness, both outcomes linked strongly to a secure sense of belonging. In research in progress, tailored versions of the social-belonging intervention have improved grades and school-related attitudes and behaviors among African American middle school students (Walton, Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2011) and female undergraduate engineering students (Walton, Logel, Peach, & Spencer, 2011).

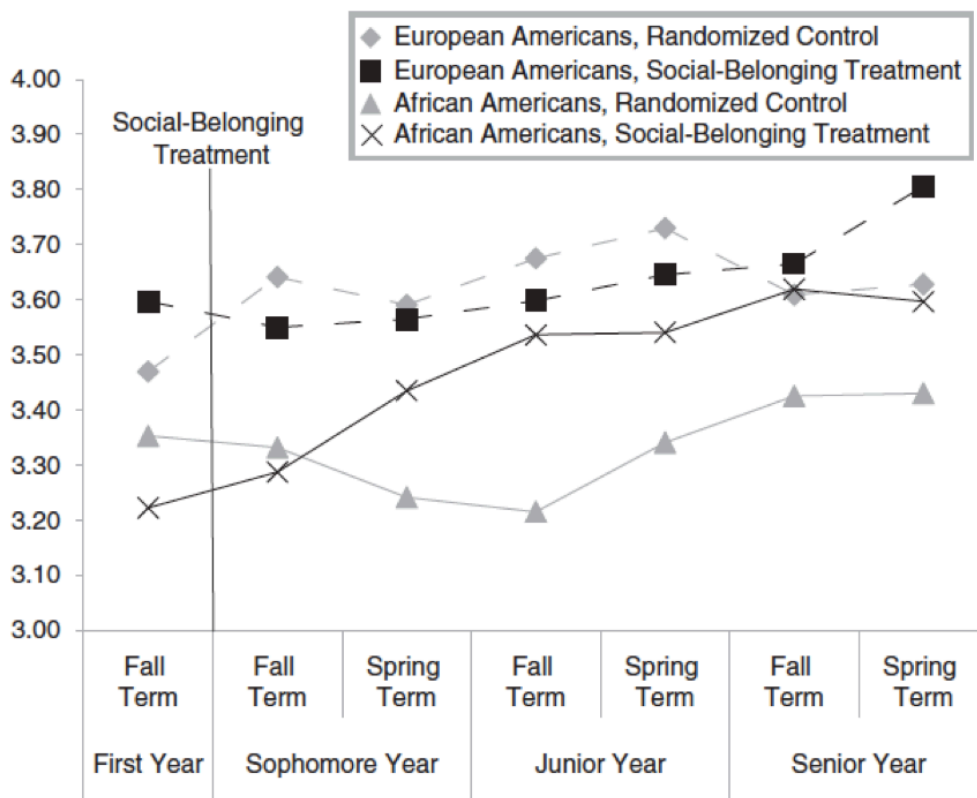


FIGURE 3. Mean academic performance as a function of semester, student race, and experimental condition (raw means) in Walton and Cohen (2011). Reprinted by permission from the American Association for the Advancement of Science.