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Discrimination and academic (dis)engagement of ethnic-racial minority students: a social identity threat perspective

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Abstract
In this paper we discuss the social identity processes by which discrimination can have an impact on ethnic-racial minority group students' academic engagement. After considering the forms, targets and sources of discrimination, we argue that discrimination implies social identity threat. Threats to ethnic/racial identity compromise specific social identity needs (belongingness, esteem, control) which relate to important motives for academic engagement and performance. Minority students seek to cope with their threatened ethnic/racial identity, and increased engagement as well as protective disengagement with the academic domain, at both the individual level and the group level, are discussed as coping strategies. We also briefly consider the possible moderating roles of individual differences in the subjective importance of one's ethnic or racial group membership, and of three classroom characteristics: classroom composition, student–teacher relation, and multicultural education. We conclude by providing directions for future research and consider some practical implications.

Keywords Discrimination · Academic engagement · Minority students

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1 Introduction

In many societies, ethnic and racial minority youth (*ER minority*; Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014) are regularly confronted with negative stereotypes, rejection, and discrimination (e.g., Benner and Graham 2013; Umaña-Taylor 2016; Verkuyten and Thijs 2002). These devaluation experiences have negative repercussions for psychological well-being (see Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009; Schmitt et al. 2014) and for academic engagement and performance (e.g., Huynh and Fuligni 2010; Powell and Arriola 2003; Smalls et al. 2007; Teny et al. 2013; Verkuyten and Thijs 2004; Wong et al. 2003). They also contribute to unequal educational outcomes for children and adolescents among a wide range of ethnic and racial groups, in different societies, and longitudinally. However, work on academic engagement has examined discrimination as an academic risk factor without specifying its exact nature and the psychological mechanisms involved in its effects on academic (dis)engagement. Thus, although the association between discrimination and academic engagement has been examined, much less is known about when and how discrimination impacts academic outcomes. Furthermore, the existing research lacks an organizing theoretical framework that allows to evaluate the research conducted and provides directions for future research.

In the current paper we do not present a summary or systematic review of the existing research findings (Benner 2017). Rather, our aim is to theoretically articulate and discuss the social identity mechanisms by which discrimination may affect the academic engagement of ethnic and racial minority students. Theoretically the impact of discrimination experiences have been examined in terms of, for example, resilience (Masten 2001), strain theory (Agnew 2001), and stress-related aspects that undermine school engagement (Gougis 1986; Liebkind and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000). However, a key aspect of ER discrimination is that one's minority group identity is at stake which means that social identity processes are involved. We use a social identity perspective in trying to make a theoretical contribution to the further development of a comprehensive understanding of the associations between experiences of discrimination and poor school adjustment. Specifically, we use Identity Process Theory (Breakwell 1986; Vignoles 2011) and the notion of social identity threat to discuss research on the relation between discrimination and academic engagement in ER minority students. Experiences of ER discrimination take many forms and occur in many contexts but represent, to varying degrees, threats to being accepted and valued, and having control over one's own life (Richman and Leary 2009). Because the large majority of the research is on older children and adolescents (end of primary school and secondary school) we focus predominantly on these age groups and at the end of the paper we consider possible developmental changes in meanings and responses to ER discrimination. Furthermore, we do not only consider research conducted in the context of the USA but also in other countries.

Our discussion draws on theoretical and empirical work and is structured according to Fig. 1 which makes a distinction between key aspects of ER discrimination and the ways these might compromise social identity needs and thereby

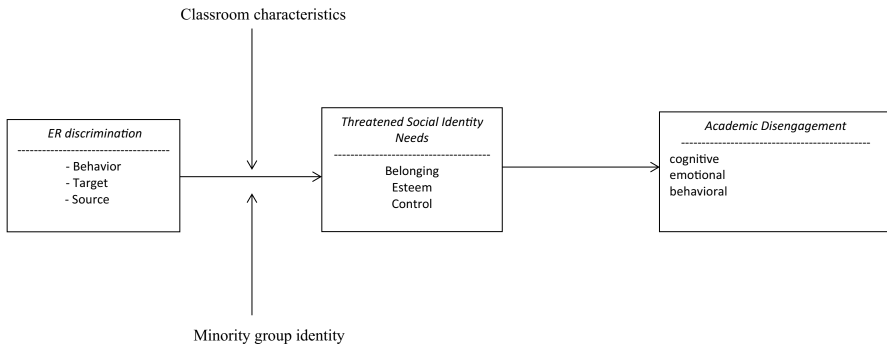

Fig. 1 A conceptual model of the interrelations between ethnic/racial (ER) discrimination, social identity needs and academic disengagement with two possible moderators

undermine academic engagement. We will first consider the multidimensionality of discrimination by making a distinction between dimensions, targets, and sources of discrimination. Then we discuss the proposition that ER discrimination forms an ER identity threat for minority group students. Specifically, discrimination is considered to compromise three important social identity needs proposed by Identity Process Theory: belonging, esteem, and control (Breakwell 1986; Vignoles 2011). We will discuss the importance of these three identity needs for academic engagement by making connections with important educational theories about motivational processes for academic engagement (for reviews of these theories see, e.g., Eccles and Wigfield 2002; Reeve 2012; Wentzel and Wigfield 1998). Furthermore we will consider some important individual and classroom moderating factors.

In the educational and psychological literature, academic engagement has been conceptualized in different ways and there is theoretical disagreement about its relation to motivation. Sometimes a clear distinction is made but at other times the two concepts are used interchangeably (see for reviews, Finn and Zimmer 2012; Reschly and Christenson 2012). Motivation refers to the question of what sets people in motion, and it can be defined as "the energization (i.e., instigation) and direction of behavior" (Elliot and Covington 2001, p. 73). The concept of academic engagement tends to be used in a broader sense and educational researchers have made a distinction between behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al. 2004). Whereas cognitive and behavioral engagement includes strategies that are necessary to perform and achieve well (e.g., flexibility in problem solving, and paying attention), emotional engagement involves affective states that sometimes are considered part of motivation (e.g., interest) (Fredricks et al. 2004). Here, we use the term 'engagement' for the cognitive and behavioral outcomes of academic motivation processes that result from threatened social identity needs (Reeve 2012).

2 Ethnic and racial discrimination

Discrimination is a complex phenomenon that can take various forms and often is difficult to detect and to study. In many situations it is not easy to establish whether discrimination actually occurs. That is one reason why research tends to focus on subjective experiences of discrimination. The other reason is that these experiences matter psychologically and can correspond with the actual discrimination that occurs (Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt 2009). Ethnic and racial discrimination is generally considered to consist of the behavioral expression of stereotypes and prejudices. It can be defined as unjust and unequal treatment based on one's ER group membership. Not all sources and forms of discrimination can be expected to have the same impact on students' academic engagement. For example, a student who is discriminated by school personnel probably will not feel the same as a student who is excluded by her peers (see Brown 2017). And having to deal with long-term, pervasive discrimination can be expected to have a more detrimental effect on school safety feelings and academic engagement, compared to a single incident of discrimination. Thus, although all types of discrimination confer a devalued ER identity on the discriminated, they differ considerably in their specific features. Yet, researchers tend to operationalize perceived discrimination by measuring it in a rather general way (e.g., 'being unfairly treated because of one's ethnicity') or by lumping together experiences with discrimination across different settings (e.g., neighborhoods, schools, shops) or sources (e.g., peers, teachers, shopkeepers; see Sanchez et al. 2016). The fact that such measures can have sufficient internal consistency indicates that there are reliable individual differences in the general perception of ER discrimination. However, aggregating across a variety of forms, contexts and perpetrators makes it impossible to examine, for example, whether discrimination in school has a different meaning for academic engagement than discrimination outside of school, and whether discrimination by teachers has a different impact than peer discrimination.

The complexity of discrimination has led researchers to propose distinctions between various aspects of discrimination but there is little empirical work on the relevance and importance of these distinctions. This greatly hampers our understanding of the different roles that ER discrimination might play in minority students' academic engagement. ER discrimination can be characterized by three broad features: characteristics of the *behavior*, characteristics of the *target*, and characteristics of the *source* (Williams 2001).

The first feature refers to the type of discrimination and its pervasiveness across time and context. ER discrimination can take different forms (e.g. name-calling, social exclusion, unfair treatment), can be incidental or chronic, institutional or intentional, direct and indirect, and covert or more overt (Brown 2017). These different aspects can be expected to matter for the educational engagement of ethnic and racial minority students. For example, institutional school policies that unintentionally restrict the opportunities and experiences of minority students differ from explicit discrimination by teachers or peers, and from a colorblind perspective that tends to ignore minority group-based experiences.

And incidental discrimination experiences differ from systematically experiencing unfair treatment and biased academic expectations that minority students can internalize (Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007).

Additionally, the research on stereotype threat demonstrates that not only pervasive discrimination but also the situational awareness of negative group stereotypes (i.e. “African Americans are not as intelligent as European Americans”) can undermine the academic performance of minority group students. This has been found for African Americans, Latino and African Caribbean students, among young children and adolescents (for reviews, see Shapiro and Neuberg 2007; Quinn et al. 2010), and also among minority youth in Europe (e.g., Baysu et al. 2016). Research has demonstrated that stereotype threat is truly a situational threat and not due to the internalization of recurrent negative experiences. The impaired performance occurs when situational features activate the relevant negative group stereotype which the related depletion of mental resources (see Quinn et al. 2010). In an ethnically diverse sample of 6–10 year old children McKown and Weinstein (2003) demonstrated that minority children were more aware of negative stereotypes about their group and this awareness was a prerequisite for performance decrements. In another study it was found that second-generation, but not first-generation, Afro-Caribbean undergraduates underperformed in a stereotype threat situation (Deaux et al. 2007). Both generations were aware of negative stereotypes about African-Americans but only the second generation identified with African-Americans.

Second, the *target* of discrimination refers to the distinction between discrimination directed at one’s ER minority group as a whole and oneself as a minority member (see Schmitt et al. 2014). There is ample evidence for the personal-group discrimination discrepancy that states that minority members—also children and adolescents—perceive less discrimination against themselves than against their group as a whole (Brown et al. 2011; Stevens and Thijs 2018; Taylor et al. 1994; Verkuyten 1998, 2002). Furthermore, not only personal discrimination but also group discrimination has been found to have negative implications for psychological well-being. For example, whereas higher personal discrimination has been found to be related to lower self-esteem among ethnic minority youth, higher perceived group discrimination is associated with higher internalizing (e.g., fear, worries) and externalizing problems (e.g., anger, aggression) (Armenta and Hunt 2009; Shorey et al. 2002; Stevens and Thijs 2018). If ER minority students perceive that co-ethnic peers are discriminated, they may feel anxious and less securely related to their school environment, even if they are spared such experiences themselves. Group discrimination implies that the unequal treatment of members of one’s minority group is relatively widespread with the related risk that oneself may become a victim. Further, there often is a sense of linked fate whereby what happens to one’s ER minority group is considered a good indicator of what can happen to oneself (Simiem 2005). African American adolescents (11–14 years) who are more aware of racial group bias in school disciplinary decisions have been found to gradually develop lower trust in school authorities (Yeager et al. 2017).

The *sources* of discrimination refers to the perpetrator(s) of the discrimination that is experienced. Discrimination can come from one particular person, a group of persons and society more generally, and different sources might have differential

consequences for ER minority students. In a survey research among Latino, African American and Asian American adolescents it was found that discrimination from school personnel was associated with poorer academic performance, whereas discrimination from peers was associated with higher psychological maladjustment, and societal discrimination was associated with heightened racial awareness (Benner and Graham 2013). Perceived teacher discrimination has been found to be more important for explaining academic attitudes in Mexican immigrant children (age 8–11) than perceptions of discrimination at the community-level (Brown and Chu 2012). And Eccles et al. (2006) reported that racial discrimination by peers lowered the value African-American adolescents attached to school, while racial discrimination by teachers additionally undermined the sense of academic competence—both of which were found to hamper students' academic achievement. Yet, other studies have found that peer discrimination is more harmful than teacher discrimination (Griffin et al. 2017) or that peer and teacher discrimination are equally problematic for minority adolescents' sense of school belonging (D'hondt et al. 2016), as well as for their perceived importance and usefulness of school, and self-competency beliefs (Wong et al. 2003).

Taken together, detailed research on the specific role of various aspects of discrimination on academic engagement is clearly useful and needed. There also can be particular combinations of discrimination experiences (e.g., of forms and sources) with different implications for school adjustment and academic engagement (Byrd and Carter Andrews 2016). For example, overt discrimination perpetrated by non-school adults, and overt as well as covert forms of discrimination by peers have been found to be differently experienced by ER minority (pre)adolescents in the US (Hughes et al. 2016). However, this study also found that all three forms and sources of discrimination (in the sixth grade) were associated with lower well-being and academic outcomes 2 years later. This suggests that discrimination can be longitudinally connected to poorer outcomes, independently of who perpetrates it and what form it takes. Furthermore, past experiences of group-based discrimination can induce so-called rejection sensitivity in which individuals "anxiously expect, readily perceive and intensely react to status-based rejection" (Mendoza-Denton et al. 2002, p. 897). Research in Germany, Switzerland and the US has shown that rejection sensitivity is cross-sectionally (Wolfgramm et al. 2014) and longitudinally (Mendoza-Denton et al. 2002) associated with poorer academic engagement and lower school success in ER minority students (respectively, ninth-graders and university students).

3 Threatened social identity needs

Minority members experience social identity threat when their minority group membership, or their group in general, is devalued in a particular context, such as at school (Ellemers et al. 2002). Identity threat is psychologically problematic because group identities tend to satisfy a range of social identity needs. Identity Process Theory proposes that individuals identify with a particular social group to the degree that this group provides a sense of belonging (closeness to others), control (sense of

efficacy), esteem (positive sense of self), distinctiveness (sense of uniqueness), continuity (sense of continuity across time and situation), and meaningfulness (sense of meaning in life) (Vignoles 2011). Based on different educational theories, to be discussed below, we suggest that the first three social identity needs are the most important ones for understanding the impact of ER discrimination on academic engagement.

3.1 Need to belong

Individuals have a basic need for social belonging and relatedness which is fundamental for their well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995). ER identity devaluation clearly undermines the fulfillment of this need, as it implies that one is not, or not fully, accepted and does not really belong. Different educational theories have argued for the importance of a sense of belonging for academic engagement. For example, both the Self-System Model of Motivation (Connell and Wellborn 1991) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci 2000) propose that, in addition to needs for competence and autonomy, individuals have a fundamental need for relatedness that is a catalyst "for engagement or disaffection" (Furrer and Skinner 2003, p. 149). Research has shown that students who experience more relatedness are more engaged in their school work (Niemiec and Ryan 2009; Skinner and Belmont 1993). For example, a longitudinal study found that early peer exclusion and victimization predicted disengagement from class activities, which in turn decreased academic achievement (Buhs et al. 2006). And experimental research among African American undergraduates demonstrated that letting students believe that they might have few friends led to a lowered sense of belonging which was associated with lower academic achievement (Walton and Cohen 2007). Furthermore, among Latino adolescents, school belonging has been found to mediate the relationship between perceived discrimination and school achievement (Faircloth and Hamm 2005; Roche and Kuperminc 2012).

To our knowledge there are no studies that used the self-system model or SDT to examine the impact of discrimination on academic engagement. Yet, a number of studies have found that experiences with ER discrimination within the school context undermines adolescents' sense of relatedness and school belonging (e.g., Brown and Chu 2012; Coutinho and Koinis-Mitchell 2014; Faircloth and Hamm 2005). Therefore, in general, both theories can be taken to predict that discrimination undermines adaptive motivation and (ultimately) weakens academic engagement. Schools and classrooms are the main contexts for academic engagement and this leads to the more specific expectation that experiences with discrimination are most detrimental for the motivation of ER minority students when these experiences occur within the school context. But consistent with our conceptual model the exact sources of discrimination probably matter, and based on SDT it can be hypothesized that discrimination by teachers is more problematic for academic engagement than discrimination by peers. Teachers are clear representatives of the academic environment and students' sense of relatedness to them is important for their academic motivation (Roorda et al. 2011). If ER minority students feel rejected by their

teacher they are less likely to adopt important academic norms and standards and might become academically disengaged (see Vansteenkiste et al. 2006).

3.2 Need for control

Discrimination means that one's outcomes are (partly) under the control of (prejudiced) others. It implies that others determine what happens to you and thereby involves a loss of control and efficacy that can develop into a sense of helplessness and lack of purpose. A sense of personal control is essential, however, for psychological well-being and effective functioning, and wanting to maintain such a sense is, for example, one of the reasons why people often tend to minimize or underestimate the discrimination that they face (Crocker and Major 1989).

According to Rotter's Locus of Control Theory (1966), people have a stronger motivation to achieve when they perceive that their outcomes are dependent on their own actions (internal locus) rather than on chance, circumstances, or the actions of others (external locus). This is especially likely when there is the additional feeling that the internal cause is under one's control. When students repeatedly fail and attribute their failure to a lack of ability (or effort) they have lower (higher) expectations of success, and this undermines (strengthens) their motivation and engagement (Weiner 2000).

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997) can be seen as an elaboration of these propositions (see Skinner et al. 1998). The theory makes the distinction between perceived self-efficacy and outcome expectancies as different but related types of control beliefs. Perceived self-efficacy involves the "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce the given attainments" (Bandura 1997, p. 3), and outcome expectancies refer to generalized beliefs that particular actions lead to intended outcomes. Self-Efficacy Theory claims that both types of belief are important for understanding human motivation, and therefore for academic engagement. Students may be convinced, for example, that preparing well for lectures results in higher grades, yet simultaneously believe that they are unable to sufficiently prepare themselves. Conversely, even highly self-efficacious students would be unlikely to study hard when they believe that doing so does not pay off (see also Eccles et al. 1984; Eccles and Wigfield 2002).

Because students cannot simply change their ethnic origin or race they have limited influence on their experiences with ER discrimination. As a result, these experiences might undermine students' sense of control. Even if minority students do not doubt their abilities, they could become quite pessimistic about the likelihood that effort pays off. Such a lowered sense of control can manifest itself in the classroom. A study among Mexican–American adolescents showed that perceptions of peer discrimination and teacher discrimination were associated with lower academic self-efficacy and thereby with lower academic grades (Berkel et al. 2010). Other research has looked at students' global feelings of control and found those to be negatively related to their perceptions of school-based discrimination. Liebkind et al. (2004) showed that a sense of mastery played a mediating role in the link between perceived discrimination and school adjustment (including behavioral engagement) in

Finnish adolescents of Vietnamese origin. Another study found that discrimination was associated with a lower sense of general self-efficacy and lower academic persistence (behavioral engagement) in African-American adolescents (Butler-Barnes et al. 2013).

Discrimination can also have a detrimental impact on minority students' perceptions of future control. Several studies measured the perceived utility of school and found that perceptions of school-based racial discrimination were negatively associated with the importance that (pre)adolescents attributed to education in general (e.g., Chavous et al. 2008; Cogburn et al. 2011; Perreira et al. 2010; Wong et al. 2003). Other work has examined students' beliefs about the usefulness of school for their personal future. For example, Mroczkowski and Sánchez (2015) found among urban, low-income Latina/o students' that experiences with racial discrimination by adults in the 9th grade predicted in grade 10th doubts about schooling being important for their future employment and economic opportunities. Likewise, D'hondt et al. (2016) showed that perceptions of ethnic discrimination by teachers heightened a sense of academic futility among ethnic minority adolescents in Belgium (e.g., "There is no use in working hard at school; a good job is not reserved for people like me"). Taken together the research indicates that ER discrimination can undermine minority students' academic engagement because it diminishes their sense of (future) control.

3.3 Need for a positive self

Discrimination conveys negative messages about the value of oneself and one's ER group. It tells people that they are not equally regarded and respected. This can undermine a positive sense of self and result in insecure self-esteem (Harter 1999), as has been found in a study among African American adolescents (Seaton 2010).

The lower self-esteem due to discrimination could also lead to the adoption of performance-avoidance goals (Eccles and Wigfield 2002; Elliot 1999; Wigfield and Cambria 2010). In that case students are mainly concerned with the possibility of failure that would confirm the negative images of themselves. Psychological disidentification with the academic domain is another possible reaction towards ER discrimination. Psychological disidentification is a "defensive detachment of self-esteem from outcomes in a particular domain, such that feelings of self-worth are not dependent on successes or failures in that domain." (Major et al. 1998, p. 35). In relation to the school domain, psychological disidentification implies that one's general self-esteem no longer, or only weakly, depends on educational performance. There are several ways in which disidentification occurs and two processes are particularly important: devaluing the particular domain and discounting the validity and diagnostic value of feedback in that domain (Major et al. 1998; Schmader et al. 2001).

First, the academic domain can be devalued so that outcomes received in that context are no longer seen as relevant or important to how one feels about oneself. Thus, the perception that one is subject to discrimination by teachers may lead to discounting the importance of school performance as a basis for self-evaluation.

Similarly, beliefs about restricted opportunities and injustices in society may lead to psychological disidentification, whereby academic performance is no longer a source for global self-worth (Schmader et al. 2001).

Second, discounting the validity and diagnostic value of feedback in a domain might lead to psychological disidentification with that domain. Major et al. (1998) showed experimentally that when undergraduate students were informed that a test was racially biased, neither negative nor positive feedback after completion of the test affected African American students' self-esteem, whereas the self-esteem of white students followed the direction of the feedback. Thus, ER minority group students may disengage their self-feelings from academic performance when they have reasons to think that performance feedback or outcomes are not diagnostic or valid indicators of their abilities.

Research in the US context has found some supporting evidence for psychological disidentification among ER minority students and the two related processes of devaluing the academic domain and discounting feedback (Major et al. 1998; Osborne 1997). In the context of the Netherlands it was found that, perceived discrimination in school was related to psychological disidentification but only among ethnic minority adolescents (Verkuyten and Brug 2003). Furthermore, among both minority and majority students, perceived diagnosticity of performance feedback was negatively related to disidentification, especially for students with relatively high educational performance. In another research in the Netherlands it was found that higher perceived discrimination in minority (pre)adolescents can lead to global self-worth being based less on performances and competencies in the academic domain (Verkuyten and Thijs 2004). Importantly, this research tested the psychological disidentification hypothesis by including a measure of academic self-esteem. According to the hypothesis, under conditions of perceived disadvantage the relationship between academic self-esteem and global self-worth should be affected, and not the relationship between educational performance and academic self-esteem or between performance and global self-worth. The findings of this research supported this reasoning: under conditions of perceived discrimination, global self-worth was less strongly derived from the academic self.

4 Coping strategies and academic (dis)engagement

It is important to recognize that discrimination experiences can sometimes prompt ER minority students to increase efforts to productively deal with their negative circumstances. This is illustrated by findings from Eccles et al. (2006) who not only asked African-American adolescents about peer and teacher discrimination but also about expected future discrimination ("would it be harder for you to get ahead in life because of your race?"). In addition to negative effects of school-based discrimination, they found that students who anticipated future racial discrimination responded with stronger rather than weaker academic engagement (Eccles et al. 2006; see also St-Hilaire 2002). This suggests that ER minority students can see academic engagement and education as being instrumental for gaining personal control and developing a positive sense of self.

Education can also be perceived as a route for overcoming the societal barriers of negative stereotypes and discrimination. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) proposes that this strategy of 'individual mobility' is especially likely when ethnic group boundaries are perceived to be relatively permeable, indicating that membership in a high-status group can be achieved. There is supporting empirical evidence for this proposition among ethnic minority youth (Verkuyten and Reijerse 2008) and also in research using cardiovascular measures which shows that being discriminated is not always identity threatening but can also lead to a cardiovascular response indicative of challenge with the related motivation to perform and improve (Scheepers 2013; Scheepers and Derks 2016).

However, in many contexts group boundaries are rather impermeable (e.g., because of a 'color line') and negative stereotypes and discrimination are pervasive in society, which makes it very difficult for individual minority members to improve their personal position. Members of ethnic and racial minority groups, therefore, also engage in various protective mechanisms in response to negative stereotypes and experiences with discrimination (Crocker et al. 1998). These mechanisms have the benefit of protecting their threatened social identity needs, but have the potential cost of, for example, reduced effort to succeed and academic disengagement. A longitudinal study among African Americans entering college found that students made external attributions to explain why their actual college performances were lower than what they had expected (Van Laar 2001). These external attributions protected their self-esteem but were associated with lower expectations for future performances, and might, in the long run, lead to the loss of feelings of control. Another way in which ER minority students can protect their threatened identity is to make comparisons with other minority students rather than with majority group students (Crocker and Major 1989). Minority students can protect feelings of belonging, control, and self-worth by making comparisons with students facing similar identity threats, but these comparisons might also reduce academic effort and engagement.

A more collective way in which minority students who feel devalued in academic contexts may protect their ER identity is by developing an oppositional culture in which avoiding performance in school becomes group identity defining. Negative stereotypes and perceived group discrimination relate to the minority group as a whole and therefore involve a collective sense of ER identity threat. Social psychological research indicates that these experiences can lead to a shared, normative reaction of protective disengagement (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Working in the US context, the anthropologist Ogbu (2003) suggested that continuing racial discrimination and perceived lack of societal opportunities might lead to an oppositional identity that is psychologically protective. His oppositional culture theory argues that racial minority students contribute to their own poor educational performance by developing a cultural identity in opposition to schooling. The belief that schooling is controlled by the dominant group and does not pay off for racial minorities would be central in the oppositional cultural frame of reference. Racial minority members would face strong peer pressures to act within the boundaries of this cultural frame and thereby support the collective struggle of their racial minority group: "To behave in a manner defined as falling within a white cultural frame of reference is to 'act white' and is negatively sanctioned" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986, p. 181). To

avoid peer sanctioning, students would disengage from schoolwork and show low effort to achieve. Importantly, an oppositional identity would only develop among so-called involuntary minority groups that have a history of suppression (e.g., slavery, colonization) and that can only compare their unfavorable conditions with the dominant majority. Minority groups that themselves have decided to migrate (voluntary minorities) would tend to compare their condition to the often less favorable situation in the country of origin. They would tend to view discrimination as a challenge to overcome and anticipate that school efforts will pay off.

In the United States, the oppositional culture theory has received extensive attention in educational sociology and there is an ongoing debate about the theory's claims (Downey 2008). Empirical research examines, for example, whether African Americans (involuntary minority) show stronger signs of oppositional identity than Asian and Hispanic immigrants (voluntary), and the dominant white group. Some research findings seem to suggest that this is the case (Farkas et al. 2002), but other findings raise doubts about the theory (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Harris 2006). For example, using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NLES), Cook and Ludwig (1998) found that black adolescents did not exhibit greater educational disengagement than white peers and that high-achieving blacks were more, rather than less, popular than low-achievers, and that black honor society members were substantially more popular. Further, although achieving at lower levels than white students, black students have been found to report stronger pro-school attitudes (Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell 2002). Additionally, it is argued that oppositional school behavior would result from black adolescents entering high school with poor school-related skills and limited experiences with school success, rather than from the formation of peer groups that resist school goals (Harris and Robinson 2007; Tyson 2002).

Outside of the US context the oppositional culture theory has found mixed empirical support. For example, using data from a nationally representative survey, Rothon (2005) examined the educational attitudes and attainments of black, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students in Great Britain. Though some of the findings were in the direction of the theory, the expected difference between more voluntary and involuntary minority students was not found. In a large-scale study among adolescents in the Netherlands no clear evidence was found that ER minority students support an oppositional culture either more or less than majority students (Van Tubergen and Van Gaans 2016). Yet, oppositional identities were more likely in more ethnically concentrated schools and among minority students who were older, male and who attended a lower educational track.

5 Moderating factors: ER group identification and classroom context

Research findings on the association between perceived ER discrimination and academic engagement are not unequivocal. There are various methodological reasons for this (e.g., samples, measures) but it also suggests that there are relevant individual differences and contextual factors that moderate this association, such as students' goal orientation and degree of family and peer support (Seol et al. 2016).

Positive relationships with, for example, parents and friends can buffer the effects of discrimination and have a compensatory role (see Benner 2017; Wang and Huguley 2012). In addition to these important interpersonal relationships we briefly want to draw attention to the possible moderating roles of individual differences in ER group identification and of three classroom characteristics.

5.1 ER group identification

There are important individual differences in ER minority identification that can play a moderating role in the associations between identity devaluation and academic engagement. This can either be a sensitizing or a buffering role (Begeny and Huo 2017). The intergroup status and health model posits that a strong minority identity provides a group-lens for perceiving and interpreting experiences as well as a resource for coping with discrimination (Begeny and Huo 2017).

First, a strong minority identity forms a cognitive 'lens' through which experiences are viewed and interpreted and which heightens one's vigilance and sensitivity to expressions of ER discrimination. Strengthening students' minority group identification implies that group-based experiences, behaviors and outcomes become more salient (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and that it becomes more likely to make attributions to discrimination, especially in ambiguous situations (Major et al. 2003). For example, stereotype threat situations tend to mentally activate negative stereotypes, in particular for individuals who strongly identify with their stereotyped group. Further, low and high identifiers respond to perceived threats to social identity differently because of the relevance that the group has to the self (Ellemers et al. 2002). Devaluation experiences have a stronger psychological and behavioral impact for higher identifiers. Additionally, oppositional culture theory argues that identification with black peers would imply an oppositional identity that rejects school efforts. School success would require becoming 'raceless' whereby mainstream educational attitudes and values are more important than a connectedness with one's racial identity (Fordham 1988).

Second, a strong connection to the ethnic or racial minority group can also be a protective factor and a source of resilience that buffers the negative impact of prejudices and discrimination (Umaña-Taylor 2016; Wong et al. 2003). It has been argued and found that minority group identification and the related feelings of group pride and identity beliefs contribute to higher academic engagement in adolescents and undergraduates (e.g., Altschul et al. 2006; Smalls et al. 2007; Urdan and Munoz 2012). For example, a strong ethnic identity has been found to help Latino male adolescents who perceive discrimination to maintain a belief in the economic value of education (Mroczkowski and Sánchez 2015). In their meta-review, Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) found a small but significant overall association ($r = 0.18$) between ethnic-racial pride with positive school attitudes and academic performance in adolescents. It is not clear why exactly a strong minority identity can buffer academic engagement from discrimination, but it might give students a sense of control, value, confidence and purpose (Brown 2017). Thus individual differences in ER identity appear to matter for individual differences in academic engagement by heighten

vigilance to expressions of discrimination but also by buffering the negative impact of discrimination.

5.2 Classroom characteristics

Mexican–American youth have been found to report less peer discrimination in neighborhoods with higher compared to lower concentration of Mexican Americans (White et al. 2014). However, not only the degree of discrimination but also how ER minority students respond to it might depend on the situational context. Although other contexts such as the home environment are clearly relevant as well, a focus on the classroom context is important for educational scientists and for school-based attempts to help minority youth deal with negative stereotypes and discrimination experiences. Therefore, we discuss briefly the possible roles of three different classroom factors: ethnic classroom composition, the student–teacher relationship, and multicultural education.

First, there is no straightforward link between ethnic or racial *classroom composition* and negative stereotypes and discrimination. The reason is that diversity provides opportunities for conflicts between ER groups but also chances for intergroup contact in which students get to know and like each other (Thijs and Verkuyten 2014). It is reasonable to expect, however, that the motivational implications of school-based ER derogation depends on the ER backgrounds of one's fellow students. When ER minority students are a numerical minority in their school or classrooms, discrimination may hit them harder because there is less potential support from co-ethnic peers. Related to this, a recent study found that perceived conflict with their ethnic majority teachers undermined the classroom identification of ethnic minority children—but not ethnic majority children—and this was explained by their ethnic underrepresentation in the classroom (Thijs et al. 2018). However, it probably also matters whether one's co-ethnic peers are discriminated against as well. When students think that they are the only ones that are rejected based on their race or ethnicity, they are more likely to blame themselves for this, with all due negative consequences (Graham 2006). An interesting approach for examining the role of fellow students is social network analyses (e.g., Stark 2011). These analyses have great potential for understanding how the dynamics of social relations have an impact on school adjustment and the ways in which ER minority students try to deal with negative stereotypes and discrimination. By examining who hangs out with whom and by taking into account the experiences of peers in the network, it is possible to better understand when and how the ethnic and racial school composition matters for ER minority students' academic engagement.

Second, classes in school also differ in the amount of support that minority students receive from their teachers (Okonofua and Eberhardt 2015). Students' interpersonal relationships with their teachers can be an important factor that influences how they react to racial or ethnic devaluation. These relationships are important for academic engagement as they provide a sense of relatedness and help students to internalize important academic norms and standards (Roorda et al. 2011). Additionally, teachers can be an important source of self-esteem and self-confidence, and

thereby protect students against rejection-related experiences. Bayram Özdemir and Stattin (2014) conducted a longitudinal study among immigrant adolescents from 54 different origin countries living in Sweden. They showed that ethnic peer discrimination was associated with lower school adjustment over time, and this link was fully mediated by lower self-esteem. Importantly, however, the mediation effect was not significant for children who reported positive relationships with their teachers.

Third, schools and school classes differ in the degree to which cultural diversity is considered (Verkuyten and Thijs 2013). Multicultural education can protect against the negative motivational impact of discrimination as it communicates to students that unequal treatment is wrong and differences should be acknowledged. A longitudinal analysis among early adolescent immigrant students in Germany revealed that both the acknowledgment of cultural diversity and an emphasis on equality and inclusion promoted school adjustment (Schachner et al. 2016a, b). Additionally, in a study among ethnic minority adolescents in Belgium it was found that perceived equal treatment at school predicted lower academic disengagement and also buffered against the negative effects of discrimination and stereotype threat on engagement and test performance (Baysu et al. 2016).

6 Future research and practical implications

We have proposed a conceptualization of the relation between discrimination and academic engagement based on the notion of ER identity threat and three social identity needs proposed in Identity Process Theory (Breakwell 1986; Vignoles 2011). Discrimination communicates the devaluation and rejection of one's ER minority identity which threatens a number of basic needs that can have implications for motivational processes. The model provides a social psychological framework for understanding and empirically testing the social identity processes involved in the impact of discrimination on academic (dis)engagement in future research. Thus, the suggested processes and implications are meant as directions for further work on the role of discrimination for ER minority students' academic engagement and performance. For example, it is important for future research to systematically investigate different aspects of discrimination. A more detailed investigation of the forms, targets and sources of these negative experiences might greatly improve our understanding about why and when these experiences are identity threatening and negatively or positively affect academic engagement (e.g., Benner and Graham 2013; Brown and Chu 2012).

Similarly, for understanding the impact of discrimination experiences it is important to systematically consider and measure the different social identity needs that are threatened (see Vignoles 2011; Vignoles et al. 2006). These identity needs can be measured by self-reported feelings (Smeekes and Verkuyten 2013; Vignoles et al. 2006) but individuals are not necessarily aware of them. It has been suggested that how strongly individuals implicitly strive to fulfil a particular need may not be the same as how strongly they say they want to fulfil it (Vignoles 2011). It might be that identity needs become more explicit and salient when they are threatened or compromised, and this activation is likely to result in responses that try to satisfy

these needs. This would mean that the presence of threatened identity needs can be inferred from their predictable effects on academic motivation and disengagement. However, strategies for coping with identity threats may be relatively automatic and future studies could consider to examine the importance of social identity needs using implicit measures.

The consideration of social identity needs is highly relevant from a practical perspective as well. To promote the academic adjustment of ER minority students, it is crucial that teachers and other educational professionals understand and acknowledge the importance of these needs and the different ways in which they can be threatened. Needless to say, teachers should approach their minority students in an open and non-biased manner. But this is easier said than done because teachers might have unconscious biases which have negative consequences for their expectations and behaviors towards ER minority students (Van den Bergh et al. 2010). More generally, school staff should create a non-biased and safe school environment, not only by preventing and counteracting discrimination but also by helping students to cope with these negative experiences and by preventing its debilitating effects.

In future research it is also important to systematically examine the (protective) role of various individual factors as well as of school characteristics and family support (Brody et al. 2016). This would allow us, for example, to address the question why some ER minority group students demonstrate resilience or unexpected optimal educational outcomes in spite of being exposed to discrimination experiences, while others do not. A resilience perspective makes the distinction between promotive factors, which compensate for the negative impact of discrimination, and protective factors, which reduce the negative impact of this risk factor (Motti-Stefanidi and Masten 2013). To obtain a comprehensive picture of the influences that contribute to academic resilience, and to develop practical interventions to facilitate the academic adjustment of ER minority students, various characteristics of individual students and their different contexts (family, ethnic community, school, peers) need to be considered and assessed. It additionally is important to consider the mutual influences between different settings, as well as higher-order interactions (see Bronfenbrenner 1979). It might be the case, for example, that close relationships with teachers only protect against the negative impact of discrimination if minority parents are involved with their children's education. Without parents involvement, the role of teachers in stimulating a sense of belonging, control and esteem might be more limited.

Cultural differences in parental support, parental educational aspirations and parental monitoring might be important as protective and promotive factors. Likewise, there can be cultural group differences in perceived family obligations that are related to better academic performance (e.g., Fuligni 2001; Perreira et al. 2010; Tseng 2004) and which stimulate minority students to be academically engaged even when (or perhaps especially when) they feel discriminated. For example, research in Belgium (Phalet and Claes 1993) and the Netherlands (Verkuyten et al. 2001) has demonstrated that ethnic minority and majority students indicate that educational achievement is important for themselves individually, but in addition, achievement of ethnic minority students is also connected to perceived family obligations.

Future research should also investigate developmental changes. With age minority children are increasingly aware of ethnic and racial differences, and

experiences with ER discrimination tend to increase as children enter adolescence, especially for more covert and indirect forms of discrimination that require more advanced cognitive skills to understand. And across adolescence, perceptions of peer discrimination appear to be relatively stable, whereas perceived teacher discrimination tends to increase (Brown 2017). Increased understanding of others' cognitions, multiple classification skills, and more advanced forms of moral reasoning are likely to be involved in the age-related differences and developmental changes in the perception and interpretation of discrimination experiences (Brown and Bigler 2005; Seaton 2010). Furthermore, adolescents tend to gradually develop a more stable and secure ER identity (Phinney 1989; Quintana 2007) and specific social identity needs (e.g. efficacy) might become more important in the ER identity development (Verkuyten 2016). These changes in ethnic identity might make adolescence more resilient but also more vigilant to expressions of discrimination. Furthermore, adolescents undergo pubertal changes that might make them more sensitive to the possibility of discrimination, and they start to function in a larger number of social settings which increases the risk of being confronted with discrimination. We have focused predominantly on research among older children and adolescents and because of the lack of developmental research we did not systematically consider developmental changes. Yet, future research on ER discrimination should examine these changes in relation to the proposed social identity needs and, for example, ethnic identity development (Phinney 1989), the school context and parental support.

7 Conclusions

The number of studies on the impact of ER discrimination experiences on minority students academic engagement is relatively small. Furthermore, much of the existing research fails to provide insights into the social identity mechanism underlying the possible impact. We have proposed that minority students experience social identity threat when they perceive and experience ethnic or racial discrimination. This is because individuals derive feelings of belonging, self-worth and efficacy from their ER group membership (Vignoles 2011). Educational theories propose that these self-feelings are important for academic engagement and performance.

There is little systematic knowledge about the nature of discrimination experiences and whether and how their impact varies as a function of the type of experience, individual differences in ER identity importance, age, gender, ethnic group, school characteristics, and the situational context. Yet, this knowledge is important for formulating better educational practices and policies to support and enhance the educational engagement and success of ER minority students. Future studies should systematically examine why, when and for whom discrimination experiences are identity threatening, and why, when and for whom they have detrimental or rather motivating effects for academic engagement. We hope that our discussion provides useful suggestions for future theoretical and empirical work in this area.

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