Stereotype Threat and Psychological Wellbeing in Children of Prisoners

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Abstract
Stereotypes are ideas that one holds regarding individuals because of their membership to a specific group. The current research was undertaken to study stereotype perception and stereotype threat on the psychological wellbeing of children of prisoners. Eight children of prisoners in the age range of 17 to 25 (females = 4), whose fathers were in prison for more than a year, participated in the study. Semi-structured interview method was used to collect data from the participants and data were analyzed using thematic network analysis method. Results revealed that children of prisoners strongly perceive stereotypes against them and they conform to stereotypes. Further to this, it was found that stereotype threat had positive effects in terms of increased goal-directed behavior and negative effects in terms of reduced happiness and increased feelings of anger and sadness. These findings are discussed in light of previous literature on the effects of stereotypes on behavior.

Keywords: Stereotype threat, Stereotype perception, Children of prisoners, Psychological wellbeing.

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Introduction

A stereotype is the expectation of an individual or group to behave in a particular way because they belong to a particular group (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000). Stereotype has been explained through several models over the years. One such model was proposed by Kanahara (2006), called the progression model of stereotype, which proposes that stereotypes are formed through different stages, that include specification, generalization, stereotype, and stereotype application. Stereotypes can be both positive and negative, with respect to whether the attributes assigned to an individual are positive or negative (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000). A complete understanding of stereotype is possible only by understanding how individuals who are subjected to stereotype, perceive the stereotypes against them.

Stereotype perception, refers to how individuals perceive stereotypes against them, which could be explained by Thomas Theorem, a sociological theory that states that an individual’s behavior in any situation is determined by how an individual makes sense of the situation; not by the situation itself (Merton, 1995; Salles & Cohen, 2016). It affirms that subjective interpretation rather than the objective appraisal of a situation determines our actions (Merton, 1995). Thus, it can be inferred that stereotype perception has an impact on the behavior of an individual against whom a bias is held. Additionally, when the individual acts in accordance with a negative stereotype, stereotype threat emerges. In fact, stereotype threat can be considered as a direct impact of stereotype perception, as explained by the principles of self-fulfilling prophecy (Steele, 1997), a concept which suggests that an individual is likely to act in confirmation to the expectations when they are compelled to act in a certain way. This may lead the individual to give rise to a situation that they believe to exist (Merton, 1948). Hence, self-fulfilling prophecy can be considered as a causal factor of stereotype threat.

Previous studies have demonstrated that stereotype threat can severely affect social behavior and cognition of the individual. For instance, a study by Henry, Hippel, and Shapiro (2010), examined the effects of stereotype threat in the social skills of individuals with schizophrenia. They reported that the disclosure of being diagnosed with schizophrenia had an effect on the behavior of the participant in this study. In another study by Barber, Mather, and Gatz (2015), stereotype threat influenced the performance of older adults in a mental status examination. It was observed that older adults were focused on avoiding conformity to the stereotype that lead them to comply to stereotype threat. In yet another study by Salles and Cohen (2016), the effects of stereotype threat on the mental health of female surgeons were examined; it was found that negative stereotype perception is a strong indicator of poor psychological health.

Stereotype threats are also known to have a sociological impact that can influence occupational choices. For instance, confirming with the stereotype that women cannot do mathematics can lead women to choose jobs that require less of mathematics (Spencer, Steele, & Qinn, 1999). Similarly, studies reported that elderly individuals, when encountered with the stereotype of cognitive deterioration, are more likely to show poor performance in the cognitive examination (Barber, Mather, & Gatz, 2015). Based on these pieces of evidence, it can be inferred that stereotype threat has a negative effect on the overall mental health and wellbeing of an individual.
According to Singletary, Ruggs, Hebl, and Davies (2009) stereotype threat can negatively affect the perceiver, in the form of lower performance and self-esteem which could inadvertently result in anxiety. Further explanation to this phenomenon can be drawn from the integrated process model, that states that stereotype threat is a result of the self-integrity threat that leads to a disruption of cognitive balance – a conflict between self-concept and primed social stereotypes (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). It is characterized by physiological arousal, monitoring of one’s own behavior and suppression of negative feelings, which leads to poor performance in any domain, such as academic performance and work efficiency (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). The model surmises that stereotype threat influences cognitive functioning, performance ability, and emotional stability of an individual.

The impact of stereotype threat has been researched in vulnerable groups such as children of prisoners, whose mental health and psychological well-being are at known to be at risk. Research suggests that the absence of one or both parental figures due to imprisonment influences the mental health and behavior of the child. A study conducted by Al Gharabeh (2008), reported that the imprisonment of fathers had impacted the child’s mental health and behavior, in the form of emotional and behavioral disturbances and problems in school. The study also noted a gender difference in response to stigma, where boys resorted to externalized behavior, in the form of aggression while girls sought to internalized behavior and this was reflected by the higher incidence of depression. On the other hand, a study by Tasca, Turanovic, White, and Rodriguez (2014) found that the child’s mental health is severely impacted by the mother’s imprisonment in itself. The study stated that mothers were more likely to report that their children had mental health issues than their fathers. Additionally, the mental health issues were reportedly more for children of ethnic minority and for girl children. To further corroborate these findings, Dallaire, Zeman, and Thrash (2015) studied the impact of maternal imprisonment on the child’s psychological wellbeing and found that any psychological issues in the child is a result of imprisonment specific risk, which included internalized (anxiety and depression symptoms) and externalized (antisocial behavior) behaviors.

According to National Crime Record Bureau’s (NRCB) Prison Statistics of India (2015) the number of children with mothers in prison was 3463. However, the statistics of the number of children with fathers in prison continue to be unknown. Studies conducted thus far in India on children of prisoners, focus on their health and hygiene in the prison settings. From mental health and psychological well-being perspective, studies so far have considered children whose mothers were in prison (who were minors – below the age of five years) and stayed with them in prison. Sarkar and Gupta (2015), based on their study, reported that children were likely to be influenced by the hostile prison atmosphere, where the inmates’ fight with each other and this atmosphere, in turn, could influence the behavior and language used by the children, in terms of learning via modeling.

The aforementioned studies clearly establish that imprisonment of a parent can have negative consequences on the child’s mental health. The present study seeks to answer whether stereotype threat is a contributive factor for the negative consequences on the mental health of children whose parent is imprisoned. Additionally, the problems faced by children of incarcerated parents is a scarcely researched area in India. The current research aimed to study the perspectives the children hold for themselves on the stereotypes they
face as a consequence of having an imprisoned parent and the likely reason for them to conform with the stereotype.

Objectives

**Broad Objective**
To explore the effects of stereotype threat on the mental health of children of parents who are imprisoned.

**Specific Objectives**
1. To understand how children of prisoners perceive stereotype against them
2. To determine the intensity of stereotype threat in children of incarcerated parents
3. To understand the children's perspective behind confirming stereotypes against them
4. To determine if stereotype threat has a role in the psychological wellbeing of the children.

Methods

The Institutional Review Board of Christ (Deemed to be University) approved the study. Fourteen children of prisoners from three districts of Kerala: Calicut, Thrissur, Ernakulam, were approached for the study with the help of police officers in these areas. The children’s fathers were in prison for more than a year and were not granted bail or parole until the time this study was completed. The study considered participants who belonged to the age group of 17 to 25 with one or both parents are at present serving time in prison. The children of prisoners living in NGOs were excluded from the study.

A semi-structured interview method validated by experts for face validity was implemented for the study. The interviews were carried out via telephone as the participants wished for anonymity, as they reported being uncomfortable with a face to face conversation. Oral and written consent (through police officers) were collected from participants. Participants below the age of 18 years are considered as legally under-age, hence, oral and written assent and consent were obtained from the participants and their mothers, respectively. Data obtained was given codes and personal identifiers were removed. The data was transcribed with the help of professionals and translated. Forward and backward translations were conducted with the help of an expert in the language and hence validated.

Thematic network analysis was used to analyze the data due to its usefulness in the interpretation of themes which were supported by the interview data following the emergence of various categories (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). Since stereotype threat has several dimensions to it, thematic network analysis could bring out various dimensions and from varying viewpoints.

Results

Eight children (females = 4) whose fathers were imprisoned, who were not living with NGOs, and who were between 17 and 25 years of age eventually participated in the study (mean age = 19.8; SD = 3.0). The economic status of the participants ranged from low
economic status (four) to the upper middle class (four). Six participants resided in a rural area. Participants were from different religious background, there were four Hindu participants, two Christian participants, and two Muslim participants.

Table 1. Themes obtained from thematic network analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Themes</th>
<th>Organizing Themes</th>
<th>Basic Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stereotype Perception</td>
<td>Stereotype</td>
<td>• Comparison to father’s behavior</td>
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<td>• Bad influence</td>
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<td>• Proneness to aggressive behavior</td>
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<td>• Never faced stereotype</td>
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<td>• Not presently facing stereotype</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Experiences</td>
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<td>• Broken Trust</td>
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<td>• Teasing</td>
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<td>• Economic Burden</td>
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<td>• Inquiry about release</td>
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<td>• Lack of freedom</td>
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<td>Stereotype Threat</td>
<td>Cognitive changes</td>
<td>• Effects on attention</td>
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<td>Psychological Wellbeing</td>
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<td>• Effects on perception</td>
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<td>• Effects on decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective Changes</td>
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<td>• Sadness</td>
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<td>Behavioral Changes</td>
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<td>Psychological Wellbeing</td>
<td>Effect on happiness</td>
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<td>Psychological Wellbeing</td>
<td>Effect on goal-directed</td>
<td>• Effect on work efficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological Wellbeing</td>
<td>behavior</td>
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Three global themes emerged after the data were analyzed; a) stereotype perception, b) stereotype threat, and c) effects on psychological wellbeing.

Stereotype perception elaborated the first specific objective of the study, on how children of prisoners perceived stereotypes against them. The global theme consisted of two organizing themes, viz. stereotypes and negative experiences. The organizing theme,
stereotype, described the participant’s view of the stereotypes held by other members of the society against them. The basic themes that came under this organizing theme are: comparison to father’s behavior, bad influence, never faced stereotype and not presently facing stereotype.

The basic theme of comparing the child's behavior to the father explained how society finds similarity in the behavior of children to that of their incarcerated parents. Participants reported that people around them compared their behaviors to their respective fathers’ behaviors. Additionally, a few of them reported about people telling them that they would become like their respective fathers.

“I play football. So, when I was playing in the field one person came and talked rudely and I talked rudely back to him. Then he told me that I am like my father. And will become like that only.” (P1, 2018)

“People say that you are not to be blamed for what you have become, your father is to be blamed for that.” (P7, 2018)

In the first excerpt the participant was justified in expressing aggression, hence the person was unjustified to judge the participant based on a single instance. In the second excerpt, the participant had adopted an aggressive stance to every negative situation hence, there was an opportunity for generalizing his behavior however the comparison to father’s behavior is still not justified.

One participant also reported stigmatizing himself, as he compared his behavior to that of what would be expected of a prisoner’s son.

“After father went to jail, my behavior became like that of a prisoner’s son, fights and all.” (P7, 2018).

The basic theme of bad influence described how society found children of prisoners to be a bad influence. Participants reported that they faced this stigma mainly from their peer’s parents.

“Three or four of my friends are my neighbors. When I go to pick them up, their father and mother are very reluctant to send them with me. They think that I am a bad influence.” (P1, 2018)

The theme never faced stereotypes, was reported by some participants (three out of eight). They found no difference in other’s behaviors towards them before and after paternal incarceration.

“No one has behaved rudely towards me. I don’t behave like that to others. Since I am friendly with everyone, and not disturbing anyone, we are good for them.” (P4, 2018)
The basic theme not presently facing stereotype indicated that participants who faced stereotypes previously due to their parent being in prison were not facing stereotypes currently either because of their improved economic status or because they had not disclosed their father being in prison.

“Now they all have changed. Now when I go there (relatives’ house), they all treat me well. Those who discriminated against me, treat me well.” (P7, 2018)

On analysis, it was found that more than stereotypes, negative experiences in fact, had affected the participants. The organizing theme of negative experiences was thus included to explore more about the participants’ views of disturbing experiences they had faced. The basic themes within the negative experiences organizing theme included broken trust, teasing, economic burden, inquiry about the release, lack of freedom, and negative talks about father.

The basic theme of broken trust consisted of the participants’ perspectives of their negative experiences with respect to their friends who broke their trust by revealing that their fathers were in prison.

“When I came to plus one, there were two friends whom I knew from 8th standard with me. They know this. They told this to others (other classmates). Then others started looking at me in another way. I had told them not to disclose this. No one should know this. This had hurt me a lot.” (P2, 2018)

The basic theme, teasing, explained how the participants perceived teasing against them as a negative experience. The participants mostly were teased by their peers in the form of jokes, usually during school time.

“They will make a joke out of it. They will tell that your father has good security and does not have to spend any money. At first, I used to laugh with them. It would hurt me in the inside, but I won’t show my sadness on the outside.” (P1, 2018)

Economic burden, as a basic theme was relevant when participants perceived that the presence of their financial problems generated unnecessary sympathies from others.

“A lot of people come to help us, financially. They buy groceries and all. I don’t like it. I feel like a charity case.” (P1, 2018)

The basic theme inquiry about the father’s release explained how constant inquiry from relatives and friends about the father’s release were distressful to them.

“Whenever we go to our relatives’ house, they ask about when father will be released. It makes me very sad.” (P3, 2018)
The basic theme perceived lack of freedom was reflected in the participants’ wish for more freedom and desire for independence. Participants felt that in the absence of their fathers, they were more restricted in their life than their peers.

"We don't have the freedom to do anything. If my father was there, I would not have to ask someone else. He would have allowed me to go on trip and all." (P5, 2018)

The basic theme on, negative talks about the fathers indicated the negative impact of society talking negatively about the participants’ respective fathers in front of them. Participants felt this as a threat to their self-respect.

“They say that it would be a problem if my father comes back and that it would be better if he doesn’t come." "Whenever some problem occurs, they call him a murderer. It makes me sad." (P6, 2018)

The second global theme of stereotype threat explained the specific objectives two and three of understanding the conformity of children of prisoners towards the stereotypes and understanding the intensity of the stereotype threat. The organizing themes associated with the global theme of stereotype threat included cognitive changes, affective changes, and behavioral changes.

The organizing theme of cognitive changes included the changes in the thought processes of the participants due to the stereotypes they have faced. The basic themes that were associated with the organizing theme of cognitive changes were effects on attention, effects on perception, and effects on decision making.

The basic theme of effect on attention explained how stereotypes had an effect on the participants’ attention and concentration on various aspects of life.

“Sometimes when I sit to study or do some work, thoughts about father disturbs me and I can’t pay attention to anything around me. It disturbs me very much.” (P3, 2018)

The basic theme, effect on perception, described the effect of stereotype on the participants’ perception of those around them and life in general.

“I realized that life is full of thorns. My view of life changed a lot. When father was with us, I could get anything I wanted. Now I have to get permission from my mother and uncles. For everything we spend we have to make note of each and every note we spend.” (P2, 2018)

The excerpt additionally can be indicative of the role of others in decision making, the next basic theme that elaborates on how stereotypes influence the decision-making capacity of the participants. The participants reported the influence of the mother and other members of the society on the decision-making capacity of the participants.
“I don’t have the confidence to make decisions on my own. I have to ask my mother and other relatives. If I make a decision of my own, I am afraid that it might go wrong.” (P1, 2018)

For the organizing theme of affective changes, the effect of stereotypes on the emotional aspects of the participants were explained. The basic themes associated with this organizing theme included sadness and anger.

The basic theme of sadness explained how stereotypes had resulted in feelings of sadness among the participants. Feelings of sadness could have been triggered by factors such as teasing about the father, friends discussing problems, seeing photos of friends with their fathers, family get-togethers, teasing from friends, others blaming father, thoughts about father, and others talking about father’s situation.

“Whenever I see my friends with their fathers at some parents meeting, I used to feel very sad. Also, when I see pictures of my friends in WhatsApp with their family, I feel sad. When we are going out with other relatives, father’s absence always makes me sad.” (P5, 2018)

“Whenever we go to any relatives’ house or friends’ house they ask when will father get released and when is he coming back. It makes me very sad.” (P6, 2018)

The basic theme of anger explained the effects of stereotype on activating anger in participants. The trigger factor for this included others calling father names and others blaming them.

“Once my mother borrowed some money from one lady in our neighborhood and was unable to return the money on time. So, she started talking ill about my mother and my father. So, I got very angry and talked rudely to her and verbally abused her.” (P1, 2018)

The organizing theme of behavioral changes explained the effect of stereotype on the behavior of participants. The basic themes that were included in this organizing theme were academic performance and work efficiency.

The basic theme of academic performance explained about how stereotypes had affected the academic performance of the participants. The responses of the participants were mixed, i.e., there were reports of both increased efficiency and decreased efficiency.

“When I sit for studies lot of thoughts come into my mind and I am not able to concentrate on studies. I feel very restless after this so I go out of the room to get some peace. My marks came down because of this.” (decreased efficiency) (P1, 2018)
"I wanted to study more to be better at everything. My father wants me to get good marks and get a good job. I don’t want anyone to say that because of my father I have become useless.” (increased efficiency) (P7, 2018)

The basic theme, work efficiency, explained how the participants’ capacity to do any work had been affected by stereotypes. The results, in this case, were also mixed as the participants reported both increased and decreased efficiency.

"I am not able to concentrate on work sometimes. I make some mistake or the other…. I am only doing small works now so it does not matter, but if some large work comes small mistakes can matter a lot." (P1, 2018)

The third global theme was psychological effects which are associated with the fourth specific objective, the effects of stereotype threat on psychological wellbeing. The two organizing themes associated with this global theme were: effect on happiness and effect on goal-directed behavior.

The organizing theme, effect on happiness explained the influence of stereotype threat on the happiness of the participants. The basic theme associated with this organizing theme was reduced happiness, which explained how stereotypes and negative experiences had decreased general happiness in their life. Financial instability, thoughts about future, and worry about their respective fathers were some of the common causes identified for reduced happiness by participants.

"We don’t have much to be happy about but we try to maintain a happy face in front of others. All these financial problems have affected us a lot. If father was there, we will be happier." (P6, 2018)

The organizing theme, effect on goal-directed behavior, explained the influence of stereotype threat on the participants’ goal-directed behavior. The basic themes associated with this organizing theme were increased motivation and decreased motivation.

The basic theme increased motivation explained few participants’ reports (two out of eight) of increased motivation to achieve goals. The reason for this varies from the need to establish self to achieving father’s dreams.

"I worked hard to get into the position I am in today. I wanted to have a name of my own. I didn’t want to be always known as a prisoner’s son. I always wanted to be independent” (P7, 2018)

In the basic theme decreased motivation, the decreased desire in the participants to achieve goals was explained. The reason for decreased motivation included financial instability and family problems.

"I wanted to do a course in lift operating. I went there with my friends to inquire about the course. But it was very far from my home and I couldn't
afford it. My dreams have stopped with that. Now all I want to do is earn for one day's meal." (P1, 2018)

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study provided the opportunity to understand the effects of stereotype threat on the psychological wellbeing of children of prisoners. The study aimed to collect subjective data to eventually help such children to improve their quality of life. Results indicated that children of prisoners indeed experienced and perceived stereotypes around them. They encountered stereotypes mainly from their peers, neighbors, parents of their peers, and occasionally from their relatives. The experienced stereotypes were reported in the form of comparisons made between their behaviors with their respective fathers’ behaviors, or in the form of bad influence due to their family backgrounds based on their fathers’ legal offenses. There were however reports of not having experienced stereotypes and not experiencing stereotype at present. It was found that more than stereotypes, the negative experiences such as teasing, bad talks about their fathers, and lack of freedom from the society had affected them. Indeed, it could be proposed that the negative experiences were found to have more effects on participants than the stereotypes. From the data it was also inferred that participants experienced various forms of discrimination in the form of avoidance from teachers or not being selected for some programs or being avoided for certain jobs.

A gender difference was present in the experience of stereotypes and negative experiences. Female participants reported experiencing negative experiences, such as lack of freedom and frequent inquiries about their fathers’ release and male participants reported experiencing stereotypes, in the form of being a bad influence on their peers and comparison to father’s behavior. Al Gharaibeh (2008), had reported that female children experienced more stigma than male children with respect to paternal imprisonment. Since the negative experience is more prominent here than stereotypes, the findings corroborated previous research.

Results also indicated that participants experience changes in cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. The changes may be a result of the stereotypes and negative experiences that they had. Cognitive changes experienced by the participants included cognitive components such as attention, perception, and decision making. Participants were disturbed by thoughts of their fathers in prison, a recurrent thought that emerged as a distractor when they engaged in tasks and this affected their concentration. Participants had a new perception of the world around them, reducing their belief in a just world. Decision making was influenced either by their mothers or other members of the family with who they lived. It could not be conclusively stated as to whether stereotypes were reasons for these cognitive deficits. Future research could address this in greater detail.

Two major emotions that were prominent with respect to affective changes included feelings of sadness and anger. There were pieces of evidence suggesting that these two emotions were triggered by stereotypes and negative experiences from society. The triggers included negative talks about the fathers’ imprisonment, teasing, and facing stereotypes. A gender asymmetry was present within the theme of emotions. Female participants mostly experienced feelings of sadness and male participants mostly experienced anger. This finding is in consensus with the study by Haskins (2014), who
found that girls’ self-report of aggressive behavior was lower in comparison to boys, whose parents were in prison, implying that girls are less likely to express aggression as compared to boys.

Behavioral changes experienced by participants were reflected mainly in the domains of academic performance and work efficiency. Both these domains had mixed responses from the participants, i.e., there were reports of both increase and decrease in academic performance as well as work efficiency. The cognitive factors played a major role in the behavioral domain as those who reported poor academic performance and decrease in work efficiency had also reported that this was mainly because of their inability to concentrate. This finding is in accordance to the integrated process model of stereotype threat, according to which, cognition (attention) and performance (academic performance) are directly linked (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). However, those who reported better academic performance had an intrinsic motivation to be able to become self-sufficient and build an identity of their own in front of society. It is likely that these children felt accepted in a relevant area of their lives, which could be a reinforcement in itself for greater self-esteem and self-confidence, which encouraged the internal motivation to not conform? to societal? stereotypes.

The effects of stereotype threat on the psychological wellbeing were reflected in the domains of happiness and goal-directed behavior. Almost all participants reported reduced happiness. It was associated with the affective changes in the participants as discussed above since feelings of sadness and reduced happiness are two different aspects of the same situation. Previous research found that imprisonment of parents could be a possibly traumatic experience for the children, as there is a change in the living arrangements and sometimes even socioeconomic status of the children, leading to the perception of unhappiness around them (Sharp, Marcus-Mendoza, Bentley, Simpson, & Love, 1997).

The effects on goal-directed behavior were found to be mixed. There were reports of both increased and decreased motivation on the part of participants. Those who reported increased motivation towards goal-directed behavior had a positive outlook towards their life and desired to establish an identity of their own. Those who reported decreased motivation did not have any major life goals and had the wish to sustain a livelihood. It was interesting to note that those who experienced decreased motivation were from a lower socioeconomic background and it could be inferred that their financial burden along with the stereotypes has caused this reduced motivation. Pareek (1970), proposed in the paradigm of the culture of poverty that poverty is a social construct that lowers the need for achievement and extension and increase need for dependency, leading to an overall reduction in motivation. Similarly, financial burden could cause a decrease in the overall motivation level with disruption in the three tiers of needs.

Social support experienced by the participants was of utmost importance in the study. This depicted the opposite of the stereotypes that they had faced. The support was from different sources for different participants, including support from peers, teachers, family, and family friends. The interaction they had with their peers helped most participants to get through difficult times. Some participants found solace in the support of the teachers who took extra care of them and helped them in both their studies and psychological difficulties. Some participants had supportive relatives who helped them get through a difficult time financially and psychologically. A study by Hagen and Myers (2003) reported
that social support decreased the perception of stigma, internalized and externalized behavioral problems and stress levels in children whose mothers were imprisoned. A similar pattern was seen here where social support played as a protective factor in reducing the intensity of stereotype threat.

Another key point noted in the study was the reluctance of participants to reveal to those around them about their respective fathers were in prison. The reasons for this varied from participant to participant. Some were keen on building a new identity for themselves and did not want the shadows from the past to affect their lives. Others were afraid as to how people would react towards them if they learned about the imprisonment of the participant’s father Hagen and Mayers (2003) had found that secrecy regarding maternal incarceration as a healthy coping mechanism, that helped reduce impulse control behavior. Thus, the pattern of reluctance to reveal paternal imprisonment could be considered a positive indicator in the psychological wellbeing of the participants in this study.

Children of prisoners perceive stereotypes and have had negative experiences in regards to paternal incarceration. The current study highlighted its effects on their cognitive, behavioral and affective domains and, in turn, has had an effect on their psychological wellbeing. Additional findings on social support and secrecy regarding paternal imprisonment emerged which acted as protective factors with regards to stereotype threat.

The study is a first of its kind in India, as the psychological aspects of children of prisoners related to stereotypes have not been explored in the Indian context thus far. The current study provided evidence for the internal mechanism of the stereotype threat faced by children of prisoners, the results of which could help in improving their quality of life.

Limitations

The study had several limitations that could be improved by future studies.

1) The number of participants in the study was less as several participants dissented from participating in the study. Theoretical saturation could not be completely obtained with this limited number of participants.

2) Direct interview was a better option for the interview process as it would have led to a clearer understanding of the participants’ perspectives, their environments, their emotions, and overall experiences living with the truth about their fathers. However, due to the participants’ insistence for maintaining anonymity, the interview had to be conducted via telephone.

3) The study could have adopted a mixed design using both qualitative and quantitative measures such as the use of scales on subjective well-being inventory to assess the psychological wellbeing of the participants. The latter could have improved the outcome of the study as participants could have been categorized into groups based on their levels of wellbeing and a comparison of qualitative findings could have been made between the groups.

Future studies can focus on differentiating the experiences of stereotype in different age groups of children of prisoners. A scale to measure stereotype threat among children of prisoners could be developed which could be an extension of the present study. Finally, a
comparison study on stereotype threat among children of prisoners and children whose fathers have been released from prison could shed light on how children’s perceptions, thought processes, and related experiences in society change over time. Interventions for improvement in mental health conditions of children of imprisoned parents could be formulated in the future by emphasizing on the social support aspects as it acts as a protective factor with regards to stereotype threat and subsequent effects on the psychological wellbeing of the children.

References


