Standing out or fitting in:

Understanding how honors students behave in collaboration with regular students.

Keywords: Honors students, collaboration, inclusion, stereotyping, culture of excellence

Abstract

In this paper we take a social psychological approach to understanding how honors students position themselves when collaborating with regular students. A pilot study ($N = 14$) shows that honors students indeed tend to behave differently by either adapting to the group of regular students or by taking the lead/control. The reasons provided for this are preventing disharmony and delivering high quality work. A Survey study shows that honors students ($N = 106$) are more likely to take a leading role when they feel valued by the group in terms of competence and inclusion. Further, regular students' ($N = 729$) attitude to such a role is predicted by inclusion goals as well and hint at the importance of either a valued or an independent position. Results are discussed in terms of its effects on creating a culture of excellence via honors programs within higher education.

Theoretical Framework

During the last decade many higher education institutions in the Netherlands developed special -- honors programs -- for highly talented and motivated students (Wolfensberger, 2012). Honors programs are used to induce a culture of excellence within higher education institutes. Although honors students spend a vast amount of time on these more challenging programs they quite often, also follow (parts of) a regular educational program. Ideally honour students inspire regular students. However, honors students face pressure to adjust to the norms (in terms of motivation and ambition) that are prevalent within the dominant group of regular students. We take a social psychological approach to understanding how honors students position themselves when collaborating with regular students.

It is often argued that honors programs create an ambitious culture or a culture of excellence that affects the institute as a whole (Tiesinga, 2014). The idea is that bringing together highly competent, ambitious and motivated students in special programs offers ground for establishing a culture of excellence which is then likely to dissimilate to the regular group of students. Research shows that honors programs are characterizes by a culture emphasizing personal development, collaboration, excellence, and innovation and creativity (Tiesinga, 2014, Scager et al). However, the fact that there is a culture of excellence within honors programs does not guarantee its dissemination. Indeed, whether a subculture affects a dominant culture is determined by whether the subculture is visible and whether the dominant culture is open to change (Harris, 1998).Within this paper we look at both the above requirements. We do this by focusing on whether honors students dare to stand out and on whether regular students offer honors students the space to stand out.

It is said that gifted students prefer to work alone and this seems especially to be the case when other students are not as motivate or gifted (French, Walker & Shore, 2011). Indeed, an important reason for students to take part in honors programs is the foresight of working together with like-minded and like-motivated students (Tiesinga, 2104). This thus raises questions about how honors students experience collaborative learning enterprises within the regular program. Further, social psychological research provide ground to believe that honors students are likely to face pressure to adjust.

Honors students are likely to be stereotyped (i.e., competent but cold; Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2012) and honors students have expectations about how regular students see them. They expect to be viewed as arrogant, overachievers, and nerds (Tiesinga, 2012). As people try to counter such negative meta-stereotypes (Klein & Azzi, 2001) it is likely that honors students show less drive and ambition when interacting with regular

students than they actually feel or would show within honors programs. Theory on the role on marginal group members (which honors students, due to their special status, are) further confirms this (marginals who have a strong inclusion goal face the pressure to adjust to group norms; Ellemers & Jetten, 2013). However, this research (Ellemers & Jetten, 2013) also suggests that especially high status marginals could occupy a position in which they are admired or rather independent paving the way for more leading or expert-like roles (i.e., when own inclusion goals are weak). In this paper we therefore explore whether (meta-)stereotypes about honors students as well as inclusion goals affect the extent to which honors students adapt to group norms in terms of ambition, motivation and excellence or take a more leading role when working with regular students. Secondly, we explore whether inclusion goals affect the extent to which regular students are open to honors students standing out.

Method

Pilot study

We first conducted a pilot study to test if students behaved differently when collaborating with regular students and for what reasons. All 17 students of the honors program of health care studies at a Dutch University of Applied Sciences were asked to fill in a questionnaire ($N = 14$); they were asked if they behaved differently when working with regular students (than with honors students), how, and why. Results showed that the vast majority tends to behave differently. Coding of the open-ended questions subsequently showed that this occurred in two ways: adapting or taking the lead/control and for two reasons: preventing disharmony and delivering high quality work.

Survey

The study was part of a larger survey digitally distributed among all full-time bachelor students of a Dutch University of Applied Sciences (in 2013: 23743 full-time students, including 1076 honors students). The final sample used in the analysis contained 106 honors students and 729 regular students. Honors students first answered 7-point likert-scale items that measured adaptation, taking the lead, individual inclusion goals and perceived group inclusion goal (See Table 1). Further, 5-point scales were used to measure meta-stereotype (Vorauer, Main and O'Connell, 1998) warmth ($\alpha = .90$) and competence ($\alpha = .82$; Cuddy et al., 2006) as well clearly negative meta-stereotypical traits (nerds/overachievers/arrogant, $\alpha = .58$; Tiesinga, 2012).

Results and conclusions

Regression analyses showed that honors students' tendency to adapt was not predicted by *inclusion goals*, while their tendency to take the lead was. More specifically, students who believed that the group wanted to include them were more likely to take the lead. With respect to *meta-stereotyping,* regression analyses showed that tendency to adapt was not predicted by meta-stereotypical perceptions, while tendency to take the lead was. More specifically, students who expect to be seen as competent were more likely to take on a leading role Results thus show that honors students take on leading roles when the feel valued by regular students.

With respect to regular students' attitudes towards positioning of honors students results of regression analysis are mixed. On the one hand honors students face less pressure to *adjust* and get more room to *take control* when regular students are not keen on including and sense that honors students are not either. On the other hand, results show that honors students get more *room to make demands* when the group wants

to include them and even a bit more so when the sense that honors students want to be part of the group as well. Likewise, regular students are more positive towards honors students *taking on a leading* role when they believe the group wants to include the honors student.

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Table 1: Items used to measure positioning, attitudes towards positioning and inclusion goals

Items asked to honors students	Items asked to regular students
When collaborating with regular students (e.g., in a project group)…	When collaborating with an honors student (e.g., in a project group)...
Leading role, $r = .84$ …I am more in the lead than when working with honors students. … I am more in control than when working with honors students.	**Leading role**, $r = -.001$ … I like it when s/he takes the lead. … I dislike it when s/he takes control (-)
Adaptation, $r = .58$ … I show less drive than when working with honors students. … I adjust to the level of regular students.	**Adaptation,** $r = -.10$ … I feel s/he can make high demands on the rest of the group (-). … I feel s/he should adjust to the group level.
Inclusion goals … I feel the group wants to include me. … I want to be included in the group.	**Inclusion goals** … the group wants to include him/her. ... s/he wants to be included in the group.