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Sense of Home Buffers Threats to the Self

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Abstract

We hypothesized that sense of home serves as a buffer against self-threat. In three experiments, we induced sense of home (vs. control) and assessed its buffering function to threat. Sense of home augmented openness to stereotype threat information (Experiment 1), increased performance on a spatial rotation ability test after stereotype threat (Experiment 2), and reduced the desire for high-status products following mortality salience (Experiment 3). This “proof of concept” research establishes the buffering potential of sense of home and raises theoretical and practical implications.

*Keywords*: home, sense of home, self, self-threat, stereotype threat, mortality salience

Sense of Home Buffers Threats to the Self

 “Home” has been conceptualized in a variety of ways by philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists (Jacobson, 2012; Moore, 2000; Sixsmith, 1986). The multifacetedness of the construct aside, we were interested in this article in a more specific question. We asked what the subjective sense of home does for people. What are the psychological functions that it serves? In particular, we proposed and tested the hypothesis that sense of home safeguards against threats to the self.

Our conceptualization of sense of home as a buffer against self-threat is supported by several lines of theorizing. For example, sense of home is theorized to be linked to one’s self-definition or identity, formed in part via familial relationships, and of authentic expression (Mallett, 2004; Tucker, 1994). It is also theorized to be linked to a spatial, temporal, and emotional enclosure. Indeed, psychoanalysts argued that sense of home encompasses such feelings as private, welcomed, safe, familiar, guaranteed, satisfied, pleasant, euphoria, content, original, autonomy, free from wariness, attached, sweet, warm, comfort, and unquestioned acceptance (Lichtenstein, 2009; Seiden, 2009).

Our conceptualization of sense of home as a buffer against self-threat is additionally supported by several lines of research. In environmental and family psychology, sense of home is tethered to family, security, intimacy, comfort, and control (L’Abate, 2003; Moore, 2000). Likewise, in social psychology, sense of home is related to identity (Scabini & Manzi, 2011), and also to security, comfort, and relaxation (Graham, Gosling, & Travis, 2015).

Sense of home may be particularly relevant in collectivistic cultures (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Triandis, 1995). Chinese, for example, are purported to be highly familial, as family has traditionally been the fundamental cultural unit (Jia, 2008; Ho, 1998a), and filial piety (i.e., submitting to parents and honoring the family) is a contemporary socialization practice (Deng, 2004; Ho, 1998b). Chinese rely on family: Relative to their American counterparts, Chinese participants took more financial risks due to stronger perceived access to financial support from their family (Hsee & Weber, 1999). Further, relative to Canadian participants, Chinese participants perceived a closer connection between self and family than self and friend (Li, 2002). In addition, the constructs self and mother activate the same brain region, namely, medial prefrontal cortex (Zhu, Zhang, Fan, & Han, 2007). That the self is embedded in one’s family among Chinese participants was illustrated in a series of experiments that induced various kinds of self-affirmation (all via the standard value-expressive method; McQueen & Klein, 2006): Affirmation of the familial self evinced stronger buffering potential against threats than affirmation of the individual self, affirmation of a close other (friends, romantic partner), affirmation of an acquaintance, affirmation of a generalized other, or no affirmation (Cai, Sedikides, & Jiang, 2013).

We conducted three experiments among Chinese participants to test the hypothesis that sense of home, similar to familial self-affirmation, serves as a buffer against self-threat. In all experiments, we induced sense of home (vs. sense of a square). Then, we examined whether sense of home increased openness to gender stereotype threat information (Experiment 1), bolstered performance after gender stereotype threat (Experiment 2), and reduced the desire for high-status products following mortality threat (Experiment 3).

**Experiment 1: Home Increases Openness to Gender-Leadership**

**Stereotype Threat Information**

Stereotype threat entails a stereotypical group identity, triggered by situations that pose a substantial threat to self-integrity (Steele, 1988). This self-threat could instigate defensive reactions, such as challenging the credibility of the threat information or derogating its source (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides, 2012). However, people become less defensive and more open-minded when their self is affirmed (Cai et al., 2013; Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Sherman & Cohen, 2002). Extrapolating from this prior research, we proposed that sense of home acts as self-affirmation. In particular, sense of home curtails defensiveness to stereotype threat information that is associated with gender-leadership.

**Method**

**Participants.** A power analysis (G\*Power 3.1; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), based on effect sizes from a prior relevant experiment (*d* = 0.64; Cai et al., 2013, Experiment 2), suggested that 80 participants were needed to ensure 80% statistical power. We conservatively oversampled, given that this experiment constituted a foray into the topic. Specifically, we tested 119 female university students from China, ranging in age from 17 to 28 years (*M* = 21.21, *SD* = 2.38).

**Procedure and measures.** We randomly assigned participants to two conditions: home (*N* = 59) and square (*N* = 60). In the home condition, participants first listed at least five items (persons, places, or things) that gave them a sense of home. Then, they visualized the listed items and re-lived the feelings that the items brought about. Finally, participants recorded these feelings in as much detail as possible and explained why the items generated the relevant feelings. In the square condition, participants first listed at least five characteristics of a public square. Then, they visualized these characteristics along with the feelings brought about by them. Finally, they recorded their feelings in as much detail as possible and explained why the characteristics generated the relevant feelings.

Afterward, participants were presented with the following argument making the case for an association between stereotypically masculine characteristics and effective leadership (von Hippel, Wiryakusuma, Bowden, & Shochet, 2011, Study 1, p. 1314): “It is males who are willing to take a stand, and also display direct and assertive qualities, who constitute good leaders. Because males are more likely to display these traits, male and female graduates differ in their potential as leaders.” At the end, participants completed the dependent measure, openness to threat information (Cohen et al., 2007, Study 1). This measure comprised eight statements: The argument is convincing, the argument is valid, the author is reasonable, the author is objective, the author is knowledgeable, the author is intelligent, the author is biased, females lack leadership (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*). Responses to the statements were internally consistent ( = 0.88), and so we aggregated them into an index.

**Results and Discussion**

**Openness to threat information.** We used independent t-test to examine the condition difference in openness to threat information. Participants in the home condition were more open to gender-leadership stereotype information (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = 1.58) than those in the square condition (*M* = 3.47, *SD* = 1.32), *t*(117) = 2.35, *p* = 0.020, *d* = 0.43. Participants, then, who experienced a sense of home showed more openness to stereotype information that threatened their identity. Sense of home alleviated the negative impact of stereotype threat.

**Experiment 2: Home Combats Gender-Spatial Ability Stereotype Threat**

We aimed to replicate and extend the Experiment 1 findings to gender-spatial ability stereotype threat. We also addressed a limitation of Experiment 1, namely the lack of a manipulation check. Stereotypes that link women with worse spatial ability can impair spatial performance among female students (McGlone & Aronson, 2006; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). According to our hypothesis, sense of home would bolster spatial-rotation performance among female participants.

**Method**

**Participants.** A power analysis (G\*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2007), on the basis of effect sizes from a previous relevant experiment (*d* = 0.64; Cai et al., 2013, Experiment 2), indicated that 80 participants were needed to ensure 80% statistical power. We felt slightly short of this goal, recruiting 78 female university students from China. They ranged in age from 18 to 28 years (*M* = 21.58, *SD* = 2.03).

**Procedure and materials.** We randomly assigned participants to the home (*N* = 38) versus square (*N* = 40) condition. The manipulation was identical to that of Experiment 1. Next, participants completed a manipulation check by responding to the statement: “To what extent do you have a sense of home at this moment?” (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*).

Subsequently, participants read a description of spatial ability (Cai et al., 2013, Experiment 2, pp. 532-533): “Spatial ability is an important aspect of human intelligence; in a short while, you will be asked to complete a widely used spatial ability test—the spatial rotation test.” Participants also learned that they would receive feedback upon test completion. The stereotype threat manipulation followed (Cai et al., 2013, Experiment 2, p. 533): “People usually think that female students have lower spatial intelligence than male students.”

Finally, participants engaged with the spatial ability test, namely, the Mental Rotation Test (Vandenberg & Kuse, 1978). It comprises 24 items. Each item includes a three-dimensional target object and four optional three-dimensional objects. Two are identical to the target object but in different angles, and the other two are different objects in different angles. Participants are instructed to select the two items that are identical to the target object. Participants were given 15 minutes to work on the test. Given that each item has two correct choices, the total score could range from 0 to 48. In this experiment, the range was 18 to 48.

**Results and Discussion**

**Manipulation check.** A t-test showed that participants in the home condition reported a stronger sense of home (*M* = 6.97, *SD* = 1.44) than those in the square condition (*M* = 5.98, *SD* = 1.53), *t*(76) = 2.97, *p* = 0.004, *d* = 0.67. The manipulation check was effective.

**Mental rotation test.** A t-test revealed that participants in the home condition (*M* = 38.05, *SD* = 7.86) scored higher on the mental rotation test than those in square condition (*M* = 33.78, *SD* = 9.61), *t*(76) = 2.15, *p* = 0.035, *d* = 0.49. Participants who experienced a sense of home performed better in a mental rotation task following gender-spatial ability stereotype threat. Sense of home, then, buffered the negative impact of stereotype threat.

**Experiment 3: Home Attenuates the Impact of Mortality Threat**

We focused in this experiment on another type of self-threat, mortality threat, which is typically induced via reminders of one’s mortality. Mortality salience has diverse consequences (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). More relevant, it heightens pursuit for high-status products (Heine, Harihara, & Niiya, 2002; Mandel & Heine, 1999), as people boost their worth within their cultural systems through such products. According to our hypothesis, sense of home would soften the impact of morality threat; that is, it would lower preferences for high-status products following mortality salience.

**Method**

**Participants.** As before, we conducted a power analysis (G\*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2007), based on effect sizes from a relevant experiment (*d* = 0.73; Cai et al., 2013, Experiment 1). The analysis indicated that 62 participants were needed to ensure 80% statistical power. We oversampled, testing 86 university students (56 women, 32 men) from China. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 years (*M* = 21.80, *SD* = 1.94). We obtained no gender differences.

**Procedure and materials.** Participants first underwent the mortality salience manipulation (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), responding in writing to two open-ended prompts: “Brieﬂy describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you” and “Jot down, as speciﬁcally as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you die and once you are physically dead.” Afterwards, they engaged in a Sudoku puzzle for a few minutes, a standard distraction task (Burke et al., 2010; Halvorson, 2016). Subsequently, they were randomly assigned to the home (*N* = 42) or square (*N* = 44) conditions. The manipulation was identical to Experiments 1-2, and the manipulation check was identical to that of Experiment 2.

Lastly, participants read an advertisement showcasing iPad as the best product to reflect high-status on the part of the owner (Heine et al., 2002), and subsequently evaluated the product’s status by responding to five questions. We adjusted the questions after Heine et al. (2002). Three of them referred to the advertisement (“How attractive do you think this advertisement is?”, “How do you think this advertisement will highlight the status of purchaser?”, “How likely do you think this advertisement will promote the purchase?”) and two referred to purchase intentions (“How much do you like this iPad?”, “How likely is it that you will buy this iPad?”) (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *totally*;  = .75).

**Results and Discussion**

**Manipulation check.** A t-test showed that participants in the home condition manifested a stronger sense of home (*M* = 7.60, *SD* = 1.08) than those in the square condition (*M* = 5.45, *SD* = 2.24), *t*(84) = 5.61, *p* < 0.001, *d* = 1.22. The manipulation was successful.

 **Evaluation of product’s status.** A t-test indicated that participants in the home condition (*M* = 3.80, *SD* = 1.22) regarded the advertisement less attractive and were less prone to buy the iPad than those in square condition (*M* = 4.33, *SD* = 1.15), *t*(84) = 2.06, *p* = 0.042, *d* = 0.45. Hence, participants who had experienced a sense of home (vs. square) showed reduced preference and desire for high-status products following exposure to a MS manipulation. Sense of home buffered the negative consequences of mortality salience.

**General Discussion**

We were concerned in this article with the psychological functions of home. We hypothesized that sense of home acts as a buffer against self-threat. The hypothesis was supported in three experiments conducted in China. Participants who experienced a sense of home (vs. square) manifested increased openness to gender stereotype threat information (Experiment 1), performed better in a mental rotation test after gender stereotype threat (Experiment 2), and expressed reduced desire for high-status product following death reminders (Experiment 3). Sense of home, then, can mitigate the negative consequences of self-threats. This is the first experimental demonstration of the self-protective function of sense of home. Sense of home appears to be a potent self-affirmatory resource, shielding from threat.

 Our findings are consistent with the possibility that sense of home allays the impact of meaning violations. According to the meaning maintenance model (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Sleegers & Proulx, 2014), stereotype threat and mortality salience constitute threats to meaning. However, people may endorse belief systems, values, or worldviews to ameliorate the influence of such threats. Induced sense of home is part of the psychological armor that people endorse to cope with meaning threat, as is self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2002) and familiar self-affirmation (Cai et al., 2013).

Sense of home may serve as a coping strategy in an age of global mobility. Professional mobility is a case in point, with the internationalization of labor markets (International Labour Organization, 2006; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008) and increasing willingness of skilled workers—including from China and other Asian countries—to seek work opportunities (“Travelling talent: Skilled workers are nowadays eager to work abroad,” 2014). Such mobility creates acculturation problems, resulting often in negative affect and psychological stress (Berry, 2006; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Residential mobility is another example. Such mobility is associated with low levels of well-being, high levels of stress, and even mortality risk in the long run (Bures, 2003; Oishi & Schimmack, 2010). Mobility is a particularly pressing problem in China, where huge numbers of people travel for work and the Spring Festival each year, and more critically where children of migrant workers are reported to suffer from mental illness (e.g., separation anxiety, depression, generalized anxiety disorder; Chen, 2011; Wong, Chang, & He, 2009). Taken together, sense of home may help to alleviate psychological malfunction associated with various kinds of mobility.

Our findings have implications for research carried out online, an accelerating trend (Adjerid & Kelley, 2018). Web-based experiments are sometimes criticized for yielding weaker results than in-lab experiments ([Finley](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anna_Finley) & [Penningroth](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Suzanna_Penningroth), 2015; but see Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013). Web-based experiments, though, are likely to be completed at home. The ensuing sense of home may serve as a particularly potent buffer against the self-threat that such experiments may manipulate. This may be one case in which online experiments produce stronger results than in-lab experiments.

We wish to highlight limitations of our work. *First*, our purpose in these “proof of concept” experiments was to establish sense of home as a shield against self-threat. But how does sense of home provide cover for threat? Mediation candidates abound. Sense of home may foster: privacy and security; familiarity and warmth; comfort and relaxation; belongingness and support; pleasure and joy; self-esteem; authenticity; or nostalgia. It is a task for future research to identify the key mediator or set of mediators. *Second*, we induced sense of home with a narrative procedure; however, it can also be induced through other means, such as images or conversations. Additional induction techniques will expand the scope of the reported research. *Third*, we restricted our studies to China, partly because this country is purported to be a good representative of collectivistic culture (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Yet, there are other kinds of collectivism (Vignoles et al., 2016), and home may evoke different psychological states in less collectivistic cultures. As such, future research should test the generalizability of our findings in a variety of cultures. *Fourth*, follow-up research should examine the generalizability of our findings among community members and also persons of varying ages; older adults, for example, may have a stronger sense of home than younger adults (Riemer, 2000; Róin, 2015). *Finally*, future research should employ larger, more powerful samples.

 To conclude, sense of home protects the individual against self-threat. It reduces defensiveness (among women) to stereotype threat referring to gender-leadership. It promotes (among women) spatial-rotation performance. And it assuages the impact of mortality salience. The findings establish sense of home as a buffer, raise practical implications, and call for future investigations on the topic.

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