



# The effect of accent prejudice on the subjective well-being of nonnative English speakers



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## Introduction

For speakers with nonnative accents, accent prejudice may have the biggest negative influence on their lives. Accent prejudice is a process of systematically oppressing a group based on their accent (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). Standard accents are often rated more positively than non-standard accents, which can disadvantage nonnative speakers in a variety of ways, including employment opportunities and intrapersonal relationships (Collins & Clement, 2012). Being systematically disadvantaged against in these ways is related to a decrease in subjective well-being because it affects the ability to accomplish a sense of eudaimonic success or the ability to achieve one's goals for flourishing, thriving, and exercising excellence. Prejudice can also impact the memories individuals develop for events. Research shows that prejudice affects people's abilities to recall events because bad events (such as prejudice) are processed more thoroughly than good events and contributes more strongly to a final impression that is formed, which Baumeister et al (2001) refers to the "positive-negative asymmetry effect".

Although a plethora of research has focused on the ways in which prejudice affects those who are discriminated against, and some of this research focuses on the objective ways in which accent prejudice affects accented speakers, there is limited research linking experiences of accent prejudice to subjective measures of well-being. Understanding the ways in which accented individuals view themselves as affected can lead to interventions being introduced to prevent maladaptive effects. Therefore, research should also consider the effects of accent prejudice on the subjective well-being of non-native English Speakers.

## Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that participants who experienced accent prejudice would show a decrease in subjective well-being scores when compared to participants who did not experience accent prejudice. It was also hypothesized that participants who experienced accent prejudice would show an increase in recall abilities when compared to participants who did not experience accent prejudice.

## Participants

Seventeen nonnative English speakers ranging in ages from 18-25 from Allegheny College were recruited from the Modern and Classical Languages and Psychology Departments.

Total Number Reported Native Languages Across the Sample

Native Language	Experience of Prejudice	No Experience of Prejudice
Spanish	3	4
Portuguese	3	2
Mandarin Chinese	1	2
German	1	0
French	1	0
Total	9	8

## Method

Participants were randomly selected to participate in the experience of accent prejudice condition or the no experience of accent prejudice condition. All participants filled out the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire from Hills and Argyle (2002) to establish baseline scores for subjective well-being. Participants in the experimental group then read a news article about an attempt of the Arizona Department of Education and State Boards of Education to remove teachers who spoke English with heavy accents from English Language Learner classrooms. Participants in the control group read a neutral news article about the Arizona State Government's legislation to fund charter schools. Both groups then filled out the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire for a second time. They were also asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire and to complete a recall task about the information in the news article to assess if the manipulation had affected their cognitive processing while reading.

Example text:

After passing the nation's toughest state immigration enforcement law, Arizona's school officials are now cracking down on teachers with heavy accents. The Arizona Department of Education is sending evaluators to audit teachers and their English speaking skills to make sure districts are complying with the state and federal laws. Teachers who are not fluent in English, who make grammatical errors while speaking or who have heavy accents will be temporarily reassigned. "As you expect science teachers to know science teachers to know science, math teachers to know math, you expect a teaching the kids English to know English," said Tome Home, state superintendent of public instruction.

## Results

A one-way ANOVA was performed with experience of accent prejudice (experience of accent prejudice versus no experience of accent prejudice) as the between subjects variable was run on subjective well-being post-manipulation scores. Results showed that there was not significant main effect of experience of prejudice,  $F(1, 17)=3.95$ ,  $p=0.539$ ,  $\eta^2=0.26$ . Specifically, post-test subjective well-being scores in the experimental condition ( $M= 129.33$ ,  $SD=18.32$ ) were not different from post-test subjective well-being scores in the control condition ( $M= 124.00$ ,  $SD=16.41$ ). A one-way ANOVA with experience of accent prejudice as the between subjects variable was run on post-test recall task scores. The main effect of experience of accent prejudice was not significant  $F<1$ . Specifically, post-test recall task scores in the experimental condition ( $M= 77.33$ ,  $SD=12.57$ ) were not significantly different from post-test recall task scores in the control condition ( $M= 76.50$ ,  $SD=20.04$ ). Additionally, a one-way ANOVA with experience of accent prejudice as the between subjects variable was run on a post-test question asking participants if they found the content of the news article prejudiced in any way. Scores on this question ranged from one(not at all prejudiced) to seven(very prejudiced). The main effect of experience of accent prejudice was significant  $F(1, 17)=8.18$ ,  $p=0.012$ ,  $\eta^2=0.353$ . Participants in the experimental condition ( $M= 4.11$ ,  $SD=.60$ ) significantly rated the news article they read as more prejudiced than the participants in the control condition ( $M= 2.75$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ).

## Spanish Literary Analysis

The discussions of the wide variety of negative consequences of having an accent in the novel *De cómo las muchachas García perdieron el acento* by Julia Alvarez provides researchers with strong evidence to extend the analysis of the relationship between accent prejudice and measures of well-being. In the novel, the presence of an accent prevents the Garcia family from integrating into the culture of the United States, affecting the Garcia girls' feelings of community and belonging, constructs previously proven to be related to well-being. This failure to connect with the culture they're immersed in along with the people associated with it causes obvious damage to the Garcia girls' well-being.

Yolanda's accent and inability to communicate to her husband alienates her within herself, causing an identity crisis that manifests into a psychotic break in which she only speaks in echoes of English words. Later on, in an attempt to reconnect with her Dominican culture, she returns to the Dominican Republic, only to find that she now speaks Spanish with an accent and is unable to reintegrate properly, even within her immediate family. Her peers in both countries express feelings of prejudice against her language skills, causing her inability to connect with either culture. Yolanda, along with the rest of the members of the Garcia family, clearly suffers emotionally and demonstrate that experiencing prejudice based on the presence of a nonnative accent can affect one's well-being.

## Conclusions

The present study hypothesized that an experience of accent prejudice would decrease subjective well-being levels and increase recall abilities. Significant results were not found and thus the hypotheses were not supported. Although the participants thought that the news article was expressing prejudice towards a specific group of people (accented teachers), they may not have perceived the group experiencing prejudice as a part of their ingroup. In other words, they might not have connected the prejudice towards accented teachers as similar enough to themselves, although they all identified themselves as speaking English with an accent.

Additionally, the current study was conducted in every participant's second language as opposed to their native language. It was unable to control for first language and therefore could not conduct the study in one singular native language, creating a possible language barrier preventing participants from fully understanding and experiencing the manipulation along with the questions asked of them. The participants may not have completely understood the questions within the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and their scores on this questionnaire may not accurately represent their subjective well-being levels. If this is the case, there would be no significant difference between participants in the control and experimental condition. In addition to not understanding the questions asked during the post-test questionnaires, the participants may not have fully understood the news articles read as a part of the manipulation, exacerbating the language barrier.

Although no significant results were found for a variety of reasons, the testimony of Julia Alvarez in *De cómo las muchachas García perdieron el acento* provides evidence for the existence of a relationship between experience of accent prejudice and poor well-being. The novel gives an in-depth description of how the lives of the Garcia sisters are affected by the presence of an accent. Although this study was unable to provide empirical evidence for the relationship, literary accounts such as *De cómo las muchachas García perdieron el acento* show the need for continuation of the present research.

## References

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