

## Stereotype Threat

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### What is Stereotype Threat?

“Stereotype threat is being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Someone who identifies or is identified by others as a member of a group that is negatively stereotyped may show lower performance on cognitive or even physical tasks. Researchers have suggested that this difference in performance results from individuals’ anxieties about confirming negative stereotypes. Situations in which the identity of a stereotyped group is emphasized can increase vulnerability to stereotype threat.

### Who is Affected by Stereotype Threat?

- Students from different socioeconomic status
  - Low-income students taking verbal tests performed poorly compared to well-off students when the test was presented as a measure of intellectual ability. The authors suggest that low-income students experience apprehension about confirming a negative stereotype about their intellect, which impairs their performance (Croizet & Claire 1998).
- Students who identify as different genders
  - Women performed poorly relative to men on a math test when they were told that the test had revealed gender differences in the past. The authors suggest that “women bear the extra burden of having a stereotype that alleges a sex-based inability... a predicament that others, not stereotyped in this way, do not bear” (Spencer, Steele & Quinn, 1999).
- Individuals from different linguistic backgrounds
  - In a bilingual region of Italy, nonnative speakers were tested on their pronunciation of German words and performed relatively poorly when they were reminded that they were not competent speakers of the language (Gluszek & Dovidio 2010, Paladino et al. 2009).
- Individuals from different age groups
  - When told that it is widely believed that age negatively correlates with cognitive ability, elderly individuals perform poorer on memory tasks than they would otherwise (Chasteen et al. 2005).

- Students of different races
  - African American and white students were given a difficult verbal test: African American students underperformed relative to white students when the test was presented as being diagnostic of intelligence or when racial stereotypes were emphasized, but performed equally well when the test was not presented in this way (Steele & Aronson 1995).
  - When confronted with the stereotype that Asian students outperform white students in math, white male students performed worse relative to students who were not presented with this stereotype (Aronson et al. 1999).

### **Strategies for Reducing Stereotype Threat:**

- Modify testing practices.
  - Consider moving away from tests and towards assignments which have a manifestly educational purpose, rather than an evaluative one. If you must administer exams, make them fair and emphasize their educational value (Steele & Aronson 1995).
  - Elect to have tests administered/proctored by TAs who come from under-represented backgrounds (Marx and Goff 2005).
  - Move questions about students' demographics to the end of test if it is necessary to have them (Steele & Aronson 1995).
- Promote diversity: incorporate the experiences and contributions of underrepresented identities into the course material.
  - Incorporate a diverse set of authors in class syllabus. Emphasize contributions of scientists, artists, etc. who come from a variety of backgrounds.
  - Invite guest lecturers from a variety of backgrounds.
  - Vary pronouns and names when presenting hypothetical scenarios, thought experiments, etc. in class discussions.
  - Emphasize that diversity is valued in your discipline and/or at your institution.
- Discuss and adopt a growth mindset in your teaching.
  - Emphasize that hard work is more important than innate intelligence. Describe intelligence to your students as something that can be developed through effort and practice, like a muscle (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002).
  - Attribute student difficulties to temporary and external setbacks that can be overcome, rather than some inherent weakness or flaw.
- Adjust classroom practices.

- Ask students for preferred pronouns.
- Appropriately address any microaggressions that arise in classroom discussions, particularly those that evoke any kind of stereotype.
- Help students foster an identity and sense of self outside of the classroom. Encourage students to think of themselves as complex and multi-faceted (Ambady, Paik, Steele, Owen-Smith, & Mitchell 2004).
- Acknowledge and discuss the existence of stereotype threat.
- Engage students in value-affirmation exercise early in the course. Sharing core personal values has been shown to reduce the effects of stereotype threat (Cohen et al., 2006, 2009; Martens et al., 2006; Miyake et al., 2010).

### Sample Course Introduction Assignment

1. Tell me your preferred name and pronouns.
2. Look over the following list of values and select one that is most important to you.
  - Artistic skills/appreciation
  - Sense of humor
  - Relationships with friends and family
  - Spontaneity/living life in the moment
  - Social skills
  - Athletics
  - Musical ability/appreciation
  - Creativity
  - Faith/spirituality
  - Connecting with nature
  - Other

In a short paragraph, describe why this value is important to you. You can write about a specific time when this value was particularly meaningful, and/or how about how you apply this value in your everyday life.

Do not think too much about which value you pick, and do not worry about how perfect your writing is. I just want you to tell me about yourself by telling me about something that matters to you.

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