Stereotype Threat

TASK PERFORMANCE SUBVERSION

MAJOR FINDINGS ON STEREOTYPE THREAT IN ACADEMIC DOMAINS

WAYS TEACHERS CAN STRUCTURE CLASSROOMS TO REDUCE STEREOTYPE THREAT

According to Steele and Aronson (1995), stereotype threat is defined as a “socially premised psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies” (Steele, 1997, p. 614). Another description of stereotype threat suggests that individuals are at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about their group. Here, individuals who experience stereotype threat are 1) acknowledging that a negative stereotype exists (i.e., salient in a given context or is explicitly stated) about the capabilities of their social group (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status) and 2) demonstrating apprehension about confirming the negative stereotype by engaging in particular activities.

An example of stereotype threat is a member of a stigmatized group (i.e., African American students, women) feeling apprehension about performing on an academic task because the individual is afraid that a possible poor performance may confirm a pre-existing negative stereotype about the individual's group (i.e., intellectual capabilities of African Americans or perceived underperformance of women in science and mathematics). For Steele, it is unnecessary for the group member to believe the stereotype to be true for stereotype threat to produce negative psychological consequences for the individual. That is, the psychological reactions to stereotype threat—exposure to contexts in which negative stereotypes about the capabilities and behaviors of a given group are or have been salient—are enough to alter the attitudes and behaviors of individual group members and produce maladaptive psychological functioning.

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Much of the research on stereotype threat has shown that the task performance of otherwise capable individuals is hindered when such a social-psychological threat is presented at the time of the performance (Aronson et al., 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997). Steele (1997) and Aronson (2002) write that, for many stigmatized groups—namely women and ethnic minority populations—stereotype threat is a common reality. In particular, low-income African American and Latino students are often exposed to academic contexts in which, historically, negative beliefs regarding their perceived intelligence have been held. The awareness and salience of the belief regarding their intelligence can disrupt academic performance for these students.

The consequences of stereotype threat have been noted. For example, in a review, Aronson (2002) notes that perceptions of negative stereotypes lead many individuals to engage in activities such as self-handicapping (Smith, 2004), challenge avoidance (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003), self-suppression (Steele, 1997; Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2002), and disidentification or disengagement with the task or the context in which the task is to be performed (Steele, 1997; Aronson, 2002; Major et al., 1998). In addition to these poor academic performance correlates, stereotype threat has also been linked to high blood pressure among African Americans (Blascovich et al., 2001), altered career and/or professional aspirations and belonging (Steele, James, & Barnett, 2002), and social distancing, particularly from the stigmatized social group of which the participants are members (Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2002).

These psychological and behavioral outcomes found among low-income African American and Latino
and women students are not typically the result of negative stereotypes being communicated directly to them from others within the given social context. Rather, these behaviors typically result from exposure to a context in which historically 1) the performance of a given group is evaluated and compared with that of others, 2) such performance has been valued by the group and the larger society, and 3) the performance of one’s group has been consistently negatively evaluated and thus stereotyped more than other groups.

**MAJOR FINDINGS ON STEREOTYPE THREAT IN ACADEMIC DOMAINS**

Much of the support for the presence and effects of stereotype threat has been garnered through experimentally designed studies that have been based on the research of Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997). In each study, participants were primed toward greater awareness of a negative stereotype either about their group or a group believed to be superior to their group. The psychological effects of this priming were the major dependent variables of interest across their works.

For example, Steele and Aronson (1995) first tested the effects and corollaries of stereotype threat with African American college students. In the first of four experimentally designed studies, Steele and Aronson (1995) gave a 30-minute GRE verbal exam to 114 undergraduates. Using a 2 (race) x 3 (threat condition) factorial design, Steele and Aronson (1995) created and analyzed the effects of race (African American and White) and testing condition on students’ performance on the graduate records exam (GRE). Similar to the research on stereotype threat and women's math performance, Steele and Aronson (1995) noted that African American and White students were matched on verbal ability prior to being recruited for participation in the study.

In the first testing condition, African American and White students were exposed to the stereotype threat condition in which the GRE exam was described by the researchers as a test to determine diagnostic ability on verbal competence. The second condition, non-stereotype threat, consisted of communication by the researchers that the students' test taking and performance were not diagnostic of ability and was only considered to be a routine laboratory task. Finally, the third condition consisted of communication by researchers indicating that the non-diagnostic task should be considered a challenge, but not indicative of their fixed intelligence. Results from the first study indicated that, after controlling for differences in SAT scores, African American students in the diagnostic (stereotype threat) condition fared worse on the GRE verbal examination than their White counterparts in the same condition and also African American students in the non-diagnostic and challenge conditions.

In study two, 40 undergraduates were recruited to participate in the study in which the same experimental conditions and procedures were employed. Here, a significant interaction emerged, with African American students in the diagnostic (stereotype threat) condition performing significantly worse than all other students in the remaining experimental conditions. Also noted were the findings that African American students in the stereotype threat condition yielded lower response accuracy and had more incomplete responses than their African American counterparts in the non-diagnostic condition. White students in both conditions also had higher response accuracy than African American students in the diagnostic, stereotype threat condition.

In addition to research with African American students, Steele and colleagues also carried out research on stereotype threat with another stigmatized group: women. Throughout these studies, stereotype threat was operationalized by stating a phrase that would evoke knowledge of and reactions to negative stereotypical beliefs about a particular group’s ability on an academically premised experimental task. For example, Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999) tested the belief that women
generally perform less well on standardized mathematics examinations as a result of stereotype threat. The study sample included undergraduate males and females deemed equally competent in mathematics performance. The criteria for such included completion of one semester in calculus with a grade of B and a score above the 85th percentile on the math subsection of the Scholastic Aptitude Test or American College Test (Steele, 1997).

To operationalize stereotype threat for the participants, students were told that the test had shown gender performance differences in the past. This would “explicitly evoke the stereotype about women's math ability” (p.11). In the other condition, students were told that the math examination did not yield gender performance differences. In this study, women in the stereotype threat condition were outperformed by men in the same condition, even though students from both gender groups had equitable ability and exposure to mathematics. In the non-stereotype condition, women performed equally to the men. A significant interaction between gender and test condition (gender difference/stereotype threat and no gender difference/non-stereotype threat) found that women in the stereotype threat condition scored the lowest on the math exam whereas no other significant differences among the four conditions emerged.

While much research on stereotype threat has shown that many persons from low-income and ethnic minority and gender minority statuses can experience the psychological threat of negative stereotypes, research has also shown that virtually any member of any group can experience stereotype threat (Aronson, 2002; Smith, 2004; Steele, 1997). For example, some research has shown negative or maladaptive effects of stereotype threat on a variety of groups, including the elderly (Levy, 1996), White males (Aronson et al., 1999), elementary and middle grade school students (Ambady et al., 2001), and low-income French and American students (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Spencer & Castano, 2007). In one study, elderly participants performed significantly worse on a short-term memory task when they were exposed to negative stereotypes regarding societal perceptions of old age and senility than their counterparts who did not receive such messages (Levy, 1996). Another study showed that White male mathematics majors could fall victim to stereotype threat, even though this population is typically not viewed as being stigmatized or marginalized.

In particular, Aronson and colleagues (1999) had White male undergraduate mathematics majors complete math tasks in one of two conditions: a stereotype threat condition and a non-stereotype threat condition. The stereotype threat prompt that they read suggested that they were participating in a study designed to determine why Asians seem to perform better on math examinations. Findings from this study showed that White male math majors in the stereotype threat condition performed significantly less well than their counterparts in the non-stereotype threat condition.

WAYS TEACHERS CAN STRUCTURE CLASSROOMS TO REDUCE STEREOTYPE THREAT

These studies and others by Steele and his colleagues have affirmed the idea that many students, but particularly low-income African American and female students, face added stressors in testing situations. These psychological stressors have little to do with students’ sense of competence regarding intellectual tasks, but rather they stem from the societal-premised, negative stereotypes associated with African Americans’ performance in testing situations. Given these findings, Steele (1997) and Aronson (2002) have noted that the challenge for minimizing the effects of stereotype threat often relies in the ability of educators to successfully counter societal-premised group stereotypes.

One solution, proposed formally by Steele, is the creation of “wise schooling.” Through wise
schooling, Steele and others have sought to replace the intangible, yet omnipresent stereotype of academic difficulty and cognitive and intellectual inferiority with instructor-based behaviors and activities that express the idea that such stigmatized students can and are fully expected to fare well in general and successfully meet the high academic standard found in and across various academic domains and settings (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999). In addition, wise schooling for Steele and colleagues duly includes communicating to and believing that the stigmatized students are capable of achieving high standards and expectations.

Some research has empirically supported the use of wise schooling to reduce the effects of stereotype threat. Using experimental methods, Cohen, Steele, and Ross (1999) studied White and African American college students, all of whom were matched on language arts/writing ability. These individuals were given an essay assignment to complete under one of three feedback conditions, each of which was characterized by written feedback to the students’ essays to indicate condition. The first condition, unbuffered criticism, was believed to be typical of the college performance evaluation experience. Here, feedback was largely directive and provided in a neutral, disaffected voice/manner that did not consider the emotional impact such an evaluation may have on students. A sample statement from the unbuffered criticism letter to students in this condition is as follows: “Your letter needs work in several areas before it can be considered for publication” (1999, p. 1306).

Another condition was the wise criticism condition, which included language that communicated high and tangible achievement standards. The first line of the wise criticism letter to students in this condition stated: “It’s obvious to me that you’ve taken your task seriously and I’m going to do likewise by giving you some straightforward, honest feedback.” Additional wording in the feedback letter stated: “I wouldn’t go to the trouble of giving you this feedback if I didn’t think, based on what I’ve read in your letter/essay, that you are capable of meeting the higher standard” (p. 1307). Finally, in the positive buffer condition, the same feedback was present as that in the wise criticism condition. However, the feedback was preceded by a paragraph that offered the student some praise for the work, prior to the revisions it needed. A sample sentence there was: “Overall, nice job” (p. 1307).

The independent variables in the study were student race and criticism condition whereas the dependent variables included task motivation and perception of teacher/instructor bias. The authors found that African American students in the unbuffered criticism condition were significantly lower in their task motivation and significantly higher in their reports of perceived instructor bias than White students in the same condition. The researchers state that the difference in task motivation and bias perception between White and African American students was virtually removed in the wise criticism and positive buffer conditions.

In addition to wise schooling techniques to reduce stereotype threat effects, Aronson (2002) identified several ways in which teachers can work to minimize stereotype threat in the elementary and secondary classrooms. Teachers should reframe how standardized tests, evaluations, and even grades are presented to students. This can be done by shifting the emphasis of assessment from a measure of ability to what Aronson refers to as a non-evaluative task. For example, a teacher can suggest to students that a test is actually examining how well the teacher has instructed the students rather than how well the students have learned and retained the material. Teachers can reduce stereotype threat by dispelling the idea that ability, skill, and intelligence are static characteristics. For Aronson, communicating to students that their skills and intelligence can be further developed and are, therefore, malleable rather than unalterable or fixed can minimize the threat of stereotypes. Additional research has shown that teachers can deemphasize stereotype threat by emphasizing self-affirmation among the students and providing same-sex, same-gender role models to students in the classroom prior to their participation on an academic task (Cohen et al. 2006; McIntyre, Paulson, &
See also: Cultural Bias in Teaching, Gender Bias in Teaching

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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