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## Reducing Stereotype Threat in the Classroom

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## **REDUCING STEREOTYPE THREAT IN THE CLASSROOM**

TODD K. PLATTS & KIM HOOSIER

### **ABSTRACT**

This brief pedagogical essay, focusing on social science classrooms, provides fellow instructors with practical strategies and advice in reducing the presence of stereotype threat in their classrooms. Techniques of task reframing, practices of positive affirmation, the providing of constructive criticism, the incorporation of marginalized groups into course content, and suggestions for meeting stereotype threat head-on are discussed as are some strategies students can adopt themselves. While the methods of stereotype threat reduction addressed in this essay can help curtail some of the negative impacts of racism's micro-level forces, stereotype threat must also be considered a structural problem that requires structural solutions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Academic underperformance among racial and ethnic minorities remains a well-documented and stubborn feature of American higher education (Zirkel, 2008; Harris, 2010; Merolla & Jackson, 2019). The issue is of particular relevance for community colleges as 52% of Hispanic and 42% of African American undergraduates are students at two-year institutions (Community College Research Center, n.d.). As well, graduation rates at two-year colleges lag behind those of four-year institutions, particularly for minority student populations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). While structural factors such as racialized economic inequality and poor prior schooling significantly contribute to this trend, and, therefore, cannot be minimized in the fight for racial justice (Zirkel, 2008; Hughey, 2015; Kozol, 2012; Merolla & Jackson, 2019), this brief pedagogical essay focuses on another contributing factor to minority

underperformance in colleges and universities: professors' unwitting (re)production of racism's micro-level processes, specifically the phenomenon of stereotype threat. Throughout the following paragraphs, various strategies of stereotype threat reduction are discussed – strategies that when combined can reduce the racial achievement in students. Before discussing these strategies, however, the stage will be set by briefly explaining the concept of stereotype threat for those unfamiliar with it.

Stereotype threat has been defined as, “a situational predicament in which individuals are at risk, by dint of their actions or behaviors, of confirming negative stereotypes about their group” (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011, p. 5). Analogous definitions include a “situation in which there is a negative stereotype about a person's group, and he or she is concerned about being judged or treated negatively on the basis of this stereotype” (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016, p. 416); “a concern that one might inadvertently confirm an unwanted belief about one's group” (Schmader & Beilock, 2011, p. 35); “the apprehension targets feel when negative stereotypes about their group could be used as a lens through which to judge their behaviors” (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011, p. 227); and “the state of psychological discomfort people experience when confronted by an unflattering group or individual reputation in a situation where that reputation can be confirmed by one's behavior” (McGlone and Pfiester, 2007, p. 175). In other words, a stereotype threat occurs when individuals are placed in situations where a negative stereotype can be applied to some aspect of their identity (e.g. race/ethnicity, sex/gender, sexuality, age).

Stereotype threat inaugurates additional operational concerns that distract from the task at hand (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011). When a stereotype threat is made salient, it often induces counterproductive senses of unease in individuals, which, in turn, causes those individuals to underperform in specific tasks. The predicament of stereotype threat means “that anything one

does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes" (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797), thereby resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy (McGlone & Pfiester, 2007).

Studies have shown that anyone has the potential to fall prey to stereotype threat, even members of otherwise privileged groups. Caucasian males, for example, underperform in tests purporting to measure "natural athletic ability" as Caucasians are stereotyped as less athletic than African Americans in the United States (Stone et al., 1999; McGlone & Pfiester, 2007; Stone, Chalabaev, & Harrison, 2011). One need not personally believe in a stereotype, they only need to be aware of it for it to have an impact (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Most research examples, however, document how marginalized groups are negatively impacted by stereotype threat such as African Americans, Latinx, and the poor in standardized testing, women in high stakes math and science assessments, and the elderly in memory, to name a few (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011). These examples confirm that stereotype threat is a pervasive phenomenon that has been well-replicated across different groups performing different tasks (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011).

Whereas any person of any background can be subject to stereotype threat, racial and ethnic minorities face negative stereotypes of greater consequence (Garfield, 2007; Logel, Peach, & Spencer, 2011). Crucial for this essay, are the stereotypes that minorities possess inferior intellect and/or are deficient in academic ability – stereotypes we contend many well-meaning instructors inadvertently fuel (Zirkel, 2008; Merolla & Jackson, 2019) and stereotypes that a nontrivial portion of Caucasians still believe (Hughey, 2015).

Anti-minority stereotypes in academic settings manifest in several ways. Placement and standardized tests, often likened to displays of intellectualism, place minorities at risk of "confirming their lack of intelligence," for instance (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 2010,

Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). Here, unfortunately, African Americans and Latinxs lag behind Caucasian students in standardized metrics for reading and mathematics, regardless of age level (Zirkle, 2008; Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011; Murphy and Taylor, 2011; Merolla & Jackson, 2019). Similarly, writing analytic assignments or term papers, tasks strongly associated academic ability, place minorities at risk of “confirming their poor intellectual skills” (Steele, 2010). Certainly we, as instructors, want to intellectually challenge students and push them out of their comfort zones, but unless we are mindful of looming stereotype threats, we can accidentally perpetuate the racial achievement gap. Accordingly, the crux of this essay is to suggest that we need to be careful in what we say and do and how we say and do things in and out of our classrooms. Failure to do so can contribute to an environment that is more “emotionally exhausting,” “cognitively taxing,” and alienating than the high-pressure world of higher education already is (Zirkel, 2008).

With these facts in mind, the strategies discussed below, synthesized from extant literature and applied to social science classes, have been shown to be beneficial in closing the performance deficit between minority and non-minority students without altering instructional content or expectations. The strategies are not wholly of the authors’ doing; many are corroborated in academic literature – although they have been tailored to dovetail into teaching social science courses. Before proceeding it is important to mention that, while this essay is aimed at community college instructors, the techniques have been tested in a variety of academic settings, and, therefore, can be effectively employed by instructors from any academic institution.

## **TASK REFRAMING**

One of the most effective ways to blunt the influence of stereotype threat is to reframe tasks to obfuscate the presence of such threat (Alter et al., 2010; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). One

way to accomplish this is to explain tests, whether multiple-choice, short answer, and/or essay-based, as designed to reward preparation. Tests should not be described as having anything to do with intelligence, they are all about the work students put into them and are designed to measure “current knowledge or school-based performance rather than overall aptitude or individual skill” (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang 2011, pp. 245–246). With tests no longer understood as intelligence metrics, their ability to exercise stereotype threat over minority students is diminished.

Similarly, writing, particularly academic writing, should be explained as being comprised of smaller steps, achievable through goal setting and planning. While it is admittedly difficult to get students to follow this advice, effective paper writing is no longer seen as the byproduct of strong intellectual skills. Writing is something that can be accomplished through hard work and dedication toward the development of critical thinking skills. Also, explaining academic tasks as challenges rather than assessments of intellectual ability provides a means to buffer the negative consequences of stereotype threats related to academic performance (Alter, 2010).

Another useful technique that helps to reduce stereotype threat in the classroom is to reverse the typical grading structure for assignments. Specifically, incorporating an anonymous grading system where instructors do not know which students’ exams and/or papers they are grading can result in minimizing stereotype threat (Wilson, 2017). This system should be set up at the beginning of the semester. On all assignments that are turned in for a grade, the student uses a chosen number or selected codename rather than their name. Before students sign up for a number or codename it should be explained the class has high expectations for all students and that through hard work and dedication any student can be successful. It is important for instructors to assess student work on its quality. Introduced in this way, an anonymous grading system assures students that instructors are not trying to reduce them to a simple number; rather, instructors are trying to

ensure fairness to all (Wilson, 2017; White, Mentag, & Kaunda, 2020). The anonymity maintained by the system corresponds to the finding that minority students perform worse on standardized tests when asked to identify their racial status before the exam (Alter et al., 2010). As well, people desire reassurance that their social identity will not restrict their opportunities and the anonymous grading system supplies a cue that stigmatized individuals will have a fair chance (Murphy & Taylor, 2011).

The anonymous grading system further alleviates any hidden biases that instructors may not realize they have. It ensures the grading on all papers and exams will be done with the “same set of eyes.” In addition, it provides a sense of comfort and security to students knowing they are just being graded on the quality of their work. This specifically helps to reduce stereotype threat in that it reframes the assessment of work to reinforce the idea that not only are assessments fair but that the grading system is also anonymous and fair. When situations can be restructured to ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to achieve success, the chance of stereotype threat is therefore reduced. The system, thus, corresponds with the suggestion to refrain from asking students to identify their sex or race on high stakes tests (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011).

## **POSITIVE AFFIRMATION**

Many marginalized and disadvantaged students readily identify as hard working and dedicated individuals. Taking advantage of these positive identities can lead to another powerful stereotype threat reduction technique (Schmader & Beilock, 2011; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). Namely, research suggests that emphasizing students’ positive attributes (e.g., disciplined, hard-working, insightful, creative) and encouraging self-affirmation among all students enhances

motivation (Martens, Johns, Greenberg, & Schimel, 2006). Related to the notion of “hard-working,” numerous studies have documented that racial minorities are more likely to enter higher education (Merolla & Jackson, 2019) and more likely to attend class, after controlling for class background (Blake, 2018). This can be harnessed positively as value-affirmations can foster feelings of connectedness and belongingness (Walton & Carr, 2011) and can bolster performance (McGlone & Aronson, 2007).

As well, as the semester progresses, assignments can be contextualized with the notion that students have proven themselves capable of producing quality work. Simple as it may seem, reminding college students that they are college students spotlights an aspect of their identity that is not aligned with underperformance (McGlone & Aronson, 2007). It can, therefore, mitigate stereotype threat (Schimel et al., 2004; Zirkel, 2008). Relatedly, instructors can affirm the strong points of students and have students affirm those points as well, which can be done by asking them directly during office meetings or in class. The building of confidence in these simple exercises can be an effective balm against stereotype threat (McGlone & Aronson, 2007; Schmader & Beilock, 2011). Taken together, these practices diminish the salience of stereotype threat while also augmenting attributes linked to performance and success.

## **CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK**

Efforts at reducing stereotype threat need not take on the veneer of coddling. Constructive, critical, and thoughtful feedback when combined with the assurance that students can meet high academic standards, research suggests, improves student performance and hamstring stereotype threat because “belonging” is tacitly assumed, not questioned (Zirkel, 2008). Focusing solely on negative feedback (e.g., only on what a student got wrong) can implicitly reinforce notions that



marginalized (and struggling) students do not belong in college. Hence, in practice, it is important to critically comment on students' individual tests and papers. However, it is equally important to explain how students can build upon otherwise astute observations, how they can ask different questions, or how they can reframe their topic to be more conducive to the material at hand. Importantly, instructors must make sure to accentuate the positives in student writing as they grade. In addition to individual comments on students' papers, problems can be addressed collectively. Specifically, instructors can make a list of general problems (e.g., missing or underdeveloped thesis statements, lack disciplinary engagement of an issue, reliance on anecdotal evidence, etc.) and discuss them with the class, asking students how they can improve on their work. This can also be done with tests. Individual troubles are marked on the tests, and generic issues are taken up in class. Students must know how they are capable of improving their performance. Simple exercises like taking sample short-answer or essay test questions and asking students to construct an answer worthy of full credit can produce surprising results. Whether covering a written assignment or a test, instructors need to take care to never attach problems with specific students. Doing so builds a critical, yet welcoming, learning environment for all students (Zirkel, 2008).

## **POSITIVE EXEMPLARS**

Providing exemplars from marginalized social groups and demonstrating how a student's own identity can be reflected in the course can also help curtail stereotype threat by reminding marginalized groups of successful individuals in their group (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). It is also important to note that stigmatized individuals look for cues of belonging, with a sense of belonging being especially important for groups who may be seen as unsuitable in certain settings (Murphy &

Taylor, 2011; Walton & Carr, 2011). Unfortunately, undergraduate textbooks paint a conservative picture of most discipline at odds with recent research and developments in the field (cf. Manza, Sauder, & Wright 2007). This entails the continual annexation of early disciplinary contributions from women and racial minorities (Wright II, 2008). Stereotype threat scholars suggest instructors should “assign biographical readings about female scientists, mathematicians, and engineers and to discuss current events which showcase achievements of women in math and science” (Inzlicht, Tullet, Legault, & Kang, 2011).

In the social science, the predominance of Caucasian males in disciplinary histories can be explained by the fact that many early thinkers from the social sciences were products of the Enlightenment – a bourgeois, racist, masculinist, and Eurocentric movement that elided the thoughts and ideas of Othered groups (cf. Salerno, 2004). With that being said, social science histories must be rewritten to provide students with a more critical understanding of each discipline’s past. As potential remedy for sociology, for instance, the “Atlanta School” of sociology, headed by W.E.B. DuBois, can be discussed as being on par with the famed “Chicago School” of the same period (Wright II, 2012). As well, incorporating the thoughts and ideas of Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells into early examples of sociological thought in the United States may also prove beneficial. Introducing luminaries from underrepresented groups is important because numerical imbalances of student composition can trigger a stereotype threat (Schmader & Beilock, 2011; Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016), and cause such individuals to feel devalued, excluded, and unfairly treated (Derks, Inzlicht, & Kang, 2008). In other words, when women are significantly underrepresented in math classes or minority students are underrepresented on campus, this can invoke feelings of stereotype threat. Including scholars from marginalized backgrounds inches a class toward what some stereotype threat scholars call “critical

mass” or “the number of identity mates that it takes for individuals to feel they will not be judged according to their social identity” (Murphy & Taylor, 2011, p. 27). Of course, there is a broader point of hiring a more diverse faculty and staff to be made here (Zirkel, 2008). In order for positive exemplars to be effective, research indicates they must be understood as competent, they must be perceived as belonging to a negatively stereotyped in-group, and individuals must be able to locate how the exemplar defies a negatively stereotyped domain (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009).

To follow up on stressing the importance of identity inclusion, incorporating a small introductory writing assignment where students spend a few minutes writing about themselves can be beneficial. In such an assignment, students can describe who they are as a person, how they would describe themselves to a stranger, what is important to them, and how their past experiences have shaped their identity today. Cohen’s et al. (2006), for instance, describe an assignment that asks students to identify values that are important to them and for students to write a brief essay explaining why they considered the values important. Generally, assignments of this vein can provide a lead-in to discuss a variety of topics, theories, and concepts germane to social science courses. It also provides a wonderful way to get to know the students in courses early in the semester.

### **MEETING STEREOTYPE THREAT HEAD-ON**

Many students have never heard of the notion of stereotype threat even if they may have experienced it in the past. Therefore, it is very helpful to talk about it and approach the issue from a straightforward perspective early in the semester (McGlone & Aronson, 2007; McGlone & Pfister, 2007). In the social sciences, this can all be done in the first couple days of class when instructors go over the syllabus and discuss the content and expectations of the semester. It is also

important to emphasize that often stereotype threat is a subtle ongoing process that could happen beyond their recognition and they may not attribute test stress or anxiety to this issue. However, this does not mean that the stereotype threat is not impacting their performance and ultimate success. It is very important to reinforce the notion that the class has high academic standards, acknowledging that each student can achieve success through hard work and putting in the needed study time. The tone and expectations of the class should be clearly articulated at the beginning of the semester so that students feel that the environment is one that will measure their time and dedication to the course.

Acknowledging and meeting stereotype threat head-on is an effective tactic in lessening its impact (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005; McGlone & Aronson, 2007; McGlone & Pfister, 2007). This simple technique allows students in stereotyped domains attribute negative sentiment to an external social force (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005; McGlone & Aronson, 2007). Moreover, students knowing about stereotype threat can help students reappraise feelings of unease and doubt more positively to mitigate its influence (Johns, Inzlicht, & Schmader, 2008). It is, therefore, imperative for instructors to find a way to introduce a full discussion of stereotype threat early in their courses, altering the sequencing of material if necessary. In social science classes, stereotype threat can be mentioned on the first day of class during our explanation of the aims and scope of the course. Students can be informed that social scientists have been able to demonstrate the impact of stereotypes on individual performance, and that stereotype threat has been known to negatively impact the test performances of racial minorities and the test performances of women in mathematics among other findings. Students can also be told that if they feel anxious while taking a test or performing an academic task, this anxiety is likely the result of stereotype threat – a well-known social phenomenon – and has nothing to do with their actual

academic ability. This is a prime example of how social forces influence human beings – one of the major lessons to be learned in any social science. It is also important to teach about the illegitimacy of stereotypes and encourage students to view intelligence as flexible rather than intractable (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016).

### **EMPOWERING STUDENTS**

In addition to steps instructors can take, there are also ways to empower students. One way is to encourage them to work in groups. Too often, students think of college success as a solitary journey made with the help of no one. With this mindset, students can experience struggles and setbacks as their own personal issues. Asking for help or working with others is seen as a sign of weakness. This is what Uri Treisman (1992) famously found in his study of why some groups of students succeed in calculus and other groups do not. More specifically, Treisman discovered that students who studied in small groups thrived because they got less bogged in individual problems and could spend more time engaging in higher-order thinking. Students who studied alone spent considerable time on individual problems, repeating them over and over, and almost never dedicated time to the higher-order thinking necessary for success. Accordingly, students should be encouraged to form study groups and to join student clubs around identity groups such as Adult Student Life Club, the Black Student Alliance, LGBT Club, and Student Veterans of America to name a few.

Students can be further armed against stereotype threat by being taught and encouraged to adopt a growth mindset where intelligence is seen malleable and academic skills such as notetaking, test taking, writing, studying, and reading are also seen as skills that are learned and

honed with practice (Dweck, 2007). Here, students should be encouraged to view their progression through school by how much they are improving their skills and knowledge, not how smart they are. In addition to promoting a growth mindset, students must know that struggle and feelings of not belonging can be part of the learning process. Experiencing these emotions is normal and not aberrant (Walton & Carr, 2011). Significantly, students must also be informed that these kinds of feelings are transient and can be ameliorated by confiding in a strong support group or an understanding instructor or college staff member.

## CONCLUSION

These are not the only strategies that can be used to combat the influence of stereotype threat in the classroom, but ones that have been shown useful in literature. Although borrowing from prior research, this essay consolidated numerous studies into a brief list of practical advice for fellow educators. It is also hoped that this essay brought a broader awareness to the (re)production of stereotype threat in the classroom. Though this essay addressed stereotype threat in the classroom, it must be noted that stereotype threat stretches beyond the classroom on college campuses. Before many students even enter a class, they are subjected to stereotype threat piquing placement testing. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address this important issue, but it must be part of a broader conversation to bring racial equity to education.

It is also important to note that addressing stereotype threat is not a solution to the structural and institutional racism and classism that exists in the United States. Far too many students face poor prior schooling and racialized inequality before they appear in college classrooms. These issues require structural fixes, not interpersonal ones. Unless they are addressed as institutional problems, a smattering of individual efforts will inevitably fall short. Be that as it may, addressing

stereotype threat is a small, but not insignificant, needed step to redress the achievement gap in higher education.

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